

## Anonymous's Glory

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Hannah Arendt is unusual among contemporary political theorists for many reasons, not least of which is her apparent praise for the pursuit of glory. Yet, far from arguing for its enduring relevance, Arendt seems to suggest the pursuit is obsolete, as the individual heroic actor has been supplanted by anonymous process in modernity. Here, the hacktivist collective Anonymous is used to illustrate the enduring significance of glory in politics, as it pursues, seemingly paradoxically, an Arendtian-style glory with its hacktivism. Through their use of pseudonymity, Anonymous's actions afford a kind of revelation and, in this way, offer a chance at glory and immortality, while respecting the collective's opposition to individual celebrity, and also protecting the offline identities of actors. With its combination of identification and obfuscation, Anonymous's pseudonymous pursuit of glory offers a model for political action today.

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Following its celebration by the ancients and denigration in Christian thought, the pursuit of worldly glory has received mixed reviews. For example, while "Machiavelli's criterion for political action was glory" (Arendt, 1958a, p. 77), Hobbes lists it among the "three principall causes of quarrell" (Hobbes & Tuck, 1996, p. 88). Often associated with the republican tradition, it was a recurring theme of the "Founding Fathers" (Adair, 1974).<sup>3</sup> Given the prominence of glory in earlier political thought, it is striking that contemporary discussions of glory are comparatively rare.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most prominent contemporary account is that of

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<sup>3</sup> They were also fond of pseudonyms, as in, for example, the famous use of the collective pseudonym "Publius" in the Federalist Papers. One could even argue that Publius represents an analog precedent for Anonymous, although the latter features both collective and individual pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that the concept has been entirely ignored. For example, Jerrold M. Post published *Narcissism and Politics: Dreams of Glory* in 2014, and there have been important recent works on the

Hannah Arendt. In fact, Peg Birmingham (2011) goes so far as to say that she “is alone among contemporary political thinkers in taking up the modern problem of glory” (p. 12). While Arendt does not offer a systematic or exhaustive treatment of the concept, by piecing together her various statements on the topic, the outlines of her understanding of glory can be discerned. Arendt understands glory as a source of inspiration for action, and though she does not explicitly define it, what she seems to be referring to when she uses the term is a kind of illumination of action, which enhances the revelation of the actor, and, in so doing, offers them a chance at immortality.

In this article, I use Arendt’s account of glory to ground an argument for glory’s enduring significance as a source of inspiration for action. To that end, the hacktivist collective Anonymous is shown to update Arendt’s conception of glory for the current moment with its model of pseudonymous glory. Ultimately, I aim to show that Anonymous’s pseudonymous pursuit of glory—with its combination of identification and obfuscation—represents a valuable model for contemporary political action.

### Glory in Arendt

Birmingham (2011) is not alone in highlighting the importance of glory in Arendt’s thought. Rather, the identification is consistent with a popular interpretation of the thinker, which foregrounds her affection for Greek agonal politics. Arendt has, in fact, often been criticized for her overemphasis on elitist ideals like glory. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin (1981) quips that “Arendt’s citizens begin to resemble posturing little boys clamoring for attention (‘Look at me! I’m the greatest!’ ‘No, look at *me!*’)” (p. 338, emphasis in original). Similarly, Sheldon S. Wolin (1983) identifies an “antidemocratic strain in Arendt’s thought” (p. 4), observing how “authority, ambition, glory, and superiority . . . figured so importantly in [her] conception of authentic political action” (p. 3).<sup>5</sup> And Richard Wolin (2001) contends that “like her mentor from Messkirch [Martin Heidegger], she suffered profoundly from ‘polis envy’—a tendency to view modern political life as a precipitous fall from the glories of a highly mythologized Periclean heyday” (p. 69).

Though Arendt does emphasize the importance of glory for the ancient Greeks and Machiavelli in particular, she also seems to suggest that it has largely disappeared in modern mass society, dominated as it is by “the rise of the social” (Arendt, 1958a, p. 38), or what Pitkin (1998) has humorously labeled “the attack of the blob.” Arendt (1958a) associates “the social” with “behavior,” which “exclude[s] spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (p. 40). In her estimation, modern society has “made excellence anonymous” (Arendt, 1958a, p. 49). In *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958a) describes “[t]he monuments to the ‘Unknown Soldier’” as “bear[ing] testimony to the *then still existing* need for glorification, for finding a ‘who,’ an identifiable somebody whom four years of mass slaughter should have revealed” (p. 181, emphasis added; also quoted in Markell, 2017, p. 81). Similarly, she writes, “action needs for its full

