

## The People Do Not Want

Étienne Tassin

“If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.”

“If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, because sovereignty, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, is contradictory to the very condition of plurality.”

### Hannah Arendt <sup>1</sup>

There exist, Hannah Arendt writes in *What is Politics?*, three prejudices that are opposed to the theoretical understanding of what politics are really about: 1. The recourse to an instrumental or teleological mode of thought which forces us to adopt the means-ends category to interpret politics, as if they were at the service of a finality external to themselves; 2. The assimilation of the content of politics with violence as a means to achieve this end; and 3. The resulting conviction that domination is the central concept of political theory<sup>2</sup>. Instrumentality, violence and domination constitute major epistemological obstacles to the intelligence of the political. But we could also wonder whence comes the fabrication of such a representation of politics, what is the source of these prejudices.

In undertaking this process, we need to acknowledge that the source of the prejudices that ordinarily make us conceive of politics as a coercive means of exercising domination resides in what I would call the belief in the will. This belief induces us into the unquestioned evidence that all political action proceeds of and is authorized by a will. Which means not only that political actions obey a will – that is, a certain type of intentionality that would give them their meaning and justification –, but also that the will is the principle of legitimacy of modern democratic politics. It would be the source and foundation of political actions. In short, according to this modern democratic orientation, it seems to go without saying that the people want, that it is of this willing that their sovereign power is born and, from there, the governmental power that presents itself as the representative of this popular sovereignty<sup>3</sup>. Thus the prejudices do not only

1 H. Arendt, “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future*, New York, Penguin Books, 1992 [1977], p. 165 (henceforth quoted BPF); *The Human Condition*, second edition, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958], p. 234.

2 H. Arendt, *Qu'est-ce que la politique ?*, trad. Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, Paris, Seuil, 1995, p. 90.

3 The original title of this article is “Le peuple ne veut pas” – which could translate as “The people do not will.” For the purposes of this article however, since “willing” and “wanting” are taken to be close in their signification they are both used synonymously to translate “vouloir,” and are not to be confused with the

affect the common thought of the political, but also command the doctrine of sovereignty with which modern political theory has become confused.

At the source of the prejudices that make us conceive of politics as the exercise of a legitimate domination by the means of a coercion that is itself legitimized, we find this evidence that “the people want.” It is this evidence which Arendt invites us to question, starting with a critical examination of the notion of the will in its relation to freedom. Does she not suggest, indeed, and on the contrary, that “the people do not want”? And does she not indicate that it is at the condition of becoming attentive to the meaning of this non-willing that we accede to an understanding of the political freed of prejudices? And maybe at an understanding of the people that is itself freed from all prejudice?

I will examine this question by successively considering three things: 1. the relation: will, people, sovereignty. 2. The manner in which freedom must be thought against will. 3. The Against Rousseau of Arendt<sup>4</sup>.

## I. The Source of the Prejudice: Will, People, Sovereignty.

Before questioning what it wants, what is the possible object of its will, modern democratic thought supposes in principle that a people is a people because of the fact that it is the subject of a will. Willing constitutes – willing constitutes the people into a subject, and into a sovereign subject. The affirmation “the people want” ties together three notions: will, people, sovereignty.

There is no will without a subject of this will. But there is in no way a subject without a will. The subject, and as for what we are concerned, the people-subject, is not simply the one who wills, the author and agent of its volitions; it is in reality the operation of willing that constitutes it as a subject. I am not someone, a subject, who moreover has this or that will, as if my subjectivity constituted itself independently of, and we could say previously, to the act of willing. I am he who wants. Willing gives me birth as a subject – the subject of willing. The will designates the operation which makes me the subject that I am.

We perceive immediately that there are consequently two manners to be born to oneself, two manners of “second births” (Arendt): the one that proceeds from the affirmation of the will; the other that proceeds from acting. Either voluntary affirmation or free action. And thus two manners of being “born”: either the subject is born from the will, or the actor is born (and reborn) from his action. But the subject born of willing cannot be assimilated with the actor born of acting. Or, in other words, the people-subject who wants, born of its will, cannot be confused with the people-plural who acts and is born of its actions.

