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# THE CONCEPT OF WORLD AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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## *1. The circle of the great world*

In *Tristram Shandy* (1759), Laurence Sterne observed that the «word *world*» can refer both to «a small circle […] of four *English* miles diameter» and to «the circle of the great world» [Sterne 2003, 12]. Even in the eighteenth century, it was recognised that the concept of world is flexible, ambiguous and diverse. In this essay, I would like to examine the problem of the relation between concepts of world and politics. I will be focusing on the American Revolution (1765-1791).[1] After the events of 6 January 2021 – an event that is still reverberating in 2022 – it is urgent to think once again about the origins, the possibilities and the limitations of American democracy. I should add that this essay is very much an experiment, as it attempts the difficult association of a concept in the long history of philosophy with a single historical political event. The limits such an experiment places on both philosophy and history are obvious [Gaston 2019]. At the same time, such an experiment allows us to ask the following question: what happens when a concept of world is «put to work» in the name of politics?

It often appears that world is indispensable for thinking about politics. Why is this the case? Why does politics *need* concepts of world? Can there be a politics without world? Hannah Arendt uses world to

[1] As only a visitor to the American Revolution, I am grateful for the wide and wise advice of Andrew Beaumont. I would also like to thank Peter Otto for his generous support.

defend and delineate political participation. In her view, those who are political «have» world, and those who are apolitical are «worldless» [Arendt 1994a, 17]. However, as Derrida suggests in his readings of Heidegger's conventional and disturbing distinctions between human, animal and stone, any kind of philosophy that demarcates access to world – even with the best of democratic or social motives – also opens the possibility of the refusal of world [Derrida 1989, 47-72; 2008, 141-160; 2011, 113-118, 263-267].

In the history of philosophy, the concept of world has traditionally been taken as a self-evident container, framework, domain, sphere or region [Gaston 2013]. It is often used to support clear-cut discriminations or boundaries, such as the «intelligible world» and the «sensible world». One could therefore say that world provides politics with the necessary concept of discrete spheres and self-evident boundaries. It was in the 1780s that the concept of world itself first became an explicit problem. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant argued that like the self or God, «world» was an old metaphysical concept in need of rigorous new critique [Kant 1997, A 334-335/B 391-392, A 405-567/B 432-595].

For Kant, we must move beyond the notion of the metaphysical world, which treats world as a timeless essence and ordered whole. The world is not simply given. Pure reason erroneously assumes that it can access a world-like «absolute totality» [Kant 1997, A 506/B 534]. Because we cannot experience the world as a whole – since there is no vantage point from which we can step back and see the Earth in its entirety – we must rely on a *regulative world*, which allows us to form our own limited, rational and systematic *idea* of the world as a whole [Gaston 2013, 1-28]. We can therefore act *as if* we can grasp the world *as a whole* [Kant 1997, A 616-20/B 644-648, A 670-688/B 698-716]. Kant opens a new philosophy of world, not least of world as a necessary fiction. For Derrida, this fiction associates world with the possibility of the uncontained [Derrida 2002a, 208-215, 233-235; 2005, 119-123, 133-134]. The second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was published in 1787, the same year that the remarkable constitutional debates began in America. While it is unlikely that any of the participants were reading Kant, there is an echo or ripple between the Kantian critique of world and the startling new political world created by the American Revolution.

If there cannot be a politics without world, and world is no longer an idealised discrete Aristotelian container – which holds everything without itself ever being touched – one can act *as if* political events can shape or reinvent world [Aristotle 1996, 208b5-10; 210b33-39; 212a5]. This opens the promise of finding a structure for making a «new» world. The danger is that the vagaries of «politics» becomes the ground of «world», both limiting it and perpetually destabilising it. At the same time, as Derrida argues, once we treat «world» as a concept with a history, as a construction rather than a timeless whole, then political concepts of world can be deconstructed. The circle can be broken.

## *2. The geo-ideal world*

In his compendious and idiosyncratic *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Samuel Johnson captured the range of eighteenth-century concepts of world [Johnson 1755, 2298]. Most definitions reflect the Christian distinction between things that are «in this world» and the promise or threat of the «world to come». However, «world» is also firmly profane, encompassing the temporal activities of «a secular life», «a publick life» and the general «manners of men». In the eighteenth century, «world» is already associated with the public domain and the sphere of politics.