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concept of glory in political theology (Agamben, 2007/2011), Hobbes (Birmingham, 2011; Mark, 2018; Slomp, 2000; Strong, 2017), Machiavelli (Baluch, 2014; McCormick, 2015; Owen, 2017; Zmora, 2007), and Tocqueville (Duong, 2018). That said, the study of the role of celebrity in politics, by contrast, has become a cottage industry (see, e.g., Inthorn & Street, 2011; Kellner, 2016; Wheeler, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> S. Wolin (1983) argues Arendt changed course in her later works, eventually taking up “a leftward position” (p. 4).

appearance the shining brightness we *once called* glory, and which is possible only in the public realm" (Arendt, 1958a, p. 180, emphasis added). Finally, the modern examples of action that Arendt praises, with important exceptions to be examined shortly, tend not to be discussed in terms of glory (Kateb, 2000, p. 139).

Acknowledging Arendt's diagnosis of modernity, Birmingham (2011) and Patchen Markell (2017) both attempt to salvage a kind of Arendtian glory. Specifically, Birmingham (2011) argues that Arendt came to connect glory with "political responsibility charged with the task of bearing the world" (p. 12). On her account, Arendt's understanding of glory shifts from a focus on acts of "sovereign, sacrificial violence" to care for the world (Birmingham, 2011, p. 12). For his part, Markell (2017) contests readings of Arendt "as a straightforward partisan of an old, aristocratic ethos of glory-seeking, or, more subtly, as a defender of a reconstructed ideal of glory, reassuringly detached from... 'sovereign violence' and 'individual and collective sacrifice'" with his concept "anonymous glory" (p. 80). Markell (2017) explains,

The seemingly contradictory combination of anonymity and glory isn't simply a sign that the aspiration to individual glory has been made obsolete by social power on the scale of modern bureaucratic rule or white supremacy; instead, it's the condition both of any possible action that could effectively transform either of those structures, and of the its [*sic*] extraordinary difficulty and unlikelihood. (p. 87)

For Markell, the pursuit of glory is a "meaningful failure" because, through its failure, it reveals the necessary conditions for effective action—heroic effort—while also simultaneously underscoring the unlikelihood of success.

While Birmingham (2011) and Markell (2017) are right to push back against the caricature of Arendtian politics as suffering from "polis envy" (R. Wolin, 2001, p. 69), Arendtian glory need not be entirely reconstituted nor relegated to failure—even the meaningful variety—as there are hints in Arendt's work that a form of glory may still be possible. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958a) writes,

From the revolutions of 1848 to the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the European working-class, by virtue of being the only organized and hence the leading section of the people, has written one of the most *glorious* and probably the most promising chapter of recent history. (p. 215, emphasis added)

Although it is the chapter of history, rather than the acts themselves that are referred to as "glorious," it is reasonable to suggest Arendt may have considered the latter, which define the former, to be worthy of glory.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in an essay published the same year as *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958b) describes the Hungarian Revolution as "the Hungarian people[']s...most glorious hour" (p. 43), and, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, she refers to the "glory" of the Warsaw ghetto uprising (Arendt, 1963/1994, p. 12). If we read these references as acknowledgments of the possibility of a kind of collective revelation, albeit likely a

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that Arendt (1958a) expresses pessimism about the fate of even this modest form of glory in mass society (pp. 219–220).

diminished form of revelation for Arendt, then it seems that she allows for a kind of modern glory. In support of such a reading is the fact that the line between action in concert and collective action is blurry to begin with (see also Markell, 2017, p. 87), and, further, that in her account of the Hungarian Revolution, Arendt (1958b) approvingly describes the actions of the “crowd” and explicitly praises the way in which “the people” acted “spontaneously”, “without leadership and without [a] previously formulated program” (pp. 26-28).

It is in the tradition of such collective action that Anonymous pursues an Arendtian-style glory. Specifically, there are three main aspects of Arendt’s account of glory that are of particular relevance to the analysis of Anonymous. First, Arendt identifies glory as a source of inspiration for action. It is, in her words, a “principle” for action. Second, Arendt stresses the relationship between glory and self-revelation. In fact, glory, which she describes in terms of a kind of “shining brightness,” seems to complete self-revelation for Arendt (Arendt, 1958a, p. 180). Third, and relatedly, Arendt identifies glory with immortality. By revealing oneself through action, the actor who gains glory also gains the possibility of achieving immortality. Though Arendt does not explicitly discuss the way in which self-revelation and immortality can be seen as comprising glory’s inspiring power, her treatment of glory primarily in terms of these three concepts—inspiration, self-revelation, and immortality—lays the foundation for such a reading.

