

FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS OF ACTION AND THE PUBLIC IN HANNAH ARENDT'S THEORY

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ABSTRACT. *Feminist Interpretations of Action and the Public in Hannah Arendt's Theory.* Arendt's typology of human activity and her arguments on the precondition of politics allow for a variety in interpretations for contemporary political thought. The feminist reception of Arendt's work ranges from critical to conciliatory readings that attempt to find the points in which Arendt's theory might inspire a feminist political project. In this paper I explore the ways in which feminist thought has responded to Arendt's definition of action, freedom and politics, and whether her theoretical framework can be useful in a feminist rethinking of politics, power and the public realm.

Keywords: *Hannah Arendt, political action, the Public, the Social, feminism*

Introduction

The reception of Hannah Arendt's work has been met with many difficulties in interpretation — while *Eichmann in Jerusalem*¹ was notoriously controversial and often misunderstood even in its time, even her fundamental works such as *On Revolution*² or *The Human Condition*³ pose challenges for the critical reader. While it is not the aim of this paper to answer why this is so, we can turn to Arendt's arguably most thorough monographer, Margaret Canovan, for an explanation: first, Arendt's particular methodology lends her texts a genre of their own. She combines a phenomenological approach with a strategy of analysis that attempts to crystallise meaning from a series of loosely related historical phenomena.⁴ Second, a challenge

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¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a report on the banality of evil* (Penguin classics), Penguin Books, New York, 2006.

² Hannah Arendt, *On revolution*, Penguin Books, New York, 2006.

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998.

⁴ Margaret Canovan: *Hannah Arendt: a reinterpretation of her political thought*, Cambridge University Press,

in interpretation may arise from attempting to read Arendt's corpus as a system that is broad and loose at the same time, one made up of theoretical motifs that converge towards the epicentre of problems that Arendt was truly concerned with: the great political catastrophes of the 20th century.⁵ This opens up the question: if Arendt's theory is firmly rooted in its historical context, precisely what relevance does it hold for the contemporary reader of political theory not primarily concerned with these specific events?

The *Human Condition*, generally considered to be Arendt's magnum opus, defies interpretation in many ways, raising questions such as: how does the book fit into the broader context of the oeuvre? And, on a related note, how does it contribute to Arendt's "non-systematic system-building"⁶ in theorising totalitarianism in the immediate, and politics in the broader sense? According to Canovan, *The Human Condition* is more than a systematic work of political theory: in fact, it is concerned less with politics itself and more with *the human condition* that makes politics possible. In order to lay out a theoretical foundation for politics, Arendt introduces a conceptual separation between political action and other forms of human activity.⁷

In *The Human Condition*, therefore, Arendt is more concerned with establishing which aspects of human life make politics possible (and necessary), rather than providing a straightforward theoretical thesis on the nature of politics. The fact that the central problem of the book is the human condition, and not "human nature", has a double significance: first, as Canovan argues, in contrast to the "hubris of totalitarianism", Arendt wishes to emphasize that human existence is determined by its fundamental circumstances.⁸ Second, against the totalising, unifying idea of "human nature", Arendt bases her analysis on the fact that human action, and as an extension the human world, is determined by man's openness to pluralism. As Linda Zerilli notes, for Arendt pluralism is ontologically given, the world, however, is a political achievement.⁹ The shared world of man is created through action (distinct from the other forms of human activity, labour and work), which is always done in *public*, in the space of appearance inhabited and shaped in cooperation with others. In developing her own definition of politics understood through human action and speech, Arendt refers back to the private–public distinction as seen in ancient Athens,

Cambridge, England, New York, NY, USA, 1992.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, 5.

⁷ *Ibid.* 100.

⁸ *Ibid.* 104.

⁹ Linda M. G. Zerilli, "Value Pluralism and the Problem of Judgment: Farewell to Public Reason", *Political Theory*, 40(1), 2012, 22–23.

where the *oikos*, the household, functions as the opposite of the public space, the *polis*. Here, freedom begins with the freedom to leave the home and enter the Public. Similarly, equality itself is created in the *polis*, where the different perspectives that make up human plurality can be shared in the form of speech.