The articulation of the people and of the will thus meets the third term: sovereignty, in the following manner. Who wills, and whose will is not submitted to any other, or is not constrained by any other, is sovereign. Who is sovereign is – that is, is a subject. The

---

register of desire. (Translator’s Note)

<sup>4</sup> Based on the idea of the *Contr’Un* (*Against One*, also known as *Le Discours de la servitude volontaire*) written by Étienne de la Boétie and published posthumously in 1574, Miguel Abensour coined the title *Contre Hobbes* (*Against Hobbes*) to characterise Pierre Clastre’s theoretical enterprise as aimed against Hobbes’ main presuppositions and theses (cf. “Le Contre-Hobbes de Pierre Clastres” in *L’esprit des lois sauvages: Pierre Clastres ou une nouvelle anthropologie politique*, Paris, Seuil, 1987, p. 115-144). (Translator’s Note)

subjectivation produced by the will is a subjectivation on the mode of sovereignty. The will produces a sovereign subject or, in reality we should rather say, produces the sovereign as subject. And, by definition, it produces him as the subject of politics. The subject of politics is thus the sovereign subject. That is, the willing people.

To say inversely that “the people do not want” is to undo this triple articulation of the people, of the will and of sovereignty. Which means many things: to begin with, that a non-wanting people is not a subject: politics is not an affair of “subject”, and the people are not the “subject” of politics. And to follow, that it is not sovereign: politics is not an affair of sovereignty, and the political meaning of the people is not relative to sovereignty. Thus, finally, that the people could not constitute a sovereign power, by default of having constituted itself in the act of willing, by default of having auto-constituted itself in the form of a general – sovereign – will. To say that the people do not want, is thus not only to say that will is not its *modus operandi*, but also that no collective political subject could constitute itself under the name of the people.

Of course, the name “people” does not mean nothing either: it means something else than a sovereign subject: non-subject, non-sovereign people. What Arendt invites us to think, and what she sketches in her essay *On Revolution*, is a people that is neither subject because it is plural, nor sovereign because it is free. As soon as we reach the understanding that “the people do not want”, the word people comes to designate a free acting plurality and not a sovereign willing subject: a plurality and not a subject, a free and not sovereign plurality, a plurality that is free and acting and not willing. We must think the people, in consequence, not under the cover of a subjective entity but of an active plurality, not under the cover of a sovereign domination but of a freedom understood as power of beginning, not under the cover of an autonomous will, but of a conflictual interaction of the plurality.

## II. Freedom versus Will.

To grasp the philosophical conditions and the political implications of the affirmation that “the people do not want,” we must take up the analysis of the will in its relation to freedom and thus to sovereignty. In “What is Freedom?” Hannah Arendt suggests a double genealogy of freedom: a genealogy of the political concept of freedom opposed to the genealogy of the philosophical concept. From there, she can demonstrate the manner in which the non-political concept, elaborated within the Pauline and stoic philosophical tradition, has imposed itself to the political domain by invalidating the originally political experience of freedom of Athenian democracy. The philosophical concept of freedom is elaborated under the theme of the will. The political concept of freedom proceeds, instead, from a status: the status of free man, in the space of the polis. “Freedom as related to politics is not a phenomenon of the will,” she writes<sup>5</sup>. It is nonetheless this phenomenon of the will which will in the end determine the political concept of freedom to the point of inflecting its meaning and to bring it back to sovereignty.

1- According to its political genealogy, freedom corresponds to the power of beginning, that is, of calling to existence something which did not exist previously. Spontaneity and

<sup>5</sup> H. Arendt, « What is Freedom? », in *BPF*, p. 151.

nality come together to designate action as that by which freedom exists – “to be free and to act are the same”<sup>6</sup> – and politics as that which seeks “to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear.”<sup>7</sup> The political concept of freedom assumes on the one hand that action is not tributary to the motives and to the goals by which we ordinarily determine its content (the register of intentionality), and on the other hand that action is ordered to the institution of a politically organised public space that preserves the possibility of free apparitions and guarantees the status of actors. By subtracting, on one side, free action from the register of intentionality, Arendt liberates freedom from any subordination to the will; and by referring it, on the other side, to the politically organised space of its apparitions, it liberates it of any pretension to sovereignty.

