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Arendt and social change in democracies

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This article explores Hannah Arendt’s insights into the forms of social control operating especially in democracies, together with the possibility of resistance to such control. Since the way in which one defines freedom informs one’s understanding of the techniques that suppress, regulate, and modify behaviour, the article begins by sketching Arendt’s notion of freedom, and compares this to its liberal counterpart. That discussion leads to Arendt’s conception of power, whose corollary is freedom, and whose suppression amounts to control. The institutional and ideological infrastructure that accompanies the encroachment of ‘the social’ – which Arendt links to the hegemony of liberalism – is conceived as rendering the individual both powerless and apathetic. The article concludes with suggestions regarding resistance to modern forms of control, viewing Arendt’s ontology as a source of tenable strategies for the deepening of democracy.

Hannah Arendt’s insights into the mechanisms of oppression and repression in totalitarian regimes have been widely recognised, yet little has been said about her insights into the forms of social control in democracies. This is somewhat surprising, since the questions of constraint and the obstruction of freedom come up time and again in her writings. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt alerts her readers to the annihilation of the political realm, the domain where freedom manifests itself through speech and deeds. She suggests that the destruction of this realm is a result of the ‘invasion of the social’. Arendt uses the term ‘the social’ in an idiosyncratic way, associating it with the *oikia*, the household. ‘The social’ is driven by the imperative of securing life’s necessities – defence, food, shelter and reproduction – thus levelling, according to Arendt, all human activities to the common denominator of
mere life, as opposed to what the Greeks called the good life. The infiltration of ‘the social’ into the public domain produces and sustains certain modes of comportment and a particular way of relating to the world informed by instrumental rationality, self-interest and the limited goal of securing the life process. Its encroachment into the public domain symbolises for Arendt the destruction of democratic practices and engenders ‘organised loneliness’, isolation, automisation and individuation, all of which are indications that freedom is being suppressed.

Our tendency to associate control with a social agent elides the fact that ‘the social’s’ invasion of the public realm can be considered a form of control. Although the processes Arendt describes cannot be traced back to any particular subject or dominant class, they engender a social configuration that disempowers people. However, even Arendt (1970: 28; 1972: 34–35) occasionally fails to comprehend her own insights, maintaining, for example, that in democracies consent is a direct manifestation of freedom. Claims of this sort should prompt her readers to ‘think with Arendt against Arendt’ when examining how people are controlled in modern democracies (Benhabib 1988: 31).

The way one defines freedom informs one’s understanding of the techniques that suppress, regulate, and modify behaviour. To formulate a precise conception of freedom is therefore crucial for the development of concrete strategies aiming to protect and enhance it. Arendtian power is a corollary of freedom and its suppression amounts to control. The institutional and ideological infrastructure accompanying ‘the social’s’ encroachment – which Arendt links to liberalism’s hegemony – entails a double movement yielding both heterogeneity and homogeneity. On the one hand, individuals are cut off from each other and from the world, while, on the other hand, singularity vanishes as individuals become a mere modicum of the mass. Arendt’s analysis of ‘the social’ alludes to negative and positive mechanisms of control facilitating the conversion of individuals into automised monads, both powerless and apathetic.

If democracy is not merely a term attributed to a set of political procedures but also involves concrete opportunities for people to manage their own collective and individual affairs, then deepening democracy entails the production and expansion of these opportunities. In the ontology of Arendt (1963: 255), freedom needs a public arena in order to manifest itself. This presumably points to the necessity of creating participatory institutions, as also to some consideration of ‘the
social’s’ positive forms of control which engender the population’s interests and identities. Thus, a feasible strategy for bringing about social change must not only create a space where people can act in concert, but also challenge the existing norms and standards that inform the way people think and act.

Thinking with Arendt

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt distinguishes between three forms of human activity – labour, work and action – which together constitute the *vita activa*. Labour (*animal laborans*) is identified with necessity and has to do with the biological process that sustains life. Work (*homo faber*) has to do with making or fabricating objects following a process of reification. The mind-set of homo faber conceives everything within a world, but relates to the objects it creates and even to the world itself as an instrument to be used by humans – as a means. Unlike labour, work is guided by instrumental rationality (Arendt 1958: 154–55). In the *Origins of Totalitarianism* we read, ‘man insofar as he is homo faber tends to isolate himself with his work, that is to leave temporarily the realm of politics’ (Arendt 1979: 475).

Action is the activity in which humans can begin something new through speech and deed. Arendt (1958: 204) explains that without ‘action to bring into the play of the world the new beginning of which each man is capable by virtue of being born, “there is no new thing under the sun”’; without speech to materialise and memorialise, however tentatively, the “new things” that appear and shine forth, “there is no remembrance”. Action is identified with natality and freedom, and its condition of possibility is human plurality. ‘Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction’, says Arendt (1958: 175, 8), noting that ‘we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live’.

Mary Dietz points out that Arendt describes history as ‘a story of continuously shifting “reversals” within the vita activa itself’, where during different periods labour, work and action have been accorded higher or lower status within society. Dietz continues:

*The critique of the modern world that* *The Human Condition* *advances rests on the claim that we are now witnessing an unprecedented era in which the process driven activity of labour*
dominates our understanding of human achievement. As a result, we live in and celebrate a world of automatically functioning jobholders, having lost all sense of what constitutes true freedom and collective public life (1994a: 233–34).

Arendt is not describing a situation by which each individual has arbitrarily chosen to amplify a certain activity within his or her life. In order to conceive the ascent of labour as random, one would have to assume some kind of neutral space in which humans are free-floating agents who can make any decision they will. In contrast, Arendt (1958: 11) suggests that the amplification of labour and the loss of freedom are intimately related to the human condition, which influences human existence but ‘can never “explain” what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that [it] never condition[s] us absolutely’.

