

MUSING

Remembering Ami (1948–2020)

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I had the fortune of having Professor Bat-Ami Bar On as my mentor and dissertation supervisor. I engaged with her in sustained dialogue for over four years, from when she welcomed me to the graduate program in social, political, ethical, and legal philosophy at Binghamton University until our last conversation, shortly before her untimely death in November of 2020. I have been retracing in my memory some moments of this journey together, and as I do, I realize that writing this reflection is essentially a way of saying “Thank you” to Ami, or, at least, expressing my gratitude publicly to my teacher and mentor. At the same time, grateful as I am for how she guided and accompanied me, I cannot help feeling that our dialogue was abruptly interrupted and that (as time passes) the list of questions and issues that I would have liked to talk about with her only grows. Ami as a mentor and as a political thinker becomes more and more irreplaceable in my mind; and, as I recall her, I realize how much I would have liked to count on Ami for professional and personal advice in the years to come.

Ami was a singular combination of strength and warmth. She cared deeply about the large-scale injustices that occur in a nonideal political world like ours. At the same time, she was always attentive to “details” and helpful to those around her. As my mentor, Ami provided support and guidance that were decisive in my finding ways to cope with the challenges of pursuing graduate studies while being a mother of two little girls. Ami cared for my family from day one. She gave me recommendations for pediatricians and playgrounds, and she always asked how my girls were doing in childcare. In the first days of graduate school, Ami empowered me when she said that it would be acceptable to take my four-month-old daughter to the lectures where I was a TA. And in our conversations, she always conveyed the joy of being a mother and seeing children grow, which served as an exemplar of how my life’s academic and maternal dimensions could coexist more happily. Ami’s support was also decisive when I had to move to Mexico City and complete my dissertation from abroad. “We just have to keep a schedule,” she said, and that was what we did. We held virtual meetings regularly, long before we would all get used to them. And when the Covid 19 pandemic hit globally, and things seemed truly unmanageable, Ami’s advice was: “Please do not add worries about the dissertation to what you are already dealing with! . . . Focus on what is most important—health and family! Just let me know every once in a while how you all are. We can regroup later.” In hindsight, I believe Ami not only made the PhD experience easier for me, to a large extent she made it possible. We always

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finished our meetings saying that we were “looking forward to the next conversation,” which was never a pure formality.

Ami exemplified to me what Hannah Arendt (the author who brought us together in the first place) understood as “thinking.” Ami had that ability to “face reality” and work through the most difficult questions, without giving in to Pollyanna-ish answers. And she was not afraid of violating the “disciplinary boundaries of philosophy” when delving into an issue (Bar On 1996, 4). Furthermore, her stance avoided the extreme of naïve optimism as much as its counterpart: reckless pessimism. It is in this regard that this remark by Arendt captures well the spirit of Ami’s thinking: “all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain” (Arendt 1968, ix).

As a thinker, Ami exemplified that thinking consists of the “habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass” (Arendt 1971, 418). Violence was the central subject of her work. She considered violence to be “among the present’s pressing subjects in need of thinking” (Bar On 2002, xv). But violence was also a deeply personal and self-reflective question for Ami, since she considered that violence had touched her life irrevocably and had played a formative role in it (ix). Ami was interested in the subjectifying power of violence, that is, “the subjects that come to be when violence is a condition of a life.” (xii) Her work addresses “what the insider’s understanding of violence might be” (xiii), that is, how reflecting on violence might take place when the person has been subjected to violence herself. Ami’s work grapples with the un/speakability of violence and trauma, but also with the necessary ambivalence in training one’s (and especially, a woman’s) body as a ready-to-fight body even when it is for self-defense. Ami also devoted much of her creative energies to inspecting different types of violence: large-scale violence (such as genocide, war, and terrorism), as much as smaller and more ordinary kinds (such as the everyday violence experienced by women). Her thinking specifically engaged with normative concerns and questions that arise in contexts of violent political conflict and structural injustice.

Ami believed in a type of thinking that would be of some use in the present, and she was actively addressing the issues that worried her the most in our current political landscape when a stroke stopped her short on November 9. In her last published article, “But Is It Fascism?,” Ami examined whether we are witnessing the emergence of new forms of fascism and expressed her concern about the dangers of not recognizing them as such. She concluded by saying:

I am afraid that phrases like “a hegemony of the right in the widest sense” or “right lite” lull at a time that heightened alertness is what is called for. . . . I think this lulling happens because appraisals of populism, and especially right-wing populism, while recognizing its illiberalism, authoritarianism, and nationalism, all of which were aspects of past fascism, nonetheless continues to ask: but is it fascist? I think that the murkiness that leads to the doubts is a mark of contemporary fascism, which in most cases is . . . fascism lite.

