

**The Space of Politics:
Wolin, Voegelin, and Arendt Compared.**

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1. Introduction

In January, 2000, a 10 year-old boy stood on the stage of the amphitheater in Fiesole, a small Etruscan-era hill-top town in the Italian province of Tuscany, and recited “In Flanders’ Fields,” the well-known paean to the dead at the second Battle of Ypres in 1915. A physician and second in command of the 1st Brigade Canadian Field Artillery, Dr. John McCrae, wrote the poem during the second week of the battle, upon the death of his friend, Lieutenant Alexis Holmer.¹ McCrae was killed in action on 28 January, 1918.

The poem reads as follows:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep,
though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.²

The poem is not, perhaps, intended to be “political” in the precise sense of motivating its audience to common action toward a common cause: the background of the poem is the death of a soldier, and it is written by another soldier who was a close friend. But the death of that soldier is one death among thousands³ in one battle among dozens, in a war that is clearly a political event, or at least an event of politics conducted by violent means.

¹ Accounts of the writing vary. After at least one rejection, the poem was published in *Punch* in December, 1915.

² (Accessed May 1, 2007 at <http://www.greatwar.co.uk/poems/iffinspn.htm>)

³ 54,896 soldiers are listed on the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing in Ypres.

Moreover, the poem itself is not merely “personal” or “individual.” It is written in the first person plural. The third stanza offers an imperative to collective action; the poem altogether asks that the sacrifices of many be neither forgotten nor scorned by those of their number left behind to continue the common action.

It is, perhaps, one step more political yet. According to the popular Canadian historian, Pierre Berton, the so-called “Great War,” especially the battle of Vimy Ridge, was a defining event of identity formation for the Canadian polity. It was the event in which Canada came of age as a nation.⁴ “In Flanders Fields” reflects a moment in that event; as late as the 1970s, many Canadian grade-school children sang musical settings or gave recitations of the poem to celebrate the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918.

The stage on which the eleven-year-old read the poem had been built sometime in the 1st century B.C., some two millennia previous. The amphitheater was used for dramatic presentations of various kinds, as it is today. We sat half-way and then all the way up in the stone seats, and were able clearly to hear this child with asthmatic lungs and little vocal training. Had the theater been full, we could easily have surveyed from any seat the 2000 or so other spectators. A handful of other tourists were milling about, and it turned out later, when we deciphered a well-hidden Italian sign to the effect, that that we weren’t actually supposed to admit ourselves to the seats or the stage; but no one was saying, and we didn’t ask.

Does a juvenile reciting a semi-political poem in the well-preserved, still-used ruins of a Roman amphitheater constitute a political event? Doubtfully. Perhaps if such an act were legally forbidden, or if the presentation were before an audience about a current political problem, or if a large group of cheering or teary-eyed Canadians had been present, one could make a case for its political qualities.

But I have misremembered. The child recited *not* “In Flander’s Fields,” but Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” which most decidedly is *not* a political poem and which it would be more difficult to put to political use.⁵ My

⁴ Pierre Berton, *Vimy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986).

⁵ Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;

misremembering raises questions, perhaps about mental processes of middle-aged men, or about memory as such, but also about the *space* of memory, especially the space of *political* memory. The move from one poem to another moves the event of recitation from one with political potential to one with much less. Is the space in which it was recited therefore politically neutral? Without immediate significance?

What to say politically about this space that the imperial Romans had built two millennia ago? It was easy for any of us to imagine this space as a place for staging, say, comic and tragic drama. That, after all, is our immediate experience of this kind of space: it exists for entertainment. At best, it may become a space of instruction: it is a potentially functional space for staging dramatic action that *could* teach us, perhaps even about some political question. Sadly, it is less immediate to our experience to imagine it as a space of politics, of deliberation, encounter, decision. Why? What has happened to such spaces? Or did they ever exist outside our imaginations? What difference does it make?

Politics, the activity of resolving a delimited set of matters that are public and common, takes place not in the imagination, nor merely in human minds, nor in any random place, but in spaces duly constituted for such an activity. Because its concerns are by definition public and common, its activity must take place in a public common space. When, for whatever reason, it does not, we have, to one degree or another, subverted, sublimated, or suppressed politics. A debate about whether such subversion may at times be necessary to preserve the political community in times of crisis is a red herring in this discussion —triage may be a necessary medical procedure under extreme duress, but it is just that, and it requires that the medical principle of “do no harm” be suspended

He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.
He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.
The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

temporarily so that some are tended (and potentially healed) while others are abandoned to die. That is not normal medical practice; the equivalent suppression of political activity in open political space need not be taken to be “normal” or at least thriving political practice either. Properly arranged space is one aspect of such thriving. Although rarely articulated in any depth, the spatial quality of politics is seldom entirely absent in political-philosophical analyses and descriptions. We usually find it present in the “political metaphysics” that ground every political theory and every well-ordered polity.

1. The “Metaphysics” of Political Space

Sheldon Wolin and Hannah Arendt are among the very few contemporary political theorists to have made explicit the theoretical (and practical) importance of space to an understanding of politics. When Wolin published the first edition of *Politics and Vision* in 1950, he found Americans, in particular, to be confronted by a “diffusion of the political,” an era in which ‘the individual increasingly seeks his political satisfactions outside the traditional area of politics.’⁶ Politics is “discredited,” citizens “retreat” to society, life is bureaucratized, whether nationally or at the local level, and age-old notions of “citizenship, obligation, and [political] authority” are abandoned without recourse to other mediating forms. Having used space as a category of analysis to understand political experiences prior to the American era, Wolin could describe the problem spatially: politics had been “transferred to another plane,” perhaps “citizenship had been crowded out by other, more satisfying forms of membership,” which immediately implies that contemporary people “inhabit” a different social environment than their modern ancestors did.⁷ “If this should be the case,” Wolin argued,

“the problem is not one of apathy, or of the decline of the political, but the absorption of the political into non-political institutions and activities. This, in turn, implies that there still exists in the West an impressive capacity for political participation and

⁶ Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 316.

⁷ Wolin, *Vision*, 316-17.

interest which is not, however, being diverted towards the traditional forms of political life.”⁸

These traditional forms included spatial qualities no longer in evidence in the current modes of non-political life.

Laments of contemporary politics are legion: many theorists speak of loss, retraction, decline, disappearance. For Wolin, the 19th and 20th-century rejection of the state among the major political and sociological theories and movements of the day served not to foreshorten state power, as the proponents of anti-statism had anticipated, but to enhance it, because it received less critical attention as a lasting entity even while its political capabilities continued to grow. This enhancement of state power has served to constrict political space, not expand it, so that political capacities have been diverted from their traditional locations in republican and democratic civic life:

Suspicion of the state has reduced the codes of civility to the appearance of rituals which we follow half in shame and half in embarrassment. At the same time, the discovery that precious little in human life is immune to bureaucratization has dispelled some of the magic of the group.⁹

Thus, if amphitheaters such as the one at Fiesole still existed for political purposes, we might not know what to do with them. The specifically *political* nature of large public and “private” (corporate) organizations in which we live and move and have our being seems not to be in dispute: their internal processes and external activities are such that large modern corporations or corporate-like organizations “seem to act like political societies [that] . . . can be studied through the categories of political science” without arousing theoretical problems.¹⁰ But where is this political power located, and to what does its place alert us? To be sure, it is no longer located where its workings can be readily seen, but only its outworkings.