The human condition signifies, on the one hand, ontological attributes like plurality and natality, while, on the other hand, it represents the concrete historical facticity of human existence. Arendt describes this historical facticity using the private/public binary, which echoes the Greek distinction between life and the good life. The private is the realm of necessity, where humans sustain life and attend to its needs. The term public signifies at least two phenomena. First, ‘that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity’. Second, the ‘public realm signifies the world itself insofar as it is common to all of us ...’ (Arendt 1958: 50, 52). The private/public distinction has been criticised by feminists who not only emphasise Arendt’s lack of concern with the ‘women question’, but more importantly in this context, persuasively claim that in several ways the private is public and should be considered as such. In addition, feminists have argued that before one orders the private and public hierarchically, it is essential to problematise the historical association between private/labour/woman and public/action/man. Several contributors to Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt (Honig 1995) have convincingly argued that Arendt ignored the implications of these kinds of associations, while also pointing out different ways in which Arendt’s work has opened a path for feminist critique.

Writing about Arendt’s political thought, Parekh (1981: 136) points out that, in the absence of a shared public space, people ‘become isolated and worldless. They lack the opportunities to listen to different points of view and develop the capacities of impartiality and objectivity’ which,
according to Arendt, are necessary for political life. They also lack the opportunity to act. Action manifests itself in the public realm, since the act, that is, the creative process that begins something new, is 'destined to appear in the world' (Arendt 1993: 154).

Unlike the triadic division of the vita activa, which is based on fairly well-defined human activities, the precise status, definition and division of the realms within which these activities take place is nebulous. The hierarchical changes of the three forms of human activities are connected in some way to the historical alterations of the private and public realms, yet they do not exactly correspond. It is as if too much hinges on this binary, and any effort to incorporate all human activities within it leads to distortions. Arendt's effort to preserve the 'purity' of politics has led several scholars to claim that she leaves us with an abstract, unrealistic, and even self-defeating conception of the political realm (Habermas 1994; Sitton 1994; Wolin 1994). Nonetheless, the distinction between the two realms, and the discussion of their particular characteristics, including their expansion and degeneration, sheds light on some of the most striking processes taking place in contemporary society.

Freedom and Politics

Arendt's criticism of modern society is informed, in part, by her effort to debunk the primacy of the liberal notion of freedom and to expose what she believes to be its dire ramifications. One issue should be clarified at the outset: Arendt's contentions do not lead her to disavow liberalism altogether. She constantly stresses the importance of rights and citizenship that are at the core of the liberal ideal, and in *Totalitarianism* she illustrates how freedom is jeopardised when rights are violated. Similar to the prevailing view of politics, informed by liberalism, Arendt (1963: 137) believes that the role of government is to ensure and protect freedom. Nonetheless, her conception of freedom differs radically from that of liberals. On one level the difference has to do with her claim that freedom is part of the public realm rather than the private. 'We are inclined to believe that freedom begins where politics end, because we have seen that freedom disappeared when so-called political considerations overruled everything else', she says, adding:

> Was not the liberal credo, 'The less politics the more freedom', right after all? Is it not true that the smaller the space occupied by the political, the larger the domain left to freedom? Indeed,
do we not rightly measure the extent of freedom in any given community by the free scope it grants to apparently non-political activities, free economic enterprise or freedom of teaching, of religion, of culture and intellectual activities? Is it not true, as we all somehow believe, that politics is compatible with freedom only because and insofar as it guarantees a possible freedom from politics? (Arendt 1993: 149).

In *On Revolution*, Arendt argues that perceiving freedom in this way contributed to the downfall of the French Revolution. She points out, for example, that after having the whole administrative corps arrested, Saint-Just explained to the 'popular society' (which had confronted him on the issue) that he was fighting a conspiracy. Shortly thereafter Saint-Just exclaimed: 'The freedom of the people is in its private life; don't disturb it. Let the government be a force only in order to protect this state of simplicity against force itself.' Arendt (1963, 244) asserts that these 'words indeed spell out the death sentence for all organs of the people, and they express in rare unequivocality the end of all hopes of the Revolution'.

By contrast, Arendt (1963: 68) praises the leaders of the American Revolution, who focused on the political problem of stopping oppression and creating a form of government that supports and protects political freedom. But even in the United States, where the 'Founding Fathers' focused on establishing a form of government that would allow for freedom, the freedom was given to the citizen in his or her private capacity. The Constitution, says Arendt (1963: 253), 'had given all the power to the citizens, without giving them the opportunity of being republicans and of acting as citizens. In other words, the danger was that all power had been given to the people in their private capacity and that there was no space established for them in their capacity of being citizens.'

Despite her belief in the emancipatory potential of the US Constitution and other liberal institutions, Arendt claims that the conception of freedom as a corollary of the private leads to the identification of freedom with sovereignty. Sovereignty is a synonym of freedom in the sense that both concepts describe a condition in which humans are liberated from external impediments and as a result may freely pursue their interests. The ramifications arising from this identification are severe, according to Arendt (1993: 164):
Politically, this identification of freedom with sovereignty is perhaps the most pernicious and dangerous consequence of the philosophical equation of freedom and free will. For it leads either to a denial of human freedom — namely, it is realised that whatever men may be, they are never sovereign — or to the insight that the freedom of one man, or a group, or a body politic can be purchased only at the price of freedom, i.e., the sovereignty, of all others.

Arendt (1972: 89) also criticises liberal institutions, claiming in her essay, 'Civil Disobedience', that the US government is in crisis, 'partly because it has lost, in the course of time, all institutions that permitted the citizens' actual participation, and partly because it is now gravely affected by the disease from which the party system suffers: bureaucratisation and the two parties' tendency to represent nobody except the party machines'. Arendt is surely right to stress that the lack of institutions providing a space in which citizens can gather in order to discuss and debate political issues dramatically reduces the opportunity of people to join together in order to act in concert.

