

Ontologizing the Public Realm – Arendt and the Political

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Within the tradition of German philosophy, the idea of a public realm has incarnated the possibilities of emancipation and enlightenment. To Immanuel Kant, the public sphere opened up in the eighteenth century represents a victory of reason over private interests. To Jürgen Habermas, the debates that are undertaken within the public sphere represent a promise of democracy. In this latter interpretation, the possibilities for communication are conditioned by the public realm, and the possibilities of democracy are conditioned by the communication taking place in the public realm; the goal of democracy is to make it possible, for as many people as possible, to participate in public debates. To Habermas as for Kant, the public sphere represents the possibilities of emancipation; we participate in open discussion and debate with a kind of unaffected enthusiasm where we are able to transcend our private interests, thereby participating in the realm of freedom opened up by the modern discovery of normativity.

In a similar way, Hannah Arendt idealised the *polis* of ancient Greece as a retrospective vision of political freedom. But to Arendt, the political impact of the public realm is less about the trajectory of modernity, the realization of reason or normative language. It is, rather, an ontologized vision of how our concepts of reality and truth arise. Rather than defining human reality as a product of *The Human*, Arendt's describes it as the product of

plurality. Through the gathering of perspectives which are realized in and through public realm, in its historical versions as given in the *polis*, the *res publica* and so on, what Arendt calls reality comes into being. Unless we perceive things in and through the perspectives of others, objects are not real; they remain in the shadowy realm of the unreal. Thus, rather than essentializing humans through their history or their activities, Arendt defines plurality as that which is human, and thereby also humans in the plural, and thereby also impossible to essentialize. The public realm, as she calls it, is therefore one that creates the kind of reality that is a product of human activity, and thereby of human life.

Our perception of reality does not arise through inner reflection. It arises through the dialectics between the self and the plurality that we call the public realm. In this way, judgment and our thought will always be dependent on what we call the public realm. It is the expectation of communicating with others that makes us perceive a common reality.

Arendt makes it clear that every idea of humanity as one form, or essence, goes against that which marks human life: that which conditions human life is not “human nature.” There is no way to summarize “the human” according to the sum of her biology or history. Human life is marked by a capacity to act. Action is a capacity which is made possible only through plurality—and thereby the multiplicity of perspectives, histories, and biographies. It is this plurality that coincides with the concept of the public realm, which to Arendt has an ontological status, transcending the difference between ancient and modern. The public realm, and the reality created through it, disessentializes the concept of human life in the philosophy of Arendt. In discussing the horrific reality of the concentration camps, and the seeming dehumanization of the twentieth century, she writes: “... man’s ‘nature’ is only ‘hu-

man' insofar as it opens up man to the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man."¹

Such a possibility is given in the public realm, where humans are defined through their actions, through their histories, and where their world is defined through its historicity. The public realm is a realm of plurality, but it corresponds to that which singularizes human beings through a history and particularity which can only be realised in the public sphere.

It is indeed as though everything that is alive—in addition to the fact that its surface is made for appearance, fit to be seen and meant to appear to others—has an *urge to appear*, to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its “inner self” but itself as an individual.²

This quote is crucial since it connotes a process of individuation, of coming into being, where the appearance of that which is singular, particular or individual is secondary to the plurality into which it fits. In other words, plurality is the category through which the world comes into being for Arendt—a condition for the creation of singularities, whether we talk about the making of things or objects, or about the appearance of human individuals. Plurality as such may be constituted by humans, but it can never be defined as essentially human; plurality is rather the spacing, the in-between, or the differentiation which creates the individuation of human beings as well as of objects.

In his well known text “Who is the subject of the rights of man?” Jacques Rancière denounces what he calls the “archipolitical” position of Hannah Arendt. In ontologizing the question of the political, through equating the political subject with the subject that is present in the public realm, Arendt, in Rancière’s view, misses the point about democracy. Democracy, in Ran-

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest, 1979), p. 455.

