

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF HANNAH ARENDT'S CONCEPT OF POLITICAL ACTION

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CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation entitled "A Critical Evaluation of Hannah Arendt's Concept of Political Action", submitted by Mr. Mohinder Singh in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of this University, has not been previously submitted for any degree of this or any other University and is his own work.

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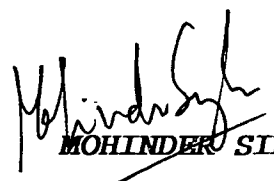
In the writing of this dissertation I have accumulated various debts. I would take this opportunity to thank various people who, through their cooperation, made my task much easier.

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INTRODUCTION

RETHINKING THE POLITICAL

Modern mass societies not only deprive human existence of any depth by reducing ^{human beings} ~~them~~ to mere consumers, they are also destructive of the natural environment. Contemporary ecological crisis is an indication of that. In such times, Hannah Arendt's political theory is very significant for its persistent concern for a disinterested care of the world - natural as well as man-made. Against the consumerist way of life, Arendt argues for an active public life. Public life, for Arendt, signifies the highest condition that human beings can achieve.

Arendt's thinking about public life is centered around the concept of political action. By means of the concept of action she tries to define the political life in a new way. Political activity in this framework is understood to have an intrinsic value.

The recent theoretical critique against western rationalism generally and against Enlightenment project particularly contextualises Arendt's concept of action. The major purpose of this critique is to rescue political from the

epistemological, i.e., foundational dimension of the Enlightenment project. On the one hand, it wants to overthrow the philosophy of subjectivity; and on the other, it challenges the domination of the institutions of the state which monopolise power.¹

The major concern of all these theories is to establish a new concept of the political by using non-metaphysical categories.

Hannah Arendt's concept of political action acquires immense significance in the light of these varied attempts at rethinking of various dimensions of politics. There have been attempts at establishing new meaning of politics by making subtle distinctions between various political terminologies, e.g., between politics and the political; between policy and polity; between political science and political philosophy etc.²

These efforts at rethinking have been channelised towards the finding of an all embracing concept of the

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1. Claude Lefort, Democracy and Political Theory (transl. David Macey), Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, p.47.
 2. For a discussion of these terms see Fred Dallmayr, The Other Heidegger, Cornell University Press, New York, 1993, pp.50, 87.

political with certain defining qualities which would transform everything from a "mere thing" to a "political thing".³

The writings of Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt remain the reference point for these thinkers as it is in the works of these two thinkers that one comes across the earliest stress on the revival of the 'political' in this century.

A brief survey of the writings of these recent thinkers engaged in the act of redefining the political is called for at this moment.

In his attempt to provide political activity a basis of its own, Claude Lefort, in Democracy and Political Theory, distinguished political philosophy both from political sociology and political science. Political science and political sociology treat politics as an empirical object domain like economy or administration. He differentiates political philosophy from both. Subject matter of political philosophy is defined as questions of "forms of government". This kind of inquiry raises the question "of the constitution of the social space, of a form of society, of the

3. Agnes Heller, "The Concept of the Political Revisited", in David Held (ed.), Political Theory Today, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991, p.330.

essence of what was once termed the 'city'. The political is thus revealed, not in what we call political activity, but in a double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured."⁴ The political which is the proper subject matter of political philosophy, is understood as a constituting power by and through which society represents itself to itself as a unity through certain symbolic means. The political, for Lefort, implies "a definite relations between human beings, a relationship governed by the need to answer the questions on which their common fate depends."⁵

Lefort further uses the concept of political to distinguish democracy both from pre-modern *form* of government as well as from totalitarianism. This he does by using a concept of power as an "empty place". The emergence of democracy led to a gradual separation of political power from society as a whole. That is, from economic, legal and academic spheres. It was not only separated but also circumscribed. Legitimacy came to be drawn from people. Power now becomes an "empty place". Those who exercise

4. Claude Lefort, cited in Fred Dallmayr, *op. cit.*, p.88.

5. Lefort, *op. cit.*, p.49.

public authority cannot appropriate it. Democracy is sustained by two principles: (a) power stems from people; (b) It is the power of nobody. The tension between two principles is essential to democracy and cannot be resolved without destroying democracy itself.⁶

Further Lefort explains totalitarianism as a *form* of government where power ceases to be an "empty place". Rather, it is materialised in an organ where all spheres coincide. On the basis of this constitutive concept of the *political*, he accuses both liberalism and Marxism for suppressing the question of the political. Under the influence of Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, he brings freedom and human rights to the centre of his concept of the political. The central concern of the political is with the *form* of government which can preserve freedom and human rights.

In her recently published book, The Return of the Political, Chantal Mouffe, following Carl Schmitt, argues for making 'enemy' and 'friend' to be the central categories of

6. Claude Lefort, The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism, Polity Press, Cambridge, pp.279-280.

the political, but she wants to displace the category of 'enemy'. The identity of the 'enemy' is to be political one. The 'enemy' is not one to be destroyed but an adversary to be contended with. There should be consensus on the rules of the game according to which the political struggle for the votes of majority by political adversaries is to take place. On this question she comes close to following Rawlsian liberalism because - "If such is missing, it can too easily be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values and essentialist identities."⁷

Further Mouffe wants to preserve traditional political identities like left and right. By breaking with rationalism, individualism and universalism, she offers a radical idea of pluralism where no identity should be definitely established. Her rejection of universalism does not throw it, rather it particularises it. A hegemony of democratic values is to be established.

Mouffe's framework, therefore, does not have any place for any essentialist argument in politics. Human subject, according to her, does not have any essential identity or a

7. Chantal Mouffe, The Return of the Political, Verso, London, 1993, p.6.

"center":

"Subject as a decentered and detotalised agent, a subject constructed at the point of intersection of a multiplicity of subject positions between which there exist no "apriori" or necessary relation and whose articulation is the result of hegemonic practices."⁸

A culture of constant debate between a plurality of positions under a hegemony of democratic values is what constitutes the essence of *political* life for Mouffe.

Agnes Heller, on the other hand, claims that the very survival of political philosophy depends upon the concept of the political. Only the concept of the political can rescue political philosophy from its falling victim to scientism and realism. The modern concept of the political is defined as "the practical realisation of the universal value of freedom in the public domain." Accordingly, everything that is decided in the public "domain" is political.⁹ Everything that is outside the "domain" of public discussion is non-political by nature. So, the main feature of the political is its publicness.

8. Ibid., p.12.

9. Agnes Heller, "The Concept of the Political Revisited" in David Held, op. cit., pp.340-343.

It is in this philosophical context that we will proceed towards a discussion of Arendt's concept of political action.

This dissertation consists of three chapters. Chapter one, "Tradition and the *Vita Activa*", deals with Hannah Arendt's efforts to overcome western metaphysics and an attempt to revive the pre-metaphysical Greek-way of understanding political life. Further, there is a discussion on the meaning of the basic terms central to Arendt's philosophy. There is also an analysis of the criticism Arendt levels against the Platonic tradition of metaphysics.

Chapter two, "The Critique of Modernity", contains a discussion on Arendt's analysis of modern age and its tendencies to destroy the public sphere.

Chapter three, "The Concept of Political Action", engages in a close examination of various dimensions of Arendt's concept of political action. Then we will analyse action in its relation to other concepts like freedom, power and judgement. We will also discuss Arendt's understanding of revolutionary action. Then we will try to evaluate the concept of action critically.

CHAPTER I

TRADITION AND THE VITA ACTIVA

Break in the Tradition: An Epistemic Condition

"I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today. Such dismantling is possible only on the assumption that the thread of tradition is broken and that we shall not be able to renew it. Historically speaking, what actually has broken down is the Roman trinity that for thousands of years united religion, authority and tradition. The loss of this trinity does not destroy the past, and the dismantling process is itself not destructive, it only draws conclusions from a loss which is a fact and as such no longer a part of the 'history of ideas' but of our political history, the history of our world."

"What has been lost is the continuity of the past as it seemed to be handed down from generation to generation, developing in the process its own consistency. The dismantling process has its own technique, and I did not go into

that here except peripherally. What you then are left with is still the past, but a fragmented past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation."¹

Hannah Arendt's conviction that the rise of the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century has broken the continuity of the western tradition, lies at the root of all her thinking. This conviction is born of the trouble she faced while trying to comprehend these movements.

The world of totalitarianism and its aftermath, Arendt claimed, is completely new for it has rendered the fundamental values of western civilization meaningless. The conclusion Arendt drew from the rupture caused by totalitarianism is that the old philosophical categories which were an essential part of the tradition do not hold their validity anymore:

"Thought and reality have parted company, that reality has become opaque for the light of thought, no longer bound to incident as the circle remains bound to its focus, is liable either to become altogether meaningless or to rehash old verities which have lost all concrete relevance."²

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1. Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind, vol. I, Thinking, Secker and Warburg, London, 1978, p.212.
 2. H. Arendt, Preface to Between Past and Future, The Viking Press, New York, 1969, p.6.

