

# DOES POLITICS STILL HAVE A MEANING AT ALL? HANNAH ARENDT'S RECONSIDERATION OF POLITICS AS HUMAN PLURALITY

[Siyaset Hala Bir Anlama Sahip mi?]  
[Hannah Arendt'in Siyaseti İnsani Çoğulluk Olarak Yeniden  
Değerlendirmesi]

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## ABSTRACT

Arendt deals with politics in quite an unconventional and challenging way. Her works center on an essential problem: public freedom. Public freedom, in its very essence, springs from political action. For Arendt, not only the unprecedented, unanticipated, and perplexing phenomenon of the extreme criminality of the twentieth century, but also the perplexing fact of the mere submission to it by a majority of people forces us to rethink the meaning of politics and its locus, which make political action possible and allow public freedom to appear. For Arendt, the phenomenon of totalitarianism brought new issues forth, such as statelessness, rightlessness, homelessness, and worldlessness. These phenomena, Arendt holds, run parallel to the collapse of the essential articulations of the human condition, which can be distinguished in sheer thoughtlessness, speechlessness, and lack of judgment. It is due to these unprecedented and unanticipated issues, which cannot be addressed by traditional political categories, Arendt invites us to grapple with the meaning of politics anew. As to Arendt, there is a question which is *more radical*, *more aggressive*, and *more desperate* than the question of what politics is and that question is: does politics still have a meaning at all? In this paper, I will focus on Arendt's genuine and insightful analysis of the question of politics in its

indissoluable relation to the experience of totalitarianism. Through such an analysis, I do not aim at a mere presentation of Arendt's political theory but pointing out the comprehensive horizon and validity of Arendt's political theory in grasping of our current political problems.

**Keywords:** Hannah Arendt, totalitarianism, morality, evil, politics, human plurality, responsibility, judgment.

## ÖZET

Arendt'in siyasal ele alışı oldukça sıradışı ve meydan okuyucudur. Arendt'in yapıtları temel bir problem etrafında odaklanır: Kamusal özgürlük. Kamusal özgürlük ise siyasal eylem üzerinden ortaya çıkar. Arendt'e göre bizi siyasal olanın anlamı ve siyasal eylemi mümkün kılan ve kamusal özgürlüğün görünür olmasına izin veren, onun ait olduğu mekânı yeniden düşünmeye zorlayan iki temel sebep vardır. İlk olarak, yirminci yüzyılın aşırı derecede kriminalize olmuş totalitaryanizm deneyiminin öncelsiz, öngörülemediği ve şaşırtıcı olması, ikinci ve daha önemli olanı ise, kitlelerin bu duruma direnmeksizin/uysalca boyun eğmeleri fenomenidir. Arendt'e göre totalitaryanizm fenomeni devletsizlik, haklardan mahrumiyet, evsizlik ve dünyasızlık gibi yeni problemleri ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu problemler ise kaba düşüncesizlik, konuşma ve yargıda bulunma yoksunluğu gibi insanlık durumunun, temel özelliklerin yıkımıyla paralellik gösterir. Bu önceli olmayan ve öngörülemediği fenomenler geleneksel siyaset felsefelerinin kategorileriyle anlaşılıp açıklanamayacağından dolayı Arendt bizi siyasal olanın anlamı üzerine yeniden düşünmeye davet eder. Arendt'e göre siyasetin hala bir anlamı olup olmadığı sorusu siyasetin ne olduğu sorusundan daha radikal, daha şiddetli ve daha umutsuz bir sorudur. Bu çalışmada Arendt'in totalitaryanizm deneyimiyle ayrılmazcasına bağlı özgün ve öngörülü siyaset analizi odağa alınacaktır. Böylesi bir çözümlemeyle niyet edilen yalnızca Arendt'in siyasal kuramının genel bir sunumundan ziyade bu kuramın bugünün siyasal problemlerini kavramak için sunduğu kapsayıcı ufuk ve geçerliliği vurgulamaktır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Hannah Arendt, totalitaryanizm, ahlak, kötülük, insani çoğulluk, sorumluluk, yargı.

Only one word more concerning the desire to teach the world what it ought to be. For such a purpose philosophy at least always comes too late. Philosophy, as the thought of the world, does not appear until reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready. History thus corroborates the teaching of the conception that only in the maturity of reality does the ideal appear as counterpart to the real, apprehends the real world in its substance, and shapes it into an intellectual kingdom. When philosophy paints its grey in grey, one form of life has become old, and by means of grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only known. The owl of Minerva, takes its flight only when the shades of night are gathering.

Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*

Mephistopheles: Dear friend, all theory is grey,  
And green the golden tree of life.

