

INTERDEPENDENT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTION AND POWER IN  
HANNAH ARENDT'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

The Institute of Economics and Social Sciences  
of  
Bilkent University

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
BILKENT UNIVERSITY  
ANKARA

August 2004

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## ABSTRACT

### INTERDEPENDENT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACTION AND POWER IN HANNAH ARENDT'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

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This thesis analyzes the interdependent relation between action and power in Hannah Arendt's political thought. In this study, it is argued that reading Arendt's political theory by considering action as the only defining aspect of her understanding of politics is misleading. Power constitutes the public realm, and brings remedies to the unpredictability and individualism of action through mutual promising and recognition. In this respect, power relations provide recognition, evaluation and meaning for action in the public realm. Outside the context of power, action loses its revelatory function in disclosing the identity of an individual and retreats from the public realm.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, action, power, promising, recognition, judgment.

## ÖZET

### HANNAH ARENDT'İN SİYASAL DÜŞÜNÇESİNDE EYLEM VE İKTİDAR ARASINDAKİ KARŞILIKLI BAĞIMLILIK İLİŞKİSİ

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Ağustos 2004

Bu tez Hannah Arendt'in siyasal düşüncesinde eylem ve iktidar arasındaki karşılıklı bağımlılık ilişkisini incelemektedir. Bu çalışmada, Arendt'in siyaset teorisini eylemi onun siyaset anlayışının tek tanımlayıcı ögesi olarak değerlendirmek suretiyle okumanın yanıltıcı olduğu savunulmaktadır. İktidar kamusal alanı oluşturur, ve eylemin öngörülemezliğine ve bireyselliğine karşılıklı söz verme ve tanıma yolu ile çareler getirir. Bu bakımdan, iktidar ilişkileri eylemin kamusal alanda tanınmasını, değerlendirilmesini ve anlam kazanmasını sağlar. Eylem, iktidar bağlamı dışında kaldığında bireysel kimliğin açığa vurulmasındaki açığa çıkarıcı işlevini kaybeder ve kamusal alandan geri çekilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hannah Arendt, eylem, iktidar, söz verme, tanıma, yargılama

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank to my supervisor Assist. Prof. Dr. Aslı Çırakman for her advises and critical reading throughout this study. I would not be able to complete this study without her enlightening suggestions and invaluable support.

Secondly, I am deeply grateful to my committee member Assist. Prof. Dr. Cem Deveci who, with his detailed reading and valuable critiques, made a great contribution to my thesis. His support and encouragement during my academic career has always been a source of motivation for me.

I also thank to my committee member Dr. Ayça Kurtođlu for her suggestions who made me realize the deficiencies of the thesis.

I would also like to thank my political theory professor, Assist. Prof. Dr. Banu Helvaciođlu, for her trust in my abilities in the field of political theory.

I am indepted to my friends Metin Yüksel, Eylem Akdeniz and Devrim Kabasakal whose supports eased my work in difficult times. I am also deeply thankful to Başak Karat, İrem Yılmaz and Evrim Özgöl Kazak as my best friends; without their love I would not be able to continue and achieve my goals.

Finally, I am grateful to my mother, Şenel Çelik, who beared me while I was studying at home; my sister Damla Uncuer, my brother Hakan Çelik, my brother-in-law Abdullah Uncuer, my sister-in-law Alev Çelik, my niece Dođa and my nephews Ataberk and Çađan who made me feel the warmth of a family deeply.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Hannah Arendt was born in Hannover, Germany in 1906. She was the only child of a Jewish family. In 1924 Arendt entered Marburg University and there she studied philosophy with Martin Heidegger. Later, in 1926, she moved to Heidelberg to study with existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers and wrote her dissertation on the concept of love in St. Augustine. In 1933, Arendt fled to Paris where she met with Zionists in exile. Between the years 1933 and 1951 Arendt lived as a “stateless person”. In 1951 she obtained American citizenship (Villa, 2000: xiii, xiv, xv). Throughout her life Arendt was always concerned with Jewish politics. Her own experiences as a Jewish woman in Europe and the concentration and extermination camps for Jews in Nazi Germany had a profound effect on Arendt’s political thought. She regarded the emergence of totalitarian forms of government in the context of non-totalitarian governments as a breaking point in the Western history and tradition. It is possible to trace the imprints of her Jewish identity and encounter with totalitarianism throughout her *oeuvre*. However, Arendt wrote in a way that defied any kind of easy classification. By constructing her own political vocabulary, she developed an understanding of politics, which peculiarly belonged to her.