² Hannah Arendt, *Life of the Mind I* (London, Secker & Warburg, 1978), p. 23.

cière's version, is not a question of freedom in the abstract, but rather of subjectivation. Democracy lives through the kind of dissensus that creates subjectivation, or through the kind of antagonisms that will leave those realms open through which rights can be claimed. In other words, democracy is defined through the processes through which new political subjects come to be, rather than through the stature of the dignified political animal of *the polis*, whom Hannah Arendt herself counts as a perpetual possibility of modernity. In ontologizing the radical difference between public and private, and in refusing the relevance of the social for the political, Rancière argues, Arendt constructs her public realm in the vein of consensus rather than dissensus. To Rancière, politics is not a sphere but a process. As his example, he takes the discussion of "The perplexities of the rights of man" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where Arendt deplors the emergence of the rightless beyond the boundaries of the city state. Arendt's logic is a vicious circle:

... the identification of the subject of the rights of Man with the subject deprived of any rights is not only the vicious circle of a theory; it is also the result of an effect of the reconfiguration of the political field, of an actual process of depoliticization. This process is what is known by the name of *consensus*. / ... (it means that we resort to identity politics and identification of interests etc...)" *Consensus* means closing the realm of dissensus by plugging the intervals and patching over the possible gaps between appearance and reality or law and fact ... *Consensus* is the reduction of democracy to the way of life of a society, to its *ethos*—meaning by this word both the abode of a group and its lifestyle.³

Rancière's redefinition of the political as process of dissensus rather than as the ongoing affairs of public realm is seconded by Chantal Mouffe, who shares the misgivings of Rancière by accusing Arendt of creating a notion of the public realm that is erected

³ Jacques Rancière, "Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2/3 (2004)), pp. 297–310, 306.

on a concept of dissensus. The quest of Rancière as well as of Mouffe is, in other words, the de-ontologization of politics. Such de-ontologization must start with the human. The idea of the state of exception as presented by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer*, as well as the idea of the rights of man in Hannah Arendt, rests on an ontological understanding of the human animal, Rancière argues. But we must instead deontologize the human in order to think another political subject, who is also the subject of the rights of man.

However, as we have seen, Arendt's conception of public realm has little to do with political influences, or with the construction of political identities. Such an endeavor, I am sure, Arendt would relegate to the social sphere, a sphere which is wholly subdued to the possibility of essentializing human life—for instance in the form of the man, the woman or the worker. What the political realm of the public sphere does, rather, is to create the possibility of a reality which exceeds, precisely, that which can be identified as human life in a biological or social sense. Thereby the argumentation of Rancière, as well as Mouffe, seems to miss the point. It may well be that the public realm has an ontological status in Arendt, in that it creates a notion of reality. But there is no notion in Arendt that we must all agree on what reality looks like. There is not even a notion that we must agree on the idea that we share the same reality. Rather, what the public realm does is to create a sense of reality which makes it possible to ask questions of truth and untruth, on what is real and unreal—questions that would simply make no sense without the pluralistic gathering that constitutes the public realm. The public realm is a kind of excess produced in and through the activities of which human life is capable, not a definition of human life itself.

When Arendt discusses the public realm in the beginning of *The Human Condition*, it is easy to read her as idealizing the *polis* as the open political space of the Greek city-state. What appears to be more interesting, however, is that she opens up the

idea of a public space inhabited by humans, which nevertheless constitutes an excess in relation to humanity; this excess is equated with what Arendt calls *the political*. It is the most worthy aspect of the life of human beings, but it is a non-natural aspect of her being, an excess that can only be understood as lying beyond the life and actions of an individual, or the history and actions of a collective. The political is a form of freedom, but it is a freedom which is impossible to realize or experience in the existential sense. The political in Arendt's philosophy is an impossible freedom, if we think about freedom as the capacity to make choices. Arendt's notion of freedom relies only on that which is inhuman in the life of humans; on differentiation and spacing in the public space. In spite of the fact that Arendt's thought is a form of anthropological philosophy, and steeped in a context where man is present as an historical, acting being, we will always encounter a form of inhuman excess. There is a presence of the inhuman in the human that cannot be reduced to a question of conceptualization. That which is inhuman is also a presence of that which conditions humanity, without being human. Public space is an example of such an excess, made up by humans but still exceeding the presence of subjects. Nor can plurality be reduced to an essentially human concept. Rather, it implies differentiation, natality, new beginnings and breaking points between perspectives.