Goethe, *Faust*

Hegel claims that philosophy and philosophers are offspring of their era. Nevertheless, he maintains that philosophy is *ex post facto*; that is, philosophy comes to the scene after the facts. For this reason, philosophy, as the thought of the world, has only to do with the understanding of the world in terms of reason subsuming the particular under the universal in order to arrive at objectivity. To some extent, what Hegel writes about philosophy and the philosopher can be applied to Hannah Arendt and her reconsideration of politics, with a striking difference regarding their respective conceptions of politics and philosophy in general nonetheless. Arendt's work is determined by the questions of the twentieth century whose roots can be traced back to the beginnings of the modern age. On the other hand, Arendt's originality lies in her distinguished way of dealing with the issues of her own time. In addition, her reflections on politics and the human condition are still viable in the face of our very own contemporary problems.

Arendt was not only a philosopher but she was also a woman, a Jew, and a political refugee who lived through multilayered oppression. Besides being a philosopher, she was engaged in political activities, though she was very skeptical about student movements' explicit advocacy of violence. Arendt inveighed against the hypocrisy of human rights discourse that centers on an abstract

conception of humanity and its fundamental principles, such as inalienable rights, rendered meaningless by the reality of stateless people, who belonged to no political community and thus enjoyed no legal protection. Nonetheless, Arendt was an advocate of human rights insofar as it is understood as a right to act and to belong to a political community.

Opposing representative democracy, if not systematically, Arendt defended participatory democracy, in which she thought that civic engagement and collective political deliberation find their peculiar meanings. As a genuine offspring of her era, what she achieved through her works is to think these peculiar experiences of unprecedented total domination of all aspects of life. Arendt's political thought introduces a new conceptual horizon that does not fall into the traps of the traditional political thought that is unable to grasp what we are going through and set forth tenable solutions to the modern crisis of politics. Arendt was also very critical towards the academic tendencies of her own time that aimed at dealing with political matters through sociology (Canovan, 1974, p. 2).

Hannah Arendt, one of the most important political thinkers of the twentieth century, deals with politics in quite an unconventional and challenging way. It is, thus, a difficult task to classify her writings and her thought in terms of traditional political schools of thought. In the very beginning of her *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt refuses to define herself as a philosopher or professional thinker (1981, p. 3). Her works center on an essential problem, which is, public freedom. This particular mode of freedom is opposed to the freedom of will, which is, morality. Public freedom, in its very essence, springs from political action. For Arendt, not only the unprecedented, unanticipated, and perplexing phenomenon of the extreme criminality of the twentieth century but also the perplexing fact of the mere submission to it by a majority of people, forces us to rethink the meaning of politics and its locus, which make political action possible and allow public freedom to appear.

Hannah Arendt's seminal work, *The Human Condition*, was published in 1958. Since its publication, Arendt received much critical attention. It is important to underscore that Arendt wrote the *Human Condition* after world wars and the catastrophic experiences of totalitarianism. Arendt,

on the one hand, takes on the outrageous outcomes of Nazism, concentration and extermination camps. On the other, she includes criminal actions of Stalinism to her meticulous account of totalitarianism bolstered by historical documents. Through *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt also deals with other issues such as nationalism, racism, and imperialism in order to show the origins and elements of totalitarianism. Contrary to conventional interpretations of Arendt, which take *Human Condition* as her central work, Seyla Benhabib offers to de-center it by taking Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism into account. Thus, Benhabib rightfully titles Arendt, who resists being named a philosopher, "the critical thinker of post-totalitarian moment" (2003, p. xlv).

It is important to note that *Human Condition* was published before the rise of new social movements in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> This remark allows us to see the inclusiveness of her insightful analysis and the limits of it as well. What Arendt endeavors essentially to do is not to give us panacea prescriptions to put into practice, but to invite us to think the modern crisis of politics in terms of her insightful analysis of the public and to leave the solution for practical politics.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Human Condition*,<sup>3</sup> one of Arendt's main arguments centers on the rise of the social and the decline of the public, and it results in an unconventional way of thinking about the public in the light of action and speech and the faculty of forgiving and making promises. For Arendt, the rise of the social obscured the division between public and private and resulted in the decline not only of the public, but also of the private realm. Indeed, the decline of the public coincides with the rise of totalitarianism, or in Arendt's words, the world-desert. Therefore, I aim at first presenting Arendt's background and her critiques of the western tradition of political thought. Then, I will deal with Arendt's explanation of the rise of the social and its essential characteristics in order to show her claim about the decline of the public and the rise of totalitarianism.

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<sup>1</sup> The broad umbrella of these *new* social movements encloses peace, or anti-war movement, women's movement, ecology movement, gay liberation movement, and immigrants' movement.

<sup>2</sup> Almost thirty years before the publishing of the *Human Condition*, Dewey published his *Public and its Problems* in response to Walter Lippmann's *The Phantom of Public* in which the public is defined as fictive.