Since the old categories of understanding do not help in grasping the reality of the new world, the rupture in the tradition is an epistemic condition³ for Arendt, which has both positive and negative significance for her. On the one hand, it signifies a loss of a safe and secure guidance through the "vast realms" of the past, and on the other hand, it also means an overcoming of the fetters that tradition placed before each successive generation in its reading of the past. It was only with this loss that "past opens upto us with an unexpected freshness and tells us things no one has yet had ears to hear."⁴ But the most serious consequence which, Arendt thinks, is possible due to a securely anchored tradition is a 'danger of forgetting'. This forgetting of the past can deprive human existence of its depth which was not being reached except through remembrance.

Arendt believes that only by remembering that past, we can bring depth and meaning to the present. A narrative of

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3. See David Luban, "Explaining Dark Times: Hannah Arendt's Theory", Social Research, vol.50, no.1, 1983, pp.217-219.
 4. H. Arendt, Between Past and Future, p.94; see also ibid., p.204 - "...the thread of tradition has broken, and we must discover the past for ourselves - that is, read its authors as though nobody has ever read them before."

the past even when the tradition has crumbled is capable of providing identity and a sense of belongingness to human beings. Arendt further claims that a narrative uniting past and present can tell us "who we are". The narrative as a form of a critical appropriation of past cannot only provide a meaning to the present it can also help in an orientation towards future.⁵

The task of thinking, in the wake of this disappearance of traditional framework(s), is to establish a meaning of the past in a new way. The redemption of the past without help of traditional categories is a project that Arendt takes up in constructing a new theory of politics.

Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, apart from helping her in relating to past in a new way, also governs her elaboration of a theory of politics. She constructs totalitarian form of governing as an "ideal type" of an absence of "politics". Totalitarianism defines politics for her in a negative way. Totalitarianism is constructed as a form of rule where public space is totally abolished by

5. Seyla Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative", Social Research, vol.57, No.1, 1990, p.188.

eradicating all the possibilities of dialogue and solidarity among human beings.⁶

Thus "ideal type" of the absence of "politics" becomes a vantage point from where she tries to appropriate the past movements where the public space is most clearly and distinctly defined. According to Claude Lefort, "she conceptualises politics by inventing the image of totalitarianism and this leads her to look for a reference to politics in certain privileged moments when its features are most clearly discernible: the moment of Greek *polis* and in modern times, the revolutions: American, French and Hungarian."⁷

Tradition and the *Vita Activa*

With regard to Greek *polis* life, Arendt defines herself against Plato. In the polemics against Plato, she identifies the whole of political philosophy with Platonic tradition in philosophy. All of the arguments against tradition(s) of political philosophy are against Platonic

6. Claude Lefort, Democracy and Political Theory (trans. by David Macey), Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp.48-49; see also Patricia Brown-Moore, Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality, The Macmillan Press, London, 1989, pp.44-47.

7. Claude Lefort, op. cit., p.50.

way of thinking which can be defined in her own words as:

"Political philosophy necessarily implies the attitude of philosopher towards policies; its tradition began with the philosopher's turning away from politics and then returning in order to impose his standards upon human affairs."⁸

After defining herself against Plato, Arendt tries to revive the premetaphysical meaning of the political life of the Greeks. This she does by re-establishing the meaning of the term *vita activa*. The *vita activa* denotes three human activities: labour, work and action. All these activities together define the active life of human beings as against theoretical or contemplative pursuits. Let us briefly discuss various aspects of these activities.

The activity of labour is linked to the biological processes of the body. It is an activity submitted to the necessity of biological survival. It produces consumable goods necessary to keep the human body alive. The products are essentially perishable, they are to be consumed by the

8. H. Arendt, Between Past and Future, pp.17-18. The tradition of political philosophy does not include writers like Machiavelli, Montesqueue, Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Tocquville etc. In the Platonic tradition of political philosophy, Arendt includes those thinkers who proceed from philosophical system building to define moral and political issues.

body. Because the biological process is an endless circle with its recurring needs and satisfactions, labour is essentially an endlessly repetitive process which does not leave behind any durable products. It corresponds to life as a natural condition on earth.

Work, unlike labour produces lasting and stable objects. Its products are not consumable goods but use-objects which do not disappear after being used. It erects a human artifice in this world to provide shelter to human beings. Whereas labour is attached to nature, work distinguishes human beings from it. It violates the natural process. In other words, it builds a world of durable artefacts which house human beings. Work or fabrication is also different from labour in its process. The process of fabrication starts when the 'maker' plans an artefact and ends when the product is finished.

Action is different both from labour and work. The basic condition of action is plurality of human beings. This plurality is not sheer multiplicity. Every living species has a plurality of its individual members. Human plurality should be distinguished from this since human beings have the capacity to distinguish themselves from each

other. Human plurality is marked by equality as well as distinction. Human beings are unique individuals. This unique individuality of each particular human being is possible only in action. As labour relates individuals to their lives, work to world, action relates them to each other. They relate to each other in speech which is part of human acting capacity. Action and speech have the capacity to disclose the unique individuality of human beings.

After outlining briefly the characteristics of all the three activities basic to Hannah Arendt's theory we can delineate her objections against the tradition of political philosophy which she holds responsible for distorting the meaning of the political activity. Arendt finds this distortion of meaning at the very foundation of this tradition, i.e., in Plato's philosophy. All the problem of the political philosophy have their roots in the origin itself. The political philosophy is criticized on two grounds: (a) it understands and explains politics from the point of view of philosophy; (b) it substitutes making (*poiesis*) for acting (*praxis*). Both these elements are present in Plato's philosophy and they are articulated most clearly in the "Republic". Let us discuss both the objections in detail:

(a) Arendt claims that the event of trial and death of Socrates has had a decisive influence on Plato's philosophy.⁹ This event, for Plato, represented a conflict between polis and philosophy. Plato invented his concept of 'Truth', which is accorded status superior to the opinions which in their plurality were essential feature of the polis life. This notion of 'Truth' in its singularity is then linked to a claim to rule. So, for the first time, according to Arendt, a clear cut connection between claim to truth and the claim to rule emerged. This connection was established most forcefully in the allegory of 'the Cave'. With the allegory of 'the Cave', Plato introduced a division between the sphere of knowledge and the sphere of political activity, i.e., "between those who know and do not act and those who act and do not know."¹⁰

The superiority that Plato accorded to a speculatively arrived at, single "Truth" over plural opinions led to a denunciation of political life whose essence was plurality. The sphere of politics is further deprived of its dignity

9. Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics", Social Research, vol.56, no.1, 1990.

10. H. Arendt, The Human Condition, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970., p.223.

and inherent plurality by the metaphysical "two-world" theory. the metaphysical tradition starting with Plato and Parmenides rested on a theory of dichotomy between two worlds: the world of "true Being" and the world of appearances. The theory is based on a hierarchy of these two worlds in which the ontological supremacy is always accorded to "Being" and "Truth". This "Being" is the essence of all appearances since it is supposed to be at the base that lies beneath them and is causing them. The appearances are treated as mere epiphenomena and always given a "low ontological status".¹¹ The world of being is also seen as a world of universal single 'Truth'. Consequently, the metaphysical "two world" theory treats the diversity and differences of opinions and appearances as a phenomenal manifestation of the "true Being".

Hannah Arendt claims that the tradition of political philosophy followed the basic assumptions of metaphysics and therefore it did not allow either dignity or autonomy of its own to political activity.

(b) The other problem of political philosophy according

11. Arendt, The Life of the Mind, vol.2, Willing, pp.15, 27.

to Arendt is its substitution of action (*praxis*) by fabrication (*poiesis*). In other words, political philosophy understood the sphere of political activity in the image of the activity of "work" or "making" and not in terms of "acting". This substitution of action by fabrication too has its roots in Plato's philosophy.

Action, as we have already noted, cannot control the process it starts. In this sense it is different from "work" in which the fabricator remains in control of the process from beginning to the end. Action, so far as it takes place in an already existing "web of relationships", starts a process which is unpredictable as well as irreversible. Hence 'actors' cannot control the affairs they are engaged in. They are mere participants in human affairs and not their masters. So human affairs are by nature unpredictable, boundless and hence fragile.

This fragility inherent in human affairs, is what, claims Arendt, metaphysics wanted to get rid of since its beginning. Recognising the lack of clarity in human affairs, Plato tried to construct a theory of public sphere in the image of *poiesis*. He wanted human affairs to be under

complete control.¹² This proposal of Plato amounted to the very abolition of the public realm with its plurality:

"The calamities of action all arise from the human condition of plurality, which is condition *sine qua non* for that space of appearance which is public realm. Hence the attempt to do away with this plurality is always tantamount to the abolition of public realm itself."¹³

Arendt maintains that the desire to substitute "making" (*poiesis*) for *praxis* in order to bestow the solidity and certainty which is the hallmark of fabrication, is at the very centre of Plato's philosophy, i.e., in the doctrine of "ideas" itself. The philosopher who left "the cave" in search for 'the Truth', after having known it, seeks to apply it for the purposes of radical reorganisation of the *polis*. Arendt further claims that his doctrine of ideas is a device which he invented to derive standards and measures to be applied to the public realm. This idea of applying standards to political affairs is, in turn, borrowed from the activity of fabrication itself where the fabricator starts the process by contemplating over a model to be imitated.

