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PART I

The question of the spectator

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The politics of pity

1.1 Pity and justice

In the second chapter of her essay *On Revolution*, ‘The Social Question’,¹ Hannah Arendt takes up the idea that in contrast with the American Revolution, the French Revolution neglected the question of liberty and of the form of government able to guarantee it. It developed instead a *politics of pity* that, if its typical manifestations became apparent only with Robespierre and Saint-Just, had been in preparation since the mid eighteenth century, notably in the work of Rousseau. Her characterisation of this politics is based on specific features that can be summarised briefly. First of all, it involves a distinction between those who suffer and those who do not. As Max Scheler notes, we do not say that a father and mother who weep over the body of their child experience ‘pity’ for him or her precisely because they are themselves also suffering misfortune.² Secondly, there is a focus on what is seen and on looking, that is, on *the spectacle of suffering*.³ What is meant by spectacle in this context? To a large extent Hannah Arendt’s demonstration consists in drawing out the latent implications of a politics which is distinguished by not being centred directly on *action*, on the power of the *strong* over the *weak*, but on *observation*: observation of the *unfortunate* by those who do not share their suffering, who do not experience it directly⁴ and who, as such, may be regarded as fortunate or *lucky* people.

To start with, let us note that a *politics of pity* is clearly distinguished from what could be called, to make the comparison clearer, a *politics of justice*.⁵ As a first approximation we could describe action coming from above taken by rulers seeking to promote justice as *meritocratic*, whatever norm is used to define and evaluate the respective merits of citizens. In all likelihood, such a politics will be based upon what we have elsewhere called a *City model*.⁶ According to this model, the proper function of the magistrates who administer the city is the resolution of disputes. Their prudence

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consists in the successful restoration of harmony by arriving at fair outcomes to disputes. A politics of justice is therefore more or less explicitly based upon a theory of justice which takes into account a common understanding of fairness.

This framework is different from that in which a politics of pity functions in at least three essential respects. First, a city orientated towards justice does not focus on the opposition between the fortunate and the unfortunate, but on the distinction between the *great* and the *small*. The disputes it is called upon to settle concern precisely whether the ranking of people in terms of size and worth is just. A satisfactory answer to this question first and foremost requires recourse to a convention of equivalence.

A second difference is essential. In the model directed towards justice, the possession of greatness, the fact of being someone great or someone of less account, is not a status definitively attached to someone. People are qualified by their greatness or smallness, but whether or not one is great or small is not a *condition*. The 'great' and the 'small' do not form distinct groups according to their size. Thus, formally at least, there are no *classes* of the 'great' and 'small'. In the terms of a politics of pity, however, good fortune and misfortune are conditions that define separate groups. The politics of pity regards the unfortunate together *en masse*, even if, as we shall see, it is necessary to single out particular misfortunes from the mass in order to inspire pity.

Finally, following from the fact that qualities of greatness and smallness are not attached to persons, a politics of justice must settle disputes by bringing the convention of equivalence to bear in a *test*. It is only at the outcome of the test, in the course of which the conflicting parties are induced to cite the objects and aims of a shared world, that their state of 'greatness' is revealed. It is because their claims are confronted with reality that the order brought to light by the test (which a different test could challenge) can be qualified as *just*. However, according to this logic what matters is not whether someone 'small' is fortunate or unfortunate. They have what they deserve whatever the state of their fortune. Even if fair magistrates evince a concern for mitigating the harshness of the ranking brought to light by the trial, they are not moved by considerations of misfortune so much as by their taking into account *movements of greatness* (*transports de grandeur*)⁷ which have affected the results of the trial, either positively or negatively, through the unequal distribution of privileges and handicaps. In equity it is always the point of view of justice that ultimately prevails.

What is thought to be important in a politics of pity is the opposite of this. A politics of pity does not ask whether the misery of the unfortunate

is justified. We will see that in some of its formulations, and specifically when the unfortunate is regarded as a *victim*, this politics may compromise with justice and consequently pose the question of justification – but it always does so in order to give a negative answer; the question remains rhetorical and is not tested. Besides, we know intuitively how indecent and scandalous it would be to raise this question when faced with what are often incredible displays of suffering. Who, for example, would dream of saying that the inhabitants of a country ravaged by famine have what they deserve? For a politics of pity, the urgency of the action needing to be taken to bring an end to the suffering invoked always prevails over considerations of justice. From such a perspective it is only in a world from which suffering has been banished that justice could enforce its rights.

1.2 Compassion and pity

The development of a politics of pity thus assumes two classes which are not unequal by reference to merit, as in the problematic of justice, but solely by reference to luck. However, there must be sufficient contact between these two classes for those who are fortunate to be able to observe, either directly or indirectly, the misery of the unfortunate, while at the same time the classes must be sufficiently distant or separate for their experiences and actions to remain clearly distinct. None the less, Hannah Arendt notes that the spectacle of misery does not necessarily lead to a politics of pity. Two scenarios appear.