Freedom as the Pursuit of Interests

George Kateb's attempt to defend the liberal idea of representative democracy from Arendt's claim that the existing political system does not enable the citizen to participate in public affairs (that is, be free in his or her capacity as a citizen) is revealing. According to Kateb (1984: 120), Arendt mistakenly makes the 'sacrifice of private interests an inevitable feature of fidelity to the well being of the public world'. Kateb wants to disrupt the private/public binary, claiming that if Arendt had not insisted on a sharp distinction between public and private interests, she might have agreed that representative democracy is more than a form of government in which the population is necessarily passive or motivated only by narrow egoistic interests.

Kateb's claim that the private and public are not tight categories and cannot be uniformly separated is well taken; yet he fails to confront Arendt's critique on two counts. First, Arendt is making a descriptive claim; namely, that the existing political system's institutional structure reinforces isolation and in this manner keeps the population dispersed, which amounts, in her view, to powerlessness. Second, Kateb misconstrues Arendt's notion of freedom. When Kateb talks about
interests – whether private or public – and the possibility of pursuing these interests, he means freedom. Freedom in this sense is an attribute of either the will or the intellect, and is conceived as a human property that can be expropriated and therefore needs to be protected. This conception of freedom is not only integral to liberalism’s most basic assumptions but informs Marxism as well.

Marx problematised ‘interests’ by suggesting that interests themselves can be molded, which indicates, in turn, that the mere pursuit of interests is not necessarily an indication of freedom. Nonetheless, Arendt’s criticism is also pertinent to the Marxist outlook because it questions the very idea that conceives humans in terms of interests. It was Marx, she says, who suggested ‘that all men, in so far as they act at all, act for reasons of self-interests ...’. He simply transformed self-interest into ‘forces of interests which inform, move and direct the classes of society, and through their conflicts direct society as a whole’ (Arendt 1958: 321; 1993: 155). The crux of the matter is that, according to both liberal and Marxist logic, the possibility of pursing one’s own interests is the standard by which one determines whether and to what extent a regime controls its population. Once humans are defined by interests and perceive everything and everyone as a means, then, according to Arendt, action becomes extinct and the political realm is destroyed.

Two Concepts of Freedom

The identification of freedom with the pursuit of interests, and the conceptualisation of humans in terms of interests, is, according to Arendt (1963: 140), connected to the ‘withdrawal of the individual’ from the world ‘into an “inward domain of consciousness” where it finds the only “appropriate region of human liberty”’. Arendt (1958: 279–83, 285, 306) traces this idea back to Descartes’ cogito, the turning from the world into the self, and states that this turning inward is firmly linked to the individuation, atomisation, isolation and loneliness characterising modernity. Arendt (1958: 305) suggests that this philosophical move is linked to the insemination of instrumental rationality into the public realm. In the Ancient world, instrumental rationality was associated with the oikia. Arendt is alluding to a structural change in which the private realm infiltrates the public – or political – realm.

For Arendt, the triumph of the ego manifests a turning inward, which results in freedom’s effacement. In the essay, ‘What is Freedom?’, Arendt
(1993: 160) acknowledges that ‘the necessity which prevents me from doing what I know and will may arise from the world, or from my body ... ; all these factors,’ she continues, ‘the psychological ones not excluded, condition the person from the outside as far as the I-will and the I-know ...’. But she introduces a new concept, the I-can (which is analogous to action), and claims that the I-can is the ‘power that meets these circumstances, that liberates, as it were, willing and knowing from the bondage to necessity ...’. Arendt criticises the notion which conflates the I-will and I-can, a notion which she believes emerged in the writings of Augustine, adopted by Descartes and modern philosophy, and today manifests itself in liberalism and Marxism (Arendt 1963: 77–79; Villa 1996: 42–79). She sees the I-can and the I-will as distinct faculties, freedom being an ‘inherent quality’ of the former and only a ‘coincidence’ of the latter.

For Arendt, the I-will and I-know are corollaries of interest, such that any attempt to conceptualise freedom in terms of interests, or even in terms of the possibility of pursuing interests, becomes misguided. She agrees that motives and aims are important factors in every single act, ‘but they are [not] its determining factors, and action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend them’. We read in ‘What is Freedom?’ that ‘Action insofar as it is free is neither under the guidance of the intellect nor under the dictate of the will ...’. Rather, humans ‘are free – as distinguished from their possessing the gift of freedom – as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same’ (Arendt 1993: 151, 153).

Arendt’s thought is steeped in Heidegger’s ontology (Villa 1996, esp.119ff.). While no in-depth analysis of the precise relation between the two is possible here, a brief examination of Heidegger’s notion of freedom may be useful by way of clarifying Arendt’s position. In ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, Heidegger (1993a: 330) says that the ‘essence of freedom is originally not connected with the will or even with the causality of human willing’. Elsewhere, Heidegger (1993b: 126) writes:

Freedom is not merely what common sense is content to let pass under this name: the caprice, turning up occasionally in our choosing, of inclining in this or that direction. Freedom is not mere absence of constraint with respect to what we can or cannot do. Nor is it on the other hand mere readiness for what is required and necessary (and so somehow a being). Prior to all
this ('negative' and 'positive' freedom), freedom is engagement in the disclosure of beings as such.

So, according to Heidegger, freedom is the possibility of engaging in the disclosure of being, and this ontological sense precedes the liberal notion of negative and positive freedom. Yet, what does Heidegger mean when he says that freedom is the disclosure of being? In other words, how are we to understand Heidegger's ontological conception of freedom?

In contradistinction to Descartes, who conceives the worldless cogito to be the philosophical Archimedean point, Heidegger considers our primordial experience as situated, as being-in-the-world. He suggests that the Cartesian cogito is dependent on, and conditioned by, its being-in-the-world, and it is not coincidental that Descartes' Meditations begin by stripping the cogito of the world. The world, says Heidegger (1988: 91-148), is not surmised from the cogito as Descartes would have us think, but rather we are already and always in-the-world.

Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world resonates throughout Arendt's work, manifesting itself in two concretely interrelated ways. It is most apparent in her notion that humans are conditioned. Arendt writes (1958: 9):

"Men are conditioned beings because everything they come into contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence. The world in which the vita activa spends itself consists of things produced by human activities; but the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers ... Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a human condition. This is why men, no matter what they do, are always conditioned."

In addition, Arendt (1958: 234) emphasises the political dimension of being-in-the-world by stressing that the world gains meaning only because humans are beings with-others-in-the-world, or in her lexicon: the world makes sense as a result of the human condition of plurality - because 'not one man, but men, inhabit the earth ...'.

Heidegger claims that, because humans are beings-in-the-world, any attempt to question Being entails some kind of engagement. The very possibility of engaging with Being so as to disclose it depends on the 'constitution' of Being itself and the human relation to it. In contrast to
the ontic conception of being-as-presence, Being can never be fully defined or captured ontologically. It always withdraws, remains always partially concealed. Therefore any attempt to render it permanent – to essentialise it or reduce it or negate it – is a distortion of Being. Being is more than one can make of it; it is overdetermined; indeed it always makes and maintains difference.

‘Difference’ does not mean the difference between two objects which are present-at-hand, but as Fred Dallmayr (1993: 101) suggests: ‘the central point is to see being itself as difference (Unterscheidung): as the play of absence and presence, concealment and disclosure, and particularly as the generative potency letting the difference happen (Ereignis)’. Arendt (1977: 187) writes that the ego ‘experiences difference in identity precisely when it is not related to the things that appear but only to itself’, and suggests in this that the self is itself always an expression of otherness.

Being, however, also reveals itself, or more precisely Being is in itself a clearing (Lichtung). To illustrate what he means by clearing, Heidegger uses as a metaphor an opening in a thick forest which enables one to discern the different trees. Humans are able to engage in the disclosure of Being due to this clearing, indicating that the clearing is, according to Heidegger, freedom. Heidegger explains that Dasein

as Being-in-the-world is cleared [gelichtet] in itself, not through any other entity, but in such a way that it is itself the clearing. Only for an entity which is existentially cleared in this way does that which is present-at-hand become accessible in the light or hidden in the dark. By its very nature, Dasein brings its ‘there’ along with it. If it lacks its ‘there’, it is not [empirically] the entity which is essentially Dasein; indeed, it is not this entity at all. Dasein is its disclosedness.

For Heidegger (1988: 171) accordingly, existence is disclosure; being is an affirmation of plurality; and humans are par excellence ‘the site which being requires in order to disclose itself’. Heidegger (1987: 205) claims that it is the particular quality of humans to wonder and to question, to open the self to otherness, to constitute ‘the site of openness, the there’.

Heidegger explains that ‘Freedom is the comprehensive and pervasive dimension of being in whose ambiance man becomes man in the first place. This means: the essence of man is grounded in freedom; freedom itself, however, is a category transcending human Dasein, that is, a
category of authentic being as such' (Dallmayr 1984: 121). In yet another context, Heidegger (1985: 9) points out that ontological freedom is not 'freedom as a property of man; but the reverse: man as the possibility of freedom. Human freedom is a freedom which invades and sustains man, thereby rendering man possible'. Thus, from an ontological point of view, freedom is the condition of possibility of being human.

Arendt subscribes to this notion of freedom and refers to it in more concrete and political terms. Freedom, she says, is a state of being that manifests itself in action. It is precisely freedom as a condition of possibility that allows humans to transcend life's necessities – the biological process that sustains life and attends to its needs – and to act. Action is a corollary neither of the will nor of the intellect and is not guided by interests: action is not determined by instrumental rationality and does not perceive the world through a means-ends lens. This does not indicate, as Mary Dietz suggests (1994b: 880), that Arendtian politics is devoid of purpose – i.e., of an aim or a goal – but rather that action is the activity which is done for its own sake (Arendt 1993: 163). While it is hard for us to imagine a politics not based on interests, it is important to note that in the Hebrew Bible the word interest does not exist, nor is there a corollary for it in biblical language. This suggests that interest politics is an historical phenomenon, one that can potentially be transcended.

While Arendt's notion of action is compelling, it also reveals some of the difficulties in her thought. The dichotomy she creates between the vita contemplativa and the vita activa is surely one of them. It appears that Arendt initially appropriated the distinction between the two spheres, because the sphere of reason associated with the vita contemplativa represents a form of necessity, and necessity would limit freedom of action. This is the difficulty that Kant (1963: 114–131) wrestles with when he distinguishes between the noumenal self and the self that is determined by the dictates of reason. Heidegger (1993c: 217) also alludes to this problem in the very beginning of the 'Letter on Humanism' when he states that 'We are still far from pondering the essence of action decisively enough'. The issue is crucial. If indeed the two spheres are totally separate, then on what basis might one distinguish between a just and unjust act? Arendt (1982), to be sure, is aware of this difficulty and stresses in her later work the important place of judgment in politics and action.
If humans are free in the ontological sense, as Arendt argues, then it becomes untenable to advance the liberal claim that 'perfect liberty' is sacrificed by the intrusion of politics. If freedom manifests itself in action, and the condition for any action is plurality, then freedom is dependent on the public domain. Plurality, according to Arendt, is essential to agency. One's experience of the world is dependent on the recognition and confirmation of others. Even one's own identity – not only in the sense of what one is, but also who one is – is contingent upon how others interpret one's words and deeds (Parekh 1981: 87). Arendt (1958: 50) goes so far as to suggest that even 'the great forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thought of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatised and deindividualised, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance'. A sense of reality, even the most intimate and private reality, according to Arendt (1993: 254), is intersubjectively derived. This suggests that Arendt's position, on one level, amounts to a reversal of the liberal view that freedom ends where politics begins.