On the first side (the will), we will say that action is free precisely in the measure where it “is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will”<sup>8</sup> The freedom of action does not depend on the will that commands it: the will that commands an action “is not a matter of freedom but a question of strength or weakness” (ibid.) On the other side (sovereignty), if freedom is not a question of will, it is precisely that it is an affair of power. But power must not be thought from willing, but from capacity. Referring to Montesquieu – “la liberté ne peut consister qu’à pouvoir faire ce que l’on doit vouloir,” “freedom (...) consists in being able to do what one ought to will”<sup>9</sup> – Arendt indicates that the accent is put on power, in the sense in which freedom, being political, consists “in being able to do” and not in being determined to do. Freedom is measured to what I can do and not to what I want to do.

Conjointly, we must note that the conceptual difference between freedom thought from willing and freedom thought from power is crossed with the difference between a conception of the law as the expression of general will defended by Rousseau and taken up by Article 6 of the *Déclaration des Droits de l’Homme et du Citoyen* of 1789; and a conception of the law as the necessary relation between things (Montesquieu). Only the law understood in this second sense – in Montesquieu’s sense, then, and not in Rousseau’s – can constitute and organise politically the public space of apparitions of freedom.

2- According to its philosophical genealogy, freedom has, on the contrary, been thought as a production of the will, a subjective faculty. Taking the opposite view of the political experience of freedom, philosophy has designated conscience as the “appropriate region of human liberty” (Stuart Mill). It is to stoicism, and to Epictetus in particular, that Arendt traces back this genealogy of inner freedom: “no power is so absolute as that which man yields over himself” and “the inward space where man struggles and subdues himself is more entirely his own”<sup>10</sup> than any home in the world could be. Power is thus brought down to self-determination and the latter is circumscribed to the interiority of the conscience. “The power of the will rests on its sovereign decision to concern itself only

---

6 H. Arendt, « What is Freedom? », in *BPF*, p. 153.

7 H. Arendt, « What is Freedom? », in *BPF*, p. 154.

8 H. Arendt, « What is Freedom? », in *BPF*, p. 152.

9 H. Arendt, « What is Freedom? », in *BPF*, p. 161.

10 H. Arendt, « What is Freedom ? », in *BPF*, p. 148.

with things within man's power, and these reside exclusively in human inwardness.”<sup>11</sup> We thus find in Epictetus' thought the themes around which will be developed with Saint Paul and Saint Augustine a conception of freedom as the emanation of the will: the “inner citadel” (Marcus Aurelius) indeed offers the image of a domination of oneself acquired at the price of a submission of oneself.

Division and subjection are from thereon already invested in the definition of freedom as sovereign will. The paradox is that this conception of freedom, anti-political insofar as it proceeds from a withdrawal from the world, and from an investment of the self, on one hand; insofar as it substitutes to the institution of plural relations outside of oneself with others in the public space, the instauration of a domination of oneself in the inner citadel, on the other hand, will end up imposing itself to the political domain as the very shape of all freedom.

From this genealogy which Arendt exposes in the article “What is Freedom?” and which she takes up in depth in the second volume of *The Life of the Mind* devoted to the will, I will essentially keep the movement which brings us from the inner domain back to the political field. Now, at the heart of this movement is found the inner division of the will with itself and the submission of the I-want to the self that it cannot dominate entirely.

The conflict of flesh and spirit which Paul presents in the Epistle to the Romans and the correlative powerlessness of the will devoid of power (“I see the good, I want the good, and I do wrong”) shows the first division between will and power, between an “I-will” and a “I-will-and-cannot.” This division implies two things: on one hand, that “It was the experience of an imperative demanding voluntary submission that led to the discovery of the Will”<sup>12</sup>; on the other hand, that “the I-will inevitably is countered by an I-nill, so that even if the law is obeyed and fulfilled, there remains this inner resistance.”<sup>13</sup> It is remarkable that Arendt brings up both aspects and ties them to one another: voluntary submission, on one hand, inner resistance, on the other. Because it would suggest that will-power cannot be dissociated from voluntary servitude; but also from an involuntary insubordination, of which the flesh is one of the names.