In 2004, Wolin’s analysis had shifted, which, he claimed, reflected a “journey from liberalism to democracy.”¹¹ Spatial metaphors (eg., “enclosure,” “containment,”

⁸ Wolin, *Vision*, 316.

⁹ Wolin, *Vision*, 374.

¹⁰ Wolin, *Vision*, 375.

¹¹ Wolin, *Vision*, xv.

“boundedness,” “location”)¹² remained as instruments of analysis, but the analysis had moved in substance from “interpreting the past” to “analyzing the present,” even while such an analysis of the present depends upon or at least is richly informed by a prior analysis of the past. While present, the metaphors of political space that had been a principle category of Wolin’s prior analysis are markedly less present in the 2004 chapters of the second edition. This diminishment seems to flow from the results of the analysis itself.

American political elites and citizens, Wolin claimed, were heavily influenced in their practices, values, and habits of thinking by “the experience of combating totalitarian regimes from 1941 to 1989.” Those influences have resulted in what may be a new (American) regime, a kind of “inverted totalitarianism” called “Superpower,”¹³ which remains in part—and perhaps continually—an aspiration, not a realization. Superpower aspires to supercede American liberal democracy, just as Nazi totalitarianism sought to supercede the Weimar parliamentary system.¹⁴ That supercession includes the evacuation of political space in several important respects. To understand political and organizational space in its pre-modern, modern and contemporary (“Superpower”) forms, and to understand thereby the relationship between democracy and space, let us consider five aspects of political space, first recognizing the general spatial nature of political institutions.

Political institutions “represent an arrangement of power and authority.”¹⁵ Thus, [t]hrough the decisions taken and enforced by public officials, scattered activities are brought together, endowed with a new coherence, and their future course shaped according to “public” considerations. In this way political institutions give additional dimensions to political nature. They serve to define, so to speak, “political space” or the locus wherein the tensional forces of society are related, as in a courtroom, a legislature, an administrative hearing, or the convention of a political party.¹⁶

¹² Wolin, *Vision*, 403.

¹³ Wolin, *Vision*, xvi; cf pp. 395-6, 590ff.

¹⁴ Wolin, *Vision*, xvi.

¹⁵ Wolin, *Vision*, 7.

¹⁶ Wolin, *Vision*, 8.

Such institutions also “serve to define ‘political time’ or the temporal period within which decision, resolution, or compromise occurs,” so that “political arrangements provide a setting wherein the activities of individuals and groups are connected spatially and temporally.”¹⁷ In consequence, for the political theorist to consider politics is for her or him to develop a “political metaphysic,” an implicit or explicit account of politics in its spatial and temporal qualities. Synonyms may arise to uncover this metaphysic: “instead of time, he may have referred to history or tradition; instead of energy, he may have spoken about power.”¹⁸ Like many theorists, Wolin knowingly fluctuates between the actual, physical space of deliberation, judgment, speech, pronouncement, and the metaphorical institutional “space” of political society in his analysis of political space. This fluctuation is conscious for Wolin, and it is no doubt associated with certain indeterminate qualities of political space itself.

“From its very beginnings in Greece, the Western political tradition has looked upon the political order as a common order created to deal with those concerns in which all of the members of society have some interest.”¹⁹ These concerns were nearly never — until the modern era— considered to be merely elemental needs (“domestic peace, defense against external enemies, and the protection of life and possessions”), but included the attainment of some moral, ultimate, or non-instrumental good, as the case might be.²⁰ Because human life at the level of meaning is indeterminate, Wolin rightly insists that “the field of politics is and has been, in a significant and radical sense, a created one.”²¹ “[P]olitical rule is concerned with those general interests shared by all the members of a community; . . . political authority is distinguished from other forms of authority in that it speaks in the name of a society considered in its common quality; . . . membership in a political society is a token of a life of common involvements; . . . the order that political society presides over is one that should extend throughout the length

¹⁷ Wolin, *Vision*, 8.

¹⁸ Wolin, *Vision*, 16.

¹⁹ Wolin, *Vision*, 10.

²⁰ Wolin, *Vision*, 10.

²¹ Wolin, *Vision*, 6.

and breadth of society as a whole.”²² These concerns are *not*, however, determinate. “The designation of certain activities and arrangements as political, the characteristic way we think about them, and the concepts we employ to communicate our observations and reactions —none of these are written into the nature of things but are the legacy accruing from the historical activity of political philosophers.”²³ While these thinkers do not simply make things up as they go along, their activity of abstracting from what is given to them in any given contingent political situation is a creative and contingent activity concerned with a creative and contingent activity, namely the practical activity of identifying, naming, and dealing with political matters. So, too, with political space.

The first aspect of political space to consider in our context is that political organization assumes, as it were, ‘raw space,’ a space of habitation, the “‘inside’ of a specific and differentiated context of actions and events and an ‘outside’ that [is] largely unknown and undifferentiated.”²⁴ This space is the “determinate geographic area and particular culture” that was noticed to great effect by Montesquieu²⁵ and interestingly dismissed by Gobineau²⁶ and his followers. Samuel Huntington is the latest in a long line of thinkers to essentialize such political spaces (and especially their inhabitants) into oppositional dichotomies.²⁷ The recently developed (and, for its circumstances, novel) language of “homeland” in U.S. politics is similarly an appeal to this basic experience of collective dwelling-space.

Second, a dwelling-space is itself—in strictly *political* terms—a conceptually undifferentiated space that humans occupy, and in which “the plans, ambitions, and

²² Wolin, *Vision*, 11; cf. page 11 passim and p. 56.

²³ Wolin, *Vision*, 6.

²⁴ Wolin, *Vision*, 16.

²⁵ Charles Louis de Secondat Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, Thomas Nugent, trans., and Franz Neumann, ed. (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1949), Bks XIV-XIX (pp. 221-315), esp. 221-226.

²⁶ Arthur de Gobineau, “The Separation of Races,” in Michael D. Biddiss, editor, *Gobineau: Selected Political Writings* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), 97-107.

²⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1996), esp. chpt 2 (pp. 40-55).

actions of individuals and groups incessantly jar against each other—colliding, blocking, coalescing, separating.” Only when this space becomes “political space” through a structuring by means of “systems of rights and duties, class and social distinctions, legal and extra-legal restraints and inhibitions, favors and punishments, permissions and tabus” do the human beings inhabiting the space have determinate pathways “along which human motions can proceed harmlessly or beneficially,” because these political arrangements have served competently to “reduc[e] frictions.”²⁸ Political institutions are, therefore, second-order spaces. They structure dwelling-space. This structure is itself no longer purely spatial: it orders physical space. Yet institutions are, at the same time, spatial: they are “housed” in ordered space—courtrooms, legislatures, assembly-halls, bureaucratic offices—in which human beings appear to one another to deliberate, to render and receive judgment about the use of primary dwelling-space,²⁹ and to maintain the political spaces that make such judgments possible by maintaining the institutional “pathways” that reduce the frictional heat of collision-filled encounters in dwelling-space. Consider, for example, the elders of an ancient city of the Levant. Their role is to render judgments concerning justice: opposing claims to resources; claims of harm and benefit; claims of obligation; claims of recognition; and the like.³⁰ The city before which they sit is a determinate space: it is enclosed by walls that protect its inhabitants; it encloses the dwellings and the worship places (sacred spaces) of those inhabitants. It is likely surrounded by cultivated land, and beyond that, “wilderness,” the wild, the untamed and undomesticated spaces, perhaps threatening, even openly hostile, inhabited,

²⁸ Wolin, *Vision*, 16, 17.

²⁹ For an analysis of politics as judgment, see Oliver O’Donovan, “Government as Judgment” in Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, *Bond of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 207-224; and Oliver O’Donovan, *The Ways Of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005).

³⁰ Cf. Genesis 19:1 and 34:20; Deuteronomy 21:19 and 22:15 and especially the comments of Keil and Delitzsch on the incidents (C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes: Volume I, The Pentateuch*, translated by James Martin [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981(reprint)], 232-3, 313, 407-8, 411].

if at all, but a few nomads and herders. The task of the elders takes place in a determinate space: the “city gates.” The specifically located space of judgment maintains the now politically-ordered dwelling space of the city in whose gate they sit to render judgment.

Third, a political space *contains* power: it restricts and shapes and locates it. In Wolin’s example of Solomon’s temple, we have a physical “enclosure of a particular shape and structure” that was perhaps “an attempt to ‘house’ power, to contain it within a structure, and thereby solidify the identification of Yahweh, the greatest power in the world, with Israel and its king.”³¹ The attempt has its limitations, which its originator recognizes, but also its equally recognized effects:

Yahweh’s power was too great to be bound within a human structure, but that does not obviate the political character of the temple as a site of power-rituals whereby a community positions itself towards its universe of power—in the case of Israel, the power of its king and the ultimate power of its god.³²

This (vain) attempt to contain, house, and identify with a particular power can be extended by analogy, Wolin believes, to the Western political tradition of containing power within a constitutional framework. Aristotle is the originator and perhaps still the best-known and most “influential theorist of constitutions”:

In the Aristotelian view, a constitution designated the individual or group that exercised supreme authority over a political society; it identified the location of power—the power that the laws of the constitution authorized to the ruler or rulers or to various bodies (e.g., courts).³³

For Wolin, the *source* of the power to be contained in such a framework originates *not* in the political activity itself,³⁴ but in a prior, extra-political arrangement of social classes. Thus, aristocracies, oligarchies, tyrannies, democracies, and mixed regimes are all political arrangements and containments of power that acknowledge “the extra-constitutional distribution of power in society.”³⁵

³¹ Wolin, *Vision*, 403.

³² Wolin, *Vision*, 403.

³³ Wolin, *Vision*, 403.

³⁴ Arendt notably and vigorously challenges this claim.

³⁵ Wolin, *Vision*, 403.

But notice what has happened here: space has suddenly become metaphorical. If we walk into a courtroom, we have walked into an actual, present, physically available location of power. In any American courtroom of note, the seat of the judge is elevated, the woodwork ornate and imposing, the physical arrangements of the seating all designed to focus attention on the space of adversarial confrontation between accused and accuser, plaintiff and defendant. So, too, a parliamentary chamber, in which seats are arranged for debate, focused on a specific place from which debate is refereed and political judgments are finalized. So, too, Solomon's temple, where the power of God is concentrated in a specific location that is largely hidden from sight and treated with considerable reverence and fear. A constitution is not such a spatial arrangement: it is a conceptual framework that is manifested in part in the spaces (such as courtrooms and assembly-halls) actualized under its conceptions and established to implement its requirements for political order. That conceptual framework orders and arranges, and those arrangements surely include spatial aspects, but the constitution itself is not a "space."

Therefore, as Wolin moves from temple ("an enclosure of a particular shape and structure that sacralizes what occurs inside"³⁶) to a "constitutional 'framework'" (an identification of the "location" of power), space is metaphorized. This metaphorization of space is an important clue to the nature of late modern and postmodern politics. Consider his description of "Superpower:"

The postmodern power, Superpower, eschews the traditional routes of "empire" and "conquest" insofar as these imply a strategy of invading other societies in order to absorb them, to take over permanently and assume responsibility for the day-to-day routines of conquered territory. Unlike a "command regime" of domination (from the Latin *dominatio*, or mastery, irresponsible power, despotism) Superpower is better understood as *predominance*, as ascendancy, preponderance of power, terms that suggest a dynamic, changing character and, above all, an economy of power, a rational structure of allocation of resources. Superpower depends upon an ability to exploit pre-existing systems, to introduce or impose new ones only when necessary, and, when opportune, to abandon and "move on."³⁷

³⁶ Wolin, *Vision*, 403

³⁷ Wolin, *Vision*, xviii-xix.

In this, post-modern expression of political power, space is attenuated. Physical boundaries are marked not with stones, pins, or fences, but by temporary capabilities. Space is neither a political resource, nor an arena of containment, but a momentary mode of exploitation. Conceptual space, likewise, does not impose a limiting framework; it is now an arena for endless process, an infinite jest. The firmer ground of everyday political space (if such still exists) helps us to understand what has shifted spatially with the emergence of Superpower, to which we return presently.

Fourth, human beings must fashion, out of the raw materials that nature furnishes, some bounded, permanent, physical space in which meaningful appearance to one another is possible. Political space is created when human beings come together to speak about and act with regard to that which they have identified as what is of common concern to them. The political space thereby engendered Arendt famously called the “space of appearances,” which “comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized.”³⁸ The space of appearances and the space within which we appear to one another should not, however, be confused. The former supports the latter, but is not coeval with it. Political space is a species of the space of appearance, but political speech and activity are *not* the only kinds of appearance possible in a duly constructed (not “constituted”) space. Thus, it is a “peculiarity” of the space of appearance “that unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men—as in the case of great catastrophes when the body politic of a people is destroyed—but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves.”³⁹ If Arendt is correct in this assessment, then “the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the ‘sharing of words and deeds’,” so that “action not only has the most

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 199.

³⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 199.

intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the one activity which constitutes it.”⁴⁰

To put the matter another way, the physical space within which we speak and act, the political space of Arendt, and the political-institutional space of Wolin, as Arendt makes clear, are not the same thing. (Neither of these, moreover, correspond entirely to the space whose disappearance Voegelin laments in his regret over the loss of a space of meaning that was present in the culture of the High Middle Ages and lost in the Reformation and Enlightenment movements of early modernity). The first two kinds of space —physical, humanly constructed and bounded space and the “space of appearances”— fit together in symbiotic fashion. “It is as though the wall of the *polis* and the boundaries of the law were drawn around an already existing public space which, however, without such stabilizing protection could not endure, could not survive the moment of action and speech itself.”⁴¹ Like a congregation and a church building or an assembly and an assembly hall, the latter “contains” the former, which “constitutes” itself, but which can hardly perform its function without some kind of physical space in which to do so. While Wolin’s institutional space is a third kind of space that may arise as an elaboration or extension of Arendt’s space of appearances, it is different in kind from the political space of appearances. The space of appearance responds not to the amelioration of friction and collision, but to the desire for speaking and acting with respect to that which is of common concern and in regard to which the deeds and words of the individual doer and speaker may shine forth among his or her peers.

Arendt’s understanding of political space especially emphasizes the permanence that such space provides for the deeds and words of those who appear in it. It may be true

⁴⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 198; further evidence for this claim emerges, perhaps, from Horst Hutter’s finding that Greek notions of politics arose out of experiences of friendship, and not the reverse. In his words, “Western political speculation finds its origin in a system of thought in which the idea of friendship is the major principle in terms of which political theory and practice are described, explained and analyzed.” (*Politics as Friendship: The Origins of Classical Notions of Politics in the Theory and Practice of Friendship* [Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1978], 2).

⁴¹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 198.

that Arendt, as Wendy Brown has it, “eulogized” in the demise of the Athenian polis “a precious, elite, immortality-and-disclosure-through-speech-and-deed ideal,”⁴² but the experience of political space found in this seemingly “romantic” ideal is nevertheless a real experience of political note among more than a social, economic, or even self-appointed political elite. Such a space comes into being in a physical, human-made arena for human action practically and actually set over against the processes of natural decay and destruction.⁴³ The amphitheater at Fiesole is of this kind, even though its explicitly political uses may have been slim indeed. Set into the top of a mountain, it is solidly built of stone and has existed continually for two millennia. Its spatial potentialities for political activity exist continually and—if one were to recount a story of it—continuously. (Those continuities may be necessary for political activity, but they are not, of course, even approximately sufficient for it). One could imagine its blocks being carted away for use in other building projects, much as happened, for example, to Roman structures such as the Coliseum in Rome for centuries after the Roman collapse. One could imagine it becoming weathered with the ravages of time, wind and rain, as have the pyramids of Egypt or the facades of any given cathedral in Europe. One could imagine it becoming overgrown, like the temples and pyramids of the Maya and Inca. All that is to say that the amphitheater at Fiesole *strives* for immortality without ever completely realizing it. In that striving, a political space, a space that spans many human life-times and in which human beings may deliberate in common and say great things about great deeds (held in common) that immortalize them, is established. It is this immortalization in a space of permanence and retained in the words of poets, historians, and other recorders of deeds that renders specific political words and deeds meaningful rather than futile.

In Arendt’s spaces of appearance, (political) power is actualized; such power “exists only in its actualization.” “Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence,” and it *only* “springs

⁴² Wendy Brown, “Democracy and Bad Dreams,” <http://muse.jhu.edu/muse.html>, accessed July 23, 2007.

⁴³ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 93-101.

up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.”⁴⁴ In Wolin’s institutional space, the question is to manage conflict, to resolve differences concerning common, public matters. This space becomes manifest as the activities of speech and deliberation and decision reveal their need to be regularized. I take this emphasis in particular to express what he names as his earlier “liberalism,” and this is an emphasis missing in Arendt’s account of political power. Wolin’s understanding of power—in its premodern form, at least—is commonsensical:

“In previous centuries ordinary power was a scarce good limited to mundane objects (food, shelter, construction, weapons) produced primarily by physical labor. In contrast, political power was represented as transcendent, ‘mighty’ or ‘awful,’ its authority divinely sanctified. Imperial rule, military force, and warfare were its supreme expressions; organization and leadership were its means.”⁴⁵

For Arendt, *political* power is first and foremost the product of collective, public involvements. Whereas political power could, for Arendt, only arise and only continue to exist in the kind of space that the Fiesole amphitheater (or any similar structure that could foster collective deliberation) provides, Wolin is more concerned with power as a means for achieving a purpose or end, with calculating the costs of using power, and therefore with determining—in nearly Hobbesian fashion—who wins and who loses by its use.⁴⁶ Power always raises a question not only of expression, but also—here the spatial link—of containment. Thus, while a polis or a legislature or a council may be a nurturing place for an Arendtian kind of political power, it is also a potential pressure-cooker.

On the one hand, the political space of the exemplary city seems a happy place. As on the Shield of Achilles that Hephaestus fashions, its greatest threat seems external: among the scenes of pastoral and civic bliss, the scene of war is between “outsiders” and the city inhabitants, not within the city itself.⁴⁷ Tyranny occurs when one man or a coterie occupies the political space to its own ends and constricts its utility for others who dwell there. Indeed, tyranny is anti-political insofar as it seeks to reduce “colliding, blocking,

⁴⁴ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 200.

⁴⁵ Wolin, *Vision*, 396.

⁴⁶ See Wolin, *Vision*, 402.

⁴⁷ Homer, *Iliad*, XVII, 528-581.

coalescing and separating” as far as possible to a relationship between the one and the many. Aside from this (all-too-common) extreme, however, other forms of political unhappiness are an ever present threat: “political space becomes a problem when human energies cannot be controlled by existing arrangements.”⁴⁸ The Reformation, the eighteenth-century conflict between entrepreneur and mercantilist, and the Malthusian challenge to liberal economics are modern instances of this kind of pressure and failure of containment or amelioration. The most influential classical instance of such pressure was the experience of the Greek polis. In Wolin’s interpretation, Plato’s political problem was too much politics, too much pressure inside the tiny confines of the Greek polis.⁴⁹ Its opposite was the space of empire—an expansion that renders meaningless the experience of intimate political space in a city, be it the polis or be it any other of the thousands of cities and communities that were swallowed up by the succession of empires in the Mesopotamian and Mediterranean basins. The experience of empire raised questions of space that were closely correlated to the questions that arose in the polis. First and foremost, how should such space —nearly boundless though it might be— be ordered? For the twelfth-century Mongols, it was ordered administratively and constitutionally in ways, Voegelin argued, any modern constitutional theorist could understand.⁵⁰ Second, if the relative intimacy of the polis and its closely-knit space(s) of appearance had now been superceded by an expansive empire, was it possible to think about politics —now experienced on a spatially vastly expanded scale— in the same way? The answer, developed slowly but surely, was: not. Political life under imperial expansion became “increasingly abstract.” In response, the Romans developed in their imperial experience “certain techniques of symbolization and propaganda in an effort to overcome [the] spatial distance” of their empire.⁵¹ The result was a civic disengagement and widespread

⁴⁸ Wolin, *Vision*, 17.

⁴⁹ Wolin, *Vision*, 37-39.