There is, of course, nothing lite about it for those who are its targets. (Bar On 2019, 418)

As I reflect on how Ami influenced me intellectually, I realize my approach as a political philosopher builds on her efforts to think normatively about our nonideal political realities. My work engages explicitly with the task of drawing normative distinctions regarding how emotions work in politics. It grapples with the fact that politics is necessarily

emotional because of the type of beings we are, but that, at the same time, there are nonideal features of ourselves (such as cognitive and social biases) that pose serious risks to political life. In other words, it addresses the fact that collective political action necessitates that we be “moved” by passion, and that even good institutions and laws cannot dispense with having emotional backing from citizens. At the same time, specific collective emotional engagements (and certain homogenizing forms of unity) threaten to put an end to politics by bringing violence to the center of our living together. Ami’s guidance helped me stay within the complexity of thinking about how the nonideal agents that we are interact in nonideal conditions marked by multiple forms of systemic injustice. Her stance prevented my work from becoming too ideal or aspirational both in terms of the political agents we ought to be and the politics we aim or wish for.

Ami’s stance stressed the fragility of politics, which implies grappling with the ever-present possibility that people with competing political views may become antagonistic and treat their political adversaries as enemies. My understanding of politics as an agonistic (and therefore, inherently conflictive) realm constituted, nonetheless, by people who share a commitment to deal in nonviolent ways with insurmountable differences was shaped jointly in my dialogue with Ami and my readings of Arendt. Moreover, it is this conception of politics that serves in my work as a standard to distinguish between properly political and antipolitical emotional engagements. Influenced by Ami, my analysis of emotions in politics seeks to avoid an idealization or romanticization of political life as much as a cynical attitude. It implies not marginalizing the inherently conflictive character of politics but, at the same time, setting boundaries or limits aimed at protecting agonistic politics from the dangers of antagonism that constantly threatens it. In our conversations, Ami always stressed that it matters how even justified emotions are channeled. “If you are sort of compelled to act in a specific way by an emotion, then it’s already too much,” she said. As Ami modeled it, this normative realism consisted of intellectually “facing” (or even enduring) the challenges that make up the fabric of our political life, without escaping to an ideal type of theorizing or mere political realism—that is, an unrestricted sort of realism that justifies using any means (including violent ones) based on their efficacy to achieve the desired ends, disregarding that the danger of violence lies precisely in that the means may overwhelm the ends (Arendt 1970, 80). Like Arendt, Ami also emphasized the dignity and value of politics as the means to finding nonviolent solutions to our collective-action problems. In hindsight, I realize that my years-long dialogue with Ami shaped the coordinates of my philosophical political thinking: it influenced the place from which I ask, as much as the answers that I attempt to provide.

My admiration for Ami stems not only from her intellectual courage but also from her consistency between intellectual work and life. She believed in a type of thinking that is responsive to events and the demands of reality, but she equally believed in the power of collective action, a belief that was evident even in her last email to me on October 30, 2020. As the US Presidential election approached, with Donald Trump as the incumbent candidate, Ami finished her message by saying: “Working hard to make sure vote is protected locally. Will know at least that our vote’s integrity is preserved.”

I want to finish this musing by letting Ami’s words speak directly to us again. I realize that I have chosen a passage where her voice gets closely intertwined with her interpretation of Arendt. And perhaps my choice responds partially to the fact that it brings Ami closer to me. But above all, her words strike me as utterly relevant for the world we share and the political challenges we face.

I believe that the question of the possibility of and stakes in meaningful political citizenship is a crucial question for the present and the immediate future, if indeed political citizenship matters for intervention with and the prevention of that subset of grave wrongdoings that otherwise proliferate, intensify, and crystallize into identity defining features of people and groups. I take the intricate story that Arendt tells between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* to tell us this. But it also points at some room for a very guarded pessimistic optimism. As I read her work, what Arendt tells us very clearly is that, on the one hand, all we have is ourselves, yet on the other hand, what that means is that we can insert ourselves between ourselves and our grave wrongdoings morally (by asking ourselves what is the future self that we are willing to live with) and especially politically (by responding to the political question about the meaning of citizenship through political action with others, though with a historically inspired healthy dose of suspicion of what we are doing and what we are actually contributing to). (Bar On 2012, 125–26)

Ami stressed how politics is always an unfinished project that depends on (and remains open to) collective action. It is that openness, or the possibility of “new beginnings,” that may prevent despair and allow for a guarded optimism even in the face of significant political challenges. Ami believed in meaningful citizenship that conjoins passion and action to confront the profound injustices that pervade our political realities; she was very passionate herself. As I remember Ami, she becomes increasingly in my mind someone who—to use again Arendt’s words—“cared for the world.”

Ami is no longer among us. Reconciling ourselves with her absence and the silence she leaves takes time. However, Ami continues to be a source of inspiration.

Thank you, Ami.

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Jessica Vargas González holds a PhD in philosophy from Binghamton University. Her primary interests are in social and political philosophy, especially Hannah Arendt’s work. Her current research focuses on a normative analysis of the role of emotions and imagination in political life based on an Arendtian agonistic conception of politics.