It is however with Saint Augustine that was formulated for the first time the paradox inherent to the concept of will: “For the will commands that there be a will, it commands not something else but itself... Were the will entire, it would not even command itself to be, because it would already be.”<sup>14</sup> The will is always double: for a will to will, it must always will against a will that resists, be at once powerful and impotent, free and unfree, Arendt comments. The originality of Saint Augustine is to establish that it is not a conflict between two wills, or two volitions, but rather a structural disposition, might we say, of the will. In the very moment where it affirms itself, the will recognises its impotence because it finds itself split between a will that wills and a will that cannot accept that the will wills. The involuntary insubordination of the flesh can then be expressed as a resistance belonging to the will. Experienced in its impotence at the very moment of its affirmation, the will-power, feeling its incapacity to can what it wills, the incapacity to

---

11 H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* ; vol. 2, *Willing*, New York, Harcourt, 1977 [1971], p. 78.

12 H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* ; vol. 2, *Willing*, *op. cit.* p. 68.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

14 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Book VIII, ix, quoted in H. Arendt, “What is Freedom?”, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

truly will and thus to be genuine power, transforms into “will to oppression,”<sup>15</sup> into will-to-power. It becomes, Arendt writes, “power-thirsty.”<sup>16</sup> Constantly defeated in its struggle with the self, the will never ceases to increase its power and conceives of freedom only as the exercise of a domination accomplished toward the self.

Arendt indicates three consequences of this genealogy of freedom as will-power. 1/ The first is that the identification of freedom with the will has led us to identify power with oppression or at least with the domination exercised upon us as onto others. 2/ The second is that the inner division of the will constitutes a form of the submission of the will to the self, or a form of what we could call the subjection of the I-will to the self, a bondage, a servitude. There we could recognize a figure of subjectivation which is built in the insurmountable division and conflict between me and myself, the exact opposite of the “two-in-one” in dialogue with myself. “I am he who wills” then means: he who surpasses this inner division of the self by submitting his will to resistance to his will to servitude. This submission is the effective content of the domination exercised on oneself. 3/ The third is that sovereignty has become the accomplished form of freedom: “Because of the philosophic shift from action to will-power, from freedom as a state of being manifest in action to the *liberum arbitrium*, the ideal of freedom ceased to be virtuosity (...) and became sovereignty, the ideals of a free will, independent from others and eventually prevailing against them.”<sup>17</sup>

Domination, subjection, sovereignty. The content of sovereignty is this indissociable articulation between domination and subjection: we will note that the domination of the self that is never achieved nor complete and that the domination of others that has almost never been total, but in the totalitarian system, are the flip side of a subjection to the self, itself problematic because conflictual, within an ineluctably divided subject. The identification of freedom and sovereignty is, Arendt adds, the most pernicious and the most dangerous consequence because it leads either to negate freedom, no one ever being sovereign, or to consider that only the struggle to the death of sovereignties for domination can open the way toward a freedom conquered at the price of that of others. According to this logic, we would face the following alternative: either there cannot be any freedom, either it cannot be anymore. Either freedom cannot be born, either it is always already dead. This sovereignty-freedom is anti-political: it forbids birth and cherishes death. We are dealing here with something like a “transcendental illusion” of politics. This illusion is modern politics. And it has Rousseau for a name.

### **III. Arendt’s Against Rousseau.**

Hannah Arendt hasn’t only written an *Against Hobbes*, which we can read in many pages dedicated to modern politics. She has also written an *Against Rousseau*. And her thought of the political is elaborated in this *against*. Rousseau is indeed “the most consistent representative of the theory of sovereignty, which he derived directly from the will, so that

---

15 H. Arendt, « What is Freedom ? », in *BPF*, p. 162.

16 H. Arendt, « What is Freedom ? », in *BPF*, p. 163.

17 H. Arendt, « What is Freedom ? », in *BPF*, p. 163.

he could conceive of political power in the strict image of individual will-power.”<sup>18</sup> It is true that Arendt is less interested in Rousseau as such than in a Rousseau read through the French Revolution and singularly through Robespierre and Sieyès. Both have espoused the thesis of the “one and indivisible will” of the people in the form of a transposition of the individual will. General will and popular sovereignty make the people into the subject of the new conception of the political to the point of bringing the Jacobins, Arendt writes, to believe “in the people rather than in the republic”<sup>19</sup> To believe in the people instead of in the Republic, is to make the general will prevail on the constitution, Rousseau on Montesquieu, absolute authority (*volonté générale*, the general will) on public deliberation (*volonté de tous*, the will of all), the national principle on the federal principle, but also the French Revolution on the American Revolution, or the Jacobins on the Girondins... that is, in the end, sovereignty on freedom (or will on capacity).<sup>20</sup>