This thesis is an attempt to understand Arendt’s understanding of politics by reference to her two major concepts: action and power. Since her understanding of



politics defies categorization and throughout all her life she occupied herself with the important events of not only twentieth century, but also with the developments occurred throughout Western history, she arises as an important figure whose ideas inspire anyone trying to come to terms with the reality we live in. This thesis aims at exploring what kind of a model of politics Arendt's thought suggests mainly by analysing her articulation of two central concepts: action and power. I tried to demonstrate that power and action are interdependent in Arendt's thought. Taking each in isolation is misleading in understanding her political theory. Because outside the context of power action seems to be an individualistic and dramatic step taken in isolation. Yet, thought together with power, indeed this was not what Arendt meant because only by the recognition, judgment and evaluation of other individuals in the same political community action becomes complete. Arendt claims that the distinctive character of human beings is that they are political beings by virtue of their capacity to act. Therefore, it is sensible to argue that, in her thought, at the preliminary level what constitutes the content of politics is action. However, Arendt's insistence that action can be meaningful only when it is exercised in the public realm suggests that it is crucial to include power in an analysis of her understanding of politics. For Arendt, public realm is constituted and kept in existence by power. Thus the nature of the relation between action and power comes to fore as the central theme in her understanding of politics. Accordingly, while the second chapter of this thesis deals with the introduction of the basic concepts and the distinction between the public and private realms, the remaining two chapters are occupied with action and power.

In the second chapter, the basic concepts of Arendt's political terminology are introduced and the distinction she makes between the public realm and the private realm is presented. In the first part, the introduction of Arendt's political terminology is limited to the human conditions and activities corresponding to those human conditions. For Arendt, basically there are three human conditions: plurality, worldliness and life. Respectively, three human activities that correspond to these human conditions are: action, work and labor. In addition to plurality, worldliness and life, Arendt claims that there are two more human conditions which condition human beings at the most general level: natality and mortality. In the second part, an extensive analysis of the distinction between the private and the public realms in Arendt's thought is presented. This public-private distinction is analyzed by means of other distinctions she makes between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, opinion and truth, freedom and necessity, equality of distinction and equality of conditions, and finally, between political activities and pre-political activities. In this second part it is claimed that the public-private distinction in Arendt's thought draws the boundaries of the proper context for the exercise of political activities.

In the third chapter Arendt's conceptualization of action is evaluated. This evaluation is pursued by reference to three major themes: identity, modernity and morality. In the first part, action's function in producing and disclosing the identity of an individual is presented. It is through the medium of action in the public realm that the unique identity of an individual becomes visible to other individuals. This unique identity of an individual manifested through action is articulated and reified in the form of stories by other individuals who share the same public space with that individual. In the second part, the prospects of modernity for action in particular and

for the public realm in general are presented with respect to three key features of modernity: world alienation, loss of common sense and victory of *animal laborans*. These three developments resulted in the rise of a third realm which Arendt calls social realm. With the rise of the social realm, behaviour is substituted with action and the public realm has lost its authentic character. In the third part, Arendt's understanding of morality is analysed. Arendt articulates a situated but not standpoint-bound conceptualisation of judgment in order to counter the two possibly negative aspects of action: irreversibility and unpredictability. Respectively, Arendt proposes two moral precepts for action: forgiving and promising. For individuals to orient themselves to the acts of other individuals through these faculties of forgiving and promising, judgment should be the result of a process of representative thinking practiced through the faculty of imagination. Thus, in this part it is claimed that judgement proceeds by taking into consideration the standpoints of others in the public realm, and as a result, morality is phenomenologically situated in the political realm.