Another central idea of *The Human Condition* is that from a historical perspective, the emergence of the social as kind of mediator between the private and the public has blurred the boundary that, for the Athenians, gave both areas meaning in contrast with each other. According to Arendt, for the ancient Greeks the distinction between the two realms of human life was not only self-evident but an axiomatic principle of political thought.¹⁰ The emergence of the social, a particularly modern phenomenon in this reading (one that coincides with the appearance of the nation state), has obscured the distinction between the different realms of human activity, also changing our concept and experience of politics in the long run. This is Arendt's central thesis that goes beyond the immediate historical context in scope and is significant for contemporary political thought. However, this is also what serves as a point of contention for contemporary interpretations, especially feminist readings of Arendt.

In this paper I will review several feminist critiques of Arendt's theory that are concerned with her "blind spots" on issues such as the gendered nature of the private and the public realms, and the role justice might play in understanding the function of the social. As the feminist reception is often ambivalent in reading and applying Arendt's theory rather than being overtly critical, I will also briefly mention some possible meeting points that feminist authors identify between the claims of contemporary feminism and Arendt's definition of politics, and some of the challenges that such a reading might face.

The Private and the Public

Arendt distinguishes between three types of human activity: *labour*, or the reproductive activity done by the *animal laborans*, the productive *work* of the *homo faber*, and, distinct from both of these, the *action* done by the *homo politicus*, the one human activity that has political significance. Arendt locates these activities on the spectrum of the relation of Man to Nature and World. With a focus on the short-term maintenance and long-term reproduction of life, the labour of the *animal laborans*, closely tied to the body and its functions, mirrors the natural cycles of birth and decay.¹¹ This cyclical nature stands in opposition to the permanence of

¹⁰ *The Human Condition*. 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 96

the built world, the existence of which fulfils the basic human needs of security and stability. Building this long-lasting world is, in part, the task of the *homo faber*, this activity, like labour, is also rooted in the materiality of human life. However, the need for stability and permanence is not limited to the material aspect of the built world, and this is what calls *action* into being.¹²

Permanence is always created collectively, as the inhabited world always bears the traces of other people.¹³ In the typology proposed by Arendt, out of the three types of human activity, *action* is the one that differentiates man from the rest of nature. Plurality, the diversity of points of view as the distinguishing feature of man, shows itself through action. Furthermore, action is inherently collective, as it both requires and implies the presence of others. Politics, then, unfolds through this collective action, which, in the form of speech, creates a *space* for people to work together and decide which elements of their life-world they deem worthy of permanence. This collectively created public space is where truth itself makes an appearance.¹⁴

From this follows a spatial separation of the distinct human activities: Arendt introduces the relational concepts of the Private and the Public, explained through the Ancient Greek distinction between the two realms of human existence. Through the example of the ancient Athenians, Arendt attempts to show that the appearance of the Social in modernity has blurred the line between private and public to the extent that we are now deprived of a real experience of politics. Or, as Hannah Pitkin argues, we have difficulty understanding Arendt's concept of the Public precisely because we have lost the experience of a real political public space.¹⁵

The Private and the Public, thus, attain their meaning in relation to one another. They are defined as the "proper" place of certain human activities (it is ambiguous whether this place is natural or assigned, as we will discuss later on), but they also imply their opposition to, and dependence on each other. The separation between the household – the *oikos* – and the public realm – the *polis* – is a clear one.¹⁶ What happens in the *oikos* stays hidden from the eyes of the others,

¹² *Ibid.* 196.

¹³ At this point in her argument, Arendt refers to the Aristotelian concept of *zoon politikon*. The transformation — or mistranslation — of *zoon politikon* into *animal socialis*, however, sheds a light on the distortion that the Ancient Greek concept of politics went through across the years. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 23.

¹⁵ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public", in Lewis P. Hinchman, Sandra Hinchman (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994, 263. The article originally appeared in: Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public", *Political Theory* 9, 3 (1981).

¹⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The human condition*, 24.

and moving from one realm of the other involves a crossing of a boundary. The citizen thus leads a “double life”: his “own” in the confines in the household, driven by biological necessity, and a completely different one in the public, where his life becomes a *bios politikos*. The private life, lived in the *oikos*, is complemented by a collective, publicly lived life – this constitutes the specifically human life, the one that differentiates the Greek from the barbarian.¹⁷ The household is thus a pre-political sphere that is subordinate to politics, but also serves as its necessary precondition, as it ensures the survival of the individual (and the human race).