Arendt’s argument can be synthesised in four steps starting from this distinction between the general will and the will of all, since “it appears almost as a matter of course that Rousseau’s *volonté générale* should have replaced the ancient notion of consent which, in Rousseau’s theory, may be found as the *volonté de tous*.”<sup>21</sup>

First step. The difference between consent – will of all – and Rousseauist general will is of two orders. In the first order, the will of all presupposes that the body politic is constituted while the general will is the act of its constitution. In the other order, and most of all, consent supposes deliberate choices, considered opinions. Now, the will, Arendt writes, “essentially excludes all processes of exchange of opinions and an eventual agreement between them. The will, if it is to function at all, must be one and indivisible.” (76)

The key to the Rousseauist problematic resides in this substitution of the will to opinion: the will proscribes opinion just as its indivisibility proscribes plurality. A divided will, Rousseau writes, would be inconceivable. Popular sovereignty just as general will cannot be divided without being lost: the will is the negation of the plurality. And thus, “chaque citoyen n’opine que d’après lui,” “each citizen opinions only according to himself”<sup>22</sup>. But a state, Arendt comments, “where each man thinks only his own thoughts is by definition a tyranny.”<sup>23</sup> The general will, erected into the subjective form of popular sovereignty, dispossesses the plurality of citizens of their singularity of actor and of speaker in favour of their fusion in the All-One (Tout-Un) of the People-subject. It is remarkable that this fusion is operated by a return to the self, not to the singular self through which civic actors distinguish themselves thanks to their words and to their

---

18 H. Arendt, « What is Freedom ? », in *BPF*, p. 163 (my italics).

19 H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York, Penguin Books, 1990 [1963], p. 75 (my italics). « People » here designates, not without ambiguity, the body of citizens as well as the unhappy and the unfortunate who are the object of the interest of an allegedly Rousseauist compassion.

20 One of the central points of the Arendtian thought of the political is found, it seems to me, in this double game which consists in opposing Rousseau to Hobbes and Montesquieu to Rousseau.

21 H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 76. Unless otherwise indicated, all the following quotations are from this essay.

22 Rousseau, *Contrat Social*, II, 3, Paris, Gallimard, « La Pléiade », p. 372. On this aspect of the arendtian critique, I will refer to E. Tassin, *Un monde commun, Pour une cosmo-politique des conflits*, Paris, Seuil, 2003, p. 101 sq.

23 H. Arendt, « What is Freedom ? », in *BPF*, p. 164.

actions, but to the general self of the citizen will. The citizen will, personal and already general of itself, dispenses of the exchange of opinions and of the public deliberation since it realises the identification of the particular individualities to the general will of the body politic without passing through the public manifestation of actions and of words. The unifying will at the principle of sovereignty proceeds to the invalidation of the plurality, whose principle rests in a singularisation of the actors and of the speakers within a public space of apparitions (actions) and of deliberations (words).<sup>24</sup>

Second step. When Robespierre evokes “public opinion,” he refers in fact to “the unanimity of the general will” that procures the durable unity of the people. This unity is not the stability of the state or of the institutions: the reference to the general will favours the durable unity of the people over the stability of the political institutions. Rousseau took his metaphor of a general will seriously enough, Arendt writes, “to conceive of the nation as a body driven by one will, like an individual<sup>25</sup>, which can also change direction at any time without losing its identity.” The passage from “Republic” to “People” thus means that “the enduring unity of the future political body was guaranteed not in the worldly institutions which this people had in common, but in the will of the people themselves.” (76, my italics) In this perspective, the political problem is to insure the identity of a people constituted into a body politic by its general will and not to guarantee the durability of the institutions that allow freedom to appear. In reality, the primacy given to the might of the will as the constituting power of the people exposes the latter to the alternative of renouncing itself – “it would be absurd for the will to bind itself for the future” (77) – to proceed to a sort of continued creation (“I want therefore I am”).