Acts of dissensus versus new beginnings: the example of feminine terrorism

I have argued against Rancière's critique that Arendt's conception of public space is dependent on an essential definition of the human. What then, about his other contention, that Arendt's notion of public space depends on consensus, and disregards the conflicting problem presented by subjectivities that are not at all recognized as being political?

I would like to bring the argument back to Rancière: if by public space we mean a space of plurality, how can we differentiate between acts undertaken through consensus and acts undertaken through dissensus? What really *is* dissensus, if we do not imply the existence of consensus from the start? Arendt does not imply either.

Terrorism today is associated with religious and/or separatist fanaticism and with the blind violence of suicide bombers. It is regarded as serious attacks against Western democracy and treated as such. In the Europe of the 1960s and 1970s, however, terrorism was associated with forms of political extremism that were intent on revealing the failure of European democracy. Although it was violent, it was not altogether blind. Until it became too bloody, too murderous and too fanatical, political terrorism was not universally condemned. In fact, the Red Army Faction (RAF) itself had stunningly high figures of silent support in the German population before their actions became too violent. It was not an unmentionable option among radical intellectuals to promote “ethical terrorism.” “Ethical terrorism” became a vogueish concept in the 1960s and 1970s, supported across a vast range of intellectuals not only in Germany but also in France. For instance, Sartre and Beauvoir were selling a radical journal on the streets that was in fact promoting “ethical terrorism.” Across Europe in the 1970s, the RAF’s political agenda was published and made known to the public. For instance, the manifesto was printed in its entirety in German and covered up as a Swedish popular novel: *Kärlek med förhinder*. It was printed by Bo Cavefors publishers in Sweden, 1977, and then smuggled back into Germany. Figures like Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin and Ulrike Meinhof sparked if not adoration then at least fascination across the left. However, the murders by the RAF and the *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades) that took place in Italy during the same period shifted public opinion against the urban guerillas; the demarcation line between terrorism and activism having become clear to those who had earlier sympathized with both. The at-

tacks that were intent on revealing the shortcomings of modern democracy turned out to be a threat to democracy. Towards the end of the 1970s European terrorism was no longer showing an acceptable face. Nevertheless, interest in the main RAF figures continued to grow, their personalities and fate becoming a favored theme in German art, literature and film from the late 1970s, from the novels by Heinrich Böll and the films by Margarethe von Trotta to the paintings by Gerhard Richter.

The filmmaker Margarethe von Trotta, approaches the question of terrorism from a subjective point of view. Clearly showing that it cannot be analyzed at merely a social level, von Trotta makes it a question of how to define political action as such. In the tradition of German political philosophy, through Kant, Arendt and Habermas, for instance, the emancipatory potential of political negotiation is dependent on its location in the public realm. Terrorism would therefore have to define itself as apolitical and secretive, associated with the dark forces attempting to overthrow the ideals of peace and tolerance that are the heritage of the Enlightenment. Von Trotta's films, however, make such a standoff between public realm and terrorist action, between enlightenment and fanaticism, and between emancipation and extremism inherently problematic. Instead, she shows the tradition of the enlightenment which has marked not only German philosophy, but also its political and cultural history, to produce contradictions that exist side by side with each other, rather than excluding each other. Von Trotta's films depict a Germany marked by violent geographical, social and political divisions. Serving as allegories of those divisions and their particular history, her characters indicate the extremes that marked political life in the 1970s; a traumatic separation between East and West, between politics and terrorism, between media and morality, between the consciousness of the individual and collective guilt, between the debates taking place in public space and the terrorist actions attempting to undermine the legitimacy of such spaces. The issues depicted cut across the boundaries defined in the

philosophical tradition and problematizes them; the promise of emancipation that has been the guiding principle of German political philosophy ever since Kant is shown to be not only stifled but in fact made impossible through the development of German history.