Curbing Power

Arendt (1970: 44) writes that power 'corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert'. A group of people joining together in order to advance a certain issue or a whole spectrum of issues is a manifestation of power. Power, therefore, 'is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together'. Arendt contends that such events as the student 'riots' in the late 1960s illustrate how a relatively small group of people, acting together, can change an institution's policies. Once the group disperses, however, power vanishes, which explains the sagacity of the old adage 'divide and conquer'. Following Arendt (1970: 50–51), power is integral to the political realm, primarily in democracies where people are permitted to form groups and act in concert. She reminds us that even totalitarian regimes cannot exist exclusively on the basis of violence and are dependent on 'the secret police and its informers' who 'empower' the government. Power, she infers, is the essence of all government.

Arendt (1970: 45, 51) maintains that violence is different from power in that violence is instrumental. It 'always stands in need of
guidance and justification through the end it pursues. And what needs justification by something else cannot be the essence of anything'. Arendt's distinction between power and violence suggests that the proportional distribution of the two is linked to the character of political space. Where violence reigns, she argues, the space where people can unite in order to contest is obliterated. Arendt's claim appears to be informed by the Aristotelian assertion that speech is a necessary condition of politics, alongside her insight that violence is incapable of speech and 'speech is helpless when confronted with violence' (Arendt 1963: 19; 1994: 308). If democracy is in principle based on the opportunity for people to express a plurality of views, then violence cannot be systematically utilised to control the population in this type of regime. While Arendt's claim is, generally speaking, correct, it remains that violence is employed on a large scale today in societies that are ostensibly democratic. In the United States the crime rate has decreased in the past decade, while the rate of imprisonment has constantly increased so that currently over two million people, mostly the poor, African-Americans, and Hispanics, are detained. Israel employs a variety of violent means to suppress the Palestinians, ranging from summary executions and torture to house demolitions and the hermetic closure of the occupied territories.

The important point here is that power – i.e., acting in concert – can be actualised only in the public domain. The relation between public space and power is complex. Power can only appear in a pre-existent public space. Yet it is only in virtue of its appearance that a public space is created. The public domain is only defined by the appearance of power. Yet power, while defining that space, may equally circumscribe it. Public space is itself a manifestation of freedom. Totalitarian regimes may curtail public space through violence. The greatest challenge to a democracy is to explore the ways in which it erodes public space without violence.

Having said this, Arendt fails to refer to some of the mechanisms of control, implicit in her own work, in terms of 'control'. This might be an outgrowth of her failure to recognise that social control can be 'non-subjective', in the sense that it frequently cannot be traced back to a social agent, a subject. Arendt's descriptions, however, clearly suggest that often control is not engendered by a particular social agent. In her essay, 'What is Authority?', Arendt (1993: 99–100) actually alludes to non-subjective forms of control, using the structure of an onion as a
metaphor to analyze totalitarian bureaucracy and how it is employed to control the population (Pitkin 1998: 88–97, 255).

At times, Arendt appears to concur with those theorists who contend that in democracies the population is free and people act according to their interests within the general framework of the law. She intimates that the identification between consent and a voluntary act is often ‘correct legally and historically but not existentially and theoretically’. Yet Arendt (1972: 87–88) seems to think that within democracies the two coincide:

Every man is born a member of a particular community and can survive only if he is welcomed and made at home within it. A kind of consent is implied in every newborn’s factual situation; namely, a kind of conformity to the rules under which the great game of the world is played in the particular group to which he belongs by birth. We all live and survive by a kind of tacit consent, which, however, it would be difficult to call voluntary. We might call it voluntary, though, when the child happens to be born into a community in which dissent is also a legal and de facto possibility once he has grown into a man. Dissent implies consent, and is the hallmark of free government; one who knows that he may dissent knows also that he somehow consents when he does not dissent.

In the second half of the passage, Arendt qualifies her claim concerning the impact the ‘human condition’ has on people. While it is true that consent only becomes meaningful where dissent is permitted, it does not necessarily follow (as the first part of the passage suggests) that consent is a corollary of voluntary acts, insofar as the latter are acts which are based on judgment. Even in democracies, where dissent is allowed, one is conditioned in such a way that one may de facto concede without it being a so-called voluntary act. Take, for example, the influence of gender norms on one’s identity, interests and aspirations. Gender norms involve the creation and circulation of notions of normalcy and abnormality, which have an immediate impact on modes of behaviour. Along the same lines, political apathy may be produced through a variety of social mechanisms and therefore should not necessarily be considered a voluntary act. (In the passage cited, Arendt suggests that political apathy amounts to political support.) Thus one must ‘think against Arendt’, but also with Arendt, since her own
illustration and analysis of the modern world suggests that, even in a ‘free society’, it is difficult to conflate consent with a voluntary act.

The Infiltration of ‘the Social’

Unlike totalitarian regimes, where public space is eradicated by violent means, in democracies it is frequently circumscribed and marginalised without need of violence. In The Human Condition, Arendt illustrates the manner by which public space is colonised, identifying this process with the infiltration of ‘the social’. She insists that this colonisation endangers action, the activity which coincides with political freedom and conceived to be the ‘highest’ within the vita activa. In The Attack of the Blob, Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social, Hanna Pitkin (1998: 2, 114, 192, 224) discusses how ‘the social’ affects the population’s comportment. Pitkin claims that ‘the social’, in Arendt, ultimately denies human agency — without arguing that it constitutes a form of social control.

Although Arendt does not define ‘the social’ clearly (Benhabib 1996: 23; Pitkin 1998: 177ff.), she associates it with the appearance of the oikia — the realm of protection, provision, and procreation — in the public domain. ‘The social’ is the sphere that ‘takes nothing into account but the life process of mankind, and within its frame of reference all things become objects of consumption’ (Arendt 1958: 89). Conceiving everything as a function of the life process idealises the task of securing life’s necessities and consequently elevates the private realm, the realm which, according to Arendt, has no place in the public domain. With the intrusion of ‘the social’, both public and private spheres are ruined: ‘the public because it has become a function of the private and the private because it has become the only common concern left’ (Arendt 1958: 69). Action, in turn, is sacrificed. Even the basic ideals of homo faber, such as permanence, stability and durability, are threatened.