The versatility of the concept of «world» means that one has to take care with its different meanings in different contexts, often in the same document. If we take the example of *The Declaration of Independence* (1776), «world» has a remarkable variety of meanings. Already, «world» registers variety and a world-like variation [Gaston 2017]. «The history of the present King of Great Britain», Thomas Jefferson observes, «is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world» [Jefferson 1984, 19-24]. This «candid world» is both a geographical place (most likely France) and an ideal political perspective and disinterested vantage point. World is a geography *and* an ideality. This is what happens to «world», or what «world» can do, in the midst of political writing.

The final draft of the *Declaration* also includes a reference, not

written by Jefferson, «to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions» [Jefferson 1984, 23]. The theological is never far from the political, but Jefferson was clearly interested in the secular ability of «world» to refer at once to a real place and to an ideal place that can offer a world-like vantage point. He goes on to charge Great Britain with having cut «off our trade with all parts of the world». It is not «world» as the ultimate moral index (God) but as open access to all economic trade routes (the globe) that Jefferson evokes in the name of political independence and republican government.

Since at least Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), the question of geography was seen as inherently political [Montesquieu 1989]. But one can see the legacy of Jefferson's evocation of a new and «independent» American world. After the revolutionary war (1775-1783) had been fought and won, an «American» world is apparent in the differences between Alexander Hamilton and James Madison in *The Federalist Papers* (1787-1788). Hamilton argues that «the world may politically, as well as geographically, be divided» [Hamilton *et al*. 2008, 60]. Despite their well-known differences, Hamilton is echoing Jefferson's «candid world», suggesting that this new American world is both a geographical and ideal political sphere. The ideality or idealisation here is the acceptance of a non-geographical political division as having the stature of a real geographical division. In the aftermath of the American War of Independence, the political division of the «world» has created a «new» kind of world. Madison reinforces this sense of the political world as *geo-ideal* when he insists that the geographical terrain of the thirteen States of America is ideally suited to republican government [Hamilton *et al*. 2008, 68-9].

### *3. The new world*

The very idea that a world can be *new* captures this liberating but unsettling re-grounding of world in the name of politics. Arendt herself was clear about the status of the «new world» of the American Revolution, observing in 1954, «a new world was being born because a new body politic had come into existence» [Arendt 1994b, 410]. For Arendt, the «body politic» is the self-evident possibility and limit of a

«new world». Politics and its institutions embody or give body to this «new world». Politics becomes the body of the world. One can certainly understand this institutional view; but it also relies on the metaphysical conceit of embodiment. If we take Jefferson, Hamilton and Madison as our guides, something more complex is taking place: the American Revolution gives world both a new body and an ideality that exceeds this body.

The Americas had, of course, long been called the «New World». The claim to a «new» world was part of the conditions that gave rise to the revolution rather than a product of the revolution. As David Hume noted long before the revolution, even England itself had once been «a new world» for the invading Romans. The Romans had claimed dominion, Hume drily observes, «without seeking any more justifiable reasons of hostility than were employed by the late Europeans in subjecting the Africans and Americans» [Hume 1983, I: 6-8]. The concept of the «new world» was a legacy of the Colonies and easily incorporated into the heightened political events of the 1770s. The dream of a new world during the revolution is of an ideality that will alter a world-like geography. The American astronomer David Rittenhouse wished in 1775 «that nature would raise her everlasting bars between the new and old world» [quoted in Wood 1998, 113].

By the early 1780s, after the victory over the British but before the formation of the structures of government, the sense of geographical separation becomes the possibility of a world-like political separation. Thomas Pownall, the former governor of Massachusetts, reflects in 1783 that the former Colonies are truly «a chosen people, in a New World, separate and removed far from the regions and wretched Politics of the old one» [quoted in Wood 1998, 101]. One cannot untangle the geographical creation of the «new» politics from the political creation of a «new» geography. For Pownall, the American Revolution has unequivocally created a new world, *as if* there has been both a geographical and a political transformation. One could call this a regulative world in the Kantian sense. In the formative constitutional debates of 1787-1788, the participants will act *as if* they can grasp this new geo-ideal world *as a whole*. And yet, as Derrida suggests, the reliance on a quasi-fiction also exposes this new world to the uncontained.