The household follows a logic distinct from the organising principles of the public: the *animal laborans* carries out his or her activity in the *oikos*. He/she sustains life, takes care of the everyday needs of the body, and, on the long term, raises children – future citizens. The specific organising principle of the household is that people are motivated to live together because of their material needs, or, in other words, the principle of the private realm is life itself, the maintenance and reproduction of biological existence. The communities that share a household are formed by necessity (driven by the primacy of life itself), not by freedom of choice. The *polis*, on the other hand, is a space of free association. It interacts with the *oikos* only to the extent that the satisfaction of the basic conditions of biological life is an essential precondition for citizens to enter the political sphere as free people.

First, freedom only has meaning in the context of the political realm, understood as freedom to participate in public life. Second, necessity is always pre-political, as it is tied to the private realm. Third, relations of domination can only be legitimate in the private realm as well, as their only acceptable role is to control necessity – by exercising his dominion over slaves (and here Arendt, surprisingly, makes no mention of women), the citizen (the *pater familias*, the free man), can transcend biological necessity and step out freely into the public to participate in the collective creation of the World. Since all men are subject to necessity, they all have the right to exercise this dominion to free themselves from necessity in order to enter this public space. As Franco Palazzi notes,

In the domestic dimension, human needs constitute the element which pushes people to live together – this is what ‘all Greek philosophers’ regarded as a ‘pre-political phenomenon’, thus justifying the appeal to violence in the private sphere as the only means able to master necessity. On the contrary, the polis distinguished itself from the *oikos* as it was grounded on the equality of all citizens; indeed, being free in the polis meant ‘both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another and not to be in command oneself’.¹⁸

¹⁷ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, “Justice: On Relating Private and Public”. 265.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 31–32; 32. Franco Palazzi, “‘Reflections on Little Rock’ and Reflective Judgment”, *Philosophical Papers*,

The citizens of the *polis*, once out in the light of the public, do not rule and are not ruled by anyone; they are free to engage in dialogue with their fellow citizens as equals. But this notion of equality, like freedom, exists only in the realm of politics, as the majority of the inhabitants of the city-state are "non-equals." Freedom, then, in short, meant that the head of the family was free to leave the realm of the private, which was organised along the logic domination and inequality, to step into a space where there was neither violence nor domination.¹⁹

Understanding politics along these lines poses a challenge for the possibility of a feminist reading – as Seyla Benhabib notes, the attitude of feminist thought towards Arendt's work is quite ambivalent. First, Arendt's definition of politics is in many ways gender-blind, which may be a source of disappointment for the feminist reader. Hannah Pitkin poses the question with a tone of surprise: could it be true that Arendt would intentionally reserve freedom for a handful of privileged men?²⁰ Second, defining politics through the exclusion of the private gives way to difficult theoretical questions. As Kimberly Maslin notes, a contemporary reading of Arendt's specific, "gender-blind feminism" is bound to lead to frustration, as Arendt was not primarily concerned with the "woman question".²¹

Therefore, it might seem doubtful whether the principles of feminism and the Arendtian distinction between the private and the public are conceptually compatible at all. Feminist critics are right to be puzzled even by the way Arendt describes the private realm and the activities that are conducted in it. After all, the greater part of life-sustaining activities, as well as giving birth and childrearing, are commonly understood as activities done by women, or have been naturalised as "women's work". Arendt, however, never makes a statement regarding a sexual division of labour reflected in the separate realms of human activity. What can appear as a strange omission at first raises complex questions in the long run concerning the possibility of women's emancipation (and workers' emancipation, who, in their state as *homo faber*, are also linked to the material aspect of human existence) in the Arendtian conceptual framework.

The ambiguity of a feminist reading becomes poignant at the very beginning: as Benhabib notes, it is hard to avoid the impression that Arendt ontologises the sexual division of labour, which would point towards a harmful biological essentialism that would reduce women's role to a reproductive one, confining them to the household.²²

46:3, 2017, 397, referencing Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

²⁰ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public".

²¹ Kimberly Maslin, "The Gender-Neutral Feminism of Hannah Arendt." in *Hypatia* 28, 3, 2013.

²² Seyla Benhabib, "Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt's concept of public space", 98.