One of Arendt’s most explicit discussions of glory’s inspirational potential comes in her essay “What Is Freedom?”<sup>7</sup> There, Arendt (1961/1993) identifies glory as one of the “principles” from which action “springs” (p. 152).<sup>8</sup> Other principles include “honor..., love of equality, which Montesquieu called virtue, or distinction or

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<sup>7</sup> It is also evident in her lecture notes on Machiavelli and Cicero (see Arendt, 1955, p. 024018; 1969, p. 024471).

<sup>8</sup> Oddly, in “Introduction *into* Politics,” which is comprised of initially unpublished notes from the mid- to late-1950s, translated from the German (see Arendt, 2005a, p. xvii), Arendt (2005a, p. 195) does not list glory among her examples of principles, although she does feature many of the same principles as are found in “What Is Freedom?” (Arendt 1961/1993). Another difference between the earlier discussion of principles and the later one is that in the earlier one, Arendt (2005a), drawing on Montesquieu, seems to suggest that certain principles are exclusive to particular ages and political systems (p. 195), a suggestion she omits from the published essay, while still acknowledging her debt to “Montesquieu’s famous analysis of forms of government” (Arendt, 1961/1993, p. 152). In her final, unfinished work, *The Life of Mind*, Arendt (1978) repeats the claim, asserting that “Montesquieu was probably right” (p. 201) to identify a single principle with each regime type. There Arendt (1978) also explicitly identifies the principle of glory with monarchy, seemingly suggesting that glory is *only* a principle of action in monarchies (p. 201). My sense is that what Arendt means by her identification of particular principles with particular regimes, given her insistence on the plurality of principles, is that while some principles may be *definitive* of a regime, they are not *exclusive* to them. According to Lucy Cane (2015), and I agree, actors “repeat principles by *rearticulating* them” (69; emphasis in original; see also Muldoon, 2016, pp. 132–133), and this rearticulation is better understood as a “reinvention” (Muldoon, 2016, p. 132) than as a mere reiteration, although it stops short of full-scale transformation in the manner of Birmingham (2011) and Markell (2017). Admittedly, this reading does not fully resolve the question of why, if principles are not exclusive to certain times and places, Arendt does not simply say that, instead of suggesting that a principle from one period, may be a “goal[!],” “standard,” or “end” in another period (Arendt 2005a, p. 195). Ultimately, even if all of the interpretative issues are not

excellence," as well as less exalted notions such as "fear or distrust or hatred" (Arendt, 1961/1993, p. 152). Arendt (1961/1993) explains,

Action insofar as it is free is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will—although it needs both for the execution of any particular goal—but springs from something altogether different which (following Montesquieu's famous analysis of forms of government) I shall call a principle. (p. 152)

According to Arendt (1961/1993), "Principles do not operate from within the self as motives do . . . but inspire, as it were, from without; and they are much too general to prescribe particular goals" (p. 152). They are "fully manifest only in the performing act itself" (Arendt, 1961/1993, p. 152). Arendt's account of principles is idiosyncratic and obscure; however, what she seems to be suggesting is that contrary to the commonplace understanding of action in terms of motives and goals, there is this additional factor—principles—which preserve the freedom of action by serving as the source from which action "springs" (1961/1993, p. 152). This is not to say that action does not involve motives and goals, but that free action, for Arendt, involves principles as well (Knauer, 1980). George Kateb (2000) well encapsulates the nature of principles when he describes them as "commitment[s]" (p. 138).

Arendt's appreciation for glory is rooted in her understanding of action, which foregrounds its revelatory aspect. She writes in *The Human Condition*, "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world" (Arendt, 1958a, p. 179). For Arendt (1958a), it is "[b]ecause of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act" that "action *needs* for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm" (p. 180, emphasis added). In a lecture on Machiavelli, Arendt (1955) describes glory as "the height of appearance" (p. 024018). Glory is integral to action for Arendt because self-revelation is only fully realized when the "shining brightness" of glory is achieved. Lewis P. Hinchman and Sandra K. Hinchman (1984) trace Arendt's conceptualization of glory to the influence of Martin Heidegger, noting the "remarkable convergence" of their thinking on the topic (p. 201). Like Heidegger, Arendt identifies being with appearance (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1984, p. 201). Thus, "glorification actually *makes* the deeds what they *are*" (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1984, p. 201, emphasis in original). Yet, as Faisal Baluch (2014) observes, it seems that Machiavelli was also an influence (pp. 159–160). In fact, Arendt's lecture notes on Machiavelli highlight this very aspect of his thinking (see Arendt 1955, p. 024018). Regardless, Arendt praises glory for the way in which it illuminates action, and, through this illumination, actualizes action in the world, thus enhancing the revelation of the self.