In the first histories of the revolution, the absolute difference between the «old» and the «new» world also becomes the ideal geo-political trope of expansion. This new geo-ideal world can only grow. In his *The History of the American Revolution* (1789), David Ramsay refers to the political creation of an independent entity by «the patriots of the new world» and to «a new world to the west» that is waiting to be cultivated [Ramsay 1990, I: 3, II: 416]. Mercy Otis Warren, in her *History of The Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution* (1805), suggests that what was once «the New World» is already becoming, post bellum, the promise of «the western world» [Warren 1989, I: 6, 15]. As a historiographical object, the new American world is at once a distinct, defined and separate region *and* an open-ended, boundless and excessive claim to the world of the West [Wood 2009; Chernow, 2010, 18-23, 31-8].

## *4. Continental minds*

This geographical claim, which is already more than a geography, marks the «origins» of the American political world. It is not bounded or geographically fixed at the outset, as the thirteen colonies huddle on the shores of a great continental land mass. And this word *continental* becomes prominent in the fragile and convulsive politics of the revolution. One of the distinctive aspects of the reformulation of the world and politics in revolutionary America is the politics of distance. As Trevor Burnard has noted, the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), which saw England claim an extended empire at the expense of the French, was «the first global war», and, most importantly, the origin of the attempt «to think globally about history and to think historically about the globe» [Burnard 2009, 112; Armitage 2013, 38]. In this sense, a certain kind of «globalisation» precedes the American Revolution and the «world» that it creates.

After their victories over the French in 1759 and the gaining a new empire, the British had a problem with distance. As Edmund Burke perceptively observed in 1775, Britain is now burdened with an «extensive and detached empire» [Burke 1993, 227]. The attenuations of distance have shaped this political «world» of empire: it is both

extensive *and* detached, extending *and* detaching. This also describes the problems within the American «world» during the revolution, not least in relation to the differences between the thirteen colonies, the split between those who supported the «mother country» and those who supported the revolution, and the attempts to organise a unified campaign for independence: it is a world that is at once *extending* and *detaching*. This world is the origin of the American world.

One can see the ideological response to this problem in Thomas Paine's famous pamphlet *Common Sense*. After the fighting between the English and the Americans starts in the spring of 1775, Paine insists that America is a «*new* world» because it is a haven for «lovers of civil and religious liberty» and demands a new scale of political thought for its distinctive and far-seeing «continental minds» [Paine 1987, 114, 81, 82]. What is a «continental» mind? How can one have a mind that has the size and sweep of a continent? It is hard not to think here of *Tristram Shandy* and of the unavoidably disproportionate world that is both «a small circle» and «the circle of the great world». At the start of a political revolution to create a «*new* world», this world already has to contend with the promise and threat of a mind that can be *continental*: it is a mind with a new vaulting perspective, a vast, excess sweep across an undiscovered country – a mind that both extends and detaches.

The «First Continental Congress», held in September 1774, had used «Continental» as a judicious term to allow the thirteen separate colonies to gather together while remaining independent. The Constitution itself would later be described as «the Chef d'oeuvre of continental Wisdom» [quoted in Bailyn 1993, I: 48]. It is here that we get an intimation of a distinctive American concept of world, which still haunts the country today. As much as Paine may praise its unique «continental minds», how can one have a political *world* that is at once united and separate, gathered together and independent?

## *5. Constituting a world*

Madison argues in *Federalist* No. 51 that a new kind of «practicable sphere» is required for a United States that can contain a «multiplicity of interests» – ranging from those of the majority to the minority and

from the individual states to the federal government – and extend both politically and geographically [Hamilton *et al*. 2008, 259]. This is what the constitutional debates and the Constitution should do: they must *create* a new world. The constitutional process of 1787-1788 can be seen as an attempt to make a geo-ideal world a *political* reality. How does one *make* a political world? By 1802, in the midst of the vicious conflicts between the Federalists and Republicans, Hamilton certainly felt that such a world had been created, ruefully referring to the unstable and contentious new world created by the Constitution as the «American world» [Hamilton 2001, 986].

This constituted world is remarkable. For all its quasi-aristocratic origins, it is something like a democratic «world» in its very constitution, in the attempt to map out, at last, the four corners of the world *in the name of politics*. But it has remained difficult for historians to capture this revolutionary world. In *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967), Bernard Bailyn describes the gradual transformation of the political ideas of the American colonists in the following terms: «They found a new world of political thought as they struggled to work out the implications of their beliefs in the years before Independence. It was a new world not easily possessed; often they withdrew in some confusion to more familiar ground. But they touched its boundaries, and, at certain points, probed its interior» [Bailyn 1992, 161]. Bailyn gives this «new world» a rich metaphorical presence: it constitutes a distinctive «ground», has its own clearly defined «boundaries», and possesses an elusive «interior» that can be glimpsed only from afar. For Bailyn, this almost tangible «world» is the «new world of political thought».