However, some feminist authors attempt to leverage the same reproductive aspect in proposing an emancipatory project. This particular application of the principle of “The Personal is Political”, as promoted by Adrienne Rich²³ among others, not only accepts women’s position as intrinsically related to reproduction, but also assumes it to be a privileged epistemological position. The political (or more precisely, practical or pragmatic) aim of this line of thinking is to include this specific (“feminine”) experience into the realm of politics, and translate this experience (presumed as homogenous) into the language of politics while preserving its inherent “feminineness”.

This reproductive politics, as described by Rich and Mary O’Brien,²⁴ attempts to posit the body itself at the very centre of politics. According to Benhabib, however, the language of politics cannot be reduced to the materiality of human existence alone. This could not be coherent in the Arendtian framework. Furthermore, this position does not question in any way the “naturalness” of the sexual division of labour, it merely tries to make the private apparent in a public way. This, in turn, is incompatible not only with the division proposed by Arendt, as well as the private–public distinction present in some form in most existing political theories, but also does not propose a challenge or alternative to any of these frameworks in a theoretically sound and/or politically actionable way.

Mary Dietz, however, proposes a different way to pose the question: what could we learn if we interpreted the condition of *animal laborans* as the historical-social construction of femininity? First, we could conclude that the various human capacities are not sterile, ahistorical categories. Rather, they are relational positions instilled along the sexual difference and solidified over time: the activity of the *animal laborans*, the cyclical reproductive labour, has been naturalised as “women’s work”, while the productive activity of the *homo faber* is seen as men’s work. As Dietz argues, the *vita activa* is not a gender-neutral territory where the individual, male or female, can freely occupy *any* position. The different areas of human life become accessible or inaccessible along (often invisible) criteria of gender.²⁵ According to her, the concept of freedom used by Arendt is thus hardly compatible with a feminist approach, primarily because it applies only to a select

²³ Rich critiques Arendt on several perceived omissions, including not talking about the gendered nature of reproductive labour, and devaluing the political significance of the body. However, the consequences she draws are rather personal: she thinks that these omissions are the effect of the toxic influence of “male ideology” that has influenced Arendt. Adrienne Rich, “Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women (1976)”, in *On lies, secrets and silence: selected prose, 1966 - 1978*, Norton, New York, 1995.

²⁴ Mary O’Brien, *The Politics of reproduction*, Repr, Routledge & Kegan, Boston, Mass, 1983.

²⁵ Mary Dietz, “Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics”, in Lewis P. Hinchman, Sandra Hinchman (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994, 241.

few. Going further, we can also argue that locating freedom in the public realm also means a devaluing of the private, and the gendered nature of the different areas of human life assigns an underlying relation of subordination to them. Considering all this, Dietz argues, a feminist concept of freedom should orient itself towards guaranteeing a free transition between the separate areas of human life (in both directions), and a free participation in all kinds of human activities, regardless of gender.

The Social

One of the challenges in understanding the significance of public life as seen by Arendt lies in the fact that we have no experience of it – according to Arendt, the modern man spends most of his time in the realm of the social. Indeed, her argument is rather unique in the broader context of political theory in that she sees the social as something that exists to the detriment of a real political public space. She claims that the social is not a historically given: it is very much the product of modernity, and its emergence coincides with the appearance of the nation-state. The social is neither private nor public: it functions as quasi-public space by giving elevating certain elements of the private realm into public, common concerns.

The emergence of the social, the incorporation of "housekeeping" and administration into the public space changed the meaning we assign to the private and the public. In antiquity, the meaning of the word "private" was much closer to the original sense of the word. To live in the private realm meant, quite literally, to be deprived of something, namely the highest human capacity. However, Arendt argues, today we do not think about our own private sphere in the terms of privation, since modern individualism has enriched this realm of human life to a great extent by making it the primary place of appearance of *the individual*. It is important to note that modern private life stands in opposition with the social as much as it contrasted the public realm in antiquity.²⁶

Arendt's critique of the social is two-fold, as she claims its appearance has affected both the structure of the private and the public. First, she links the emergence of the social with certain issues gaining the status of "common" or public concerns. Arendt not only thinks that these issues "belong" to the private realm, but that they have to remain private in order to exist at all. Second, the "victory" of the social over a real public life has led to the appearance of certain "non-political political forms"²⁷ that have eroded true political discussion, and relegated the function of government to an administrative role.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public", 268.