According to Arendt, in achieving glory, actors are afforded a chance at immortality. Arendt consistently stresses this aspect of glory, at one point noting how for the Greeks, "Glory, the specifically human possibility of immortality, was due to everything that revealed greatness" (2005b, p. 46). In a discussion of Homeric impartiality, Arendt (1961/1993) describes how Herodotus sought "to prevent 'the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks *and* the barbarians from losing their due meed of glory'" (Arendt,

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fully resolved, I have attempted to offer, at the least, an Arendtian account of principles, and one with support in the secondary literature.

1961/1993, p. 51, emphasis in original). Similarly, she relays Pericles' claim "that the glory of her [Athens'] deeds will be so great that the city will be able to dispense with the professional fabricators of glory, the poets and artists" (Arendt, 1961/1993, p. 217; see also p. 72; 1958a, pp. 197–198). She notes too how Machiavelli traces "the rise 'of the Condottiere from low condition to high rank,' . . . from circumstances common to all men to the shining glory of great deeds" (Arendt, 1958a, p. 35). In each of the examples, the "shining brightness" of glory affords actors a chance to achieve immortality, whether it be in the form of the historical works of Herodotus and Machiavelli, or in the history that Athens will memorialize for itself through the polis (at least according to Thucydides's Pericles). The quest for immortality is not selfish or egoistic vainglory for Arendt, but is marked by an orientation toward this world or care for the world that is essential to its endurance. In a lecture course, "History of Political Theory," Arendt (1955) observes that the "[a]ncients could become immortal only by adding something to the world which goes on after they are dead" (p. 024019). Immortality is significant for Arendt not only because it may help to inspire actors to seek greatness but also because, in so doing, it contributes to the stability, depth, and meaningfulness of human existence. With this in mind, glory should be seen as an example of what Lucy Cane (2015) calls "(re)generative" principles, which serve to "reinforce the vitality of the public realm in which they operate" (p. 67).

Finally, it is worth noting that many of Arendt's examples of glory—the deeds of Hector and Achilles (Arendt, 1961/1993, pp. 51–52, 262–263), "the Greeks *and* the barbarians" (Arendt, 1961/1993, p. 51), and Machiavelli's Condottiere (Arendt, 1958a, p. 35), as well as the American Revolution (Arendt, 1963/2006, p. 207; Arendt, 1975), the working-class revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century (Arendt, 1958a, p. 215), and the Warsaw uprising (Arendt, 1963/1994, p. 12)—involve violent action. This is surprising given Arendt's suspicion of violence and tendency to minimize its role in politics, and Arendt clearly understands glory as a political concept. As I see it, Arendt is able to understand glory as a political concept while linking glory with violence because she understands that political action often contains an element of violence. What is crucial for Arendt is that in order to qualify as political, actions cannot be primarily violent (Isaac, 1992, pp. 126–139).

### **Anonymous's Glory**

The issue of violence aside, and despite Arendt's tentative embrace of collective action, her examples of modern glory—specifically the working-class revolutions—remain puzzling in that they seem at odds with her supposedly strict division of action and labor, of the individual heroic actor and anonymous social process. In his own account of glory in Arendt, Markell (2017) notes her tendency to immediately complicate the very distinctions she sets up. Specifically, Markell (2017) observes that in *The Human Condition*, Arendt at once offers "theoretical simplifications while also, as it was, turning them back against themselves, arranging them so that they would eventually complicate and enrich, rather than polarize and harden, her readers' view of the world" (p. 89). In this way, the hacktivist collective Anonymous can be seen as extending Arendt's project, as Anonymous enacts, while complicating, an Arendtian conception of glory.

Foremost Anonymous scholar Gabriella Coleman (2012) describes the collective as "by nature and intent difficult to define"; it is, in her words,

a name employed by various groups of hackers, technologists, activists, human rights advocates, and geeks; a cluster of ideas and ideals adopted by these people and centered around the concept of anonymity; [and] a banner for collective actions online and in the real world that have ranged from fearsome but trivial pranks to technological support for Arab revolutionaries. (para. 1)

Particularly active in the early 2010s, Anonymous has used a variety of tactics in its hacktivism, ranging from tweets and YouTube videos to website defacements, leaks, and DDoS (distributed denial of service) actions, among others.<sup>9</sup> As Molly Sauter (2014) explains,

At its most basic level, a denial-of-service action seeks to render a server unusable to anyone looking to communicate with it for legitimate purposes. When this action comes from one source, it is called a DoS, action. When it comes from multiple sources, it is called a DDoS action. (p. 10)<sup>10</sup>

Such tactics seem to depart from Arendt's examples in that they are nonviolent, but they can also be seen as in line with the primacy of nonviolent political action in modern revolutions that she praises. Anonymous has employed such tactics against various targets, including the Church of Scientology, Amazon, and the KKK, among others, as well as in operations in support of various movements including, for example, OpTunisia and OpFerguson. In Coleman's (2014) estimation, "beyond a foundational commitment to the maintenance of anonymity and a broad dedication to the free flow of information, Anonymous has no consistent philosophy or political program" (p. 3).