12. Arendt, The Human Condition, pp.220-230.

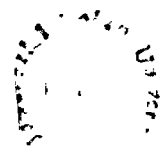
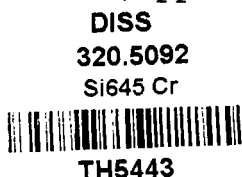
13. Ibid., p.220.

The above mentioned two assumptions of Plato's philosophy, Arendt argues, decisively influenced the tradition of political philosophy whose main features can be summarised as follows.

This political philosophy did not respect the dignity and the autonomy of political activity. Politics, therefore, was not seen as an activity intrinsically valuable, rather it was taken to be a means to some ulterior end. Further, it was believed that the political way of life could not raise distinct ontological, epistemological, methodological and moral questions.¹⁴ Politics was understood as a mere function of the general human need for order, security, and, social and economic cooperation.

This way of thinking also reduced politics to an act of ruling and it concentrated on the formal features of political organisation and institutions. It never cared to theorise about the structure and character of the political experience of those involved in this activity. According to Arendt, this is partially due to the fact that the concept-

14. Bhikhu Parekh, Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy, The Macmillan Press, London, 1981, pp.1-10.



al articulation of the philosophical theory of politics was never grounded in political experience. Hence, this tradition never had a participatory view of politics.

Further, since most of the philosophers assumed 'Man' to be an epistemologically self-sufficient entity, they did not appreciate the intersubjective dimensions of human existence. Arendt finds this assumption of philosophy to be fallacious since each of us is epistemologically and ontologically dependent upon the presence of others.¹⁵ In other words, Arendt maintains that political philosophy is based on a philosophy of 'Man' with a common essence. Theorising from this point of view does not respect the plural nature of human affairs. Rather, it leads to an argument in favour of uniformity and homogeneity in human affairs.

Finally, the theory of "truth" followed by the tradition of political philosophy does not admit the plurality of perspectives and world-views. It tries to subsume all particular phenomena under universal categories thereby devaluing plurality, contingency, and flux inherent in human affairs.

15. Arendt, The Life of the Mind, Vol.I, Thinking, pp.19-23.

Let us now see how Arendt develops a theory of public sphere on the model of Greek *polis*.

The Public and the Political

In Arendt's schema of things the public constitutes two phenomena. First, public means, "everything that appears in the public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity".¹⁶ The presence of others makes the "reality" possible. "Reality", in Arendt's epistemological framework is possible when "Being" and appearances coincide. Only what appears to everybody and shared in common constitute "reality". The world and the reality which is not common to, and shared by all is no "reality".¹⁷ So, the public realm guarantees a sense of reality which is shared intersubjectively. Second, the public signifies the world itself, insofar as it is common to all and distinguished from everyone's private world. The "world" should be differentiated here from the merely organic life. (Since organic life is concerned with the fulfilment of mere bodily desires and necessities, it does not, in fact, should not

16. Arendt, The Human Condition, p.50.

17. Arendt, The Life of the Mind, Vol:I, Thinking, p.19.

appear in the public.) The "world" should be able to relate and "gather us together". While it "gathers us together", it also separates and prevents "our falling over each other". The world is like a table which can relate and separate a gathering at the same time.¹⁸

So, the public realm is a space where "I can appear to others as they appear to me". The appearance in this space is made explicitly. In this space, people encounter each other, exchange their viewpoints and opinions by talking to each other. Appearance and dialogue, visibility and speech and, intersubjective exchange of opinions are the central features of the public sphere. The play of specific worldly, objective interests of participants may enter this space but that is not its essence. Its proper essence lies in the fact that it provides them a sphere where they can reveal their identity to others. Though commonly shared, everyone present in the public sphere has a different location by virtue of their diverse perspectives and viewpoints. This feature of the public realm ensures the plurality of opinions.

18. H. Arendt, The Human Condition, p.52.

The public world guarantees a permanence and durability against the impermanence and futility of individual organic lives. This world comes into existence out of a striving for immortality among mortal human beings:

"By their capacity for immortal deeds, by their ability to leave non-perishable traces behind, men, their individual mortality notwithstanding, attain an immortality of their own and prone themselves to be of 'divine' nature. The distinction between man and animal, run right through the human species itself; only the best and who 'prefers immortal fame to mortal thing' are really human; the others, content with whatever pleasure nature will yield them, live and die like animals."¹⁹

The great deeds in order to become permanent must not only be seen and heard but also remembered. The commonly shared public world provides a space, not only for the opportunities for glorious acts to be performed but also their reification into stories, history and poetry which have the function of immortalising them. The public sphere, therefore, offers a plurality of perspectives and opinions, permanence of remembrance and a space for participation in public affairs.

19. Ibid., p.19.

This kind of public sphere, Arendt claims, first emerged in ancient Greece where it was strictly demarcated from what was meant to be private. In Greek life, the distinction between public and private corresponded to that between the *polis* and the household. The former was the realm of human affairs in which two activities were prominent: speech (*exis*) and action (*praxis*). In *polis* life, all transactions took place in words. To be political and to live in *polis* meant that everything was decided through discussion and persuasion and not through force or violence.²⁰ The *polis* was a 'space of appearance' and fulfilled double political function. On the one hand it used to multiply the occasions of action and speech, thereby offering everybody to participate in public debate and realise his capacity as a citizen; and on the other hand, it was to overcome the futility of human affairs through communal remembrance thereby assuring the immortality of the actors for their performance. The Greek public sphere, in a sense, had a heroic element in it. The actors were always concerned about excelling and surpassing each other at that.

20. Ibid., pp.28-32; see also Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics", pp.84-85.

As opposed to the public, the private sphere of household was a "pre-political realm", a domain of "necessity" whose mode of operation was characterised by the use of force and domination. The household was the locus of economic life. It was concerned with the maintenance of organic life - hence with necessity. And for the Greeks, everything economic was non-political by definition. The realm of *polis* on the contrary was a space of freedom. Mastering of necessity in the household was the condition of freedom to be realized in active *polis* life.

So, the private in Greek life coincided with the economic concerns which took place in the household. The Greek public sphere was based on a slave economy where the "citizens" could fulfill the needs of their "organic" life by dominating slaves. So the exclusion of the private and the economic was automatic in that mode of life where a class of rulers enjoyed their leisure time by suppressing another class of people who were suppressed to work, to fulfill the needs of their masters.

The modern life, as Arendt herself has described it, is not based on this strict dichotomy between public and pri-

vate which coincide with the political and the economic. With the rise of the capitalist economy, Arendt argues, this clean, watertight separation between public and private vanishes. The capitalist economy brings an intermediate sphere of the "social".²¹ Arendt has a very narrow view of social. According to her analysis, social is essentially concerned with the economic aspects of necessity but it operates in public, for it is no more restricted to "the household". The social realm therefore blurs the distinction between the public and the private. More than that it has challenged the earlier coincidence of public and the political. In Arendt's theoretical framework, the "publicness" of the social is accepted but it is still excluded from the political.

Theoretically, therefore, we can see a complete coincidence of the public and the political.

Methodological Observations

It is important to note here that these terms - action, labour, work, public, private, etc. - fulfill a dual function. On the one hand, they have a normative value,

21. H. Arendt, The Human Condition, p.257.

i.e., they described an ideal condition to be strived for; on the other hand they are also used as concepts for the description and analysis of a given reality. This is clear from the structure of the Human Condition.

In The Human Condition, Arendt lays out the "conditions" and the species of the *vita activa*. These conditions and spaces correspond to the activities of *vita activa*: labour, work and action. The "conditions" she identifies are life, natality, mortality, plurality and worldliness. The "species" are public and the private. The 'condition' and 'space' of labour are life (the concern for survival) and private sphere respectively. The 'condition' of action is plurality, and its 'space' of appearance is public. Work occupies an intermediary stage whose task is to erect a durable 'world' of artefacts. They are also interdependent. Among all three activities, action signifies the highest state of the human condition.

From the methodological observations we will move toward Arendt's conception of modernity. In the analysis of modernity also, these categories are used in the dual manner we talked about. The basic critique Arendt makes is that with the rise of the modern age there is a gradual shift

from the care of the "world" to the concern for the necessities of "life" and self which in its extreme, produce a mass consumerist society where values of public-political life are completely undermined.

CHAPTER 2

THE CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

The last chapter showed how Arendt demonstrates the rupture in a western tradition because of totalitarianism. Since tradition no longer has authority over the minds of people, the categories of western metaphysical tradition are no more relevant. The harmony between thought and reality being lost, the categories of this tradition no longer allow access either to past or to the present.