<sup>3</sup> In the Introduction to *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt notes that the title of the book was chosen by her publisher. Arendt finds this choice wise, though she was considering naming her work "The Vita Activa."

Hannah Arendt's philosophy is influenced by both German existential philosophy and Marx. Arendt was one of the distinguished students of Heidegger and Jaspers.<sup>4</sup> Though she was largely influenced by Heidegger's philosophy, she went beyond it and transformed the concepts that she got from him into politics. Mortality, being-toward-death, is one of the essential concepts of Heidegger's philosophy, though, Arendt's philosophy centers on natality. This remark is very crucial to grasp the depth of Arendt's philosophy. Natality, for Arendt, means being born into the world and the ability to make new beginnings. It plays a central role in her political thought. Moreover, she asserts that "men ... are not born in order to die but in order to live" (1998, p. 246). Action, for Arendt, is the touchstone of public freedom, and it is ontologically rooted in natality. Moreover, by this ability to act we are enabled to transform the conditions of worldlessness into the human world.

Marx is the second thinker whose influences on Arendt can easily be seen throughout her entire corpus. Arendt acknowledges Marx's contribution to the tradition of political thought and especially to social sciences. She is also careful enough not to confuse vulgar Marxism or Marxism as an ideology, with the original writings of Marx. Nevertheless, for her, Marx represents the end of the tradition of political thought, and he is under the rigorous critiques of Arendt. Like Heidegger, Marx is a constant source for Arendt, but she goes beyond both of them by transforming and rejecting some important aspects of their thought.

Then, let me begin with Arendt's criticisms of traditional political thought. Arendt holds that the tradition of western political thought began with Plato and Aristotle and it came to its end with Marx. What Arendt sees with this beginning and ending is of great importance to grasping her overall analysis, critique, and diagnosis of the modern crisis of politics in which we encountered new questions that challenge traditional political thought and to which it is not able to provide a fulfilling response. Although the authority of the western tradition was held in abeyance by the criticism of Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, the real moment that marks out the break with the continuity of the western history, for Arendt, is the total domination of totalitarian terror and

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<sup>4</sup> Arendt was not only Heidegger's student; she also had a love affair with him. This complicated relationship for some scholars blurred somewhat the originality of Arendt. At the same time, Arendt was the one who spent some effort to clear the name of Heidegger against the accusations about his collaboration with the Nazis.

ideology. Arendt holds that “Totalitarian domination as an established fact, which in its unprecedentedness cannot be comprehended through the usual categories of political thought, and whose ‘crimes’ cannot be judged by traditional moral standards or punished within the legal framework of our civilization, has broken the continuity of Occidental history. This break in our tradition is now an accomplished fact” (1961a, p. 26). Arendt’s constant reference to ancient Greece and the loss of tradition is sometimes misinterpreted by some scholars. It is, then, important to note that what Arendt aims to do is not, in Marx’s word, to roll back the wheels of history. It is not a mere nostalgia, but this return provides a starting point, for Arendt, to handle the problems of her own time. What Arendt, in fact, wants to point out is the insufficiency of the tradition of political thought to provide adequate responses against the unprecedented and perplexing phenomenon of totalitarianism, which broke the continuity of western history.

The western tradition of political thought begins with Plato and Aristotle. Nevertheless, it is important to grasp that for both Plato and Aristotle politics is bound up with the imperfection of human beings. This imperfection, the dependence of men on others in their existence, necessitates living together in political communities. Politics, then, comes to the scene as an instrument that is not much concerned with the truth, and thus the justification of politics is only understood “as a means to some higher ends” (Arendt, 2005b, p. 115). Managing human affairs has nothing to do with claiming truth, which abides beyond human actions. Like Plato, Aristotle classifies politics under the practical sciences, which are ranked below the theoretical sciences. For him politics is a means to acquire the greatest good and the task of the statesman is to make the citizens better. Aristotle’s well-known conception of man as a political animal can be best understood by taking its limits into consideration. Arendt holds that the meaning of politics is derived from the Greek word polis. Then Aristotle’s definition of man as a zoon politikon excludes slaves and barbarians who are not citizens in the full sense of the word. In order to make clear Aristotle’s statement, Arendt writes, “Slaves and barbarians –everybody outside the polis was *aneu logou* [without speech], deprived, not of course the faculty of speech, but of a way of life in which speech and only speech made sense and where the central concern of all citizens was to talk each other” (1998, p. 27). Slaves, like women, belong to the household (*oikos*), not to the polis, or public realm, since their way of life is determined by labor which is meaningful within the framework of the maintenance of

life. Aristotle excludes the barbarians from this definition because of their use of force and violence as a way of life, rather than persuasion as it is used in the polis.<sup>5</sup>