Given its eponymous commitment to anonymity, the pursuit of glory seems antithetical to Anonymous. In fact, the collective enforces an informal prohibition against seeking glory or fame for oneself, especially in one's offline name.<sup>11</sup> Anonymous (@YourAnonNews) tweeted in 2015: "If you're hacking for fame you're doing it for the wrong reasons. Not everyone gets eternal glory being caught for leaking to wikileaks." The pursuit of individual glory directly contradicts Anonymous's commitment to anonymity and "collectivist, anti-celebrity ethic" (Coleman, 2014, p. 47). Coleman (2018) tells how

Anonymous enforced this standard by punishing those who stepped out into the limelight seeking fame and credit...If a novice participant was seen as pining for too much praise from peers, he might be softly warned and chided. For those that dared to append their legal name to some action or creation, the payback was fiercer. At minimum, the

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<sup>9</sup> Here, I follow Molly Sauter (2014) in using the more neutral "action" instead of the more prevalent "attack" to describe a DDoS event (p. 7).

<sup>10</sup> The process can be automated with the use of a 'botnet': "a collection of computers [voluntarily or involuntarily] acting under the control of a central machine" (Sauter, 2014, p. 11).

<sup>11</sup> Though Arendt seems to use "glory" and "fame" interchangeably at times, the subtle distinction between the terms seems to be that "everlasting fame" follows from glory (see Arendt, 1961/1993, p. 47). In a lecture on Machiavelli, Arendt (1955) writes: "Fame is the continuation of glory, is glory made more lasting" (p. 024018).

transgressor was usually ridiculed or lambasted, with a few individuals ritually “killed off” by being banned from a chat room or network. (p. 0212)

Unsurprisingly, there is little explicit discussion of glory by Anonymous. And yet, a kind of glory is significant to the collective. In fact, an unofficial emblem for the collective—a headless suit in front of a laurel wreath surrounding a globe—evokes this seemingly paradoxical commitment to anonymity (the headless suit) and glory (the wreath).

The desire for glory is not unusual among hackers, who, as a community, tend to value related notions like meritocracy, virtuosity, mastery, “winning,” and peer recognition (see Jordan & Taylor 1998; Levy, 1984/2010; Taylor 1999; Turkle 1984). Former Anon “Topiary,” Jake Davis, has described hackers as being motivated by the desire for “kudos from other hackers” (quoted in Moore & Rahman-Jones, 2017, para. 8). According to Davis, “They’re good at hacking, and they want to be seen to be good at the thing” (quoted in Moore & Rahman-Jones, 2017, para. 8). In the case of Anonymous, the pursuit of glory takes on a distinctly political aspect. Coleman (2014) sums up the situation well when she writes,

Anonymous performed the . . . Nietzschean lesson embodied in Zarathustra: to act out the secret desire to cast off—at least momentarily—the shackles of normativity and attain greatness—the will to power set to collectivist and altruistic goals rather than [*sic*] self-interested and individualistic desires. (p. 275)

Here, Coleman echoes Arendt in her description of the heroic actor whose words and deeds offer them the opportunity for glory and immortality. However, the actor, in this case, is not simply the individual, but Anonymous.

In the call to action for what is generally regarded as Anonymous’s first political campaign—“Operation Chanology”—the desire for glory is uncharacteristically clear. Posted on 4chan’s /b/ board by “Anonymous” on January 15, 2008, the call reads:

I think its [*sic*] time for /b/ to do something big.

People need to understand not to fuck with /b/,  
and talk about nothing for ten minutes, and  
expect people to give their money to an  
organization that makes absolutely no fucking  
sense.

I’m talking about “hacking” or “taking down” the  
official Scientology website.

It’s time to use our resources to do something we believe is right.

It’s time to do something big again, /b/.

Talk amongst one another, find a better place to plan it and then carry out what can and must be done.

It's time, /b/. (quoted in Coleman, 2014, p. 55; see also Olson, 2012, p. 62)<sup>12</sup>

Although it is impossible to know how sincere any poster is, in this case, the poster does seem to be motivated by a particular concern with the Church of Scientology's exploitation of its members, and a more general desire to "use [/b/'s] resources to do something [/b/] believe[s] is right"; they also want "to do something big," something glorious. The phrase "it's time to do something big" appears twice in the passage, at the beginning and the end. Thus, although they are "fully manifest only in the performing act itself," the sentiments expressed in the call to action suggest that glory was likely one of the "principles" that "inspire[d]" Anonymous's actions against the Church of Scientology (Arendt, 1961/1993, p. 152).