⁵⁰ Eric Voegelin, “The Mongol Orders of Submission to European Powers, 1245-1255,” in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: Volume 10, Published Essays, 1940-1952* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 76-125.

⁵¹ Wolin, *Vision*, 76.

alienation from politics, a phenomenon both Wolin and Voegelin studied and analyzed closely.⁵²

The experience of empire indicates as clearly as possible in negative fashion that these four aspects of space do not exhaust the question(s) of space I have adumbrated thus far. Humans are physical (spatially located) creatures who ascribe meaning to their existence, including its spatial aspects. Human flourishing requires order, physical, spiritual, and intellectual, and this order has meaning, which is to say, a comprehensible “place” within a greater, comprehensible whole. Physical space, as at Stonehenge, can be ordered in accordance with our perceptions of a greater order, an order that informs and also transcends the immediate order of our locality. As every reader of Voegelin knows well, the political philosopher appears on the scene after the fact, after order has been fashioned and symbolized.⁵³ The speculations and analyses of political philosophy on the problems of the day may, in a reciprocal relationships with institutions and processes change the face of politics itself. For this reason, too, politics is, like many human activities, to some extent indeterminate.

Political space is therefore a part of the human realm of meaning. In Voegelin’s famous formulation, upon which, for its political salience, he never improved, human society (including its political components) “is as a whole a little cosmion, illuminated with meaning from within by the human beings who continuously create and bear it as the mode and condition of their self-realization.”⁵⁴ What Wolin calls the “institutionalized processes and settled procedures for handling public matters,” has superimposed on it (or underlying it) “an elaborate symbolism in various degrees of compactness and differentiation—from rite, through myth, to theory” that “illuminates” those processes and procedures and the established order as a whole “with meaning in so far as the symbols make the internal structure of such a cosmion, the relations between its

⁵² Cf. Wolin, *Vision*, 78-94; Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Volume Four: The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 114-211.

⁵³ Voegelin, SPG, 10-14.

⁵⁴ Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 27; See also the spatial aspects of his well-known “Introduction” to *Order and History, Volume 1: Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), 1-11.

members and groups of members, as well as its existence as a whole, transparent for the mystery of human existence.” The processes, procedures, and symbolizations are “a ‘nature’ or field of phenomena that is roughly analogous to the nature confronted by the natural scientists.”⁵⁵ Since institutions establish “a previous coherence among political phenomena . . . when the political philosopher reflects upon society, he is not confronted by a whirl of disconnected events or activities hurtling through the Democritean void but by phenomena already endowed with coherence and interrelationships,”⁵⁶ and, we must add, with multiple levels of meaning.

In summary, political space confronts us with five aspects. First, it begins simply with the three dimensions —“raw space”— within which, along with the time dimension, we exist. To become *political* space, however, it must be differentiated some way so that the explicitly common and public concerns of that space are named and their effects dealt with in a publicly available manner. Third, political space can therefore be said to contain power by restricting, shaping, and locating it. Fourth, such a political construction requires the establishment of specifically demarcated space in which public concerns are regularly treated; this space we may call a “space of appearances.” Finally, the space of dwelling and the space of politics alike are spaces of meaning that nearly always represent, reflect, and also establish a wider context of meaning for the human activities that occur within them.

Democracy and Space

I began the discussion of the metaphysics of space with a question about the location of political space in the post-modern political economy of Superpower without further comment. It is surely not the case that we could criticize the regime of Superpower for being a theatrocracy as Plato and Nietzsche criticized Athenian democracy:⁵⁷ if political deliberation has any spectatorship remaining at all, it is in the

⁵⁵ Voegelin, *New Science*, 27; Wolin, *Vision*, 7; cf. Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1968), 15-22.

⁵⁶ Wolin, *Vision*, 8.

⁵⁷ Wolin, *Vision*, 488.

private cubicles of cyberspace, connected by copper and glass filaments, or in separate living rooms, connected by the self-same filaments or waves in the electro-magnetic spectrum to a central, produced space of appearance, but in no way breathing the same air of the open, public seating of the Athenian assembly in a space much like the one at Fiesole. It was in such amphitheaters and market-places that the Greek demos had its political existence, and that is not the existence of our modern-day demos.

Democracy has received variety of definitions or descriptions and evaluations. Most prominent among them for political theorists is the “coat of many colors” and attendant mob rule that a line of political philosophers from Plato to Nietzsche⁵⁸ have disparaged, in part for its spectatorial, demagogic qualities. Let us begin, however, not with the over-pressured and frequently corruptible rule of the demos at Athens, but something like the town hall meetings that Tocqueville admired in the political experience of pre-Revolutionary New Englanders.⁵⁹ It is some version of *this* form of democracy that Arendt and Wolin both admire. It is a version that, to my knowledge, Voegelin does not consider beyond the Athenian version, where he tends to adopt Plato’s generally negative evaluation.⁶⁰ Voegelin’s essential thinking on democracy in its modern form may be capture on the one hand in his comment on effective communications therein: “On the contrary, the functioning of a modern industrial democracy is largely dependent on the effectiveness of well-devised and well-conducted political and commercial propaganda.”⁶¹ In a society with the “vasteness” and “infinite

⁵⁸ Plato, *Republic*, 557c; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, “Vorrede,” and “von der Schenkenden Tugend: I” (in Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, eds. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, 4 [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980], 11-28, 97-99).

⁵⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, George Mayer, trans., and J. P. Mayer, ed. (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1969), Pt I, chpts. 2-5 (pp. 31-98).

⁶⁰ However, Voegelin’s remarks in *World of the Polis*, 265, 267, and similar comments dispersed elsewhere would lend caution to an overly-broad censure.

⁶¹ Eric Voegelin, “Necessary Moral Bases for Communication in a Democracy,” in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: Volume 11, Published Essays, 1953-1965* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 49.

complexity of its structure” that ours has, to speak of meaningful deliberation may be largely beside the point.⁶²

On the other hand, the substantive order of such a mass society nevertheless requires a certain level of maintenance, and therefore a certain liveliness of virtue, to remain viable.

“A democracy is no Cockaigne in which the peaceful citizen can pursue his affairs and enjoy the economic miracle; rather it is a state of daily, well-exercised, and habitual vigilance and discipline in the fundamental questions of political life.

Democracy is possible only where civic virtue exists. And the first of virtues, without which all others lack a proper basis for action, is sound knowledge of the principles of social coexistence among free men in a free society.”⁶³

The space of democratic politics as a space of deliberation and active freedom, however, never appears in Voegelin’s pages as of theoretical concern. To be sure, a free and responsible democratic society requires limited government, which is to say, an “organized authority” that is “limited to the protection of a sphere of life, understood as being ‘natural,’ of free, independent men.”⁶⁴ The spatial metaphors receive no further development in Voegelin’s work. That is not his interest: he is pragmatically interested in the workings of large, modern representative democracies.⁶⁵

Arendt, in contrast, is concerned with a different kind of democratic experience. Democracy in its classical version is best thought of in her studies as “a form of government, and neither an ideology nor an indication of class preference.”⁶⁶ Democratic rule works through political spaces established at what we might call the “local level.”