How does a «new a world of political thought» constitute a world? Thinking makes it so, as Hamlet believed. This is a common assumption in political historiography. However, in *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1993), Gordon Wood, the one-time student of Bailyn, moves away from discussing seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political theory, arguing that Colonial America should be seen through the empirical study of a series of «little worlds» governed by family, patronage and dependence [Wood 1993, 63, 57-77]. Wood implies that in pre-revolutionary America, «world» described a

personal sense of community, while in post-revolutionary society, «world» registers a vibrant, impersonal and chaotic popular democracy [Wood 1993, 305-325]. Despite Wood's rejection of political theory to account for the revolution, the ghosts of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* are apparent in these concepts of world. While Wood's analysis of «the republicanization of monarchy» during the revolution vividly shows the conceptual cross-border complexity of the political transformation at the time, he argues that the trajectory of the revolution can be measured in a discernible shift from a «monarchical world» to a recognisably «democratic world» [Wood 1993, 82-96]. But can we really describe something as complex as a revolution as the change simply from one «world» to another «world»?

At the start of *The Barbarous Years* (2012), Bailyn himself dramatically conjures the seventeenth-century «world» of the North American Indians as a «multitudinous», «diverse world – polylingual, polyethnic, regionally disparate in political and social structure, and economically multiform» [Bailyn 2012, 3, 22]. The Indians live in «a crowded, delicately balanced, and perilous world» shaped by «inexact but effective territorial parameters» [Bailyn 2012, 5, 9, 14]. It is «a fluid world, a world in motion» [Bailyn 2012, 28]. Bailyn uses this last vivid phrase in a number of works [Bailyn 1986, 7-8, 20]. In *Atlantic History: Concepts and Contours* (2005), he remarks: «Atlantic history is the story of a world in motion. Its dominant characteristics shifted repeatedly» [Bailyn 2005, 61]. The «task» of the historian, he concludes, is to describe «the phasing of the development of this world, its motion and dynamics – to grasp its history as process» [61].

In contrast to Wood's reliably static concepts of world, Bailyn's later work gives us a reliably mobile concept of world. But do these historiographical strategies, which mirror each other, make any difference when it comes to the problem of constituting a world? Can political philosophy do any better? I have attempted to address this question in a forthcoming essay, «Arendt and World as "space for politics" » [Gaston forthcoming]. I will offer some brief comments here from this essay, as it examines the «theoretical» problem of constituting a political world and gives some context to Arendt's later account of the American Revolution.

In her early work, Arendt follows a common gesture in the history of philosophy: world functions as both a general framework of *possibility* and as a particular *object* in this framework. This *double duty* of world is never questioned. Arendt only begins to think about the problem of world itself in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). As evidence of a world under threat, totalitarian political thought in the twentieth century does not constitute worlds, but «underworlds», fictitious and phantom worlds. For Arendt, a political world can only be constituted *as* a world when it is an open, public and light-giving space for politics. Most notably, Arendt argues that there cannot be a *total world* in her searing history of totalitarianism. A totalitarian world – and the political concept of world as a totality – is always a «fictious world» [Arendt 2017, 546].

If a political «world» cannot be constituted as a tangible totality – even when the Nazi's controlled much of Europe, there were other political worlds found on the globe – Arendt attempts to chart the constitution of a viable political world in *The Human Condition* (1958). But her call for world-building in the name of the best of politics is fraught with metaphysical limits, as if one can put aside various «theoretical» problems in the name of political «practice». To constitute a political world, she argues, it is necessary at the outset to separate the artificial from the natural, the human from the animal and life from death. This exclusively natural, human and living political world already seems like a refined ideality, like an ideal discrete domain or limited sphere. To maintain this ideal sphere, Arendt can only fall back on the unacknowledged double duty of world: work and action create this political world only because they are already part of the general framework of «worldliness». As we have seen, for Arendt to be without world is to be without the political.