The response to the call was divided as some were concerned that "attention whores" were corrupting "the lulz" with an ethical, status-enhancing pursuit (McDonald, 2015, p. 975). Yet they were far from the only voices in the debate. Echoing the sentiments in the call, one poster proclaimed:

All you losers who have no achievement to their name, THIS IS YOUR CHANCE! You could be part of something big. If we make enough headway into the raid, eventually mainstream media and the public will join us. If Scientology is eradicated, it will [be] because we had the balls to stand up to them. (quoted in McDonald, 2015, p. 976)<sup>13</sup>

The desire to participate in "something big" has continued to feature in many of Anonymous's actions, whether directed at Amazon, the Tunisian government, or any one of its numerous high-profile targets.

The collective's focus on "big" projects is reflected in the self-descriptions of Anons, Anonymous, and its splinter groups. For example, Jeremy Hammond has expressed the desire "to play an electronic Robin Hood" (quoted in Luman, 2007, para. 5), Christopher Doyon, "Commander X," has described his persona as "a bit like Batman, a sort of cyber-super hero" (quoted in Anderson, 2013, para. 2), and Davis once said of LulzSec, "We're kind of like a rock band" (quoted in Olson, 2012, p. 271).<sup>14</sup> Even Hector Monsegur's ("Sabu") assertion that he is "not some cape-wearing hero, nor . . . some supervillain trying to bring down the good guys" came in response to an interviewer's recognition of his mythic casting (quoted in Murphy, 2011, para. 3). Such language is evident in accounts of Anonymous as well. For

<sup>12</sup> In 2011, Lee Knuttila characterized 4chan as "a discordant bricolage of humor, geek cultures, fierce debates, pornography, in-jokes, hyperbolic opinions and general offensiveness" (para. 1). For an excellent discussion of the problematic nature of "exclusionary" "humor", see Phillips (2019).

<sup>13</sup> In reference to an earlier raid, the poster continues: "So stop being a dipshit, and don your afros and suits. Scientology is closed, and we need all the help we can get to keep the AIDS contained" (quoted in McDonald, 2015, p. 976; see p. 974).

<sup>14</sup> Commander X went on to say, "But like Batman, the impossible persona of 'Commander X' rests upon the shoulders of a simple man. And like all men, I have frailties, weaknesses—and limits" (quoted in Anderson, 2013, para. 2).

example, Quinn Norton (2011) observes that “like Alan Moore’s character V who inspired Anonymous to adopt the Guy Fawkes mask as an icon and fashion item, you’re never quite sure if Anonymous is the hero or antihero” (para. 24) and Wendy H. Wong and Peter A. Brown’s (2013) characterize the collective as “e-bandits” in the tradition of Robin Hood (see also Alexopoulou and Pavli, 2019). Finally, Coleman’s (2014) less heroic framing of Anonymous in terms of the trickster archetype is still “mythic” (p. 394). When it comes to its persona, Anonymous is anything but anonymous.

In arguing that glory is a “principle” for action for Anonymous, I do not mean to suggest that all of Anonymous’s actions are necessarily concerned with glory or that those that do involve glory are exclusively concerned with it. As Arendt (1961/1993) explains, principles are distinct from motives and goals, they are not substitutes for them (p. 152). In this way, Anonymous’s pursuit of glory should not be seen as necessarily coming at the expense of its stated motives and goals. Further, “Anonymous is not [u]nanimous,” and because the collective is far from a monolithic entity there is likely a diversity of principles among Anons for any action (A Guest, 2011; also quoted in Coleman, 2014, p. 106). What I am arguing is that glory is a prominent, if often unacknowledged, principle for action within Anonymous.

### **Pseudonymity**

What allows Anonymous to negotiate its seemingly paradoxical combination of anonymity and glory is its pseudonymity. As has been said, for Arendt (1958a), it is “[b]ecause of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act” that “action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm” (p. 180). Put simply, glory’s ability to enhance self-revelation, and, in so doing, offer a chance at immortality, is central to Arendt’s appreciation of it. Arendt (1958a) is emphatic about the connection between revelation and action, writing at one point “[a]ction without a name, a ‘who’ attached to it, is meaningless” (pp. 180–181). If, as was suggested earlier, collective action can be seen as offering the opportunity for a kind of collective revelation, then collective actors can be said to give action “a name” by acting in the name of their collectivities. In this way, Anonymous’s employment of pseudonymity allows the collective to give action a “name.”