Third step. Here Arendt finds again, without saying it explicitly, the operator of the division of the will that she had identified in Saint Paul and Saint Augustine. It presents itself in the guise of the enemy, inseparable of any process of identification. The evocation of the common enemy unravels two argumentative strategies. The first proceeds from the transposition of a logic, that of foreign affairs, into another, that of internal affairs. It is thus that she recalls Saint-Just’s affirmation that only foreign affairs have to do with politics, human relations forming, instead, the “social.” The politics internal to the people-body politic is then modelled on exterior politics through which this same people is in relation with its enemies. And so this first argumentation leads to a second one

---

<sup>24</sup> The constitution of the sovereign people by and within the general will does not proceed from a summons but from an integration: each individual is, as a citizen, at once himself and all the citizens. The generality is personal; and the personal will can thus be general. The personality – the personal character of the will or the identification of each person to their will – insures the subsumption of particularity under generality. Thus the people as a unified sovereign subject always precedes itself in the demultiplied figure of the small sovereigns that are the citizens, just as the latter are but the anticipation of the great sovereign subject that gives them their consistency. The sovereign-people-subject depends on a hyperindividualism which attempts to unify the multitude under the figure of the One borrowed from the individual sovereign subject: it is but the integrality of the small sovereignties that compose it, but their integration is only possible by the elimination of the words and of the actions that distinguish singularly the “actors” (the “small differences” in Rousseau’s language). The short-circuit that insures a direct transition between particularity and generality comes down to eliminating at once the distinctive singularities affirmed in speech and in action, that is, plurality, and the public space of their manifestation. We deduce that only a political thought of the plurality can stand against the subjective individualism underlying general will just as against any contract theory.

<sup>25</sup> “The very attraction of Rousseau’s theory for the men of the French Revolution was that he apparently had found a highly ingenious means to put a multitude into the place of a single person; for the general will was nothing more or less than what bound the many into one,” H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 77.



which Rousseau will have given the example: the internalisation of the external enemy within the people-subject, that is, in reality, within each citizen in the guise of his particular will and of his egoistic interest. And this particular enemy of each citizen can be erected into the common internal enemy of the entire people by the generalisation that the general will operates: “The common enemy within the nation is the sum total of the particular interests of all citizens.” (78) Or still, as Rousseau writes, “L’accord de tous les intérêts est formé par l’opposition à celui de chacun,” “The accord of all interests is formed by the opposition to that of each.” (Rousseau, CS, II, 3) The result is that national unity is guaranteed not so much by an external enemy, after all random, than by the permanence of an internal enemy incarnated by the particular interest or the particular will of each and against who will ceaselessly struggle the general will of each citizen. This internal struggle in each individual of the two “wills,” or of the two aspects of the will, as particular will and general will, pits the citizen against the particular man and gives birth to the general will, making him a “true citizen of the national body politic.” (78)

Fourth step. The division internal to the subject between the citizen and the particular man, the general will and the particular will, has the function of producing the external unity of the body politic. Why? Because the division of the community in the conflicts that oppose citizens to one another can be surpassed and the body politic can be united only by the internalisation of the division in the form of a split between the particular will and the general will of each citizen. The external division of particular wills is surpassed by the internalisation of the division in the form of a conflict between the particular will and the general will of each citizen. This division presents two moments: it is first insubordination to the particular will, insubordination of the generality to particularity. “To partake in the body politic of the nation, each national must rise and remain in constant rebellion against himself,” Arendt writes (79). But this insubordination, obviously, immediately turns into submission of the particularity to generality. The internalisation of the division is at once the subjection of the particular individual to the citizen, of the particular will to the general will, which supposes in order to put an end to the relation of force, to the internal conflict, self-constraint. The obligation to obey the law is guaranteed at the auto-submission of the subject to itself.