The misery of the unfortunate may simply be ignored and thus inspire no pity. Hannah Arendt takes the example of the Founding Fathers of the American Revolution who are upset by slavery insofar as it conflicts with the demands of liberty but in whom one looks in vain for a word of pity for the condition of about one quarter of the American population existing under the yoke of necessity, absolute want and violence. In this, as in many other historical situations, the fortunate and unfortunate can live in the same country without the former seeing the latter, either as the result of a kind of physical blindness arising from a subtle separation of the spaces within which they each move, that is of their social networks, or, and the two phenomena are commonly found mixed together, due to a moral blindness, when the discrepancy between their respective conditions creates a gulf that prevents the class of ‘those who do not suffer’ from forming an idea of the suffering of the unfortunate.

There is however another possibility that is particularly relevant for our purposes. Those who are more fortunate may show a benevolent concern for the unfortunate without this being describable as a *politics*. We follow

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Hannah Arendt again when she claims that until the eighteenth century ‘compassion operated outside the political realm and frequently outside the established hierarchy of the Church’ (pp. 70–1).

To show how, within the framework of Western traditions and especially in early Christianity, a benevolent concern for the suffering of others may manifest itself outside the political dimension, Hannah Arendt takes up the contrast between *compassion* and *pity* (pp. 85–95). Her description of compassion, which is based on an analysis of two works of fiction, *Billy Budd* by Melville and *The Grand Inquisitor* by Dostoyevsky, emphasises those features which bring out an analysis of the notion of Christian love or Agape, especially in its contrast with justice.⁸ For Arendt the principal characteristic of compassion is that it is directed towards particular individuals, particular suffering beings, without seeking to develop any ‘capacity for generalisation’. It possesses thereby a *practical* character in the sense that it can only be actualised in particular situations in which those who do not suffer meet and come face to face with those who do. Face to face presence in compassion has two important consequences on which Arendt repeatedly and rightly insists. On the one hand, compared with pity compassion is not loquacious and, on the other, it shows no great interest in *emotion*. Not having to ‘generalise’, Arendt says, compassion is content with a ‘curious muteness’ in comparison with the ‘eloquence’ of pity. To be more precise, compassion is not so much mute as that its language ‘consists in gestures and expressions of countenance rather than in words’ (p. 86): ‘compassion speaks only to the extent that it has to reply directly to the sheer expressionist sound and gestures through which suffering becomes audible and visible in the world’ (p. 86). As a direct response to the expression of suffering, compassion is not ‘talkative and argumentative’ (p. 86), and for this very reason emotion plays no great part in it. Perhaps we should postulate the existence of a compassionate emotion, but to the extent that the person it affects is immediately moved no place is left for its expression as such. Quite the opposite is the case with pity which generalises in order to deal with distance, and in order to generalise becomes eloquent, recognising and discovering itself as emotion and feeling.

However, as Hannah Arendt’s analysis again suggests, the opposition between compassion – which is linked to presence and thereby apparently local – and pity – which generalises and integrates the dimension of distance – only works analytically if we keep in mind the position from which this opposition was arrived at. Actually, it is only from a world in which the principal mechanism of generalisation is political that compassion can appear to be something purely local. Now in its theological understanding compassion is supported by a different mechanism of generalisation which

is that of the union of the baptised (and, by extension, all human beings) in the mystical body of Christ. The *Communion of Saints* is precisely that form of union which brings the baptised together, beyond the constraints of space and time, in an ‘exchange of prayers’ (*commerce de prières*) in such a way that ‘everything received in holiness by each belongs somehow to all’⁹ and ‘what each must do and suffer is not gauged by his needs alone, but on the needs of all’¹⁰ so that we cannot say who receives and who gives (or, in other respects, who is great and who small, what is cause and what effect, etc.) because those who ‘thus act on each other’ are all equally ‘members of each other.’¹¹

This is the theological background against which, for example, the confraternities of penitents were founded, those ‘organised groups of the laity with a religious character’ that Maurice Agulhon tells us ‘congregated’ in Provence from the sixteenth century up to the second half of the eighteenth century, and which, besides undertaking religious duties, assumed responsibility for the upkeep of the hospital (that is to say, for aid to the poor) and, in particular, for burial services for the indigent and for execution victims, requiring ‘almost physical contact with the dead’ which was especially dangerous in times of epidemics.¹² To start with these works were occasions for soliciting prayers from those ‘privileged intercessors’, the poor.¹³ Maurice Agulhon suggests that the decline of these fraternities around the 1770s, which were criticised by ‘reforming bishops’ as well as by ‘enlightened opinion’, was linked with the secularisation of philanthropy and, in particular, with municipalities taking greater responsibility for public assistance. It is thus tempting to see, if not a causal relationship between the two phenomena, at least the sign of a shift in the forms of generality on which the relationship to suffering rests. The movement which led from a spiritual to a political kind of generality thus takes on an explicit concern with the dimension of *distance*. In fact, distance is a fundamental dimension of a politics which has the specific task of a *unification* which overcomes dispersion by setting up the ‘durable institutions’ needed to establish equivalence between spatially and temporally *local* situations.