Arendt provides another definition for the social, understood as neither private nor public, in her controversial work *Reflections on Little Rock*,²⁸ The text was first published in 1959, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement and the increasing tensions underlying in the Southern society of the time: the focus of *Little Rock* is one of the epicentres of this tension, building around the desegregation of schools. Arendt specifies her own point of departure as a picture of a Black girl as seen in newspapers at the time: “on her way home from a newly integrated school: she was persecuted by a mob of white children, protected by a white friend of her father, and her face bore eloquent witness to the obvious fact that she was not precisely happy.”²⁹ While she begins her commentary from a factual error,³⁰ she attempts to use the case of *Little Rock* to point out an inherent tension between the organising principles of the political and the social. While the article drew heavy criticism even at the time of its publication, many commentators have attempted to “salvage” Arendt’s thesis from the racial overtones of the text. Indeed, despite the questionable treatment of the Black minority in her argument, read together with *The Human Condition*, *Little Rock* provides the most complete account on how Arendt sees the role of the social in modernity and its drawbacks concerning the function of politics.

The starting point of her analysis is a distinction she makes between fundamental human rights and social preference: in her interpretation, the choice of school belongs to the realm of the latter. In other words, while segregation itself is incompatible with the principle of equality that stands as the very basis of American republican politics, education is a matter of social tradition. The distinction clearly builds upon her separation of the social and the public: Arendt locates the source of the “color question”³¹ in „American tradition”, thus rendering it a social, rather than political issue. The USA is not a nation-state in the European sense, and even in its heterogenous population Black people are made visible by the colour of their skin. This holds great significance in a conception of the public in which things exist by being made to be seen. As soon as it is made to be seen in the public, however, this difference immediately enters into conflict with equality: as Tocqueville argued, equality is the

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, „Reflections on Little Rock”, in *Responsibility and judgment*, 1st ed, Schocken Books, New York, 2003.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ As Franco Palazzi notes, the picture she used to confirm her analysis was not taken in Little Rock at all: “On September 1957, the New York Times featured on its front page two quite similar photographs about school desegregation. The first depicted the National Guard preventing Eckford’s access to Central High, whereas the second portrayed Dorothy Counts and Dr. Edwin Thompkins surrounded by hostile white students while walking toward Harding High School in Charlotte, North Carolina.” Franco Palazzi, “Reflections on Little Rock’ and Reflective Judgment”, 401.

³¹ Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock”, 198.

very foundation of American politics, but it brings about tensions that ultimately endanger the “American way of life”.³² The principle of equality cannot completely equalise by itself, nor can it homogenise by erasing visible difference. In addition: the more equal a society, the more it resents difference – according to Arendt, this is the “danger” threatening the balance of society.³³ Therefore, the social tension point does not stem from the political franchise of Black people (a clearly political right), but from the question of desegregation of schools (a social issue).

One of the main arguments Arendt derives from the tensions at Little Rock is the question of discrimination: she claims that discrimination serves the same role in the social as equality does in the political. The social is a hybrid realm that exists between the private and the public, and is organised along the logic of similarity and difference: we form communities with those who are similar to us, who share our particularities. Mass society, which erases the differences between various groups is dangerous to society as a whole. Therefore, for Arendt, the main question is not how to eradicate discrimination completely, but how to keep it in the realm of the social so as not to let it endanger political equality.³⁴

Here, Arendt does more than simply provide a historical explanation for the transformation of the public. Rather, she aims to point out that the disappearance of real politics from public life is not without its dangers. Read from the perspective of her critique of totalitarianism, the public is significant first and foremost as the *space* between people: totalitarianism, Arendt warns, collapses this space, and presses people together into a “mass”. While the emergence of the social does not coincide with totalitarianism itself, the disappearance of a space where collective political action can be done and truth can assert itself through speech makes it harder to defend the space of freedom that exists between people.³⁵

Besides criticising *Little Rock* along Arendt’s apparent racial biases, feminist authors also argue, on a theoretical basis, that Arendt weakens her own argument by building on the sharp distinction between the political and the social to delimit a very narrow definition of the political. In other words, she gives a normative definition regarding the content of political action and speech that excludes significant problems from the public realm. Furthermore, the distinction she makes between social attitude and legislation can be read as self-contradictory. As Franco Palazzi notes,

A thing Arendt should certainly have known, instead, was that educational segregation in the South was not a kind of spontaneous social tendency replicated

³² *Ibid.* 199.