The degradation of men of action and the elimination of praxis from philosophy mark the beginning of this tradition. Marx reverses this traditional way of thinking that overvalues bios theoretikos. Marx values action over thinking, and the question for him, as it is explained in the eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, is to change the world, not only to contemplate over it. Marx's revolutionizing philosophy, then, offers us a theory of social change that needs to be necessarily a violent rupture from the established power relations. It points out the proletariat, which represents all oppressed classes under the specific mode of production, namely, capitalism, as the only agent of this social change per se. Arendt acknowledges that Marx's definition of man as animal laborans, as laboring creature, has no predecessor in the history of political thought, but she is not satisfied with the theory of human nature and naïve expectation of a withering away of politics that sprung from this definition. Moreover, Marx's reversal of the traditional hierarchy of thought over action, challenges the lack of depth of philosophy in regards to politics compared to its investigations into metaphysics, epistemology, and so on. Arendt, however, puts emphasis on a significant characteristic of Marx's break with the tradition; she asserts that he still stands in the framework of the tradition. She holds that

What Marx never doubted was the relationship between thinking and acting as such. The Feuerbach thesis clearly states that only because and after the philosophers had interpreted the world could there come a time to change it. That is also why Marx could allow his revolutionary politics ... to end in the image of a 'classless society' –an image strikingly oriented around ideals of leisure and free time as realized in the Greek polis. (2005a, p. 77)

Arendt's approach towards these two extreme attitudes towards politics recalls Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. This beginning and ending, in which the fundamental problems of politics are

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<sup>5</sup> The original Greek word that Arendt uses for persuasion is *πειθεῖν*. The bare meaning of this word is to obey, but it implies to obey by consent of the parties who are involved in the decision making. Therefore, it excludes violence in political life in so far as it is understood within the polis.



crystallized, are essentially defective, at least before the modern problems of political life, and it seems that Arendt seeks for a means to reconsider the meaning of politics in its own peculiarity, that is, human plurality, that is actualized and discloses itself only in speech and action. Leaving aside both the traditional hierarchy of thought over action and its reversal, Arendt invites us to reconsider “the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears” (1998, p. 5). In her first major political work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the essential question is what and how this catastrophic experience could have happened. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt seeks for an answer to the question of who we are and what we are doing. Finally, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt exclusively delves into aspects of totalitarianism by means of a concrete delineation of what happens when we lose the ability to think. In the latter work there is an obvious shift from the radical nature of evil to the banality of evil and from forgiveness to legal responsibility.

Arendt maintains that the central theme of the *Human Condition* is nothing but “to think what we are doing” (1998, p. 5). What Arendt offers us here is not an existentialist analysis of human experience or a morality but a kind of phenomenology of the fundamental forms of human activities while searching for a way to understand and to overcome the destruction of politics.

At the end of the World War One the political map and the climate of the world has dramatically changed. I use this geographical analogy because I think it seems the best way to emphasize what Arendt calls the alienation from the world and from the earth.<sup>6</sup> For Arendt, the modern age began with the atomic bombs in which we encountered a new phenomenon that is alien to the western tradition. Our witness to the extermination and concentration camps has also no parallel in the history of humanity.<sup>7</sup> In the light of these tragic experiences Arendt attempts to turn our attention towards these new phenomena by insisting upon the capacities of human beings in an age when the

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<sup>6</sup> The realm of first alienation is politics and the latter is science.

<sup>7</sup> In *the Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt attempts to understand this unparalleled experience of death camps—directed at a particular community, that is, Jews—in the western political tradition rather than document the experiences that people had lived through. In this experience she sees “the appearance of some radical evil previously unknown to us” (1979, p. 443). By this consideration of “radical evil,” she took from Kant; Arendt rejects Christian understanding of man as a sinful creature in order to give way to the possibility of transformation by means of thought and judgment.

world in which we live was under the threat of not only the decline of the public but also the total destruction of organic life. In the very beginning of the Human Condition, Arendt quotes from the lines carved on a Russian scientist's gravestone, "Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever" (1998, p. 1). This quote, as Arendt puts it, "the banality of the statement," sheds light on a great break with the traditional understanding of the human being and her place in the world. At the same time, it enlightens the phenomenon of modern alienation. In order to show its excessiveness, Arendt writes,

for although Christian have spoken of the earth as a vale of tears and philosophers have looked upon their body as a prison of mind or soul, nobody in the history of mankind has ever conceived of the earth as a prison for men's bodies or shown such eagerness to go literally from here to the moon. (1998, p. 2)

To Arendt, this scientific development has crucial political implications as well. Human beings, for Arendt, are considered as earth-bound creatures, but, she states, this insuppressible rupture indeed represents "a rebellion against human existence as it has been given..." (1998, p. 2). Arendt holds that speech is what makes a human being political.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, science, for Arendt, "adopts a 'language' of mathematical symbols— in no way can it be translated into speech" (1998, p. 4).<sup>9</sup> They, scientists, "move in a world where speech has lost its power" (Arendt, 1998, p. 4). The loss of a permanent place, namely, alienation from both the world and earth, which provide a permanent ground for the possibility of the human condition, underscores the dimensions of the calamities we encountered.