Hannah Arendt finds the categories of Metaphysics in present existence 'irritating':

"Only the beginning and end are pure or unmodulated; and the fundamental chord therefore never strikes its listeners more forcefully and beautifully than when it first sends its harmonizing sound into the world and never more irritatingly and jarringly than when it still continues to be heard in a world whose sounds and thought it can no longer bring into harmony."¹

To overcome the dead weight of the metaphysical tradition spawned by Plato and Parmenides, Hannah Arendt in a phenomenological exercise challenges and breaks down these

1. Hannah Arendt, Between Past and Future, p.18.

categories in many regards. She uses the tools of comparative philosophy to hark back to a pre-Socratic past. Arendt distinguishes between the etymologies of words like 'labour' and 'work' to establish a new framework of analysis.² The set of categories which she receives collectively called *vita activa*. *Vita activa* designates three activities - 'labour', 'work' and 'action'.

The general project of Arendt is to reinstate 'action' as the final and relevant object to be strived for, the basis and end of her philosophy of praxis. Arendt's main arguments against the Platonic mainstream are: (i) it perceived politics from the perspective of philosophy and hence denied its autonomy and dignity; (ii) it interpreted action in the image of work (activity of making) thereby reducing the realm of political activity to one of governance.

Hannah Arendt sharply distinguishes her categories from the pattern of Platonic tradition. In fact she uses them to show how there are tendencies within modernity that continuously encroach upon the public sphere.

2. Jacques Taminiaux, "Phenomenology and the Problem of Action" in Critical and Dialectical Phenomenology, (ed. by Donn Welton and Hugh J. Silverman), pp.90-91.

In her analysis of modernity, Arendt employs the categories of *vita activa* along with other categories which form the "conditions" and "spaces" of *vita activa*. The conditions of labour and action are 'life' and 'world' respectively and their spaces are 'private' and 'public'. We will first glance over her analysis of modernity wherein all these categories are applied and then follow it analytically as to how certain tendencies in modernity destroy public sphere. Hannah Arendt's method involves an appropriation of categories of Greek life and their application to the historical and conceptual analysis of modern age.

The conceptual would follow the historical one wherein the basic force behind history is understood to be the force of unprecedented events and not ideas or processes. The ideas are mere philosophical responses which in turn take their own logical course but the basic character of modern age is determined by the phenomena started by events.³ The three major events which according to Arendt, determine its

3. Arendt believes that only events bring significant changes in history, not "ideas" or other "hidden" forces. In this way she challenges Hegelian and Marxist theories of history. See H. Arendt, The Human Condition. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970, pp.251-253, "...history is a story of events and not of forces or ideas with predictable courses", p.252.

character are: the exploitation of earth and discovery of new continents, the process of expropriation started by the reformation and the invention of the telescope challenging the adequacy of senses. These events, though not themselves modern induced certain changes which fundamentally altered the character of the age they lead to. With the help of the historical analysis of the events and their effects, Arendt constructs an image of modernity which has following features.

Alienation

Modernity is characterized by two kinds of alienations: World Alienation and Earth Alienation. Before going into the description and analysis of world alienation the specific sense in which Arendt uses the term "world" should be kept in mind. World here means "an artificial environment of humanly created objects, institutions, and settings that provide us with an abode upon this earth, with a shelter from the natural elements and insofar as it is relatively stable and permanent, with a sense of belonging of being at home with our surroundings."⁴

4. M.P. D'Entreves, The Political Philosophy of Hannah Arendt, Routledge, London, 1994, p.37.

As we discussed in the previous chapter the "world" is significant for a public life insofar as it provides a specific location to the people from where they develop their sense of reality by sharing the world with others and a sense of identity in inter subjective communication. These features of the "world" make it particularly suitable place, where a political action as Arendt understands it, can be performed: "In politics, not life but world is at stake."⁵

Rejecting Marx's notion of alienation she asserts that world alienation, rather than self alienation, is the central fact of modern life. In fact, the concern for self and "life" is defined as the consequence of the alienation from world. The lack of a commonly shared world throws them back upon themselves.

Historically, "the world alienation", according to Arendt, has its roots in the events at the threshold of modern age. The 'shrinking of the earth', essentially a result of discoveries and explorations of new continents, creates a new anxiety in the existential experience of the

5. Arendt, Between Past and Future, p.

people. The expansion of the inhabited universe radically alters the earlier relation that people had with their 'immediate earthly surroundings'.

The other factor contributing to the "loss of the world" is the rise of capitalism and modern secularism which Arendt thinks, is a result of the expropriation of Church property following the Reformation. "Exploration, the deprivation for certain groups of their place in the world and their naked exposure to the exigencies of life, created both the original accumulation of wealth and the possibility of transforming this wealth into capital through labour. These together constituted the conditions for the rise of a capitalist economy."⁶

The capitalist economy is described by making a distinction between wealth and property. 'Wealth' is identified specifically, with the capitalist economy wherein the surplus production is again fed back into the same process. This circle goes on endlessly. 'Property', as opposed to 'wealth', on the other hand, is described by

6. H. Arendt, The Human Conditions, pp.254-255.

Arendt as a 'piece of one's privately owned world'.⁷ The essential difference between them lies in their relation to human beings. In modernity, "wealth" assumes an independent value in itself without an "authentic" use for human beings. Where "property" is considered as an essential part of a personality of a person since it provides him with a stable place in the world.

The endless dynamics of wealth accumulation has the tendency to destroy the worldly stability and durability since it does not to have any end. Everything in modern society, Arendt argues, becomes an object of production and consumption of acquisition and exchange, where individuals are forced to concentrate on their purely biological needs. So self-interest and care for the necessities of life are the dominant concern in modern society. The care for the "world" and values of permanence, stability and durability attached to it are sacrificed in favour of the values belonging to the activity of "labour" life, productivity and abundance.⁸

7. Ibid., p.66.

8. M.P. d'Entreves, op. cit., p.39.

The invention of telescope by Galileo is another major event that plays a very important role in Arendt's understanding of modernity. By making it possible for the first time, to reveal the "secrets" of the universe with the certainty of the sense perception, this invention challenged the dominant notion of truth, thereby altering the experience of the epoch fundamentally:

"The traditional concept of truth whether based on sense perception or on reason or on belief in divine revelation, which had rested on the two-fold assumption that what truly is will appear on its own accord and the human capabilities are adequate to receive it."⁹

Without the certainty of the self-evident truth, Arendt claims, modern philosophy started doubting the existence of traditional truth itself. From here we can move to the other major moment in Arendt's understanding of modernity.

Modernity and the Hierarchy of Human Activities

As we saw in the last chapter the Platonic philosophical tradition begins by placing the contemplative or philosophical way of life at a higher position than the activities of *Vita Activa*. This hierarchical order is kept intact

9. H. Arendt, The Human Condition, p.276.

by the Christian tradition insofar as it gave a religious sanction to the activity of contemplation and undermined the other worldly activities by stressing their sinfulness.¹⁰ It is with the rise of modernity that Arendt finds a reversal of this order in favour of *Vita Activa*.

This reversal became possible with the challenge to the earlier notion of truth that the Cartesian doubt affected. Arendt interprets modern "philosophy of consciousness" in terms of an activity of "making" or "fabricating". Since Cartesian philosophy challenged the notion of self-evident truth, it could be certain only about those things that are produced or "made" by human activity:

The point was not that truth and knowledge were no longer important but that they could be won only by "action" and not by contemplation. It was an instrument, the telescope, a work of man's hands, which finally forced nature or rather the universe to yield its secrets. The reasons for trusting doing and distrusting contemplation or observation became even more cogent after the results of the first active inquiries. After being and appearance had parted company and truth was no longer supposed to appear, to reveal and disclose to the mental eye of a beholder, there arose a veritable necessity to hunt for truth behind deceptive appearances. Nothing indeed could be less trustworthy for acquiring knowledge and approaching

10. M.P. d'Entreves, *op. cit.*, pp.42-43.

truth than passive observation or mere contemplation. Certainty of knowledge could be reached only under a twofold condition: first, that knowledge concerned only what one had done himself - so that its ideal became mathematical knowledge where we deal only with self-made entities of the mind - and second, that knowledge was of such a nature that it could be tested only through more doing."¹¹

Further, Arendt invokes Vico to confirm her notion that in modernity, truth is a product of "making".¹² The concern for knowledge, therefore, was no longer with the 'why' or 'what' of phenomena but only with the 'how', that is, with the "process" of its generation and development. Modern concern with "process" finally accomplishes the break with earlier notion of contemplation. The concern with 'being' is replaced by a concern with "process" which reflects itself first in the natural sciences where nature is interpreted as a process governed by immutable laws and then it is eventually taken up by historical sciences.¹³ The overall impact the idea of "process" had on the experience of modern man is a loss of contact with whatever was stable and

11. H. Arendt, The Human Condition, p.290.

12. H. Arendt, Between Past and Future, pp.57-58.

13. Ibid., pp.57-58.

durable in the world.¹⁴

Though modernity reverses the earlier hierarchy between *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* in favour of the latter, it does restore the hierarchy within itself. The victory of *vita activa* does not restore the old dignity of action, rather it is the *homo faber* (the maker engaged in the activity of worked) that is placed at the prominent position. As the essential feature of the worldview of *homo faber* is the principle of utility. Arendt finds its reflection in Bentham's utilitarianism.¹⁵ The concern for subjective interests therefore becomes the central feature of modern age. But this prominent position of the *homo faber* does not remain stable for long, but eventually replaced in favour of the *animal laborans*.