³³ *Ibid.* 200

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On revolution*.

by local laws and suddenly abolished by the Supreme Court. Actually, the period between 1865 and 1877 had experienced a notable increase in the number of integrated schools with a reported 170,000 African Americans attending parochial integrated schools by 1869 and several antidiscrimination laws approved[.]³⁶

He also calls attention to the contradiction in defining the education of children as a private matter: “the only way to grant them to (mainly white) segregationist parents was to deny the same rights to (mainly black) integrationist ones.”³⁷

Similarly, Mary Dietz claims that what Arendt does not consider to be a fundamental right (according to her, the right to attend a desegregated school belongs to a different category than the inalienable right to “life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness”), is in fact a category error stemming from an imprecise differentiation between political association and social preference – the right to attend a desegregated school is not the equivalent of deciding who to invite over for dinner.³⁸ The right to equal education belongs more to the realm of politics than to the social in which private issues may appear to gain public significance.

Feminist readings therefore often reflect on the normative definition given by Arendt regarding the content of political speech and action. There are two main problems that appear in critical readings: first, that Arendt prescribes the content of political speech in such a restrictive way that she renders her own argument contradictory. And second, that she does not give due attention to the concept of justice in the public–private division.

The first point can be understood through another distinction that Arendt draws, this time between the “agonistic” and “associative” aspects of the Public as seen in ancient Athens – although it is important to note that neither of these have existed in a pure form.³⁹ The citizens of the agonistic public compete with each other for excellence and recognition – their heroism and political performance become real through each other's gaze and acknowledgement. The “associative” public, on the other hand, is the space in which people (“Men”), act together, in coordination with each other, to decide on a common present and future that affects them all – it is the space in which freedom and equality in the political sense can make an appearance. The public will thus be a place of *power* that unfolds through common speech and action.

However, this concept of power differs both from violence and domination. In the Ancient Greek private–public structure, domination belongs strictly to the

³⁶ Franco Palazzi, “‘Reflections on Little Rock’ and Reflective Judgment”, 402.

³⁷ Ibid. 403.

³⁸ Mary Dietz, „Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics”.

³⁹ See Benhabib, „Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt’s concept of public space”, 102.

realm of the private: the head of the family rules unconditionally over the women and slaves who run his household (in other words, everyone in the household is equally subordinate to him). The head of the family – the individual, the citizen – begins to exercise his freedom when he exits the realm of “his own,” the “intimate,” to be in the presence of his peers, where no one rules and no one is ruled. The place of violence in this structure is ambiguous – it exists in an indirect connection to the possible content of political speech (as Benhabib puts it, Arendt’s *homo politicus* is in many ways the Homeric war hero tamed into a deliberative citizen),⁴⁰ but, at the same time, violence itself cannot speak in the public, as it is “mute”.⁴¹

From a feminist viewpoint, there is another issue raised by the definition of the agonistic political space: this definition of the *polis* presupposes the existence of a morally and politically homogeneous, but therefore exclusive (in the literal sense of the word) community, in which action means the revelation of the *self* in relation to others, under equal circumstances. The modern public realm, in which the social is the predominant structure, is not characterised by this kind of homogeneity as a given precondition. After the French and American revolutions, more and more groups demanded the right to access public, based on their specific needs: workers' movements made property rights the primary subject of public discourse, while for women's movement the issues of the household, the family and reproduction gained political significance. And, as we have seen, the Civil Rights Movement has raised a multitude of both social and political issues. Within this public–social–private distinction, freedom is still equivalent to the freedom of entering the public, of participating in politics, but it is immediately met with the challenge of a pre-determined content of political speech.

According to Benhabib, however, this is not an inherent self-contradiction, but a blind spot concerning social justice in Arendt's argument that confuses the issue of public justice with social preference, as seen in the case of Little Rock. The implicit premise that all human activity has its place (Benhabib calls this “phenomenological essentialism”)⁴² contributes to Arendt's effort in determining what public discourse can be about (or, more definitively, what it should *not* be about), and, in a similar vein, what can (and what should not) be the subject of political action. A normative definition of the public, Benhabib argues, narrows down the scope of the public in such a way that makes its associative form impossible: the content of political speech cannot be prescribed or predicted, as new problems will continuously arise through collective action.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 103.