Following the encroachment of ‘the social’, work is reduced to labour (Arendt 1958: 89, 126), ‘because all things [are] understood, not in their worldly, objective quality, but as results of living labour power and functions of the life process’. The transformation of the production process and the ensuing amplification of labour has, in Arendt’s opinion, ‘almost succeeded in levelling all human activities to the common denominator of securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance’. It is as if, in the words of Pitkin (1998: 202), people ‘had
been swallowed by some Blob that deprived them of their individuality and capacity for initiative, compacted them into an undifferentiated mass’. Arendt, one might add, links the invasion of ‘the social’ to the ascent of liberalism, and it is not coincidental that in today’s paradigmatic examples of democracy’s success, the industrialised countries, the infiltration of the private into the public is most pronounced.

**Instrumentalising Politics according to the Life Process**

Arendt’s discussion of the instrumental character of politics enables one to distinguish between two distinct movements which are at work: it is not only that ‘the social’ realm grows and thus reduces the space that was once allotted to politics, but that politics itself, as a realm that is informed solely by interests, is transformed into a national household. The issue at stake, claims Arendt (1958: 157), is not instrumentality in itself, ‘but rather the generalisation of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men’. Arendt appears to be claiming that modernity’s predicament is tied to the infiltration of instrumental rationality into politics. But in the final sections of *The Human Condition*, she makes clear that *homo faber* – associated with instrumental rationality – has been superseded by *animal laborans*. One of the implications of this displacement is that instrumental rationality has, in a sense, been limited.

‘Limited’ is more appropriate than ‘outstripped’, since Arendt continues to describe society and the political realm as if the two function according to interests, i.e., instruments or means. The difference is that the character of these interests has become extremely confined – almost as if the rationality that is guiding them is limited to a single trajectory. Arendt (1958: 46) describes the shared private realm as ‘rooted in the one-ness of man-kind’, a one-ness informed by the survival of the species. She (1958: 311) argues that, hidden behind the ‘all-pervasive power of self-interest … we find another point of reference which indeed forms a much more potent principle than any pain-pleasure calculus could ever offer, and that is the principle of life itself’. The focus on life’s necessities ‘allows for only one interest and one opinion’ – which in the context of our discussion amounts to conformism (Arendt 1958: 46).
Arendt goes on to argue that the monolithic character of interests has transformed society into a mass society of jobholders, and traces this idea to the liberal economists who, even before Karl Marx, propounded the idea that there is such a thing as the one-interest of society. It was the liberals, she avers, who assumed that "an invisible hand" guides the behaviour of men and produces the harmony of their conflicting interests. Despite 'the liberal hypothesis of a natural "harmony of interests"', Arendt (1958: 43, 44) maintains that a society based on 'one interest' or even on a harmony of interests is not advantageous; furthermore it is a 'fiction'. Indeed, the very notion of a one-interest society is a 'social construct' in the dual sense of the word social. A one-interest society exists where 'the social' has triumphed, for it is the societal idealisation of survival and not, as it were, human nature, which produces and cultivates a singular interest. Thus, it is not so much that politics are instructed by instrumental rationality and conceived in terms of a means-ends calculus, which is informed by interests, but that these interests are uniformly the interests of the oikia.

What was left was a 'natural force', the force of the life process itself, to which all men and all human activities were equally submitted ... and whose only aim, if it had an aim at all, was survival of the animal species man. None of the higher capacities of man was any longer necessary to connect individual life with the life of the species; individual life became part of the life process, and to labour, to assure the continuity of one's own life and the life of his family, was all that was needed. (Arendt 1958: 321)

For Arendt, the identification of the biological cycle that sustains life with politics – which she alludes to in her discussion of imperialism (Pitkin 1998: 76) – leads to a form of automatism. With the amplification of life's necessities, 'society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household'. Accordingly, states Arendt (1958: 40), 'society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behaviour, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalise" its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement'. In other words, the elevation of one interest facilitates control by encouraging and even training people to concentrate on promoting their own welfare. This, on the one hand, nourishes 'behaviour', a mode of
comportment that is totally preoccupied with securing life’s necessities. On the other hand, it leads to a disregard of all the concerns that transcend necessity, like equality, justice, solidarity, courage and excellence.

Arendt (1958, 322) concludes that the ‘society of jobholders demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species and the only active decision still required of the individual were to let go, so to speak, to abandon his individuality, the still individually sensed pain and trouble of living, and acquiesce in a dazed, “tranquillised”, functional type of behaviour’. Indeed, the amplification of one interest leads to political apathy.

Making a Living

Arendt claims that

whatever we do, we are supposed to do for the sake of ‘making a living’; such is the verdict of society, and the number of people, especially in the professions who might challenge it, has decreased rapidly ... As a result, all serious activities, irrespective of their fruits, are called labour, and every activity which is not necessary either for the life of the individual or the life process of society is subsumed under playfulness.

From the standpoint of ‘making a living’, Arendt (1958: 127, 128) maintains, ‘every activity unconnected with labour becomes a “hobby”’. In the final analysis, every activity that does not pertain directly to the private becomes superfluous.

Arendt’s claim has two dimensions: ideal and material. The ideal of ‘making a living’ is generated in society in such a way that action is looked down upon and often even shunned. From a material perspective, ‘making a living’ is ingrained in, and propagated through, society’s institutional infrastructure – the political system, education system, media, and a variety of other institutions. In turn, the norms, rules, standards, and proprieties of ‘making a living’ which embody these institutions are internalised by the population.