Then let us turn back to what the rise of society meant in this process of alienation and how it resulted. The rise of society brought new questions before politics because it was a new phenomenon that occurred in the modern age. Arendt holds that "the emergence of the social realm,

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<sup>8</sup> Speech is a form of action for Arendt.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt writes, "Modern natural science owes its great triumphs to having looked upon and treated earth-bound nature from a truly universal viewpoint, that is, from an Archimedean standpoint taken, willfully and explicitly, *outside* the earth" (1998, p. 11). Emphasis added.

which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state” (1998, p. 28). For Arendt this rise resulted in the downfall of politics and the eclipse of the public realm along with their fundamental components. Then this rise reached its peak in the totalitarian terror and ideology.

Arendt’s reflections on modernity are indebted to Max Weber’s analysis of the emergence of modern bureaucracy and capitalism. Weber’s analysis of the process of modernity was based on his distinguished grasping of formal or instrumental rationalization. As David West states, “with bureaucracy the state organizes efficient administrative means for the rationalization of particular ends, in the same way that capitalism represent only one-sided, instrumental rationality,” and he maintains, “So the formal or instrumental rationalization of society is compatible with the occurrence of substantively irrational outcomes” (2009, p. 62). The dissolution of values and traditions resulted in the disenchantment of the world (Weber, 2004, p. 30). Weber asserted that this process of instrumental rationalism, turning the social texture into an iron cage, is inevitable.

Weber was right in his prediction when he was warning us about the waiting perils before humanity regarding the inevitable outcomes of instrumental rationality. On the other hand, taking concentration and extermination camps, death factories, into consideration, human beings, for Arendt, turned out to be superfluous and have no value, let alone any economical value. In this respect, Weber’s grasping of modernity in terms of “rationally calculated pursuit of profit” lacks a comprehensive understanding of the unprecedented phenomenon of totalitarianism, which brought about a new crime not found in any law books called genocide (West, 2009, 209).

Let us then delve into Arendt’s dealing with society in order to understand the background of the inevitable emergence of totalitarianism. For Arendt, the distinguishing mark of this process is its unprecedented results, such as loss of meaning, homelessness, rightlessness, thoughtlessness, human beings’ becoming superfluous, and loss of belonging to a political community due to a general loss of public space where political matters genuinely appear. The loss of public space, for

Arendt, was a result of the invasion of the private realm; that is to say, issues that once belonged to the private realm, or to the household, turned out to be collective concerns.

The private invaded the realm of the public. From this invasion, economy appeared as a fundamental science of society and the nation-state understood as a gigantic housekeeping. The form of government in a nation state, for Arendt, is bureaucracy. Arendt states that “bureaucracy (the last stage of government in the nation-state just as one –man rule in benevolent despotism and absolutism was its first), the rule by nobody is not necessarily no-rule; it indeed, under certain circumstances, even turns out to be one of its cruelest and most tyrannical versions” (1998, p. 40). It is likely to be cruel because of the lack of responsibility. Together with the advent of the science of economics, there developed some technical tools to understand and overcome the social issues. Statistics was the major tool of the nascent behavioral sciences.<sup>10</sup> Statistics basically uses the symbolical language of mathematics, as we have seen before, a language that has nothing to do with and cannot be translated into human speech. Therefore, when we speak of actions in terms of numbers, human plurality loses its very own characteristic. It turns out to be something alien to itself. Arendt holds,

The laws of statistics are valid only where large numbers or long periods are involved, and acts or events can statistically appear only as deviations or fluctuations ...The application of law of large numbers and long periods to politics or history signifies nothing less than the willful obliteration of their very subject matter, and it is a hopeless enterprise to search for meaning in politics or significance in history when everything that is not everyday behavior or automatic trends has been ruled out as immaterial. (1998, p. 42-43)

Once the criterion of normality, the uniformity of behavior, was set up, action is replaced with behavior and turns out to be something that can be calculated, manipulated, and excluded. The search for homogeneity of the society, that is, its monolithic character, is settled in the one-ness of man-kind. Therefore, differences and diversities of human actions are not tolerated but deserted for

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<sup>10</sup> In the Epilogue of her article, *Introduction into Politics*, Arendt takes psychology as a major example of the behavioral science. I will discuss it later in this paper.

the sake of the formation of unity. Arendt maintains that this monolithic character, that is, its conformism, “allows for only one interest and opinion” (1998, p. 46). Indeed, this search for homogeneity does not only destroy human plurality, but it threatens “humanity with extinction” (1998, p. 46). Action and speech lose their fundamental characteristics since they are excluded from the public realm, and, Arendt holds, “the rise of the social realm banished these into the sphere of intimate and private” (1998, p. 49). The world as it is understood, as the condition for the possibility of human action, is deserted. Action substituted by behavior, then is replaced by bureaucracy, the rule of nobody, economics took place as the fundamental science, and politics lost its meaning and became considered as a profession. And the final step was the reduction of man “as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal” (1998, p. 45). Eventually, modern mass society brought about a final deserting experience, that is, the feeling of loneliness, the loss of solidarity. What is of great significance here is that “the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government,” is closely related to this feeling of loneliness (Arendt, 1966, p. 475).