The victory of the *animal laborans* can be understood as a victory of the values related to the laboring activity. The basic feature of 'labour', as we discussed in the last chapter, is a concern for the sheer necessities of organic life and endless consumption. Arendt describes modern society as a society which tends to destroy all the values

14. H. Arendt, The Human Condition, p.300.

15. Ibid., pp.308-309.

related to the public life since there is no other concern except endless consumption. Now we move to the other characteristic of modernity which is thought to have confused the distinction as well as relation between the public and the private.

The Rise of the Social Realm

The essential feature of the capitalist economy is that it brought the activity of production out of the limited sphere of household and made it a large scale 'public' activity. This gave rise to what Arendt calls the social realm. The rise of this realm blurs the borderline between the private and the public sphere and creates confusion about their proper function.

Let us now try to follow this summary analytically. For this purpose we will have to make sense of the basic concepts employed to describe modernity. These concepts are: world and life, public and private. On the one hand Arendt uses these concepts as methodological tools on the other hand they have a content of their own. Both these uses exhibit a typical Hegelian unity of method and content. In other words, these pairs of concepts have a normative as

well as descriptive purpose. Let us first understand them in their interrelationship. Both the pairs of concepts are related to the activities of *Vita Activa*: labour work and action. 'World' and 'Life' are the basic "conditions" of action and labour respectively; and public and private are the proper "spaces" of action and labour respectively.

As we saw in the summary described above, Arendt's understanding of modernity can be described as a movement from the 'conditions' of 'world' to the 'conditions' of 'life'. This movement eventually lead to a severe encroachment upon the public sphere by private concerns. Let us now see what are the overall effects of this movement.

First, it leads to a loss of 'reality' which, Arendt claims is possible by a common sense that results from intersubjective communication. This common sense is lost as an effect of introspective "worldless" mentality resulting from the Cartesian philosophy. Modern man therefore is essentially inward looking who doesn't have any concern for the world, which is essential for a public activity to be possible.

The rise of the social realm mixes the public sphere - the sphere of political participation and individual freedom - with the private sphere of 'necessity' and economic activity. And since the sphere of economy has become public, it comes to acquire the central feature of politics which becomes the administration of economy and satisfaction of people's needs and demands. The public sphere which according to Arendt's understanding is a sphere of freedom of action and plurality of opinion, it becomes a sphere of bureaucratic rule and uniform behaviour.

The bureaucratically ruled modern 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."¹⁶ This behaviour in turn is ruled by the selfish private interests of individuals. Gradually it leads to a total atomisation of society. This atomised society does not tolerate anything which is not a part of normal and predictable behaviour. All these conditions combined together produce uniformity, conformism

16. Ibid., p.40.

and automation in human affairs. This logic takes the world towards a "global society in which cultural regulatives fade and human race experiences the same experiences and is affected by the same happenings."¹⁷

The public sphere, where the citizens could act responsibly in conducting their political affairs is dead in the modern world. Political activity devoid of self-interest, i.e., a disinterested concern for worldly affairs which for Arendt is the hallmark of strictly political action is completely absent in the modern world. Modern mass democracies with their representative institutions provide very little space for citizens to exercise their political freedom. They are powerful only on the day of elections. Constitutions have formally given all powers to the people without giving them the opportunities of acting as citizens and participating in public affairs. No space is available for them to act and participate in the public-political matters.¹⁸

The other major cause for the destruction of the public

17. George Kateb, Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil, Martin Rebertson, Oxford, 1984, p.159.

18. H. Arendt, On Revolution, p.237.

space is the rule of bureaucracy and technology. Public matters are taken as problems to be solved by experts thereby excluding the participation of the public at large and rendering them politically powerless. And since nobody can be asked to answer for what is being done in the bureaucratically ruled society it becomes impossible to locate responsibility. So, the knowledge and expertise becomes the criteria for entry into public offices, rendering large body of people politically alienated.¹⁹

In spite of such a dark image of modernity, Arendt thinks that the human capacity to engage in a public life is not "irretrievably lost". Even within modernity, she tells the stories of various revolutions as an evidence of human capacity to 'begin something new' by acting together. Revolutions, according to Arendt, tell the "innermost story" of modernity. In the next chapter we would engage in a discussion of her concept of action which involves an appropriation of both Greek - polis life as well as modern revolutionary movements.

19. H. Arendt, "On Violence" in Crises of the Republic, HBJ, New York, 1979, pp.140-150.

CHAPTER 3

THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL ACTION

As previously discussed, Hannah Arendt's revival of the categories of ancient Greek political life is an essential function of her methodological strategy. This strategy in turn forms a part of her general project of overcoming metaphysics and the political philosophy based on the assumptions of the same.

Metaphysics has to be overcome because not only can it not solve problems posed by modernity, it does not respect the active and political way of life which is solely, according to Arendt, capable of providing some meaning to life in the modern world. So, the political way of life is the answer Arendt has for the aporias of modernity.

The theoretical basis for her vision is in the concept of action. Political activity is defined in opposition to the assumptions of metaphysics which since its foundation in Plato has maintained a distorted view of politics. The metaphysical tradition understood political activity in the light of the activity of a craftsman who works according to

a preconceived model and tries to realise it with adequate means. The metaphysical tradition accordingly obliterated the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*.¹

Distinguishing between action (*praxis*) and fabrication or work (*poiesis*), Arendt rescues it from means-end categories and links it to freedom and plurality on the one hand, and, speech and remembrance on the other. Moreover, by viewing action as a mode of collective living, possible only under the conditions of human plurality and solidarity, she is able to develop a theory of participatory public sphere. This stands in direct contrast to the bureaucratised and interest-based politics so characteristic of the modern democracies.

Let us briefly discuss the various dimensions of Arendt's theory of action.

The Conditions of Action: Natality and Plurality

The concept of Natality has a very significant place in Arendt's philosophy. Following St. Augustine she believes

1. Jacques Taminiaux, "Phenomenology and the Problem of Action" in Donn Welton and Hugh J. Silverman (eds.), Critical and Dialectical Phenomenology, State University of New York Press, New York, 1987, pp.90-91.

that every birth is a promise for a new beginning. Every newborn child has the capacity to begin something new in the world which can break its continuity by starting an unexpectedly new chain of events. Political life is a kind of second birth for human beings:

"With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born, and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin, to set into motion. Because they are initium, newcomers and beginners, by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action."²

The political actors' power to act is an affirmation of the human condition of natality. In fact all strictly political action, Arendt maintains, are ontologically rooted in natality.³ Political activity, in this framework represents a secondary natality which is a response to the pri-

2. Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970, pp.176-177.

3. Ibid., p.247.

mary natality, i.e., the birth.⁴

Apart from the capacity to begin something new in the world which is actualised in action itself, plurality forms its other condition. Action and speech, so far as they need to be seen and heard, require the presence of others for their very appearance. The public world is constituted by the presence of human beings with plurality of perspectives. Each actor and/or spectator has a different location in the world, that is, that location of an individual does not coincide with the location of another and this results in the same thing being observed from different perspectives.

This plurality of perspectives has two attributes: (i) equality and (ii) distinction. While all participants are equal by virtue of their membership in the body politic, this equality is marked by a sense of distinction. Every individual actor has a unique perspective which he exchanges in intersubjective communication. This eventually helps in the constitution of identity of the individuals.

4. Patricia Bowen-Moore, Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality, The Macmillan Press, London, 1989, pp.42-68.

Action, Disclosure and Identity

In action and speech, Arendt maintains, individuals disclose to the world their distinct personalities, i.e., their identities. Since the problem of identity essentially involves the question 'who' one is, action and speech achieve precisely this. In these modes of appearances, and only in these modes, the "who" of a person is revealed. It is not the characteristic of other human activities. Neither labour, nor work, nor even the theoretical pursuits of life are capable of revealing the "who" of the person. But this 'who' should be clearly differentiated from the 'what' of the person. The "what" of somebody includes the qualities, gifts, talents and shortcomings of a person which can be displayed or hidden depending on the will of the persons. But he cannot hide his "who" if he speaks at all. The revelation of the true identity of a person is possible only as an effect of acting and speaking in the presence of others.

The other important aspect of the disclosure of identity in political activities is that human beings cannot master themselves. That is, they are, so far as they are engaged in acting, not subjects sovereign over themselves:

"...disclosure can almost never be achieved as though one possessed and could dispose of this "who" in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that the "who" which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters."⁵

What we see clearly from this assertion is that Hannah Arendt's subject is not a sovereign subject. In her theory of action, human beings are not self-defining autonomous subjects. The political actors can only begin and take initiatives but cannot attain control over the events and processes started therewith. Human beings, so far as they are acting in the public sphere, are only 'actors and sufferers' of their deeds but they are not their "authors".