In the fourth chapter, Arendt's understanding of power is analysed. Her understanding of power is evaluated at four steps. First, power's function in the emergence of a space of appearances and in the existence of the public realm as a potential space of appearances is evaluated. Second, by means of presenting the differences between power, strength, force, violence and authority, power's significance for the existence of political communities is explored. Third, the difference between Arendt's understanding of *polis* as an embodiment of power and ancient Greeks' understanding of *polis* as organised remembrance is analysed. Fourth, the relation between Arendt's individualistic conceptualisation of action and

collaborative or associational understanding of power is examined. Analysis of Arendtian conception of power in fourth chapter yields the result that power is what keeps the space of appearances and thus the public realm in existence, and action is meaningful in the public realm only when it is performed in a way to generate power. In other words, this chapter reveals a relation of interdependency between action and power. Power curtails the possible negative consequences that the unpredictability and individuality of action could end in.

My argument in this thesis is that what counts as politics in Arendt's thought operates through the interconnectedness between action and power. Articulated by Arendt as acting in concert, power is the reappropriated form of the individualistic conception of action in her thought. As such, power brings remedies against action's predicament of unpredictability and extreme individuality that action could bring into the public realm through mutual promising and recognition among individuals. In this sense, Arendt's thought suggests a model of politics based on continuous intersubjective argumentation in the public realm.

**CHAPTER II**

**THE HUMAN CONDITIONS AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE REALM**

**DISTINCTION IN ARENDT'S THOUGHT**

Hannah Arendt is an important as well as controversial figure of twentieth century political thought. She wrote mainly in two complementary lines of thought. On the one hand, Arendt wrote on the events that she believed to shape the modern world. Her writings on totalitarianism, violence and revolution are the products of her efforts to understand the prospects of modernity regarding the political aspects of our lives. On the other hand, she also elaborated on “general human capacities” with a particular emphasis on the prospects of these capacities for the public life of individuals as citizens (Arendt, 1958: 6). As human beings, individuals have the capacity to labor, work, act and think. Arendt claims that these capacities are within the range of every human being and they “cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed” (Arendt, 1958: 5, 6). Through her dual analysis of modernity and general human capacities, Arendt tries to sketch out what human beings are doing in the modern world (Arendt, 1958: 5). She does not explicitly propose a political solution for the consequences of modernity on the life of individuals as citizens but this is not to mean that she does not do it indirectly.

It is usually considered that Arendt theorises on what is political as action. However this approach brings with it a problematic dichotomy. The problem is that it

seems as if there are two contradictory conceptualisations of the political deriving from two distinct models of action in Arendt's thought: agonal and associational (Benhabib, 1992). The agonal interpretation of politics is derived from Arendt's analysis of the ancient Greek understanding of politics (Arendt, 1958). However, Arendt's elaboration on power contradicts the agonal interpretation of politics because, she conceptualises power as acting in concert, and, in this sense, her understanding of power is associational (Arendt, 1958: 199-207; Arendt, 1972: 143). In contrast to the agonal type of action, originating from the ancient Greek political practices, her conceptualisation of power as acting in concert is compatible with democratic practices. Arendtian power entails that the individuals in the public sphere act in a way that facilitates communication and collective action through the medium of speech and being together in a political sense.

Arendt emphasises in her works that the political tradition of West was broken with the emergence of totalitarianism. Since the Western tradition has been broken, under contemporary conditions it is no more possible to think in terms of traditional concepts. In addition to this rupture occurred in tradition, according to Arendt, with modernity the public realm and action in the political sense have lost both their meanings and their significance which they possessed during the ancient times in the Greek *polis*. However, human beings still have that capacity to act since it "cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed" (Arendt, 1958: 5, 6). What needs to be done is to go back to the past to rediscover and reinterpret those elements of the past that are of significance for the revitalization of the lost public realm in the modern world without being guided by any tradition during this intellectual journey. Reinterpretation of the elements of our past

experiences that are significant for the revitalization of an authentic public realm in the modern world is a crucial activity because these elements of the past have lost their original meanings due to the developments accompanied the evolution of Western political tradition and emergence of modernity. Among these elements of the past, action is the most significant and vital one that should be restored, but with a new interpretation of its meaning. Hence, Arendt foregrounds the faculty of action as the basis of her understanding of power. As a result, power, as acting in concert, seems to be a reformulated version of action in Arendt's political thought. In this sense, the agonial understanding of action that Arendt extensively elaborates on while explaining the ancient Greek way of political life should not be interpreted as the model of politics that she proposes for the revitalization of an authentic public realm under modern conditions.