⁶² Voegelin, “Necessary Moral Bases,” 49.

⁶³ Eric Voegelin, “Democracy in the New Europe,” in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: Volume 11, Published Essays, 1953-1965* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 59-60.

⁶⁴ Eric Voegelin, “Democracy in the New Europe,” in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin: Volume 11, Published Essays, 1953-1965* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 62.

⁶⁵ “Democracy,” 62-69.

⁶⁶ Arendt, *Revolution*, 225.

councils, town-hall meetings, Räte, and the like, in which there can be “a direct handling of public business through the people,” namely those people who care to take an interest in public affairs.⁶⁷ Democracy of this kind seems unsustainable, romantic, at best vestigial; yet the idea of a space of politics or a space of appearances is neither mere metaphor nor merely an abstract component of a metaphysic for Arendt: she speaks of political space in the most literal way possible as a bounded, measurable, tangible, three-dimensional space in which people can appear to one another, being seen and heard by one another.⁶⁸ The idea of such a space elides into the metaphorical, because such a space must, like all other spaces not left entirely to the processes of nature, be maintained, and such maintenance is the effort of a group, not a solitary individual. In fact, it could be said to be constituted in the very activity of the group. It is, moreover, not as easily taken for granted as the private property of an individual is in a society of laws. That kind of space, in such a society, can be fenced about and have “no trespassing” signs posted. In a reasonably well-functioning society, the owner of the space (it may be two- or three-dimensional, depending upon the local legal framework) can reasonably expect that, the legislative power responsible for the locality having done its work, the executive and judicial competencies in the locality will, for the most part, provide for the security of that space. And so, indeed, it usually works. In nearly all modern developed societies, property invasions are the exception, not the norm. Once invaded, moreover, the property does not cease to exist; if it is portable, it can be recovered; if it is real estate, it does not by temporary invasion transfer ownership. But a public space of appearance is less tangibly secure. Why? First, it requires a *group* to constitute it as such a space, because it requires a group of active participants to be such a space in the first place. Second, its internal activities must be publicly acknowledged in ways that the internal activities and private affairs of the private individual in his/her private space need to be. Third, the space of appearances is maintained by self-selected caretakers.⁶⁹ These are various kinds of political elites who rule not on the basis of inherited privileges or the like, but on the

⁶⁷ Arendt, *Revolution*, 263.

⁶⁸ Arendt, *Revolution*, 277.

⁶⁹ Arendt, *Revolution*, 279.

basis of a free choice to do so, in contrast to those who freely choose not to.⁷⁰ And we now begin to move toward the question, to paraphrase Machiavelli, of how such space is gained, retained, and maintained.⁷¹ Proceeding more systematically, we observe the following.

Both Wolin and Voegelin shift at the point of considering political space to a consideration of institutions. That is a step that Arendt is unwilling to take without further reflection or comment. And it is at this point, that the question of a *democratic* space of politics arises most pointedly. Although Wolin begins with the observation, indeed, admission that the “system of political institutions in a given society represents an arrangement of power and authority,” his further elaboration of the coming to be of power and especially of authority is largely functionalist, a reflection, perhaps, of the liberalism he claims formed the perspective of the first edition of *Politics and Vision*. His final reflections on democracy in the expanded edition move toward Arendtian sensibilities. Voegelin is content to reflect on mass democracy.⁷² Neither of these moves are, on their face, problematic, but they do leave us with the problem of how institutions come into being in the first place. And this particular problem is especially acute in *democratic* space.

One historical indicator of the problem is in the emergence of empire, to which I have already referred. While Iroquois and other peoples had various institutions of widespread participation in political decision-making, most political theorists are agreed that the Western tradition of political participation originates in the Greek experience of the polis. Similarly, the Western tradition of non-participation or, indeed, *alienation* from politics originates in the Alexandrian, Seleucid, and Roman empires, which successively and systematically quashed the political activities of the *poleis* and any other so-called “city-states” that were not ruled by tyrants, kings, or oligarchs. On this much, in its broad outlines, Wolin, Arendt, and Voegelin seem to agree.

⁷⁰ Arendt, *Revolution*, 280.

⁷¹ Niccolo Machiavelli *The Prince*, chpts 1 & 2.

⁷² Wolin, *Vision*, 8. Wolin is well aware of the problem, and, indeed, the need for meaning in politics. Cf. 7, 9, 56.

For Wolin, as for Arendt, “political activity [was] . . . a significant mode of human experience” in the Greek polis.⁷³ Accordingly, the meaning of “membership” and the nature of the “political element” were clear to those who did participate in politics. Such participation took place —literally— within a relatively small, confined space, namely within the walls of any given polis, along —perhaps— with its surrounding territory. The association of the polis “was political, because it dealt with subjects of common concern, and because all of the members were implicated in a common life.”⁷⁴ Politically, the problems associated with the rise of the Macedonian and Roman empires can be bluntly stated spatially as well: “how far could the boundaries of political space be extended, how much dilution by numbers could the notion of citizen-participant withstand, how minor need be the “public” aspect of decisions before the political association ceased to be political?”⁷⁵ The practical problem of political alienation was manifest in “the increasingly abstract character of political life.”

With the development of imperial organization, the locus of power and decision had grown far removed from the lives of the vast majority. There seemed to be little connection between the milieu surrounding political decisions and the tiny circle of the individual’s experience. Politics . . . was being conducted in a way incomprehensible to the categories of ordinary thought and experience. The ‘visual politics’ of an earlier age, when men could see and feel the forms of public action and make meaningful comparisons with their own experience was giving way to ‘abstract politics,’ politics from a distance, where men were informed about public actions which bore little or no resemblance to the economy of the household or the affairs of the market-place.⁷⁶

Arendt is more directly interested than either Wolin or Voegelin in what takes place in the so-called “space of appearances,” where people can see and feel politics as Wolin describes, in a space whose possibility for existence seems to disappear with imperial rule.

⁷³ Wolin, *Vision*, 70.

⁷⁴ Wolin, *Vision*, 64.

⁷⁵ Wolin, *Vision*, 63.

⁷⁶ Wolin, *Vision*, 70.

In comparison to Wolin, however, Arendt seems to begin with a strange political space, a space of freedom, a space of power, and a space of happiness. At first glance, these three may, if anything, seem to exist on contradiction to one another. Is happiness not antithetical to power? Does not the presence of power threaten happiness? And does power not only sustain freedom, but also threaten it at all times? Her most extensive treatment of these questions concerning political space occurs in the context of the modern phenomenon of revolution.