Here it is important to recall the distinction between action and work. In the activity of work, the *homo faber* remains in control of the process from beginning to the end. He is therefore sovereign master over the fabrication process. The processes started by action, on the contrary, do not remain under the control of the actors. By this kind of

5. Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, pp.179-180.

assertion, Arendt comes close to those theorists of 'post-modernity' who, following Nietzsche, have pronounced the death of the autonomous subjectivity.⁶

This denial of "authorship" to the actors is also clear in Arendt's theory of history. According to her, the actors start a new chain of events into an already existing "web of relationships". As a result, the chain of events goes beyond the expectations and is never in control of those who began it. This unpredictable and boundless nature of the events started by action renders them futile. Only by their "reification" into stories and narratives composed by historians and biographers can save them from their inherent futility. Arendt's theory of history, therefore, has its actors and sufferers but not subjects because the events always escape control:

"[These] stories have their subjects as actors and sufferers but nobody is their author."⁷

6. D.R. Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche and the Aestheticisation of Political Action" in Political Theory, vol.20, no.2, 1992, p.298.

7. Hannah Arendt, op. cit. (5), p.184.

Having discussed the principal components of Arendt's theory of action, let us see what are the various modes in which political action is possible in the modern world. Though the public sphere is severely crushed under the burden of various tendencies of modernity hostile to it but the 'genuine' political action sprang from time to time in the various revolutions and resistance movements. These movements, starting with French revolution, are the political actions par excellence since their aim has always been one of creation: creation of the space for the realisation of freedom and the establishment of lasting institutions of public participation. The revolutions are modern phenomena and like true political action they always came with a promise of beginning something entirely new in this world.

Revolutions, according to Arendt, occur when ("but not always") there is a breakdown of authority. In such a situation, the revolutionaries or the "men of revolution" come and "pick up the power lying in the streets".⁸ People exercise their newly found power through various institutions of public participation which the revolutionaries

8. Hannah Arendt, "Thought on Politics and Revolution" in Crisis of the Republic, HBJ, New York, 1972, p.206.

establish. The revolutions, Arendt maintains, always create space for people's participation in political affairs through which they exercise their freedom "positively". A horizontal constitution of power is always to be found in all revolutionary movements in history after French Revolution. Unfortunately for one reason or the other, all these organs of public participation in the form of councils or revolutionary societies were defeated invariably in the course of all the revolutions.

The revolutions, which started with the promise of foundations of participatory bodies politic ended up achieving at the most the blessings of "limited government".⁹ in the form of modern democracies guaranteeing civil rights and liberties. But we are warned not to:

"...mistake civil rights for political freedom or to equate [these] preliminaries of civilised government with the very substance of free republic. For political freedom, generally speaking, means the right 'to be participator in the government' or it means nothing."¹⁰

9. Hannah Arendt, On Revolution, Penguin Books, 1973, p.218.

10. Ibid., p.218.

Arendt is by no means against these 'preliminaries of civilised government'. On the contrary we find a powerful defence of what may be called the procedural apparatus of modern democracies in the writings of Arendt. In fact she maintains that the distance between tyranny and constitutional, limited government is as great, perhaps greater than, the distance between limited government and freedom."¹¹ Further, in the essay, "Truth and Politics" she provides powerful defence of such instances, as free press, independent judiciary and an independent institution of university.

Thus a defence of negative liberty has an equally important place in Hannah Arendt's thought as positive freedom which can be realised only by directly participating in public affairs.¹² If this is true then Claude Lefort's criticism that Arendt is silent on the question of democracy does not hold. In fact the view of modern democracy she upholds in "On Violence" comes very close to Lefort's own theory of democracy as a form of government where power is

11. Ibid., p.218.

12. This point has also been noted by E. Hobsbawm. See E. Hobsbawm, "Hannah Arendt on Revolution", in Revolutionaries, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1973, pp.201-208.

an "empty place". According to this theory, power, in a democracy, is an "empty place" where those who exercise public authority cannot appropriate it permanently. Democracy is sustained by two principles. On the one hand, power stems from the people, on the other, it is the power of nobody.¹³ In 'On Violence', Arendt has a similar understanding of modern democracy:

"It is the people's support that lends power to the institution of a country, and this support is but a continuation of the consent that brought the laws into existence to begin with. Under conditions of representative government the people are supposed to rule over those who govern them. All political institutions are manifestations and materialisations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them."¹⁴

The constitutional guarantees of civil liberties are important, in fact their defence - against totalitarian and tyrannical forms of government - is one of the purposes of political action,¹⁵ they are nevertheless not adequate

13. Claude Lefort, Democracy and Political Theory, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, p.55.

14. Hannah Arendt, "On Violence" in Crises of the Republic, p.140.

15. Hannah Arendt, On Revolution, pp.237-238; also J. Habermas, "H. Arendt's Communications Concept of Power" in Social Research, vol.44, no.1, 1977, pp.6-7.

conditions for political action and public participation. As against a mere guarantee of the negative liberties, Arendt is for a public sphere where freedom and power can be realised by people's "acting in concert".

To develop a theory of freedom, again, Arendt tries to reconstruct and appropriate the experience of pre-Platonic Greek *polis* as well as of modern revolutions. She contends that philosophical concept of freedom which starts with Augustine's theory of free-will is not authentic. Also, that in Greek *polis* life, freedom was a fact of political life but it was not articulated in philosophy.¹⁶ She calls the philosophical concept of freedom as hostile to political activity since this does not require the presence of others. The philosophical concept of freedom from Augustine down to modern liberalism emphasises on freedom from politics.

Against the philosophical articulation, Arendt maintains that freedom is possible only in a political activity only. Freedom is a phenomenon of the public world where it makes its appearance. In a public space, Arendt claims, freedom is a manifest fact which can be "seen and

16. Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom" in Between Past and Future, The Viking Press, New York, 1969, pp.145-148.

heard". As a demonstrable fact it coincides with the political act itself. Freedom and political action are related to each other as two sides of the same coin: "The *raison d'etre* of politics is freedom and its field of experience is action."¹⁷

The aim of political action, therefore, is freedom. Freedom and action need political institutions for their "appearance" in the world. To "be", they must appear phenomenally in this world. Freedom, for Arendt, then, is either a tangible reality or it does not exist at all.

It is the basic feature of Arendt's epistemology that anything to be 'real' must 'appear'. 'Being' and 'appearance' must coincide.¹⁸ Since all appearances are conditioned upon the presence of spectators, freedom is always a 'public' phenomena. To prove her point, Arendt argues the basic principles of American and French revolutions were "public happiness" and "public freedom" respectively.

Further, while reflecting upon the experience of French intellectuals who participated in the resistance against

17. Ibid., p.146.

18. Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind, vol.I, Thinking, Secker and Warburg, London, 1978, pp.19-20.

Nazism, she says that in their 'action':

"...they had been visited for the first time by an ~~apparition~~ of freedom, not, to be sure, because they acted against tyranny and things worse than tyranny - this was true for every soldier in the allied armies - but because they had become "challengers", had taken initiative upon themselves and therefore, without knowing or even without noticing it, had begun to create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear. "At every meal that we eat together, freedom is invited to sit down. The chair remains vacant but the place is set."¹⁹

Arendt's theory of freedom as well action devoid them of any telos. They do not have any purpose beyond the effect realised in the act of performance itself. Political action has an existential dimension to it. It is the experience gained in the performance itself which is the most important aspect of this theory of action. Political way of life, according to this theory of action, is the only way which can provide meaning and depth to human existence. Action, then is existentially superior to any other human concern.²⁰ The only purpose of public participation is a kind of self-actualisation. But actualisation of one is not incompatible

19. Hannah Arendt, The Preface to Between Past and Future, p.4.

20. George Kateb, Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil, Martin Robertson, Oxford, 1984, p.155.

with those of others, rather they need the company of others.

So, from the discussion so far we can conclude that political action has three purposes: (a) to protect liberty; (b) to resist against the forces that threaten political liberty; and (c) to establish new institutions of public freedom.²¹

Political ~~action~~ in concept leads to a generation of legitimate power which lends the decisions taken a force of authority. Arguing against the Weberian theories in social sciences, Arendt holds that power does not consist in the instrumentalisation of others' will. It is not an attribute of an individual, rather, it always presupposes the existence of a group of people in a consensus-oriented communication. The power, Arendt states, lasts as long as the group is there and vanishes as it dissolves. Here power is differentiated from authority, which performs the function of stabilisation of a body politic. This authority comes from the 'origin' of the body politic, where the origin means moment of foundation. The foundation can take place by

21. J. Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communication Concept of Power", op. cit., pp.6-7.

revolution or by peaceful means but it essentially involves the establishment of basic rules of the body politic for instance a written constitution. The institutions of authority derive their legitimacy both from the written documents established at the time of foundation and from the power created by people who lead their active support to these institutions. But the power people create in acting in common, i.e., in public participation, is far more important and superior. This power, for instance, in a revolution can create or establish new institutions of authority where the old ones have broken down or lost their legitimacy.²² So, we see that Arendt has a participatory model of public sphere which does not fit well with the heroic model of political action as emphasised by Arendt, in The Human Condition.