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 25.

⁴² Seyla Benhabib, „Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt's concept of public space”, 104.

By placing the associative model in the centre of discussion, Benhabib favours a procedural model instead of a substantive or normative one: what matters is not what the political discourse is about, but *how* it takes place. Force and violence make political discourse impossible, replacing it with the silence of coercion.⁴³

Hanna Pitkin formulates her critique around the notion of justice, or, more precisely, the absence of this concept from Arendt's thesis on politics. Pitkin's main question is: if we exclude all material references from political discourse, inextricably attributing them to the private sphere, what could be the factor that unites those in participating in the public into a single political body? And, derived from this: what *can* be the content of political speech and action?⁴⁴

In attempt to find an answer, she refers back to the Aristotelian concept of politics. Aristotle's definition of man is twofold: on the one hand, he describes man as a political being, and on the other hand, as *zoon logon echon*, whose main ability is *logos* – the capacity for speech, language, and rational thinking.⁴⁵ The role of language, of speech as a political action, is therefore to decide together what is fair or just and what is not. It is striking, then, that Arendt's argument omits this dimension, but it does converge with the general scope of her argument. As long as the goal is to restore the original function of the public, the inclusion of the concept of justice makes it difficult to redraw the original distinction, especially in that it inevitably implies a rethinking of the material dimension of survival. The things that Arendt considers to belong strictly to the private inevitably make an appearance in a public defined along the lines of justice.

According to Pitkin, Arendt rightly comes to the defence of political freedom in her attempt to re-legitimise the political public space. However, a necessary step in this direction would also involve exploring the ways in which justice can contribute to linking material distribution to public action. Choosing this direction of inquiry would also change the goal of what feminist action might mean in the framework of private–social–public: the aim should be not to separate the different realms of human activity as perfectly as possible, but to reintegrate the social into politics in such a way that the issues of the social can be translated to the language of collective political action.⁴⁶

⁴³ *Ibid.* 104–105.

⁴⁴ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, „Justice: On Relating Private and Public”, 270.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Transl. David Ross, Oxford University Press, USA, 2009.

⁴⁶ Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, „Justice: On Relating Private and Public”, 277–280.

A Feminist Rethinking of the Public — Further Lines of Inquiry

As we have seen, feminist readings of Arendt, ranging from critical to reconciliatory, have found her arguments on the private, the social and the public lacking in several key issues related to the possible political goals of the feminist movement. First, as several authors have pointed out, a gendered perspective appears to be absent from the examination of human activity and the corresponding realms of human existence, as well as the division of labour between them. Second, the absence of the concept of justice seems to be another significant omission from her theory, even though, as for instance Pitkin suggests, it has the potential to translate a material, and even a gendered viewpoint into the language of political speech and action. However, some authors such as Seyla Benhabib, are hopeful that contemporary feminist theories may still find a meeting point with Arendt's political theory. Yet it remains a question as to what extent can feminist thought maintain its position in a framework defined by the strict separation of the private and the public.

Based on the above, the theses formulated in *The Human Condition* make the possibility of an actual feminist reading uncertain. The gendered aspect present in the delimitation of the private sphere represents a fertile ground for the feminist reception precisely *because* its absence from the discussion, and the concept of justice is also significant *because* of its lack. It can be argued, however, that contemporary feminism, shares Arendt's goal of re-politicising politics and may turn to the Arendtian definition of politics in order to reconceptualise a participatory public informed by dialogue and collective action.

At the centre of Arendt's views on politics are collective action and pluralism – none of which are inherently incompatible with the foundational principles of feminist thought. Benhabib suggests that feminist theories should turn to Arendt to develop their own coherent, positive theory of the public.⁴⁷ It is insufficient to base an emancipatory political project merely on reproductive issues, she states, especially considering that in political systems operating on some sort of distinction of private and public, this would not be consistent at all – the issues of the reproductive sphere can inform feminist theories of subjectivity, but feminist political action cannot be limited to them.