Like all ideologies or -isms, totalitarianism derives its meaning through a process of reasoning outside the realm of human affairs, but utterly plunged into the framework of logic. Arendt argues that the laws of nature and history are the leading principles of totalitarian ideologies, rather than the law of earth, namely, human plurality. Arendt asserts that there are three essential characteristics of ideological thinking: 1) appealing to total explanation, 2) independence of all experience, in other words, emancipation from reality, and 3) impotence regarding the transformation of reality (1966, p. 470-471). Moreover, Arendt holds, “ideological thinking orders facts into an absolutely logical procedure which starts from an axiomatically accepted premise, deducing everything else from it; that is, it proceeds with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality” (1966, p. 471). The ideological thinking, proceeding from a self-evident premise alienated from the reality of the self and the world at the same time, eventually destroys human plurality, giving rise to the irresistible fact of loneliness: the disappearance of the self and the world all together.

Arendt’s arguments against the hypocrisy of human rights discourse needs to be taken into consideration in order to come to a proper explanation of the experience of totalitarianism, since the collapse of three mental capacities of human being, —thinking, acting and speaking, and judging

respectively— coincide with the conditions of homelessness, statelessness, and rightlessness. Arendt argues that there is no such thing as inalienable human rights. Moreover, this discourse's main assumption, the sovereign individual, is rendered meaningless regarding the atrocious events that stateless people had encountered. Then again, as she states, "the abstract nakedness of being nothing but human was ... [the] greatest danger" (1966, p. 300). Stateless people, those who lost their right to belong to a political community, found themselves in the middle of nowhere without any governmental protection. Arendt states, "the rights of man, after all, had been defined as 'inalienable' because they were supposed to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them" (1966, p. 291-292). Therefore, the condition of rightlessness coincides with the loss of belonging to a political community. The final stage or the final solution of the Jewish problem, the loss of a right to live, took place when the totalitarian movement had reached at "a condition of complete rightlessness" (1966, p. 296).

The experience of loneliness, as the total annihilation of the inner harmony of a self, is a significant result of totalitarianism as well as the cause of its maintenance. In addition, in this fact a crucial phenomenon reveals itself. The experience of totalitarianism is not limited to a form of government; it is, in fact, a total domination of all aspects of human life. Arendt's reflections on the emergence of totalitarianism essentially differ from those who endeavor to explain it in terms of propaganda and brainwashing. Arendt holds,

No doubt, the fact that totalitarian government, its open criminality notwithstanding, rests on mass support is very disquieting. It is therefore hardly surprising that scholars as well as statesmen often refuse to recognize it, the former by believing in the magic of propaganda and brainwashing, the latter by simply denying it, as for instance Adenauer did repeatedly. ... It [a publication of secret reports on German public opinion during the war] shows, first, that the population was remarkably well informed about all so-called secrets –massacres of Jews in Poland, preparation of the attack on Russia, etc.— and, second, the "extent to which the victims of propaganda had remained able to form independent opinions." However, the point of the matter is that this did not in the least weaken the general support of the Hitler regime. It is quite obvious that

mass support for totalitarianism comes neither from ignorance nor from  
brainwashing (1966, p. vii).

Here is the most controversial issue in Arendt. Her arguments lead us to a conclusion that challenges the useless assumptions of collective guilt and collective innocence. Arendt was even accused of exonerating Nazi criminals based on the groundless misinterpretation of her arguments on the undeniable fact of the resignation of the well informed public. It is first asserted in the *Origins of Totalitarianism* and found its more clarified delineation in her most controversial work, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. In that work, Arendt questions the legal responsibility of Eichmann himself and the contribution of the Jewish community leaders in the beginning of the Nazi regime. For Arendt meek submission to the conditions of totalitarianism cannot be exempted from its analysis. Public space, the only space where public freedom appears, consists of fellow citizens, those who act in the presence of others. Public space, identified with public freedom, is a necessary condition for self-realization and recognition along with mutual respect and trust. It is not a mere aggregation of people, as it is experienced within the framework of mass society where atomized and isolated individuals lost not only their freedom to act and speak but also their inner harmony. Solitude can be chosen arbitrarily, but loneliness is forced upon us by total domination resulting from the substitution of diversity and differences of action with normalized behavior and that of politics with the movement of history and nature. Then abnormalities and diversions or those who are unfit to live, namely, those who were demonized and dehumanized in accordance with the logical consistency of the ideological thinking, are subjected to elimination, or extermination, for the sake of the laws of nature and history by means of Hitler's "ice-cold reasoning" or Stalin's "merciless dialectics."