Theory of Political Communication

Arendt takes the field of aesthetic appreciation as a model of political communication. By imitating this model she excludes the criterion of cognitive truth from political communication. By imitating this model she excludes the

22. H. Arendt, On Revolution, p.116.

criterion of cognitive truth from the judgement of political activity. For this she invokes Kant's Critique of Judgement in which he insists upon a different kind of thinking from one propounded in the Critique of Practical Reason. In "Practical Reason", the self is supposed to act according to the categorical imperatives which are dictated by the law giving faculty of reason. The new way of thinking is being able to "think in place of everybody else". This ability he called "enlarged mentality".²³ Judgement involves a judgement of the particular without subsuming them under universal categories.

"Judgement of the particular - this is beautiful, this is ugly, this is right, this is wrong - has no place in Kant's moral philosophy. Judgement is not practical reason; practical reason reasons and tells us what to do and what not to do; it lays down the law and is identical with the will, and the will utters commands; it speaks in imperatives. Judgement, on the contrary, arises from "a merely contemplative pleasure or inactive delight."²⁴

23. H. Arendt, Between Past and Future, p.220.

24. H. Arendt, "Exerpts from Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy" in Appendix to The Life of the Mind, (ed.) M. McCarthy, pp.256-257.

Arendt further argues that it is the faculty of judgement that fits us into the world of phenomena and appearances, and makes it possible for us to find our place in it.²⁵ According to her, judgement is "one of the fundamental activities of man as a political being insofar as it enables him to orient himself in the public realm, in the common world...."²⁶ It is one of the most important activities in which "sharing-the-world-with-others comes to pass."²⁷

For a judgement to take place, presence of a community of taste is presupposed. The activity of judging requires a way of appreciations which Kant described as an "enlarged mentality":

"The 'enlargement of mind' plays a crucial role in the Critique of Judgement. It is accomplished by comparing our judgement with the possible rather than the actual judgement of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man."²⁸

25. Ronald Beiner, Political Judgement, Methuen and Co. Ltd., London, 1983, p.14.

26. H. Arendt, Between Past and Future, p.221.

27. Ibid., p.221.

28. H. Arendt, Appendix to The Life of the Mind, p.257.

The "enlargement of mentality" also involves the individual's liberation from his/her "subjective private conditions", for privately held opinions lack validity in the public realm.²⁹ The judgement has to be more "general". But this generality, however, "is not the generality of concept [of the concept "house" under which you then can subsume all concrete buildings]. It is on the contrary closely connected with particulars, the particular conditions of the standpoints you have to go through in order to arrive at your own "general standpoint".³⁰

This movement from particular to more "general" requires the presence of others since it is in an anticipated communication with others that judgements are formed. So, "the presence of others is an important condition for the judgement to take place and hold its specific validity. Its claim to validity can never extend further than the others in whose place the judging person has put himself for his considerations."³¹

29. H. Arendt, Between Past and Future, p.222.

30. H. Arendt, Appendix to the Life of the Mind, p.258.

31. H. Arendt, Between Past and Future, p.222.

What is striking here is that political judgement is contrasted with philosophical argument oriented towards 'truth'. The latter, by insisting upon demonstrable truth seeks to compel agreement by a compelling evidence. Judgements, but also political opinions for Arendt, are by contrast, persuasive. Their aim is to persuade in the hope of coming to an agreement with everyone else eventually. So judgement is always communal and intersubjective.

In the essay, "Truth and Politics", Arendt further develops this thinking. She claims that political thought is representative. In this essay, opinions are contrasted with 'truth'. In her theory of politics, opinions and not 'truth' occupy the central place. People do not simply have opinions, rather, they form opinions with a kind of "representative thinking". She describes 'truth' to have a "despotic character" and, the "modes of thought and communication that deal with such truth are necessarily domineering; they do not take into account other people's opinions and taking these into account is the hallmark of strictly political thinking."³² Though the relevance of 'truth' or

32. Ibid., p.241.

facts for the formation of opinions is not denied. Both 'factual' as well as 'rational' truth should enlighten the opinions.

Let us now engage in a critical examination of Arendt's theory of political action.

Public Sphere: Discursive or Agonal

Various commentators on Arendt have noted that the major tension in Arendt's theory of political action is between its heroic and communicative dimensions. They rightly claim that there is a gradual shift of emphasis from the heroic model of action articulated in The Human Condition to a more participatory and discursive one articulated particularly in On Revolution and On Violence.

According to Peter Fuss,³³ Hannah Arendt oscillates between the *agonal* and an accommodational conception of politics. The first is articulated in The Human Condition where her model is the Greek *polis*, more particularly, the Athens portrayed by Pericles' speech. And the second is

33. See Peter Fuss, "Hannah Arendt's Conception of Political Community" in Melvyn Hill (ed.), Hannah Arendt: Recovery of the Public World, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1979, pp.157-176.

articulated when she turned the American Revolution wherein she praised its institutionalisation of the arts of persuasion and accommodation. Fuss further notes that Arendt's works published after The Human Condition have tended to emphasise the latter conception. He writes:

"...her laudatory assessment of the roots of American political experience in On Revolution, is, in the final analysis, a tribute to a politics of persuasion and mutual accommodation rather than to a polis dedicated to the manifestation of individual excellence."³⁴

Margaret Canovan,³⁵ on the other hand, emphasised tension between elitist and democratic aspect of Arendt's theory. Elaborating upon this, Canovan writes that Arendt:

"Can be read as one of the most radical of democrats. Her political ideal is a vision of ancient Athens, a polity in which there were neither rulers nor ruled, but all citizens were equal within the agora, acting among their peers.... She cites again and again the revolutionary situation in which the people have sprung into action, and she shares Jefferson's desire to perpetuate that revolutionary impulse by means of direct participation. However, if Arendt in some moods can seem prominently the theorist of participatory democracy, she can also be read as an elitist of almost Nietzschean intensity. She attributes

34. Ibid., p.172.

35. See Margaret Canovan, "Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought", Political Theory, vol.6, no.1, 1978, pp.5-26.

totalitarianism largely to the rise of "mass society"; she expresses contempt not only for the activity of labouring, but for the characteristic tastes and dispositions of labourers; and she shows what is, for a modern political thinker, a truly astonishing lack of interest in social and economic welfare of the many, except in so far as the struggle to achieve it poses a threat to the freedom of few."³⁶

Similarly Seyla Benhabib³⁷ has also emphasised the tension between agonistic and discursive public space in the writings of Hannah Arendt.

The contention that Arendt was gradually able to overcome the heroic model of action in favour of the participatory one is true. It becomes all the more clear in the last chapter of On Revolution where she tries to describe her own idea of democratic participation in form of a council system.³⁸ This is again emphasised in an interview published in The Crises of the Republic.³⁹

36. Ibid., pp.5-6.

37. See Seyla Benhabib, "Hannah Arendt's Redemptive Power of Narrative", Social Research, vol.57, no.1, 1990, pp.190-196.

38. Arendt, On Revolution, pp.277-278.

39. H. Arendt, Thought on Politics and Revolution, pp.

But the problem here is that though Arendt is able to overcome the heroic dimension of political action, her idea of politics still has an important aesthetic dimension to it. This dimension is one we discussed in the theory of political communication wherein she tries to appropriate Kant's "Third Critique". By this model of communication based on "sensus communis", Arendt tries to exclude the application of any universal criterion from political judgement. The criterion of Judgement found in the realm of aesthetic appreciation presupposes the existence of a community of people who share certain common 'tastes'. There the particular is not subsumed under universal category, and judgement is not purely subjective: it is in fact shared in common. Arendt, thereby, develops a political theory of communicative action which is grounded in the possibility of sharing opinion in a community of common 'taste':

"We all know how quickly people recognise each other and how unequivocally they can feel that they belong to each other, when they discover a kinship in questions of what pleases and displeases."⁴⁰

Here we shall enter into a criticism of this theory by

40. H. Arendt, Between Past and Future, p.223.

registering help from a materialist analysis of taste judgements conducted by Pierre Bourdieu in his book, Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. In this book, Bourdieu has shown that the taste judgements of a person are materially grounded in the stratum or the group he/she belongs. Let us follow his argument more closely which he uses against Kant's theory of Judgement.

Bourdieu argues that for a particular community to emerge, the condition that "art" (which can be understood as having relative ontological autonomy) must mark is the fundamental *distinction* between "humans" and "non-humans". Artistic creation is a free imitation of natural creations, at the same time, it is transcendence of nature. To the tune of this transcendence, sublime enjoyment which is *interior* to the principle of true art surpasses-and-crushes - a kind of material pleasure which is merely and "vulgarily" natural. Bourdieu's philosophical question based on the conclusions formed after studying class-specific, stratum-specific "judgement of taste", is what can be the *possible* content of this 'sublime enjoyment'? He indicates that this Kantian notion is born of a refusal of materiality in the construction of opposition between disinterested or pure pleasure and 'interested' taste. Bourdieu is very clear

that the concealed interest of disinterested or elite community of taste follows a denied social relation of membership and exclusion.⁴¹

Now coming to Hannah Arendt, there is a clear emphasis in her theory of aesthetic as well as political judgement on the criterion of disinterestedness:

"Taste judges the world in its appearance and in its worldiness; its interest in the world is purely "disinterested" and that means that neither the life interests of the individual nor the moral interest of the self are involved here. For judgement of taste, the world is the primary thing, not man, neither man's life, nor his self."⁴²

Further she argues time and again that political action should be disinterested. So far as the judgement of the "spectators"⁴³ is concerned, as Bourdieu's argument makes it

41. Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, Tr. Richard Nice, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1984, pp.490-493.