For Arendt, a political world is only made when «public» action creates a «public» domain. In these terms, a *public* realm can only be a *world*. But why cannot a «private» realm also be world-like? Arendt insists that a constituted political world is only formed in «the constant presence of others» [Arendt 1998, 23]. Is this political world then diminished or de-constituted if there is anything less than a «constant presence of others»? If I am alone, do I not have access to the political

world? If politics only happens in the public domain, are there no politics in the home? If I am not only extended but also detached, is there still a political world? For Arendt, political worlds are only made in the purity of an *untouchable* public realm that is separated both from the «private sphere» and from «mass society». But one could argue that the hybrids and double binds found in these other «domains» already constitute the possibility of the «political» world as an uncontained public realm.

One can applaud Arendt's clear-eyed notion of a political world that is fabricated in «common», even if this commonality is based on a narrow definition of «sameness in diversity» [Arendt 1998, 52, 57-58]. Because this political world is «the same object» for one and all, it also has the status of a quasi-totality [57-58]. And Arendt's very understandable evocation of an ideal political world of permanence and durability belies her own account of its profound vulnerability in the first half of the twentieth century [Arendt 1998, 94, 101, 135-137, 167-168]. The political world can only be made with others, but for Arendt it must also be fortified with a unique concept of *space*: the space of the political world both gathers together *and* separates [Arendt 1998, 52]. But this gathering-separating world also marks a profound rationalization of space: it always gives us a bit of space. Arendt says that without this special kind of space, we could not avoid «falling over each other» [Arendt 1998, 52]. But isn't this what world does, and especially a «democratic» world? Are we not always, gloriously, annoyingly, «falling over each other»?

### *6. A written world and a world-quake*

In his influential *Two Treatise of Government* (1690), John Locke had disdainfully spoken of Robert Filmer's view that «a strange kind of domineering Phantom, called the *Fatherhood* […] kept the World in order» [Locke 1988, 142, 145]. Locke easily rejects Filmer's claim that Adam, and all subsequent patriarchs and monarchs, have enjoyed «Unlimited, and Unlimitable Power». But he also displays a good empiricist's scepticism towards a mere idea or «Phantom» that can keep a «World in order» [Locke 1988, 148]. As Jack Rakove remarks in *Original Meanings: Politics and Ideas in the Making of the Constitution*, «I

firmly believe that the framers and many of the ratifiers were themselves decidedly empirical in their approach to politics» [Rakove 1997, xv]. But empiricism, of course, has its own idealities and idealisations [Gaston 2022]. No doubt, the framers of the Constitution would argue that it is not the «phantoms» of political theory but the writing down and enforcing of the rule of law that forms a political world. The American «world» is written down in statutes and amendments: it is *constituted* as a set of instituted laws. For Arendt, as a «written document», the American Constitution is «an endurable objective thing» [Arendt 2006, 148]. But can a world be «an endurable objective thing»? Arendt insists that the American Constitution is «a tangible worldly entity» [148]. At the very least, a *written world* becomes a hermeneutical problem: it is not only a set of established institutions, it is also a world to be interpreted [Ricoeur 1974].

It is the interpretation of this written world that ultimately protected America against the events of 6 January 2021, because it also embraces a *divided sovereignty*. Bailyn argues that eighteenth-century American political thought forms a distinctive group of new ideas on «representation and consent», «constitution and rights» and «sovereignty». The most radical idea in the revolution is the recognition that sovereignty is not indivisible, and can be devolved, divided and shared out amongst a number of institutions [Bailyn 1992, 205-206, 216, 224, 228]. This idea progressed from an empowered colony in relation to the mother country to the federal model of the independent states of America, to the United States of America governed by the distributed sovereign powers of an elected president, two representative bodies, the judiciary and the state governments. For Arendt, the ideal gathering-separating space of politics is found in Madison's vision of the «federal principle» in the Constitution [Arendt 2006, 160-161].

But there is also a different kind of «world» at work in the revolution. In the constitutional debates of 1787-1788, Tenche Coxe speaks with enthusiasm of the new dispensation of religion in independent America, with its «numberless, unconnected, disunited corporations, wherein the principle of perfect equality universally prevails» [quoted in Bailyn 1993, I: 22]. This suggests an unprecedented dissemination of world as the customary political container of theology. In March 1770, when

John Adams was defending the British soldiers that had opened fire on a volatile Boston crowd, he offers an elaborate but compelling metaphorical use of the concept of world. «There are», he observes, «church-quakes and state-quakes, in the moral and political world, as well as earthquakes, storms and tempests in the physical» [Adams 1977, I: 246]. Incidentally, Adams also later visited William Herschel, who had discovered a new world, Uranus, in 1781. There were many new worlds in the 1780s! As Richard Holmes observes, the 1780s also saw the start of a cosmological revolution when «the very terms "world", "heaven" and "universe" began to change their meanings» [Holmes 2009, 106, 166-167, 205].