In order to understand the political phenomena of the modern world and explore what is the original meaning of politics, Arendt had to construct a "new political lexicon" (Disch, 1994: 31). For Arendt has a political lexicon of her own, to come to terms with her understanding of politics it is essential to become accustomed to her own terminology. To achieve this, first, the human conditions and activities corresponding to the human conditions will be analysed. Second, the public and private realms to which each of the activities corresponding to the human conditions properly belongs will be considered.

## **2.1 The Human Conditions and the Activities Corresponding to the Human Conditions**

Arendt asserts that human beings are conditioned beings (Arendt, 1958: 9). For her, human beings are conditioned in the sense that they are conditioned both by the “conditions under which life is given to man” and by “man made” or “self made” conditions (Arendt, 1958: 9). Among the given and self-made conditions of human existence, natality and mortality are the two most general human conditions. The human condition of natality implies that every human being born into this world is a newcomer. However, human beings who come to this world through birth also die one day no matter whatever they do in their lifetime as new individuals, hence mortality is also a universal condition.

As mortal creatures, human beings move along a “rectilinear” line during their life times (Arendt, 1958: 246). But everything except for the individual life span is caught in a circular movement that characterises the universe surrounding human beings. The only way for human beings to overcome the mortality of their lives is to leave some trace behind through their works, deeds and words. With regard to the efforts of human beings as mortal creatures to attain some degree of permanence on this world, three basic human conditions are important: life, worldliness and plurality.



### **2.1.1 Life and Labor**

The human condition of life refers to the biological life process of human beings. The activity corresponding to the human condition of life is labor. By means of labor human beings sustain the necessities of life. The productivity of labor not only guarantees the survival and reproduction of one individual but it also secures the reproduction of more than one life process (Arendt, 1958: 84). The end products of the labor process are the things needed for the life process. These consumer goods necessary for the exigencies of the life process are the least durable but most natural of the things of the world (Arendt, 1958: 96). When the cyclical movements of nature are separated from nature and put into the world they manifest themselves as growth and decay. The exigencies of the life process that bring the necessity of subsisting create a cycle between the labor process and the following consumption process. This endless cycle from production to destruction is characteristic of the human condition of life.

### **2.1.2 Worldliness and Work**

The human condition of worldliness conceptualizes the unnaturalness of human existence on earth. Human beings are able to construct a world of their own making through “working upon” or fabricating things in the midst of the eternal movements of nature. These human artifacts that human beings create out of nature through the destruction of nature surround their mortal lives and separate them from the cyclical movements of nature.

The things fabricated through work also decay and return to nature. This decadence and eventual return to nature is a “sign of being the product of a mortal maker” (Arendt, 1958: 137). Just as the things for consumption are destroyed through consumption, so are the things for usage used up. Usage wears out the durability of the fabricated things. However, apart from the single objects that constitute the human artifacts, as a whole they continue to exist. Human artifice endures against fleeting time because with the change of generations the individual objects of the world are constantly replaced with new ones. Thus, human artifacts are not absolutely durable, but their erosion by human use and nature is prevented by the activities of successive generations (Arendt, 1958: 137).