42. H. Arendt, Between Past and Future, p.222.

43. It is not clear from Arendt's theory of judgement, whether it is meant for 'actors' also or only for 'spectators'. Though, a gradual shift toward inclusion of "judgement of actors" can be seen. It is after her reflections on the "Eichmann controversy" that she became more particular about this inclusion. In Life of the Mind, we can also see a merger of the two faculties of "thinking" and "judging". See H. Arendt, Life of the Mind, pp.3, 4, 190, 191, 192, 193; also see Richard Bernstein, Philosophical Profiles, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1986, pp.230-235. We are here concerned only with the "judgement of the spectators" since this aspect of the theory is closer to the field of aesthetic judgement.

clear, it essentially involves an apology for an elitist conception of politics. A conception of political communication, in a stratified society, would imply both "exclusion" and domination of a large group by the ruling elite hegemonising the "culture".

Now we would enter into a discussion on another major problem of Arendt's theory of action. This is related to the exclusion of the social, economic and 'private' questions from the concern of politics. This theory, stubbornly, argues that the inclusion of these concern would lead to a degeneration of the public sphere. These exclusions are based on her rigid theory of correspondence between the "spaces" and "activities". Since the proper realm to take care of the "necessities" of "life" is the "private" realm, it should not enter the "public" sphere lest it destroys it. This theory, as we have discussed has its root in the experience of Greek *polis* life where the "necessities" of "life" were overcome by a class of "masters" by means of a domination of slaves. But in the modern societies, whereas Arendt herself has recognised, these dichotomies do not hold validity, the applicability of her theory

is seriously impaired. As Habermas has observed, "remains bound to the hisotrical and conceptual constellation of classical Greek philosophy."⁴⁴

Let us try to analyse some of the problems this theory poses in terms of its applicability to modern society.

First, according to Arendt's theory, the participants in the political affairs, i.e., the citizens, should be free from the concerns of economic "necessity". But the question - How can we get rid of this burden? is not answered. Do we use other people's labour by domination on the model of Greek slave economy? On this account, the rigid "exclusion of everything merely necessary or useful" from political life, as Hanna Pitkin has argued means, "simply the exclusion of exploited by their exploiters, who can afford not to discuss economics and to devote themselves to "higher things" because they live off the work of others."⁴⁵

Second, the problem this framework poses is the

44. J. Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power", p.7.

45. Hanna Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Private and Public", Political Theory, vol.9, no.3, 1981, p.336.

criteria of visibility and invisibility applied to differentiate between public and private. This point is most notably emphasised by recent feminist theories. Arendt's theoretical argument excludes all those oppressions and domination which take place in family, i.e., in private sphere which is not visible.

So far as the critical dimension of Arendt concept of political action is concerned, it has a great value as a critique of those tendencies within modernity which threaten to destroy the public realm.

But the major problems with this concept, insofar as it has a substantive content of its own, is its exclusion of the concern with justice. Hannah Pitkin builds her criticism of Arendt's concept of action on this question. She argues that by a concept of justice, we can relate private issues with public policy'. She tries to articulate an alternative way of thinking by which the questions of social domination and private profits can be related to the general principles of genuine public life that Arendt tries to articulate. She writes:

"It is no use banishing the body, economic concerns, or the social questions from public life; we do not rid ourselves of their power in that way, but only impoverish public life. What we need here is not reparation but linkage. It is the connection that matters, the transformation of social conditions into political issues, of need and interests into principles and justice."⁴⁶

46. Ibid., p.46.

CONCLUSION

From the discussion so far we can conclude that Arendt's theory of action has two aspects: the critical and the foundational. In the Preface to Between Past and Future, she herself calls them "critical" and "experimental" concerns.¹ The source of the critical aspect can be located in her explicit positioning against Plato. The "Philosopher" who went out of "the cave" and returned to impose his "ideas" on human affairs after knowing the "truth" was criticised for two reasons. One, for his externality to politics; and two for his attempt to interfere in the human affairs. The critical aspect of Arendt's concept of action is concerned with saving politics both from the philosophically grounded claim to truth as well as from any (external) attempt at interference in public affairs.

The problem of externality is one of the major points of debate in philosophy today. The problematique of this debate is one of grounding politics. The major contenders

1. Hannah Arendt, The Preface to Between Past and Future, p.15.

in the debate are hermeneutic and critical theories.² The latter tries to ground politics in theory but this step makes it external to the totality it criticises, whereas the former believes that the "truth" cannot lie outside reality itself. In the one case, as Dick Howard argues, "the possibility of critical theory excludes the intended political results; in the other, the intended political results cannot be grounded theoretically."³

Hannah Arendt's critical movement is aimed precisely at getting rid of grounding politics in theory, thanks to her hostility against any philosophical claim to truth. For founding political action and communication, she does not go towards philosophy, rather search for the fields where she could find a practical yearning for the both. But before going to the foundational or experimental aspect of this theory, let us analyse the significance of the other criti-

2. By critical theory, we here refer to the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, particularly to Horkheimer, Marcuse and Habermas; and by hermeneutics we refer to the theory of Gadamer. For a discussion as this debate see Dick Howard, "Enlightenment as Political" in Donn Welton and Hugh J. Silverman (ed.), Critical and Dialectical Phenomenology, pp.76-87.

3. Ibid., p.82.

cal aspect.

Here, we should recall the distinction made between action and "making" (*poiesis*). The activity of *poiesis* has two steps: the contemplation of a model and the fabrication of the artefact by imitating the model. Arendt's hostility against the interference in (read "making" of) the public affairs should be seen in the context of her reading of totalitarianism. There is a considerable support to argue that Arendt saw totalitarianism to be extreme and the most dangerous case of *poiesis* in politics. Margaret Canovan has shown that there is a good deal of support in the Origins of Totalitarianism for this interpretation. Totalitarians take their "ideology seriously not as something that is already true but as something to be *made* (emphasis original) true in place of what actually exists."⁴ In other words, they tend to realise a fiction. George Kateb has the same reading of Arendt. He argues that she sees totalitarianism as "the disposition to live a fiction... or to make the world over into a fiction", and this is linked to the artistic impulse

4. Margaret Canovan, "Hannah Arendt on Ideology in Totalitarianism" in Noel O'Sullivan (ed.), The Structure of Modern Ideology, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., 1989, p.154.

to remake reality and to "the latent murderousness inherent in aestheticism."⁵

This perhaps explains Arendt's persistent suspicion of the validity of the claim to truth as well as of any attempt to actively interfere in the political world. Apart from this reading, Arendt's argument against the nexus between the claim to "truth" and the wish to "make" a body politic can also be read as a criticism of the rule of experts and technocrats in modern societies.

Jurgen Habermas also makes a powerful criticism of the domination of the public sphere by technocratic instrumental rationality. He makes distinction between various kinds of knowledge and their specific interests. He argues that the public sphere needs to be rescued from the clutches of technological and instrumental rationality based on the model of natural science which is based on interest in domination and control.

5. George Kateb cited in Neol O'Sullivan (ed.), op. cit., p.155.

Habermas, by remaining committed to rationalism of Enlightenment, tries to establish a theory of political communication on the basis of the emancipatory potential of reason itself. Arendt, however, would not share his concern. She does not have any faith in the emancipatory potentials of reason.⁶

Arendt's task was to find the sites where a practical interest in action and communication could be found within modernity itself. This theoretical task was accomplished in two ways. First, by appropriating and reconstructing the experiences of the actors who were engaged in revolutions and resistance movements; second, by appropriating the practical interest in communication which she foundⁱⁿ the field of aesthetics, for a theory of politics.

In both cases, she finds a disinterested concern for the care of the world to be a primary impulse of the participants. There are problems in both. In the first case problem is of evidence. In her interpretation of French and American revolutions she asserts that longing for freedom in

6. J. Habermas, Theory and Practice (tr. John Viertel), Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, pp.7-10.

the "men of revolution" led to the outbreak of revolutions. But she does not have a tangible proof. Hobsbawm in his essay on On Revolution finds this assertion to be a metaphysical hangover.⁷ Though she grounds action and freedom in the fact of human natality that does not solve the problem.

The effort to find a theory of political communication in the aesthetic field leads to other problem, the one we discussed by invoking Bourdieu. That is, that we are not left with any theoretical argument to question domination and exclusion; and that it is bound to be an elitist conception of politics.

These problems notwithstanding, Arendt's concept of action makes valuable positive contributions to the field of political theory apart from being a powerful critique of bureaucratically ruled modern societies which foster political apathy.

The most important of them is the emphasis on the

7. E. Hobsbawm, Revolutionaries, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1973, pp.201-208.

intersubjective dimension of human affairs against a politics where the "subjects" of social technology reduce human beings to "objects" to perform their social experiments.

Second, the notion of remembrance with which we can establish a meaningful relation to past thereby bringing depth to our lives.

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