We obviously see that is exactly reproduced here the operation described by Saint Paul and taken up by Saint Augustine: conflict of the flesh and of the spirit, conflict of the will divided against itself. In Saint Paul’s terms, to participate to the body of Christ (to the Spirit), each faithful must rise up against himself and vanquish the flesh. In Saint Augustine’s terms, to love God, each faithful must will against his own will and submit himself – with, of course, all the ambiguity of this pronominal: to submit himself, that is to surrender his arms, but to surrender them to himself, which means submitting to God in himself and to be for himself like a god. In the revolutionary logic, this submission proceeds from the theory of terror which from Robespierre to Lenin and to Stalin, Arendt writes, “presupposes that the interest of the whole must automatically, and indeed permanently, be hostile to the particular interest of the citizen.” (79)

This submission takes the shape of selflessness as the refractory particularity necessary to the constitution of the self as almighty subject. This selflessness of revolutionaries must not be confused with heroism, Arendt points out. It is the sacrifice of the flesh in the name

of the Spirit, of the particularity in the name of generality. In this sacrifice, the value of a policy is appreciated according to the extent to which it is opposed to particular interests and “the value of a man may be judged by the extent to which he acts against his own interests and against his own will.” (79) The auto-accomplishment of the self in the figure of the general will proceeds from an effacement of the self as acting singularity. Nothing is perhaps more opposed to the revelation of the “who,” revelation of the actors, than this effacement of the acting singularities in the generality of a willing erected into a collective subject in the paradoxical mode of a sovereign servitude or of a servile sovereignty.

### **By way of a non-conclusion: le peuple destituant, the destituting people ...**

Whence comes, to conclude with a new beginning for the interrogation, the question of the people. If the figure of the sovereign people constituted by the general will is easy enough to grasp, so much it has been commented, what would be on the opposite a non willing people, a non sovereign people, a non subject people, a non constituted people, yet invested, since and by this evasion from any sovereign auto-constitution, of a strange constituting power? Or in other words, what is a people that has been destituted of its subject function, of its sovereign function, a people liberated from the fiction of its auto-constitution? What is a people who is first and foremost recognizable to its destituting power? The people of the days of July 89, of June 48, the people of the communal insurrection of 1871, or maybe still of the days of October 56 in Budapest, of the Prague Spring, of May 68... I obviously couldn't answer these questions here in a few minutes. Besides, could we ever do it? I can at least evoke the opposition which Arendt sketches, which puts us on track, between the peoples of the French Revolution and of the American Revolution.

To one side, Sieyès attempts to “put the sovereignty of the nation into the place which had been vacated by a sovereign king.” And so “Rousseau’s notion of a General Will, inspiring and directing the nation as though it were no longer composed of a multitude but actually formed one person (...) was indeed the theoretical substitute for the sovereign will of an absolute monarch.” (156, my italics) And it is also why “The ‘general will’ of Rousseau and Robespierre is still this divine Will which needs only to will in order to produce a law.” (183, my italics) Sovereign will, monarchic still, and divine: the people of the French Revolution is clothed with the ancient discretionary will of the Prince. The nation perpetuates the kingdom by becoming sovereign. The people is but a pretence of a people because it is nothing else than a disguised sovereign. On the opposite, to the other side (of the Atlantic), the word “people” for the Founding Fathers of the American Revolution kept its meaning of “manyness,” it evoked “the endless variety of a multitude whose majesty resided in its very plurality.” (93) Thus the political problem resides for them in the “regulation” of this plurality and not in its submission in a unified body politic animated by a single will. “People” then designates a plurality acting in concert, engaging each other mutually through promises, binding themselves through pacts without ever erecting themselves into a collective subject of a general will. This people do not want. They deliberate and act.

The opposition of these two figures is well-known. It is also obviously insufficient. We would still have to describe what is done by a plural-people who do not want, who are not sovereign but active, who do not adhere but promise, who do not legitimate but elaborates, who do not command but who constitute from its fundamental resistance to the obligatory figures of sovereignty. In reality, this orientation would invite us to examine the process of the constitution of freedom once it is not thought from the sovereign general will of an auto-constituted collective subject. And I think that we could discover, against ordinary and agreed upon lessons, that constitution is not an act of the sovereign will or an artifice of auto-constitution. That the constituting power owes nothing to the will and does not requires the fiction of a people constituted in its sovereign will so much as the distance from itself, the destitution of itself, of a plurality acting at once and at the same time against the ancient regime and against the new regime that its action will inevitably bring forth. Maybe a meticulous analysis of the historical experiences of the councils could inform us on the non sovereign forms of organisation and of institution of which a “destituting people” is capable without renouncing to its own power. A constituting power of a destituting people, such would be the enigma of any plurality that is animated by the desire for freedom, rather than by the will to power.

Translated by Jérôme Melançon