

**Review of Roberto Esposito, *The Origin of the Political: Hannah Arendt or Simone Weil?* Trans. Vincenzo Binetti & Gareth Williams
(New York: Fordham University Press, 2017)
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Mankind's being-in-the-world, its communal existence: Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil contemplated this subject in particular, from different angles and perspectives, during one of the darkest periods of European history. The reciprocal implication of the thought of two of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, despite their undoubted differences, is the focus of Roberto Esposito's attention. We may wonder, however, what underlies the interest in these two thinkers expressed by the author of the trilogy on community: *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* [1998] (Stanford, 2010), *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* [2002] (Polity, 2011) and *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* [2004] (Minnesota, 2008). Is it casual, a fortuitous intersection, or does it have deeper roots than might appear?

In fact, in *Categories of the Impolitical* [1988] (Fordham, 2015), the pages that Esposito devoted to Simone Weil opened up new perspectives, above all that of the 'impolitical' thinker, which had a significant impact on Weilian studies. Meanwhile, Arendt is undeniably present in Esposito's reflections, and her philosophy is not infrequently used to weave some important conceptual constellations. However, neither Weil nor Arendt could be considered among Esposito's key authors, unlike Spinoza, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Deleuze and even Machiavelli and Schmitt. These authors certainly represent essential theoretical points of reference for Esposito, up to and including his latest work (*Politica e negazione. Per una filosofia affermativa*, Einaudi, 2018), in which Simone Weil does not even make an appearance, although it contains a few mentions of Arendt. It is therefore particularly significant that Esposito, almost twenty years after the first edition of the book that he dedicated to them (1996), felt the need to come up with a new introduction for the reprint (*L'origine della politica. Hannah Arendt o Simone Weil*, Donzelli, 2014), in which he tries to sum up his relationship with Arendt and Weil. The interest that this new edition has aroused, both in Italy and abroad, certainly facilitated the timely English translation of the book in 2017.

This shows, in my opinion, that this dialogue 'in the margins' with Weil and Arendt is actually a milestone in the progression of Esposito's philosophy. We can better understand the reason for his interest if we interpret these 'margins' not as

synonymous with a ‘marginal place’, i.e. secondary, but rather as a *threshold* where *inside* and *outside* come into contact, yield to and implicate one another. The margin concept that Esposito decides to explore together with Arendt and Weil is the one contained in the title of this important book: *origin* and, in particular, the *origin of the political*, in regard to which Esposito follows the different paths proposed by the two thinkers:

The Origin of the Political analyses various aspects of their relation that are attributable in particular to their tension between origin and history, between the originary war (that is the Trojan War) and the constitution of the political city; or, in the words of Arendt and Weil, to the tension between *polemos* and *polis*. How does origin relate to what follows? Does it do so from outside or from inside, as a beginning or its opposite, as a genetic moment or as a point of contrast? Is War part of a politics that always implies an agonistic dimension, or the negative it leaves in its wake? (p. x).

Why, ultimately, is it so important for Weil and Arendt to question the origin of the political? Their reflection is always provoked by actuality, therefore their questioning of the origin makes sense in relation to their understanding of their own present. For Weil and Arendt, the present was totalitarianism, a spectre that even today, unfortunately, continues to circulate in Europe and throughout the world, albeit in different forms. Biopolitics, in fact at work in National Socialism, has today assumed less explicitly violent forms, but it can always revert back to thanatopolitics: Esposito draws attention to this risk, scrutinising its transformations.

The fundamental questions posed by Weil and Arendt, which Esposito echoes, are persistent:

Does totalitarianism have a tradition, or is it born of destruction? How deep are its roots? Does it go back two decades, two centuries, or two millennia? And ultimately: Is it internal or external to the sphere of politics and power? Is it born from lack or from excess? (p. 4)

These questions recur almost obsessively in Arendt and Weil, both explicitly and between the lines of their works, throughout their lives. The challenge is to understand what scope there is to create, through the categories of Western philosophy, a communal being-in-the-world that is not oppressive. At the origin of Western *history*, both Weil and Arendt, however, identify a *war*, the Trojan War – hence the importance of the *Iliad* in the reflections of both thinkers – which also marks the beginning of Western *politics*; war that does not end with an armistice, but with the *total destruction* of the city:

Politics in this sense, is born at the heart of a *polemos* whose outcome is the destruction of a *polis*. It is upon this constitutive antinomy that the two authors measure themselves, fully aware of what it means not only in relation to the reconstruction of the initial event itself, but also in relation to the interpretation of everything that follows. (p. 13)

The spectre of this beginning of history, coinciding with destruction, will always haunt the history and politics of the West, forcing us to question the role that this beginning has had in forming the conceptual constellations that underlie them:

It is this bond between origin and politics – the political destiny of the origin but also the constitutive originarity of politics – that captures the attention of both thinkers, who had already made the *polis* the primary concern of their reflexion. [...] The question to be resolved is, precisely, that of the relationship between origin – a specific originarity – and what originates from it. (p. 13)