One alarming example of the obtrusive character of ‘making a living’ is that it is now embodied within the framework of most universities, whose traditional and pronounced objectives are the search for truth and
preparation of students for good citizenship. Because of the ideals disseminated in society, students doggedly go to university in order to improve their prospects of attaining a more decent – better paying – job, rather than to study, think, acquire knowledge, and perhaps even excel. Universities do not resist this tendency, but rather reinforce the students’ aspiration by curtailing such fields as philosophy and the classics and by expanding computer science and MBA programmes. These programmes, in turn, propagate the norms of ‘making a living’, and in this manner feed the dialectic elevating labour.

A recent study about the changing status of humanities in higher education exemplifies this point well. According to James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield (1998: 48–55), ‘Humanities represent a sharply declining proportion of all undergraduate degrees. Between 1970 and 1994 computer and information sciences, protective services, and transportation ... increased five- to ten-fold’, while ‘already popular, business management doubled. In 1971, 78 per cent more degrees were granted in business than English. By 1994, business enjoyed a four-fold advantage over English and remained the largest major’. In thirty years, Engell and Dangerfield continue, ‘a total flip-flop has occurred in the proportion of freshmen entering college who expect their higher education to enhance future job security and assure high-wage employment (greatly increased) versus those who want to develop values, form a broader social vision, experiment with varied forms of knowledge, and formulate a philosophy of living (greatly decreased)’. The authors suggest that a university field will succeed in attracting students if it offers at least one of the following: a promise of money (an improved chance of securing occupation that offers above average lifetime earnings); a knowledge of money (the field itself studies money); or a source of money (the field receives significant external money).

A closer examination of ‘making a living’ discloses how the infiltration of ‘the social’ supports societal control. For Arendt, differentiation within a labouring society is determined only according to one’s function vis-à-vis the ideal of ‘making a living’, while the various other characteristics, which had previously divided society into social groups or classes, become obsolete. Hence, with the ‘invasion of the social’, society turns into mass society. Masses (Arendt 1979: 311)

are not held together by a consciousness of common interest and they lack that specific class articulateness which is expressed in determined, limited, and obtainable goals. The term masses
applies only where we deal with people who either because of sheer numbers, or indifference, or a combination of both, cannot be integrated into any organisation based on common interest, into political parties or municipal governments or professional organisations or trade unions. Potentially, they exist in every country and form the majority of those large numbers of neutral, politically indifferent people who never join a party and hardly ever go to the polls.

Within mass society, following Arendt (1958: 41), the social realm ‘embraces and controls all members of the community equally ... and the victory of equality in the modern world is only the political and legal recognition of the fact that society has conquered the public realm, and that distinction and difference have become private matters of the individual’. Seyla Benhabib (1996: 27) persuasively argues that, by ‘equality’, Arendt ‘not only means political and legal equality but also the equalisation of tastes, behaviour, manners, and lifestyles, which is executed by mass society’. One notices a tension between, on the one hand, the liberal notion of the individual as a citizen who bears rights (which accentuates each person’s individuality), and, on the other hand, the equalisation or homogenisation of society that results from the infiltration of ‘the social’ and the aggrandisement of ‘making a living’.

The homogenisation process that Arendt portrays is characterised by abandonment of the political realm for the sake of sustaining the life process and consuming the abundance produced, thus leading the population into political apathy. Considering the current political apathy of large segments of the population, Arendt’s analysis is extremely important; it not only proffers an explanation for this phenomenon, but questions the validity of the claim that citizens who are apathetic should not expect as much return as those who are more active in social life. C. B. Macpherson (1977: 87, 88) wrote that this position ‘would be a fair principle, consistent with democratic equality, if the apathy were an independent datum ...’. If, on the other hand, apathy is manufactured or induced, then the whole question becomes much more complicated. Macpherson attributes apathy to the ‘blurring of issues and a diminution of the responsibility of governments to electorates, both of which reduce the incentives of the voters to exert themselves in making a choice’. Arendt might have agreed, but her description of society suggests that a more primordial process is involved. Accentuation of the private as the realm of freedom, preoccupation with the life process, leads to
depoliticisation, to a turning away from the affairs of the world. This fixation is not natural but a result of the configuration of our society – both institutionally and ideologically (Arendt 1963: 277). Therefore, it should be considered as a form of control.

Arendt’s analysis of ‘making a living’ has to do with her rejection of economism – whether liberal or Marxist – in theory and more importantly in practice. Her depiction of society suggests not only that the population is homogenised into apathy, but that the very idea of individuality, which liberalism rightly elevates, is scarcely judged or even conceived in terms of action. Rather, a person’s singularity is determined, for the most part, according to his or her function within the production process. Individuality is judged from the perspective of labour, she says, suggesting that people tend to consider their particular strengths mainly as ‘assets’ which can be utilised or ‘capitalised’ in order to secure life’s necessities. The constitution of individuality around the notion of attaining life’s needs, not only diminishes the very idea of individuality but leads to the isolation and loneliness of the individual. Arendt (1979: 478) warns that organised loneliness is not to be taken lightly:

What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century ... organised loneliness is considerably more dangerous than the unorganised impotence of all those who are ruled by the tyrannical and arbitrary will of a single man. Its danger is that it threatens to ravage the world as we know it – a world which everywhere seems to have come to an end – before a new beginning rising from this end has had time to assert itself.

Arendt’s discussion of ‘making a living’ points to a double movement that characterises our society. On the one hand, with the amplification of labour and the elevation of the private, individuals are isolated and therefore their propensity to act is greatly reduced. On the other hand, singularity disappears as individuals become mere particles in a mass. ‘What makes mass society so difficult to bear’ (Arendt 1958: 52) ‘is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them’.
Unlike a violent purge implemented by security forces, the ideal of ‘making a living’ and the institutional configuration of society implicated by this ideal is always in the background (Pitkin 1998: 192–96). Precisely because it is so familiar it is hardly noticed or discussed, yet this is not to say that it is less potent than more perceptible forms of control. On the contrary, as argued by Foucault (1990: 86), the less apparent a controlling mechanism, the more effective the control.