The relative durability of the human-made world bestows upon the lives of human beings a degree of objectivity. Fabricated or use objects enjoy a “relative independence from the human beings who produced and use them” since these objects, though not absolutely, are durable and permanent in the world (Arendt, 1958: 137). Thus the objectivity of the human-made world functions as a stabilising element for the subjectivity of human beings and their mortal lives. This means, on the one hand, that human beings “retrieve their identity by being related to the same use objects” (Arendt, 1958: 137). On the other hand, the human-made world functions as a buffer zone between nature’s eternal movement and human life’s rectilinear movement (Arendt, 1958: 18, 19, 137). The human-made world that separates human beings as mortal beings from the cyclical movement of nature enables them to “move along a rectilinear line”, that is, to become immortal (Arendt, 1958: 19). If the objectivity of the world did not provide some degree of stability and permanence for human beings to speak words and achieve deeds that leaves some

trace behind after the death of their subjects, every individual life “with a recognisable life-story from birth to death” would perish without leaving no trace behind as just a single process of biological life (Arendt, 1958: 18,19).

Accordingly, the activity of work is different from the activity of labor in the sense that destruction is incidental to usage while it is inherent in consumption (Arendt, 1958: 138). Destruction is inherent in the fabrication process but after fabrication each use object gains relative independence from its fabricator and its existence might outlast the life of its master.

### **2.1.3 Plurality and Action**

The human condition of plurality expresses the idea that every human being born into the world is a distinct and unique person. Every individual is distinct and unique in the sense that s/he is like neither anyone who lived before nor will live after him/her. The activity that corresponds to the human condition of plurality is action. The capacity of the human beings to act is the capacity of beginning something anew (Arendt, 1958: 8-9). It is only through action that “the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world” (Arendt, 1958: 9). Hence, among the other activities within the range of human beings, action has the closest connection to the human condition of natality (Arendt, 1958: 9). For Arendt, natality is “the central category of political” (Arendt, 1958: 9). It is because plurality of human beings inhabit the world and no one among them is the same as any other that political life is possible.

Action is different from labor and work in terms of its unmediated character. Both labor and work are mediated activities of human beings. Labor is the activity mediated by nature while work is the activity mediated by tools. Distinct from work and labor, action is the activity that takes place directly between individual human beings (Arendt, 1958: 7). While acting, human beings disclose their unique identities. Human beings possess their unique identities by virtue of being born as new comers into the world and through acting among others they make their identities manifest. Hence, according to Arendt, plurality is the “*conditio per quam* of all political life” (Arendt, 1958: 7).

## **2.2. Public Realm and Private Realm**

The distinction Arendt makes between the public realm and the private realm is a fundamental distinction in her thought. In order to understand the difference between the public and the private realms it is important to grasp another distinction: between *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*. *Vita contemplativa* represents a life of speechless wonder. It is the life of the philosopher who is in a position of *thaumadzein*, that is, wondering “at that which is as it is” (Arendt, 1990: 97). This wonder cannot be communicated or formulated in words because for Arendt it is too general for words (Arendt, 1990: 97):

As soon as the speechless state of wonder translates itself into words, it will not begin with statements but will formulate in undending [sic] variations what we call the ultimate questions -What is being? Who is man? What meaning has life? What is death? etc.- all of which have in common that they cannot be answered scientifically (Arendt, 1990: 98).

In contrast to *vita contemplativa* which even excludes speech as an activity, *vita activa* comprises of the three fundamental human activities of work, labor and action. It is a life devoted to public and political affairs. In this sense, *vita activa* is the life of the citizen who constantly strives for earthly immortality. In other words, for Arendt, *vita activa* is *bios politikos*, the political way of life. According to Arendt, among the activities of *vita activa*, action holds the highest rank while work and labor follow it respectively. However, with the disappearance of the ancient city-state the hierarchy within the *vita activa* has changed and with the emergence of modernity labor has risen to the highest rank.

The distinction between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa* is grounded upon Arendt's separation of truth from opinion. By drawing upon the ancient Greek understanding of *doxa*, Arendt explains opinion as one's positioning in the world:

The world opens up differently to every man, according to his position in it; and that the "sameness" of the world, its commonness or "objectivity" resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and that despite all differences between men and their positions in the world -and consequently their *doxai* (opinions)-"both you and I are human" (Arendt, 1990: 80).

In addition to one's positioning in the world, Arendt asserts that *doxa* also means splendor and fame. In this sense *doxa* "is related to the political realm, which is the public sphere in which everybody can appear and show who he himself is" (Arendt, 1990: 80). For Arendt, in private life there is no place for *doxa* since in the private realm one cannot shine or appear (Arendt, 1990: 81).