Arendt argues that the modern concept and experience of revolution introduces a new political idea into the world, namely that a truly new beginning can be made in politics. This idea exists in contrast to the political conception of antiquity, in which politics, and, indeed, the existence of society, follows a recurring cycle. The two initial modern revolutions—the French and the American—established near the end of the eighteenth century the broad outlines of what could be possible under this new conception. The American Revolution, unique for lack of subsequent imitators, succeeded in its practical and political restrained objectives, while the French model, much broader in the scope of its intentions and frequently imitated, essentially failed.⁷⁷ Both revolutions established political space. In that space several unusual, yet not quite unprecedented events took place: human beings pursued public freedom, engaged in political action, created political power, engendered novelty, and experienced happiness. How does *space* make these experiences and activities possible, and what, to repeat, do we learn from these episodes about the accession, retention, and maintenance of such space?

Arendt's space of freedom is a space in which human beings initiate new things. These new things are *political*, because they are concerned with the common weal.⁷⁸ They are at the same time *individual*, because they are initiated by men amidst their fellows, to be seen and heard, but for the sake of the common. Reflection on the polis experience of the Greeks, some of whose qualities were replicated in the political

⁷⁷ Arendt, *Revolution*, 55-56, 198, 215-16.

⁷⁸ Arendt, *Revolution*, 245.

associations immediately following modern revolutions, Arendt concludes that freedom and concern for what is common among us are intertwined:

freedom was understood as being manifest in certain, by no means all, human activities, and that these activities could appear and be real only when others saw them, judged them, remembered them. The life of a free man needed the presence of others. Freedom itself needed therefore a place where people could come together — the agora, the market-place, or the *polis*, the political space proper.⁷⁹

The isonomic polis —the space in which the citizens ruled one another, where “men met one another as citizens and not as private persons,”⁸⁰ was, of course, a conventional, “manufactured” space. Arendt marshals considerable evidence that given even a slight opportunity, spontaneous spaces of freedom have arisen amidst diverse circumstances during various revolutionary episodes, and that they would likely arise again, given similar opportunities. In the course of the French Revolution, for example, councils, clubs, and societies came into being wherever an absence of supervening political power and/or an absence of institutional impediments permitted.⁸¹ Listing a series of historical episodes in several different countries over the course of nearly two hundred years in which such spontaneous democratic societies arose, she concluded that the phenomenon is not a tradition, but an anthropological potential.

It is precisely the absence of continuity, tradition, and organized influence that makes the sameness of the phenomenon so very striking. Outstanding among the councils’ common characteristics is, of course, the spontaneity of their coming into being, because it clearly and flagrantly contradicts the theoretical “twentieth-century model of revolution —planned, prepared, and executed almost to cold scientific exactness by the professional revolutionaries.”⁸²

It is anthropologically rooted in a second way: political activity in freedom leads, so the participants claimed to have learned, to human happiness.

⁷⁹ Arendt, *Revolution*, 31.

⁸⁰ Arendt, *Revolution*, 31.

⁸¹ Cf. Arendt, *Revolution*, 239-40, 242-244, 249.

⁸² Arendt, *Revolution*, 262. “Each time they appeared, they sprung up as the spontaneous organs of the people” over against the professional revolutionary leaders. (*Revolution*, 249).

While Arendt frequently refers to one or another of Aristotle's arguments and insights, she does not carry the argument concerning political space to its Aristotelian completion, namely that the activities and experiences in the spontaneously created desultory political spaces of the modern revolutions are a species of human flourishing.⁸³ But she approaches this argument in her observations concerning the happiness that the participants in the councils and other forms of democratic rule noted they had experienced and the passing of which they lamented. Thus, the "public freedom" of the participants

was not an inner realm into which men might escape at will from the pressures of the world, nor was it the *liberum arbitrium* which makes the will choose between alternatives. Freedom for them could exist only in public; it was a tangible, worldly reality, something created by men to be enjoyed by men rather than a gift or a capacity, it was the man-made public space or market-place which antiquity had known as the area where freedom appears and becomes visible to all.⁸⁴

And that freedom was a source of great happiness, a happiness found in public activity concerning public matters.⁸⁵ This activity of happiness leads, perhaps surprisingly, to order, to a space of political appearance that is not entirely anarchic and certainly not chaotic: "The councils, moreover, were always organs of order as much as organs of action, and it was indeed their aspiration to lay down the new order that brought them into conflict with the groups of professional revolutionaries, who wished to degrade them to mere executive organs of revolutionary activity."⁸⁶ If that is true, then the democratic space of appearances is self-sustaining, *if* its participants possess the virtues required for citizenship.⁸⁷ But *that* requirement is no more than Voegelin, among many, argues is required even for the sustenance of mass democracies. One must also note the additional

⁸³ For an excellent account of such flourishing that especially takes into account the qualities of human beings as animals, see Alisdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company, 1999).

⁸⁴ Arendt, *Revolution*, 124.

⁸⁵ Arendt, *Revolution*, 126-8, 132.

⁸⁶ Arendt, *Revolution*, 263.

⁸⁷ Arendt, *Revolution*, 85.

requirement that Arendt treated extensively in *The Human Condition*, namely the requirement for freedom from biological necessity, articulated in revolutionary language as “misery,” and in anthropological language as basic human needs.

The “direct participation of any citizen in the public affairs of the country” is self-sustaining and self-maintaining. It challenges the party system of mass-democratic and non-democratic rule, and that system has ultimately won the day after every revolution in the modern era.⁸⁸ Accordingly, the space of political participation remains as a human possibility a fragile flower; it could exist continuously for more than a few episodes after it comes into existence, but it requires tending. It is self-sustaining and self-maintaining precisely because within it flourishes a political instinct, as it were, to create federative institutions that will preserve such space, even while the will to power may crush it:

The most striking aspect of these spontaneous developments is that in both instances it took these independent and highly disparate organs no more than a few weeks, in the case of Russia, or a few days, in the case of Hungary, to begin a process of co-ordination and integration through the formation of higher councils of a regional or provincial character, from which finally the delegates to an assembly representing the whole country could be chosen.⁸⁹

If it is true that “political freedom, generally speaking, means the right ‘to be a participator in government’, or it means nothing,”⁹⁰ then mechanisms and spaces of genuine participation are necessary for that freedom to be realized. What removes from Arendt’s account the kind of Romanticism Brown implies is her insistence that the space of freedom requires institutional preservation. The American Revolution, for example, had failed to provide the revolutionary experience of political freedom and expression and action “with any lasting institution;” in the newly founded republic, “there was no space reserved, no room left for the exercise of precisely those qualities which had been instrumental in building it.”⁹¹ The evidence is clear that the founders of the republic had “cherished above everything else the potentialities of action and the proud privilege of

⁸⁸ Arendt, *Revolution*, 262-6.

⁸⁹ Arendt, *Revolution*, 267; cf. 246.

⁹⁰ Arendt, *Revolution*, 218.