A feminist reconceptualisation of power appears to be a crucial step in this process, and the Arendtian framework may offer a possible point of departure. A conception of the public that is based on equality, in which different perspectives based on different fields of experience can be freely expressed, allows for a concept of power that sees it unfold through collective action. In other words – as Habermas

⁴⁷ Seyla Benhabib, „Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt's concept of public space“.

himself suggests – Arendt connects power with communicative action, detached from its teleological dimension: power unfolds in public speech, and it is not primarily aimed at achieving a goal, but at the process of building consensus. The role of power is to maintain the collective, non-coercive, consensual practice that has created it.⁴⁸

While it is important to note that Habermas's communicative model of action does not fully correspond to the concept of action used by Arendt,⁴⁹ a critical reinterpretation of communicative action has also contributed to the evolution of certain feminist conceptions of the public: Nancy Fraser, for instance, attempts to define an equal public space along the lines of communicative action and justice understood as parity.⁵⁰ Working with the idea of power understood as collective speech and action can be a way for feminist politics to move beyond simply incorporating the relations of domination present in the private realm into political speech, and to transcend the depoliticised understanding of power that stands at the basis of feminist theories of subjectivity.⁵¹

The aim of rehabilitating a genuine political public space, complemented by a gender perspective, also relates to the feminist goal of overcoming the bureaucratism present in politics that has been criticised by several feminist authors. Feminist critiques tend to describe politics in the traditional sense as patriarchal in itself (i.e., they believe that the role of actual politics has been replaced by bureaucracy structured along the logic of “patriarchal rationality”).⁵² Following a critical reading of Arendt however, we can argue that there is nothing inherently “masculine” about politics, as the private realm is not inherently “feminine” either.⁵³

⁴⁸ Jürgen Habermas, „Hannah Arendt’s Communications Concept of Power”, in Lewis P. Hinchman, Sandra Hinchman (eds.), *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994.

⁴⁹ Seyla Benhabib, *The reluctant modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Modernity and political thought), New ed, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Md, 2003, 125–127.

⁵⁰ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of feminism: from state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*, Verso Books, Brooklyn, NY, 2013.

⁵¹ The most well-known of these concepts of power is the one put forward by Michel Foucault, who understands subjectivity as subjectivation („*assujettissement*”), or the submission to the power working through society as a whole. See: Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits I*. (Dits et écrits. 1954 -1988 Michel Foucault. Ed. établie sous la dir. de Daniel Defert 1). This notion of power has inspired feminist theories of subjectivity, such as Judith Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender, which describes gender as performative process of subjectivation. (See: Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (Routledge classics), Routledge, New York, 2006. However, these concepts of power have drawn criticism for being difficult to translate into political action.

⁵² Among other feminist critics of bureaucratic institutions, Kathy Ferguson suggests that political institutions, especially in their bureaucratic, administrative forms, perpetuate social patterns of the subordination of women. See: Kathy E. Ferguson, *The feminist case against bureaucracy* (Women in the political economy), Temple Univ. Pr, Philadelphia, 1984.

⁵³ See Mary Dietz, „Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics”.

In a similar vein, against what she identifies as the apolitical stance of the liberal strategy of avoidance that posits difference and dissent as a potential threat to stability, Linda Zerilli turns to Arendt's concepts of representative thinking and reflective judgment,⁵⁴ the latter of which Arendt expanded on in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, nearly a decade after formulating her thesis on political action in *The Human Condition*. However, as Franco Palazzi argues, in her attempt to link a political conception of reflective judgment with "some kind of dialectical corrective action,"⁵⁵ Zerilli falls into the trap of reaffirming the public as the proper space of human action along the same lines Arendt has originally defined it – appearing as neutral, but defined along terms of exclusivity that is bound to keep certain groups and their demands outside the boundaries of politics.⁵⁶

As it were, it remains doubtful that a feminist politics of difference may still remain coherent in the strict Arendtian definition of the political public. While contemporary feminism may share Arendt's goal of repoliticising politics in order to move beyond apolitical governance, rethinking participation in the political public in terms that allow for the diversity and difference of the participants to be translated into political speech and action might require a shift away from the Arendtian substantive definition of the public space.

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⁵⁴ Linda M. G. Zerilli, "Value Pluralism and the Problem of Judgment: Farewell to Public Reason".

⁵⁵ Franco Palazzi, "'Reflections on Little Rock' and Reflective Judgment", 425.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 429-434

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