One particular thread that runs through von Trotta's films is connected to what has been said above; they portray the question of terrorism to be not only a German-historical problem, but a problem which crosses into a domain where the question of the political would have to be analysed in relation to the legitimate function of public space. The films of von Trotta open up issues in relation to politics that have engaged contemporary philosophy, namely, what deficiencies define the subject in relation to the state, and the public realm defined by that state? In what sense can we relate current definitions of the political to a public realm where various subjectivities, historically, have been oppressed or rather excluded? To what extent can terrorist acts be interpreted as symptomatic not only of the excluded subject but of the subject as such in relation to such a realm? Von Trotta's films suggest a link between terrorist acts and the kinds of repression which modern democracy has proven not only to tolerate, but even help produce. In other words, the question of terrorism is not only answered through historical references, but more importantly through the way subjectivity is produced by the modern state and its construction of public realm. Von Trotta's women are terroristic by nature or by proxy: Katarina Blum's love for a bank robber can only be allegorical of a terrorist, the insubmissive sister in *Marianne and Juliane* winds up in jail through her uncompromising resistance, while the main figure of von Trotta's best-known film, *Rosa Luxemburg*, leads a movement through which forced attacks on the establishment were part of the agenda. Such fascination for the female terrorist is built not merely on psychological interest, or solidarity, or catharsis. The films show female subjectivity to be the product of an impossible double-bind; the violence directed against the

state is produced by the violence exerted by the state on the female subject as such, since that subject is also excluded from the public realm. In this way, the female subject becomes an exemplary subject of violence, not only oppressed by the state but violated by those same laws that are said to carry the promise of emancipation. Von Trotta is not merely depicting the destiny of female terrorists; she is placing herself on the side of the modern subject of disavowal.

Released toward the end of the flourishing years of New German Cinema in the 1970s, *Die bleierne Zeit* ("The Lead Years") or in English *Marianne and Juliane* (1981), is a film about two sisters, one of whom chooses the terrorist path while the other is a politically motivated journalist. The film is inspired by the life and fate of Gudrun Ensslin, one of the founders of the RAF and, together with Ulrike Meinhof and Andreas Baader, one of its leaders. Von Trotta shows two women that function like mirrors of one another. The terrorist Marianne incarnates a position of dissensus; she represents a position of exclusion or a form of subjectivity not recognized by the political, as it is defined in the public realm. Juliane is more able to protest in a constructive way. The film shows her to have been the more rebellious sister early on, reading Sartre in her youth and perpetually challenging conservative gender roles. As an adult, she works as a journalist for a feminist magazine. Juliane is meanwhile engaging in traditional work for emancipation in compliance with the rules set up by society, using the public realm to advance her political work: writing in the press and demonstrating for the rights of abortion, for instance. However, Juliane's belief in the system comes to a standstill at the moment of her sister's death. From that point on, Juliane will dedicate her life to proving that her sister did not take her life but instead was murdered; the victim of a state more violent than the criminal it has imprisoned. Juliane inherits Marianne's stance of disavowal or extreme dissensus, of the kind through which public realm has set itself up as the only possibility of emancipation.

The film ultimately shows the collapse of both women, each position proving impossible to sustain. Neither terrorism, nor the public realm which traditionally has been considered the realm of emancipation, allows for the freedom of the subject to come into being. Beyond the contract of protection and freedom lies an imaginary realm of projective identification. When the promise of public realm is made too strong, or may seem too weak, it begins to appear transparent and faulty, producing rejection and hatred as a consequence, thus disjoining the possibilities of emancipation as construed through history and culture.

The end of violence?

In his dialogue with Derrida in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, Habermas argues that only the constitution can serve as protection against terrorism, provided that the constitution does not set boundaries on tolerance of minorities. A democratic constitution must, in the end, also tolerate civil disobedience and other forms of protest which for some may appear threatening to the constitutional order.⁴ It is difficult to get beyond the impression, however, that Habermas' idea for a new constitution that would serve as normative rather than restrictive, amounts to a new form of social contract. The complication added to the idea of constitutional patriotism, forwarded by Habermas, in light of terrorist nihilism when it comes to comparing "just" and "unjust" violence, is that Habermas does not discuss the possible violence implied in the founding of a new law. Von Trotta's obsession with Germany and her staging of Germany in the symbolic figure of two women must be seen as complicating the Habermasian belief in "constitutional" patriotism—there is no

⁴ See Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 41–43, and Jürgen Habermas, "Yet Again: German identity – A Unified Nation of Angry DM-Burghers" in *When the Wall came Down*, Harold James and Marla Stone (eds) (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 86–102, p. 97.