⁹¹ Arendt, *Revolution*, 232.

being beginners of something altogether new.” They were equally aware, however, that “if foundation was the aim and end of revolution,” and if this foundation was of something new yet lasting, then they could not build an institution in which the very activities in which they had engaged was encouraged, since the continual development of new things would defeat the founding purpose of their revolution.⁹² This is, of course, not an argument concerning political space except insofar as the metaphorical containment role of the constitution persists to preserve the institutional achievements of the revolution, which means that the space in which that spirit which brings about revolutions can thrive must be cut off in order to preserve from future political action the achievements of the revolution.⁹³ That this constitutional containment was not the only possible route to post-revolutionary stability is evidenced in Jefferson’s speculations on a ward system:

The elementary republics of the wards, the county republics, the State republics, and the republic of the Union would form a gradation of authorities, standing each on the basis of law, holding every one its delegated share of powers, and constituting truly a system of fundamental balances and checks for the government.⁹⁴

Arendt finds in this speculative plan the preservation of a space of freedom that was never realized, a loss that Jefferson himself recognized.⁹⁵

⁹² Arendt, *Revolution*, 232.

⁹³ Arendt, *Revolution*, 232.

⁹⁴ Arendt is citing Thomas Jefferson’s letter to Joseph C. Cabell, February 2nd, 1816 (*Revolution*, 254).

⁹⁵ “If the ultimate end of revolution was freedom and the constitution of a public space where freedom could appear, the *constitutio libertatis*, then the elementary republics of the wards, the only tangible place where everyone could be free, actually were the end of the great republic whose chief purpose in domestic affairs should have been to provide then people with such places of freedom and to protect them. The basic assumption of the ward system, whether Jefferson knew it or not, was that no one could be called happy without his share in public happiness, that no one could be called free without his experience in public freedom, and that no one could be called either happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power.”

(*Revolution*, 255; cf. 31-33). “It was precisely because of the enormous weight of the Constitution and of the experiences in founding a new body politic that the failure to incorporate the townships

Superpower and Democratic Space

We live not in the world of the polis, nor of the ecumenical empire, nor of revolution, nor, as it turns out, of townships and councils and soviets and *Räte*, but, according to Wolin, of Superpower. If Arendt's findings are historically and anthropologically accurate, then the space of appearance, of political freedom and action, is a continual possibility, always a human potential. What, then, of such a space under the aegis of Superpower?

The question falls into two parts. First, in some concordance with Arendt,⁹⁶ he argues that we can imagine a "fugitive democracy" that is not "a permanent form," nor a permanently "institutionalized process," but a periodic regime, "a moment of experience, a crystallized response to deeply felt grievances or needs on the part of those whose main preoccupation —demanding of time and energy— is to scratch out a decent existence."⁹⁷ Spatially, "small scale," is "the only scale commensurate with the kind and amount of power that democracy is capable of mobilizing, given the political limitations imposed by prevailing modes of economic organization."⁹⁸ Second, such democracy is spatially dispersed. It would not be centrally located at a site like Fiesole, but spread over dozens or hundreds of such sites, and in this multiplicity lies a kind of power:

The power of a democracy lies in the multiplicity of modest sites dispersed among local governments and institutions under local control (schools, community health services, police and fire protection, recreation, cultural institutions, property taxes) and in the ingenuity of ordinary people in inventing temporary forms to meet their needs. Multiplicity is anti-totality politics: small politics, small projects, small

and the town-hall meetings, the original springs of all political activity in the country, amounted to a death sentence for them." (*Revolution*, 239).

⁹⁶ Wolin's comments in *Politics and Vision* on Arendt's work are generally negative. He gives no evidence of having read *On Revolution*.

⁹⁷ Wolin, *Vision*, 603.

⁹⁸ Wolin, *Vision*, 603.

business, much improvisation, and hence anathema to centralization, whether of the centralized state or of the huge corporation.⁹⁹

Recovering *any* experience of the political, which for Wolin (and Arendt) can occur only in some versions of democratic engagement at what we would call the local level, depends “upon combining tradition localism and postmodern centrifugalism.”¹⁰⁰

Superpower, economic politics, and other versions of the universal and homogenous state render “scarce for [their] citizens . . . the direct experience of politics itself and the responsibilities of power.” “And that is the ‘renewable resource’ unique to the political ecology of localism: unlike the corporation and its accomplice, the postmodern state, localism can generate and continuously renew direct political experience.”¹⁰¹ Such experience requires the preservation of local, locally controlled spaces in which such activity is possible and locally made visible.

But what of Superpower, that newly ubiquitous behemoth? Its power, Wolin argues, is centripetal: centralizing, concentrating, and not necessarily territorially expansive in the mode of former empires. While “the development of power and riches” may be limitless,¹⁰² this kind of expansion may, in fact, eschew the establishment of permanent spaces altogether. Indeed, where spaces and legal structures—both concretely and metaphorically—once served to contain individual and collective power alike, the postmodern conception of the individual serves as an apt partner to the spatially deconstructing post-modern state.

the postmodern is encouraged to enjoy “the play of flux in practice, without stabilization . . . an incessant fluctuation in the institutions [as] a end in itself.” The idea of a stable, rule-oriented, centered self is rejected in favor of the freedom to invent and reinvent the self. Loyalties are merely contingent “solidarities,” while alliances are things of the moment, dispensable when no longer pleasing. While this conception might seem eminently democratic, it might also reflect a changed understanding of democracy, one less centered on political citizenship and more

⁹⁹ Wolin, *Vision*, 603.

¹⁰⁰ Wolin, *Vision*, 604.

¹⁰¹ Wolin, *Vision*, 604.

¹⁰² Wolin, *Vision*, 591.

concerned with cultural expressiveness. The postmodern self is the microcosm of a political macrocosm, of a Superpower that is impatient with the restraints of treaties, alliances, and arms limitations —perhaps because both are searching for a justifying identity.¹⁰³

If institutions —for Wolin as for Arendt and Voegelin— are the spaces, or at least the preserve of the spaces of political freedom and political action, then a postmodern yen for disappearing spells the end of political action.¹⁰⁴ The “continuous recreating of political experience” must search for an account of political spaces that preserves a “reality principle” even while recognizing the appearance qualities of that reality.

Yet again, an evaluation of contemporary life ends badly. While it is certainly true that we —perhaps even all but the very poorest among us— live with extraordinary creature comforts in the modern economy that is superintended by Superpower, it is equally true that such comfort comes at a cost. Or at many costs. One of these is the loss of a potential, at least, to act meaningfully in a political way among peers. Whether we academics —who write essays mourning such a loss— would ever actually take advantage of such an opportunity for political activity if it were to present itself is an open question. If Arendt’s descriptions of the usual self-selected participants is any indicator, widespread academic participation is both doubtful and undesirable. But a loss of potential for us and our fellows it is nevertheless. It is, however, more than that. It may be the loss of something that is ineluctably human, and it is certainly the potential loss of common self-determination, a loss, —at the risk of sounding sentimental— of freedom. We can still ignore the indicting signs at Fiesole and recite poetry on the stage. Can we deliver political speeches and can we deliberate together in the course of making meaningful decisions in an assembly there?

¹⁰³ Wolin, *Vision*, 584-5. Cf. 395 (on postmodern “(dis)appearances”); 562-3, 581-2, 605.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Arendt, *Revolution*, 55; Wolin, *Vision*, 395.