In *Improper Names: Collective Pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous*, Marco Deseriis (2015) identifies the properties of pseudonymity that are central to the account of Anonymous offered here. Deseriis writes,

[T]he main distinctive feature of improper names is to provide anonymity and a medium for recognition to their users. By failing to designate clearly identifiable referents, improper names make it difficult for authorities to track down specific individuals while enabling individuals to participate in social and political activities on an informal basis. (p. 24)

Although the adoption of “improper names” as Deseriis (2015) describes them is a collective phenomenon, the combination of identification and obfuscation is a feature of pseudonymity in general.<sup>15</sup> Through its use

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<sup>15</sup> Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum (2011, 2015) have famously praised obfuscation in particular as a tactic for countering surveillance online.

of pseudonymity, Anonymous not only preserves the revelatory aspect of action, and with it the potential for glory and immortality, it also obscures the offline identities of Anons.

### ***Identification***

Pseudonymity's affordance of identification is significant because it gives content to glory's inspirational power. Put differently, glory's power to inspire is premised on the existence of an identifiable actor, even a pseudonymous one, on which it can be bestowed. While it is well-known that Anons share the collective pseudonym "Anonymous," it is perhaps less well-known that Anons have often adopted individual pseudonyms as well. Publicly, individual contributions take on the collective name "Anonymous," while more privately, Anons can come to know one another, to some degree, by their handles, or individual pseudonyms. Coleman (2014) has characterized Anonymous as constituted of '[m]icro-micro-politics and cabals nested within cabals' (p. 114). Yet, "[t]he number of relationships, fiefdoms, and cliques in simultaneous existence is largely invisible to the public, which tends to see Anonymous from the vantage point of carefully sculpted propaganda and the media's rather predictable gaze" (Coleman, 2014, p. 115). By facilitating identification on the collective, and, to some extent, the individual level, pseudonymity facilitates the revelation of the actor through action without disregarding the collective's fierce opposition to self-promotion. According to Coleman (2014),

While among Anons it is acceptable to shower some degree of praise, any perceived attempt at converting internal status into external status is deemed unacceptable. The public, individual persona must be kept out of the equation, in the interest of collective fame. (p. 190)

In preserving the revelatory aspect of action, Anonymous's pseudonymity also preserves the potential for immortality. Arendt tells us that ancient immortality was gained through glorification in art and history. While this may still be true, today it seems the media also plays a role in this process.<sup>16</sup> Not incidentally, Anonymous and its offshoots have largely embraced the media, if only with the ostensible aim of publicizing its operations, and the media has, in its own way, embraced it back. Arendt describes glory as the "shining brightness" afforded to greatness (Arendt, 1958a, p. 180). Based on her examples of glory, such greatness seems closer to Machiavellian *virtù* or virtuosity than to conventional virtue (see Arendt, 1961/1993, p. 153). Thus, while the media's coverage of Anonymous has been far from unambiguously positive, it can be understood as glorifying Anonymous's *virtù*, rather than extolling its virtue, as they have reported on Anonymous's actions without necessarily condoning them. Ultimately, by covering Anonymous's hacktivism, the media memorializes Anonymous's actions, and this memorialization, can be seen as offering the collective a chance at immortality, both on the collective and, not unproblematically, the individual level as well.

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<sup>16</sup> Arendt (1961/1993) seems to understand journalism in particular as a lesser or insufficient if vital, form of memorialization concerned chiefly with "daily information" (p. 261).

### **Obfuscation**

Not only does pseudonymity help Anonymous negotiate the fraught relationship between anonymity and glory, it also, on a practical level, helps to protect the offline identities of Anons. As political action, and with it the potential for glory, has come to increasingly exist outside of, and in tension with, the law, the ability to obfuscate one's identity has become increasingly valuable. Arendt identifies the decline of action—the public performance of words and deeds—with “the rise of the social” in modernity (Arendt, 1958a, p. 38, all caps in original). In mass society, Arendt argues, politics has largely been reduced to administration and action relegated to moments of protest and revolution (Arendt, 1958a; 1963/2006; 1972). In her essay “Civil Disobedience,” Arendt (1972) directly attributes an increase in political action outside of the law, particularly in the form of civil disobedience, to the failure of traditional political institutions, writing,

Civil disobedience arises when a significant number of citizens have become convinced either that the normal channels of change no longer function, and grievances will not be heard or acted upon, or that, on the contrary, the government is about to change and has embarked upon and persists in modes of action whose legality and constitutionality are open to grave doubt. (p. 74)<sup>17</sup>

Existing outside of formal political channels, action such as Anonymous's hacktivism, is often legally ambiguous or illegal. In this context, obfuscation of identity is beneficial as it helps to protect actors from prosecution.