Tenche Coxe describes what we might call a quasi-regulated *church-quake*: «unconnected, disunited» churches can co-exist in universal equality. The constitutional debates themselves – these detailed, tumultuous and myriad year-long public discussions between Federalists and Anti-Federalists on the ratification of the Constitution – can be described as a *world-quake*. Their aim was nothing less than the creation of a regulated world that was also a written world. The constitutional debates enjoin us to act *as if* we can grasp this political world as a whole. This regulated world is capacious enough to contain the dynamic mobility of a federal, distributed and divided sovereignty.

In *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt argues that the American Revolution had little influence on the subsequent revolutions in Europe. The American «world» was not seen as sufficiently revolutionary precisely because its «body politic» was founded on a divided sovereignty [Arendt 2006, 14, 144]. As Arendt observes, «it was the French and not the American Revolution that set the world on fire» [Arendt 2006, 45]. But if one treats the events in America as a world-quake for the concept of world itself, it is this very lack of an indivisible *sovereign world* that makes the American republic a «practicable» sphere, in contrast to the violent failed revolutions of France and Russia. It is a world without a sovereign concept of world, and therefore cannot «set the world on fire». At the same time, as Arendt reminds us, this world-quake still maintained its terrible geographies of slavery [Arendt 2006, 60-61].

As we have seen, Arendt describes the virtues of the American Revolution in terms of the ideal space *for* politics. It is a world wary

of simple «unanimity» because there must be «an exchange of opinion between equals» [Arendt 2006, 83]. But she also identifies its limitations, arguing that Jefferson's evocation in the *Declaration* of a «pursuit of happiness» that confuses «private welfare» and «public happiness» has contributed to the «ambiguous» social legacy of the revolution [Arendt 2006, 119, 123, 126-127]. And the profound limits of the Constitution are apparent: it provides «a public space» for «the representatives of the people» but not for «the people themselves» [Arendt 2006, 230, 245].

Most strikingly, from the perspective of later violent popular social revolutions, often prompted by general abject human suffering, Arendt argues that «the American Revolution was achieved in a kind of ivory tower» [Arendt 2006, 85]. Untested by «compassion», she argues, its revolution creates an unduly rational world that risks «a certain weightlessness» [85]. Can one speak of the unbearable lightness of the American Revolution? At the very least, it is notable that Arendt suggests that the American Revolution can still be contained in a world-like «ivory tower». For Arendt, there has been no revolution in the concept of world itself in America. And yet, the ultimate political worlds of the French, Russian and Chinese Revolutions hardly changed the sovereign concept of world.

However, as Arendt justly remarks, what distinguished the American revolutionaries was their commitment to «the establishment of lasting institutions» [Arendt 2006, 82]. They are a generation of founders. And she insists that «the act of constituting» itself must not be forgotten [Arendt 2006, 196]. It is the constitutional debates that create the Constitution: they are the possibility of this new political world. The final terse written document cannot be detached from this endless recorded polemic, which is preserved in nearly two thousand pages of testimony. As Jack Rakove significantly observes, the debate itself «could never be brought to a single focus or confined to any single forum» [Rakove 1997, 133-134]. Arendt certainly appreciates this, noting that the Americans «enjoyed the discussions, the deliberations, and the making of decisions» [Arendt 2006, 110]. For the revolutionary generation, she observes, «public freedom consisted in having a share in public business» [110]. It is this loquacious «public business» that forms the Constitution. The debates are the possibility of the written

world. And the debates themselves – so extended, so detached – become a world-quake.

Bailyn states that it was the Constitution that finally created a new «public world» in America [Bailyn 2003, 120; Paine 1987, 109]. As part of the undelivered fragments of his first inaugural address in April 1789, Washington himself first refers to «the civil institutions of the American world», suggesting that it was only in the wake of the Constitution that one could confidently describe America *as* a «world» [Washington 1987, II; 171]. It is evident, as Rakove argues, that the constitutional process «created a national polity» [Rakove 1997, xiii]. This is the «body politic» that Arendt celebrates. But this contained body was also created by the uncontained debates, which «could never be brought to a single focus or confined to any single forum».