“neutral” ground on which to stand from which we could discuss these matters in the public realm. One may even argue that the violence exerted by the RAF is motivated by the failure of the public realm, and the weakness of its future promises for emancipation.

Von Trotta’s film shows a culture where the work for international solidarity has become perverted into the form of terrorism, and where the work for emancipation in public space has become equally perverted. *Die bleierne Zeit* is in many ways preoccupied with the same themes as the film on *Rosa Luxemburg*, the two sisters attempting to pursue the work of Luxemburg. Whereas Rosa has a constructive vocation for international solidarity and peace, however, the political engagement of the two sisters is marked by death and confusion.

It is not only for reasons of historical guilt that von Trotta is interested in the fate of the German Jew. In her films, the fate of the Jew is linked to that of women; a fact which gives us a further clue to her depiction of terrorist subjectivity in *Die bleierne Zeit*. In von Trotta’s films, women and Jews alike fail to identify not only with the ideology of German nationalism but with the construction of the contractual relation between citizen and state, through which public space is considered to give the only possibilities of political action. In *The Women in Rosenstrasse* (2003), she examines a historical episode in which German women, married to Jews, managed to reclaim their men from Nazi persecution. Such a historical incident evokes not only the intrinsic relation between German femininity and Jewishness, both disidentifying with certain aspects of German history, but also the intrinsic threat posed to those that are excluded by the state and from the public realm—Jews and women alike. After *Marianne and Juliane*, von Trotta’s biggest success was her film on *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986), depicting the fate of the spartacist leader. In her essay on Luxemburg in *Men in Dark Times*, Hannah Arendt emphasizes her Jewishness above her femininity. In her film, however, von Trotta reverses the two emphases. Both, however,

come to the same conclusion concerning her activism: the violence directed towards the state is the result of a necessary disidentification, not to be seen as mere destructiveness but rather as the attempt to liberate another way of defining politics, allowing for European politics to leave the enlightenment tradition of a contractual body politic behind, as well as the traditional spaces for political action.⁵ Von Trotta, like Arendt, wants to show that Luxemburg incorporated the true possibilities of a proletarian kind of cosmopolitanism at a certain historic moment. Her murder by the *Freikorps*, a right-wing extremist paramilitary group later to form the core of Hitler's supporters in his rise to power, incarnated a true watershed in European history. Not only did it set back the revolt on the left and the worker's movement, as well as their cause; it was, above all, a setback for all internationalist attempts to conceptualize and create a different form of Europe, to place international solidarity above nationalism in the wake of the First World War and to form an alternative to the nation state in European politics.

One must look upon Arendt's idealization of public space of the *polis* in this light. It is because the public spaces of modernity have failed that she returns to ancient Greece. It is because the modern public spaces are so bound up with the nation-state that she wishes to ontologize the political, beyond the idea of public space as being defined and controlled by the nation-state. In this, the stance of Arendt is quite different from that of Habermas. To Habermas, public space serves the nation-state and enhances its legitimacy. To Arendt, the legitimacy of the modern nation-state has been in doubt ever since the persecution of the Jews. The function of public space can never be emancipation in the sense of the Enlightenment; that is, it can never serve goal-oriented

⁵ Arendt explains Luxemburg's anti-nationalism not as a disavowal of German culture, but rather a reaction to the fact that the Jews of Europe were the first Europeans; identifying not with one single nation but rather with European commonality and languages. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (London: Harvest, 1968), p. 42.

political purposes. Therefore the question of consensus or dissensus does not really matter. What matters is the making real of reality—the differentiation, individuation and creation of individuals and objects that appear, that take on weight and texture as being reality itself. Only in considering public space as a space of new beginnings can we account for the possibilities which modern politics may offer.

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The public realm is indeed a space of paradoxes. While on one hand it seems to be shrinking due to commercialization and to be losing its position as a forum where different agendas can meet, it can also be said to be expanding through social media and thus merge with traditional “private” areas.

The contributions in this volume range from philosophical and political takes on the idea of the public to texts that understand the current situation from the point of view of the art scene. Thinkers such as Chantal Mouffe, Jürgen Habermas and Giorgio Agamben meet, for example, with local Swedish graffiti, the international digital world and multicultural New Delhi. All offer perspectives on what the public—and the private—realms might mean today.

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