1.3 The Good Samaritan

We can attempt to take Hannah Arendt’s analysis further by considering the parable of the Good Samaritan and the use to which it has been put by contemporary jurists in founding what in French law is called the obligation to assist someone in danger.¹⁴ The analysis of this paradigmatic situation will enable us to pose a third alternative which contrasts with both

compassion and the politics of pity and, in addition, to reflect further on the relationship between spectacle and action.

Let us note at the outset that in its concision the story of the Good Samaritan, which is a secular parable in the sense that it does not employ the metaphor of the Kingdom to come but indicates the action that must be taken in this world,¹⁵ gives a form to the principal features of compassion. Its real starting point is *the spectacle of suffering*. Three passers-by travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho *see*, one after the other, an unfortunate who has been left half-dead by robbers. The first two carry on regardless. The third ‘exercises charity’ towards him, dresses his wounds, gives him oil and wine, carries him on his horse to an inn and, the following day, provides the innkeeper with money for his care until the traveller’s return. In this model, fortunate and unfortunate travellers find themselves face to face so that what is within the range of eyesight is also within reach of the hand. It is precisely this conjunction of the possibility of knowing and the possibility of acting that defines a *situation* characterised by the fact that it offers the possibility of being involved, of a *commitment*. This can be rejected, obviously, but only, as is shown by the example of the first two travellers, by looking the other way and quickly putting a distance between oneself and the sufferer. That is why, as Paul Ricoeur notes, the neighbour here belongs to ‘the order of narration’ as a ‘chain of *events*’: the parable converts ‘the story told into a paradigm of action’.¹⁶

The second relevant feature is the absence of speech. Neither the indifferent passers-by nor the one who provides aid express the unfortunate’s misery in words, nor do they seek to justify themselves. In short, we know nothing, or next to nothing, about the emotions and sentiments of the traveller who interrupts his journey. The ‘pity’ he feels at the sight of the unfortunate is immediately transformed into ‘charity’, that is to say into the ‘objective disposition to relieve the distress of others’ which incorporates ‘the sentiment which prompts the act of pity’.¹⁷ The ready availability of action does not free a space between seeing and acting within which an emotion or feeling could be displayed and expressed as such. The action, however, is described in detail. Its characteristic feature is its practicability. The person who practices charity does not accomplish the impossible. He sacrifices time, goods and money, but it is a limited sacrifice. The task that presents itself to him is not insuperable; he arrives on the scene after the struggle has taken place, for example, and he is not required to put his own life at risk by confronting the robbers.

Finally, coming upon the unfortunate one after the other, each of the passers-by comes to a decision as if they were on their own in considering the suffering. Significantly, this excludes a discussion of where the obliga-

tion lies for providing assistance. This last, and as we have seen, central feature of compassion, charity, is not put into action in wholly general terms but is inscribed in particular relationships between particular individuals: passers-by without problems and an unfortunate whose suffering manifests itself locally.

It should be noted that this kind of description of the form of compassionate relationships is realistic. It is realistic first of all because it focuses on the situation with its inherent constraints and on the ends with which individuals must come to terms if they are to commit themselves. It is also realistic because it places itself at the level of action, and specifically of an action directed towards the relief of the unfortunate's suffering which must consider both its practicability (taking into account the constraints on the person providing help) and effectiveness (the likelihood of effectively changing the condition of the suffering individual). Finally, it is realistic because it chimes with common experience. So, for example, the survey conducted by Kristen Monroe comparing a sample of non-Jewish people who helped Jews during the Second World War (identified and certified by Yad Vashem) with a control group, shows that explanations in terms of interests (linked, for example, to 'socio-cultural factors' or even 'psychical gratifications'), or in terms of political or religious affiliations, cannot account for the actions of those giving help (in whom only the cognitive framework, including a high sense of shared humanity, is specific).¹⁸ At the same time the survey shows that those interviewed are usually themselves unable to attribute general motives to their action and they account for this by invoking a necessity inherent in the situation in which they found themselves involved without having wished to be, a situation which brought them into contact with individuals being hunted.¹⁹