Obfuscation is particularly valuable in the case of hacktivism, as the legal consequences for those charged under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA) can be quite serious. Jeremy Hammond (“Anarchaos,” “burn,” “o,” “sup\_g”) received a ten-year sentence for his participation in a 2011 operation by Anonymous offshoot AntiSec that targeted the private intelligence company Strategic Forecasting, Inc. (“Stratfor”) and involved accessing and leaking private e-mails and other information as well as using their clients's credit card numbers to make donations to charities (Booth, 2011; Coleman, 2014, pp. 334–339; Mazzetti, 2013; Perloth, 2011; Pilkington, 2013). In response to his sentence, Hammond was quoted as saying, “They [the prosecutors] have made it clear they are trying to send a message to others who come after me” (quoted in Pilkington, 2013, para. 3). Members of the “PayPal 14” faced felony charges under the CFAA for their role in “Operation Avenge Assange,” which came in response to the company's decision, following “Cablegate,” to stop serving WikiLeaks (O'Brien, 2013). Ultimately, as journalist Quinn Norton (2013) reports,

Eleven of the co-defendants pled guilty to one misdemeanor and one felony, with the provision that after a year of continued good behavior that felony [would] be dismissed. Beyond that they would be sentenced to for [*sic*] 1–3 years probation and restitution of \$5600. (para. 6)

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<sup>17</sup> DDoS actions have frequently been compared to sit-ins, although the comparison is not uncontroversial; see Sauter (2014).

And, finally, although the CFAA charge was eventually dropped against Deric Lostutter ("KYAnonymous"), he still received a two-year prison sentence for his participation in an Anonymous operation undertaken in solidarity with a rape victim in Steubenville, Ohio (Farivar, 2017; Kocher, 2017). According to Lostutter's lawyer, his sentence was "a year more than one of the rapists got" (quoted in Farivar, 2017, para. 3).

The above discussion helps to rebut a common critique of Anonymous—mainly, that Anons are unaccountable for their actions in a manner that contrasts with traditional political action in general, and with the traditional understanding of civil disobedience in particular (see also Coleman, 2015, epilogue; Sauter, 2014). Incidentally, this critique overlaps with Arendt's understanding of action, which can be seen as deriving "shared responsibility for the world" from action's revelatory and relational aspects (Williams, 2015, pp. 38, 43). As we have seen, Anonymous's actions also involve a kind of revelation, and with it, a sense of responsibility. This responsibility operates on the collective level—a sense of responsibility for what is done in the name of Anonymous— and, at times, the individual level—a sense of responsibility for what is done in the name of one's handle. And while the reality of legal responsibility contradicts facile assumptions about the irresponsibility of Anons, it is far from the only form of responsibility they experience, as pseudonymity entails responsibility to oneself, the collective, and the public at large. With this in mind, Anonymous's efforts to evade legal responsibility through obfuscation should not be seen as efforts to avoid responsibility *tout court*.

Through its use of pseudonymity, Anonymous reinvents Arendt's conception of glory for the contemporary moment, as pseudonymity's combination of identification and obfuscation enables a kind of revelation of the actor in action, thus offering a chance at immortality, while also disguising the offline identity of actors. In this way, pseudonymity allows the inspirational potential of glory to be channeled, while also mitigating the seductions of ego, as well as the threat of prosecution, and, as the examples from Anonymous have shown, the legal penalties for hacktivism can be harsh. For these reasons, Anonymous's pseudonymous pursuit of glory represents a valuable model for political action, especially online.

### Conclusion

Political action may always require some form of inspiration, but the nature of that inspiration seems especially significant if we believe, like Arendt, that action has come to exist largely outside of political institutions in evanescent moments of protest and revolution. Put simply, if action has become extraordinary, then the inspiration for action must also be extraordinary. Though the Internet affords novel spaces for political action, the need for inspiration remains. Here, the seemingly antiquated concept of glory has been offered as one, but by no means the only, potential source of inspiration, or principle, for action. More specifically, Anonymous's pseudonymous pursuit of glory was said to provide a potential model for political action.

That being said, the relationship between anonymity and glory is admittedly fraught, and the tension within Anonymous has been evident. In fact, in some sense, the desire for glory may have contributed to the arrest of some of Anonymous's more prominent members, as their notoriety may have made them targets. Today, arrests seem to have taken a toll on Anonymous, which has, until recently, receded from the spotlight to the point of sparking debate about whether or not the collective was finally "dead" (see Cimpanu, 2019; Gilbert, 2016; VICE TV, 2017). Given the pervasive pessimism concerning the current state of politics in

general, we may want to borrow from Arendt not only her appreciation for glory but with it her understanding of action as a kind of beginning, which holds within it the ineliminable capacity for surprise.

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