Notwithstanding Arendt’s failure to deploy her insights under the rubric of social control, her discussion of the encroachment of ‘the social’, alongside her description of modernity, illuminates some of the processes that lead to apathy, depoliticisation and conformism. On her view, the reduction of politics to a confined realm of interests that focus on securing the life process threatens the social subject and even the world itself. Once humans perceive everything and everyone as merely part of the life process, then, according to Arendt, action becomes extinct and the political realm is destroyed.

Conclusion

Arendt points to a tension between the understanding of freedom as the pursuit of interests – more specifically, the interests of the oikia – and the notable liberal conceptualisation of the social agent as a bearer of rights. The elevation of household interests (i.e., liberal freedom) endangers the notion of a participatory citizenry and its underlying conception of the subject who has individual rights.

A similar point has been made by Sheldon Wolin (1992: 244), who claims that ‘once politics is reduced to interest groups, there is no general constituency to support government in its role of impartial defender of rights’. He argues that

Interest politics discourages the development of civic culture, favourable to the defense of rights ... [It] dissolves the idea of citizen as one for whom it is natural to join together with other citizens to act for purposes related to a general community and substitutes [it with] the idea of individuals who are grouped together according to conflicting interests.

Arendt’s different notion of freedom enables her to advance an alternative perspective, yet she seldom provides concrete recommendations. She suggests that the moment one accentuates the
ontological conception of freedom, a normative implication arises: in order to actualise one's freedom one needs to expand rather than confine the political realm. This suggestion reverberates in her advocacy of participatory democracy as opposed to representative democracy. She stresses the importance of establishing institutions that would create a space in which citizens could come together in order to discuss and debate political issues and thus participate in the political process as equals. Institutions such as these are based on the idea that freedom exists, but needs a public arena in order to manifest itself (Arendt 1963: 255). Even the word *concert*, which Arendt chose to use, has the dual connotation of togetherness and mutuality, on the one hand, and harmony, congeniality and friendliness, on the other. Thus, Arendt appears to intend that acting is also a way in which persons relate to one another as ends.

Arendt's proposal to expand public space is extremely important considering the fact that isolation is one of the primary forms of social control. Her recommendations, nonetheless, do not spell out how this objective can be accomplished. This is why Barber's *Strong Democracy* is important. Barber (1984: 307ff.) spends considerable time discussing a variety of institutions that would need to be constructed in order to secure public space, which would, in turn, enable political participation. Following Arendt, he argues that it is crucial to establish a whole range of institutions that will promote participation and coincide with the spirit of democracy. Among his suggestions are neighbourhood assemblies, electronic balloting, and a national referendum process permitting popular initiatives and referenda.

Barber's practical proposals, important as they are, seem, nonetheless, to be based on a voluntaristic outlook, failing to take account of the productive character of 'the social', which helps constitute the very interests and identity of the population. So while the creation of a public space – achieved by establishing participatory institutions – may be a form of constructive resistance to 'the social's' encroachment, this space may be used readily enough to perpetuate the same norms and standards that have already been advanced by 'the social'. The establishment of participatory institutions is accordingly a necessary, but not a sufficient, objective.

Arendt's portrayal of modernity underscores the difficulty of bringing about social change and urges us to rethink some of the strategies employed in the past. The lack of a well-defined opponent, resulting
from the inability to trace back some contemporary forms of control to a social agent, makes it even more difficult to mobilise people. Along the same lines, the ubiquity of ‘the social’, the fact that it is not located in a limited number of identifiable sites, suggests that it cannot really be conquered or rapidly altered. Because ‘the social’ is widely dispersed across the social terrain, any swift attempt to bring about substantial change is bound to fail. This rules out the traditional revolutionary strategy associated with a speedy assault on a number of identifiable sites of control, and suggests that groups should focus on prolonged struggles that coincide with democratic practices.

Arendt’s analysis also suggests that everyone is complicit to a certain extent with the powers that be, because even the language we use is saturated with the values and norms disseminated through the rise of ‘the social’. Considering that language is the very condition of intelligibility, that it helps shape the way people think and behave, and that it is embodied in society’s institutional design, to create new participatory institutions cannot alone suffice. There is no guarantee that new institutions will not preserve the norms and hierarchies accentuated by ‘the social’. There is no easy solution, and language alone, though it informs thought and behaviour, is not of itself a determining force. The human condition of natality, as Arendt maintains, always contains the possibility of creating something new – words or deeds. In addition, Arendt’s discussion of plurality and her claim that meaning is dependent on intersubjective experience suggests that plurality is the ground of linguistic forms of control. Put differently, non-subjective forms of control are ultimately dependent on plurality: ‘on the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear’ and thus assure us of the world’s reality (Arendt 1977: 183). The appropriation of the norms and standards of ‘the social’ by a plurality of people not only empowers these norms but is also the force that sustains them. Were they not adopted and employed by a plurality of people, the norms and standards advanced by ‘the social’ would be rendered powerless. If the instrumental relation to the world seems overpowering, it is the people themselves who empower it, and they too who have the capacity to neutralise it.

From a more practical perspective, hooks (1990: 145) notes that ‘language is also a place of struggle’ and that people should constantly be critical of the words they use and the way they use them. Many of the iniquities of modern democratic societies persist because the values and
standards of political language, in the Arendtian sense, have virtually disappeared. Changing the language of debate, inserting the values and vocabulary of the political realm in an effort to exit the economistic mind-set, is one way to begin resisting current trends. Hooks also stresses that there is no privileged site of resistance. The struggle against economic exploitation is neither more nor less important than the struggle against racism, sexism or environmental degradation. Moreover, privileging one over the other leads to division and exclusion and is, accordingly, detrimental to the overall struggle against domination.

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