1.4 The community bond

To elucidate the story of the Good Samaritan, however, it is not enough to oppose particularity to generality. Nor, it follows, can this opposition fully account for the structure within which compassion is inserted. If the various actors are all equally present in their particularity, an asymmetry is introduced by the different treatment of their definite statuses. The three passers-by are ascribed definite statuses which are necessary to the dynamic of the story because, as Jean Zumstein has shown, there is a tension between the expectations these statuses give rise to and the paradoxical outcome of the story.²⁰ The first two, a priest and a Levite, 'are defined by their social position'.²¹ Being connected with the temple they occupy the summit of the religious hierarchy and it is precisely in order to avoid the

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ritual pollution involved in touching a body, and therefore in obedience to the law, that they pass on by. In contrast, as an enemy of the Jews the Samaritan represents the other pole of the moral and religious hierarchy, so that to the question posed by legal experts concerning the identity of one's neighbour, the story offers, as Mazamisa notes,²² two answers depending on whether one cites the relationship of the Samaritan to the unfortunate – the unfortunate is the Samaritan's neighbour – or the relationship of the legal expert to the Samaritan – the Samaritan is the legal expert's neighbour (in conformity with the New Testament injunction to 'love your enemy').²³

However, in contrast to the passers-by, the unfortunate has no definite status. Posited as a particular being, his role can none the less be filled by anyone. This lack of status cannot be attributed simply to a stylistic constraint that, out of concern for brevity, omits 'any description of the traveller fallen among thieves' as a 'secondary character', as Bultmann suggests.²⁴ The absence of status plays an active role in the story. Actually it makes possible a position in relation to suffering which does not entail any conventional, customary or contractual obligations. Thus, the paradoxical outcome rests on the unfortunate's lack of a definite status. And, in conformity with the structure of the parabolic statement, this outcome is paradoxical in the sense that the direction in which charity is exercised is not orientated by prior conventions. Compassion is thereby inscribed within a framework that is reducible neither to the universality of overarching law (to which Michael Walzer opposes a reiterative universality which can recognise the particular²⁵), nor to a narrow communitarianism in which difference becomes endogenous.

If compassionate acts are distinguished from a politics of pity by their local and practical character, both of these possibilities together are opposed to a third and certainly more widespread alternative in which the relationship to the suffering of a third party is immediately identified as a function of the nature of pre-existing bonds connecting the unfortunate to the person who is aware of his misfortune. As in the well-documented case of systems of vengeance²⁶ and of relationships of honour in Mediterranean societies in particular,²⁷ such bonds enable obligations to assist to be ranked according to the status of the unfortunate and whether or not the offender belongs to the group.²⁸ Obligations depend in the first place on one's position within a kinship system which provides an answer to the question of who is responsible for helping someone. But by the same principle unfortunates are first of all divided into friends and enemies towards whom charity is far from being obligatory. In this instance, when confronted with the spectacle of suffering the moral attitude is not neces-

sarily governed by the requirement to end it. One may come across an enemy who is suffering and do nothing to help him and nor yet hurry on to put a distance between this sufferer and oneself. The spectator may satisfy his legitimate desire for vengeance by gazing on the unfortunate's suffering and rejoicing in it, as when defeated enemies are tortured or simply put on show.

1.5 The question of commitment

This figure, that for convenience we will call *communitarian*, however different from compassion it may be, none the less shares with compassion a property which distinguishes both of them from a politics of pity. What they have in common is the reduction of the question of *commitment* which, while giving rise to a casuistry is none the less not posed in an unsettling, paradoxical or insoluble manner. We have seen that by bringing together particular individuals in a face-to-face situation compassion fills the space between sight and gesture, between knowledge and action, leaving only the alternative of flight or help, despite the indeterminate nature of the unfortunate who is *no matter who*. In a communitarian figure the unfortunate is immediately qualified in some way; by definition he is never just anyone. But because the properties which define him are *relational* in the sense that they establish his position in a structure, they also define, as we have seen, conventional courses of action which limit uncertainty about who must give assistance and the means to be used. Pre-existing conventions establish a precommitment that only has to be actualised when needed.

It is then only when suffering is considered from the standpoint of a politics of pity that the question of commitment appears as a problem. The reason for this is that a *politics of pity* must meet a double requirement. As a *politics* it aspires to generality. Its role is to detach itself from the local and so from those necessarily local situations in which events provoking compassion may arise. To do this politics may rely upon techniques for establishing equivalences, and on statistical techniques in particular. But in its reference to *pity* it cannot wholly free itself from the particular case. Pity is not inspired by generalities. So, for example, a picture of absolute poverty defined by means of quantitative indicators based upon existing conventions of equivalence may find its place in a macroeconomic treatise and may also help define a politics.²⁹ It will not, however, inspire the sentiments which are indispensable for a politics of pity. To arouse pity, suffering and wretched bodies must be conveyed in such a way as to affect the sensibility of those more fortunate. Clifford Orwin recalls that for Kant,