In order to make sense of Arendt's distrust of the majority or her radically critical point regarding mass society, we need to turn back to her question: what happened and how could it have happened? These questions are of great importance in getting a comprehensive understanding of totalitarianism. Nevertheless, one can easily be misled and be out of tune with reality by ignoring the moral and legal responsibility of a person. What was then the role of Eichmann? Was he a part, a mechanism of a cog, "whose functions could just as easily have been carried out by anyone else?"

(Arendt, 2006, p. 289). Was he a law-abiding citizen whose only responsibility was to obey what he was ordered to do? Or was he a monster or a gangster? These latter questions deprive us of orienting ourselves toward out of the nightmarish atmosphere of totalitarianism. Totalitarianism was not only a form of government, but it has essentially permeated all the aspects of human life. For Arendt, totalitarianism did not come to an end when Hitler had been defeated or after the death of Stalin. What is of great importance is that “once a specific crime has appeared for the first time, its reappearance is more likely than its initial emergence could ever been” (Arendt, 2006, p. 273). Appealing to psychological terminology is no use in grasping the responsibility of Eichmann for committing a crime that could not be found in any law books and “whose like was unknown in any court” (Arendt, 2006, p. 298). He was quite normal insofar as normality is understood as “sheer thoughtlessness” (Arendt, p. 297).

The term “evil” sounds like Arendt is interested in morality, but it is a misleading and premature deduction. Arendt constantly accentuates that Eichmann in Jerusalem, written as a report of the trial for a daily newspaper, is not “a theoretical treatise on the nature of evil” (2006, p. 285). What needs to be taken into consideration in the criminal deeds of Eichmann is not his conscience but the actual crimes he committed. Nor does being a mere functionary who is subjected to superior orders make him innocent, as if he had no alternative to act otherwise but only to obey. Obedience, for Arendt, is an article of religious faith, not that of politics. Moreover, she asserts, the pernicious term “obedience” needs to be ruled out from our “moral and political thought” (2003, p. 48).

Let us then take a closer look at what Arendt means by the term of banality. It is represented by the normality of Eichmann’s characteristics: “inability to speak,” “an inability to think,” and finally, lack of judgment (Arendt, 2006, p. 49). These three concepts, speaking, thinking, and judging, are intertwined. Therefore, as a genuine example of the destructive outcome of totalitarianism, that is, the loss of human dignity and integrity, the perplexingly normal character of Eichmann is devoid of all these fundamental characteristics. Then it is important to understand what we are doing when we speak, think, and judge in order to retrieve the meaning of politics at stake.



Through our ability to speak, which is, for Arendt, what makes human beings political, we insert ourselves into the common world, and others become visible for us, along with their distinctive perspectives. Self-realization, the disclosure of our identity, entails recognition. Moreover, speech makes agreement possible not by means of sheer coercion, ready-made assent, or prejudices, but by persuasion. On the other hand, the essential characteristic of thinking reveals itself in solitude. However, for Arendt, thinking is a dialogue between me and myself: it neither emerges in an absolute solitude and nor is it incommunicable. The activity of thinking represents one's own plurality within oneself. It is only through our ability to speak that we insert our different and diverse perspectives into the common world. Our ability to speak, our face to face encounter with others, along with our ability to judge, provides us an objective ground beyond the fundamental subjectivity of a thinking self.

Finally, along with the faculty of judgment we arrive at one of the most important aspects of Arendt's moral and political thought, even though it was developed through the last period of her life and unfortunately left incomplete because of her untimely death. The faculty of judgment holds two distinct but interconnected aspects. On the one hand, by judgment Arendt means an ability of "telling right from wrong" and "to think from the standpoint of somebody else" (1981, p. 5; 2006, p. 49). On the other, judgment has to do with making distinctions or problem solving. Arendt holds that judgment functions "when we are confronted with something which we have never seen before and for which there are no standards at our disposal" (2005b, p. 102). Therefore, for Arendt, judgment is a moral faculty as well as a political one. It refers to both the past and the present, or, in other words, it points out not only agents but also spectators. Thus, the faculty of judgment provides us an objective and valid criterion regarding moral and political matters rather than reducing the human plurality to an absolute and uncompromising subjectivity explained in the Sophistic maxim, "man is the measure of all things." Agreement on the matters that concern all fellow citizens are made through "an anticipated communication" with them by means of the faculty of judgment, that is to say, by being able "to think from the standpoint of somebody else" (Arendt, 1961b, p. 220; 2006, p. 49).