The constitutional debate was fought, in broad terms, over how a new necessary unity could avoid returning to an old form of «despotism» [Bailyn 1993, I: 59]. Between the states and the federal government, the written constitution would inaugurate an immediate and incessant tension between powers «given» and «reserved» and the unending search for the propriety of reserved rights [Bailyn 1993, I: 64, 66]. The debate for ratification would itself produce the supplement of the Bill of Rights in 1789, which was ratified in 1791, five years after constitutional debates had begun [Rakove 1997, 288-338]. And the amendments to the Constitution continue to this day. It is a written document that keeps being written. Can we describe this open-ended work as a constituting *world*?

The debates started an interminable «process of interpretation» of Talmudic proportions [Rakove 1997, 149]. The politics of original meanings, and of an increasingly fundamentalist «originalism», dominates much of contemporary American politics in the attempt to close down and secure this open-ended history at its apparently stable point of origin [Rakove 1997, 339-368]. Some of this anxiety no doubt informed the events of 6 January 2021. Can one have a political concept of world that is at once *contained* and *uncontained*? This is perhaps the best and most challenging legacy of the concept of world formed by the American Revolution.

In *Federalist* No. 9 Hamilton had called for «a strict and indissoluble

union». Madison responded in *Federalist* No. 10 with the call for «a well-constructed Union» [Hamilton *et al*. 2008, 44, 48]. To what extent can a constituted world ever be unified? Can a constituted world be «indissoluble»? Can a «well-constructed», but not «indissoluble» world, still be a world? Thus formed, the political world of the American Revolution has become a series of structural problems that continuously put the concept of world in question. Madison's notion of federalism, as expressed in *Federalist* no. 39, is a complex and incessant interweaving between the federal and the national that already suggests a political model that exceeds the traditional boundaries of the political world as a discreet and sovereign container [Hamilton *et al*. 2008, 187-193].

The origins of the conflict over state rights versus the rights and duties of federal government presents a metaphysical problem: empirically, the states preceded the federal government, but ideally the federal configuration is the proper origin of the United States of America. This lends itself to a Derridean question about the need for the fiction of pure precedence and untouchable origin at the point of foundation. The foundation, Derrida insisted, cannot be separated from its founding [Derrida 2002b, 46-54; 2002c, 241-252; see also Arendt 2006, 196-197]. The constituted world of America is the history of an impure, intertwined and polemical mixture of the rights and claims of both the states and the federal government [Rakove 1997, 163-168].

As Madison recognised in *Federalist* No. 37, the process of ratification was already producing «deviations» from an ideal «artificial structure and regular symmetry» [Hamilton *et al*. 2008, 179]. He illustrates this by noting that neither «the faculties of the mind» nor «the boundaries between the great kingdoms of nature» have «yet been distinguished and defined with satisfactory precision» [176-77]. Politics and the «science of government» must therefore confront the insufficiency and uncertainty of its efforts «to discriminate and define» the legislative, the executive and the judiciary [177]. There are «indeterminate limits» at every turn [177].

For Madison, the birth of the «practicable sphere» was neither moderate nor disinterested [Hamilton *et al*. 2008, 174]. If there is to be something like an «American world», he argued, it needs to be a world that can bear the weight and stress of the divisions between the states

and federal institutions, the large and small states and the northern and southern states [Rakove 1997, 57-93]. It remained to be seen whether such a world was possible. It was already a world on its way to civil war and to the uncivil war of American politics in our own time. And yet, after the events of 6 January 2021, the American world endures; it is tenacious and chaotic, bitter and hopeful, and its legacy is the perpetual and noble discomfort of a political world that is always more and less than a «world».

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**Keywords**

concepts of world; world and politics; Kant; Arendt; Derrida; the American Revolution; the American Constitution

**Abstract**

What happens to the concept of world when it is ‘put to work’ in a political event that attempts to *constitute* a new world? This article uses the American Revolution

(1765-1791) to examine the relation between concepts of world and politics. Evoking Kant, whose writings were contemporary with the events in America, and touching on Arendt and Derrida, this essay suggests that the American Revolution relies on a concept of world that is at once geographical and ideal, limited and excessive. The variation of meanings of world in the midst of these political events, especially in the year-long constitutional debates, suggest that the attempt to create a new kind of political world also transformed the traditional concept of world itself. This is not only due to the divided sovereignty that distinguished the new republic; it is also the creation of a political structure that is always more and less than a world.

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