Although Arendt and Weil identify the causes of oppression from different theoretical and political standpoints, both lucidly and extensively analyse the oppressive nature of power. Esposito manages to highlight the most original features and most enlightening insights of their philosophy and, above all, to emphasise the peculiarity of their conclusions:

Arendt reads the phenomenon of totalitarianism in terms of absolute exceptionality [...]. Totalitarianism [...] is the product of different subjective choices taken at specific points that, from that very point, are consequently rendered inevitable by subsuming the overall context in which they were articulated. (pp. 4–5)

Arendt, therefore, emphasises the substantial extraneousness of totalitarianism in relation to the previous forms that oppression assumed in the West. It is an event that is not due to an original predisposition of Western political categories, but to the convergence of individual wills, which warped these categories in an unprecedented, unpredictable way.

Weil takes a diametrically opposed position: it is true that totalitarianism is a new phenomenon in its 20th-century form, yet it is *internal* to the logic of Western politics. If we dig genealogically into the tangle of European history, we can trace certain traits in massacres and violence that occurred not only in modern history, but also in ancient history. Taking an approach that may seem paradoxical, Weil identifies some of its characteristics in French imperialism and, above all, in Roman imperialism, as Esposito rightly notes: ‘they can be extended to the point of constituting a line of continuity that concurs ultimately with the dominant line of

Western history, and, what is more important, with its constitutively political dimension' (p. 5).

Clearly, if this were the case, the way to find, within the Political, a *pharmakon* against the violence of the Political would be precluded. It is no surprise that Weil, especially in the final years of her life, focused on the need for 'spiritual education' for individual citizens and, above all, for all those responsible for governance. For Weil, the central question, in the absence of the intrinsic 'goodness' of the Political, is *metanoia* (changing one's mind, repenting): this is not an action that can be ascribed solely to the religious horizon; rather, it is the *conversio* of the mind: changing one's mind because, although it seemed infallible, it has failed, by transforming power, which should have been at the service of life, into a terrible instrument of death. In order to avoid this deviation, we must be able clearly to comprehend it in order to recognise and prevent it, and to do so, *metanoia* is essential.

It is from this perspective that we should read the profound pages that Roberto Esposito devotes to the concept of hero, which Weil develops, taking her cue from Plato, by establishing an interesting dialectic between the two gods that embody this figure:

Eros battles Ares without utilising arms, prescinding from force. But he does *battle with* him and does so *forcefully* with a strength that is not only equal but also superior to that of Ares. In the end, this allows Eros to grasp Ares *in the palm of his hand*. Despite its contrary inspiration, Love too fights. It wages war even against the god of war. It opposes war, but with a peace that resembles war, except for the fact that this is not a simple war but its contrary: a war of war, *on* war. (p. 69)

Esposito finds the connection between *love* and *nous* – evident in the *metanoia* that Weil hopes for, such that there is a connection between the ability to love and the ability to think and therefore the ability to think of a struggle in the name of Eros, rather than Ares – in Arendt's last work, the unfinished *Life of the Mind*. The hero of thought, or heroic thought, acquires, in this connection, those warlike traits which keep him standing in the conflict, ready to make up his mind at any moment, judging the justness of a cause, without shrinking from the fight:

He is no longer obliged to flee from conflict, because in the final analysis He coincides with it, for conflict is his origin and destiny to the extent that only in battle can He finally 'remain', having found rest and truce in the 'immobility' of the movement [...]. *He* – thought – no longer limits itself to battle. He is by now, like the 'first war', the battle to which we are eternally entrusted. (p. 78)

Thought, therefore, is the margin in which Weil and Arendt – joined by Esposito – contend with the origin of history and the origin of the political, entrusting it with the task of conducting a fair fight. This is certainly why Esposito is convinced of the central importance of the reflection that both philosophers dedicate to thought: ‘If I had written this book today, I would have paused longer on the meaning that both thinkers attribute to the dimension of thought’ (p. xi). Even if it is an activity of the mind, apparently especially focused on interiority, it can acquire a communal and political dimension, since it is closely linked to the faculty of *judgement*. Judgement, as Arendt argues in several works, is the most political of the human faculties:

Judgement is the most political faculty not only because it is the means by which we decide on an action, between what is right and wrong, or between the just and the unjust, but also because [...] it explicates itself while sharing out something for everyone. (p. xii)

So, we return to mankind’s being-in-the-world, its communal existence that ultimately constitutes the origin and goal of the reflections of this book, which, far from being a deviation, falls firmly within the progression of Esposito’s philosophy. It not only constitutes a decisive stage, but almost amounts to a sign indicating a direction that has always remained constant, despite a few ‘hairpin bends’. As Simone Weil put it, ‘thinking is a heroic act’: then as now, as always, it is impossible to make political decisions geared towards justice if we do not start with a *rigorous* – and thus heroic – thought exercise.