Arendt takes her conception of judgment from Kant's third critique, *Critique of Judgment*; however, her conception radically differs from his. Kant makes a distinction between determinant and reflexive judgment. The former is understood "as the faculty of thinking the particular under the universal"; the latter proceeds the other way around, that is, from the particular to the universal. Kant holds,

By the name *sensus communis* is to be understood the idea of a public sense, that is, a critical faculty which in its reflexive act takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order, as it were, to weigh its judgment with the collective reason of mankind, and thereby avoid the illusion arising from subjective and personal conditions which could readily be taken for objective.. This is accomplished by weighing the judgment, not so much with actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the position of everyone else. (qtd. in Benhabib, 1998, 39)

The radical difference, then, lies in Arendt's placing the faculty of reflexive judgment within the framework of politics as "a procedure for ascertaining intersubjective validity in the public realm," whereas Kant deals with the concept in the light of aesthetic experience (Benhabib, 1998, p. 39).

Through Eichmann's sheer thoughtlessness, through his inability to stop and think, Arendt saw a coincidence of crisis of politics and conscience. She asks, "is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought? Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide?" (2003, p. 160). Therefore, her theory of judgment provides us the relation between politics and morality, although Arendt did not deal with the problems of morality independent from politics.

Arendt's endeavor to re-define the meaning of politics was indissolubly bound to the catastrophic experiences of totalitarianism of her own time, but her reflections go beyond the contemporary issues of her time in her unconventional, challenging, and insightful way of dealing with these issues. The unprecedented emergence of totalitarianism resulted in the phenomena of homelessness,

statelessness, and rightlessness running parallel to the phenomena of thoughtlessness, speechlessness, and lack of judgment. Moreover, the rise of the social coincided with the respective decline and abolition of politics. Therefore, Arendt's political thought, or her search for a new political science, requires not only peculiar critiques of politics, but also a radical dismantling of philosophy through which genuine experiences of political action are sacrificed to contemplation. Arendt's reflections are still viable regarding the task before us today, that is, grasping and transforming our contemporary political, economical, cultural, and ecological crisis, provided that we reserve some critical approaches toward her political thought.

Western political thought began with Plato and Aristotle. Needless to say, this beginning was marked by the degradation of politics insofar as action subordinated to contemplation and was considered and justified only as a means to some higher ends. The medieval approach to action continued this distinction between men of action and men of thought and turned its back to all things related to action. Moreover, politics was understood as a necessary evil, human nature was considered sinful, and redemption was offered only in solitude. Finally, the end of the tradition of political thought came to the scene by Marx's naïve claim about the withering of the politics that would come with the proletarian revolution that results in a classless, laborless, and stateless society. Arendt, therefore, states that "Underlying our prejudices against politics today are hope and fear: the fear that humanity could destroy itself through politics and through the means of force now at its disposal, and, linked with this fear, the hope that humanity will come to its senses and rid the world, not of humankind, but politics" (2005b, p. 97). Contrary to these approaches that intend to abolish politics, what we should get rid of is not politics itself but the prejudices against politics. She contrasts "judgment" to "prejudices" and claims that prejudices are characteristics of the social realm where politics has lost its genuine meaning, whereas political thought is fundamentally based on judgments. The danger is prejudices' permeation into the political realm.

Now, we can turn back to our leading question: Does politics have any meaning at all? Arendt's response to this question is also a clear statement of her commitment to the tradition of civic republicanism. Politics has still a meaning, for Arendt, insofar as politics is understood as human plurality, empowered by action and interaction. Yet action requires an affirmative understanding of public freedom. Then again, this affirmation is only possible within the framework of the public space or space of appearances where we are seen and heard by others, and our identity is confirmed and recognized within this genuine space which embraces the different and diverse perspectives of

one's fellow citizens. In the light of excessive criminality of totalitarian experience, both in the sense of its reality and the plausibility of its recurrence, it is an indubitable fact that if we lose our right to belong to a political community, we lose our human characteristics all at once and the world eventually collapses upon us.

The stumbling block before the genuine understanding of politics is the assertion of *man* as political. Arendt holds that politics is not something that belongs to the essence of a human being, understood in her singularity. She thus maintains, "*man* is apolitical. Politics arises *between men*, and so quite *outside* of man" (2005b, p. 95). Therefore, the abolition of human plurality is the same thing as the abolition of the public, wherein we act and speak in the presence of others, in other words, where we are seen and heard by others. To sum up, "Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt, 1998, p. 7). Arendt believes that human beings do achieve the infinitely improbable, unless they isolate themselves from living together and from *acting in concert*. Politics, therefore, still has a meaning insofar as it is understood as human plurality and human plurality reveals itself only within the public space, in the presence of others.

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