In contrast to opinion, according to Arendt, the search for truth should not have a place, or in other words it is not relevant to politics. On the one hand, when submitted into the public realm as the reflection of the eternal, truth becomes an opinion among opinions (Arendt, 1990: 78). On the other hand, since, the search for truth requires isolation and inwardness, in the public realm search for truth works at the expense of the plurality of the public and political life.

In this context, the distinction between the public and the private realms in Arendt's thought is a fundamental one, closely connected to the other distinctions she makes. In *The Human Condition*, in the second chapter entitled "The Public and the Private Realm", she explains the public-private distinction among the ancient Greeks and the significance of the existence of a public realm where individuals can act in a sphere of freedom. The sections "The Greek Solution" and "Power and the Space of Appearance" in the fifth chapter of the same work entitled "Action" also illuminate our understanding of the public-private realm distinction in Arendt's thought.

Arendt portrays the private realm as the realm of necessity. It is in the private realm where the necessities of life are sustained. In contrast, for Arendt, the public realm is the realm of freedom where individuals disclose their unique identities. That is, each individual expresses her/his distinct self in the public realm. In this respect, action exercised in the public realm distinguishes the human way of life from the life of other living beings because only human beings are 'political animals' capable of speech and action (Arendt, 1958: 26, 27). Arendt, by following Aristotle's *zoon politikon*, claims that the term *animal socialis* does not refer to the distinctively

human way of life. She argues that Aristotle's *zoon politikon*, that is, political animal, has been mistranslated as *animal socialis*. The etymological proof she presents for this argument is that "the word 'social' is Roman in origin and has no equivalent in Greek language or thought" (Arendt, 1958: 23) Arendt continues:

It is not that Plato or Aristotle was ignorant of, or unconcerned with, the fact that man cannot live outside the company of men, but they did not count this condition among the specifically human characteristic; on the contrary, it was something human life had in common with animal life, and for this reason alone it could not be fundamentally human. The natural, merely social companionship of the human species was considered to be a limitation imposed upon us by the needs of biological life, which are the same for the human animal as for other forms of animal life (Arendt, 1958: 24).

Thus Arendt maintains that the human being is a political animal and the peculiarly human way of life could be realised only in the public realm where speech and action find their proper context.

For the ancient Greeks, the distinction between the public and the private realms corresponded to the distinction between the political and the household. The public realm in this sense harbours the political and thus what is free from concerns related to the necessities of sustaining biological life. The activities excluded from the public realm due to their function in sustaining the necessities of life are undertaken in the private realm. According to Arendt,

the distinctive trait of the household sphere was that in it men lived together because they were driven by their wants and needs. The driving force was life itself ... Natural community in the household therefore was born of necessity, and necessity ruled over all activities performed in it (Arendt, 1958: 30).

Thus economic activities belonged to the private realm and the ancient Greek household was the realm where production and consumption took place, where basically two main necessities were sustained: individual survival and maintenance of the species. In the ancient Greek household, these two necessities were sustained by the efforts of slaves and women. The labor of the slaves and women in the domain of the household was necessary for the adult male household heads to have a life of freedom stripped of necessity in the public realm. Thus it was possible for the household heads to enter into the public realm without any concern related to the processes of biological life. Rather, they only had concerns related to human excellence and distinction as long as they lived off the labor of their slaves and women. Hence, the private realm necessarily entailed inequality and violence. Arendt says that:

The prepolitical force ... with which the head of the household ruled over the family and its slaves and which was felt to be necessary because man is a 'social' before he is a 'political animal'... the whole concept of rule and being ruled, of government and power in the sense in which we understand them as well as the regulated order attending them, was felt to be prepolitical and to belong in the private rather than the public sphere (Arendt, 1958: 32).

Concomitantly, the activities pertaining to the private realm are conceptualised by Arendt as pre-political activities. Without freedom from the fetters of necessity through the activities taking place in the private realm, public life as a life of freedom is not possible. Freedom for Arendt meant freedom from both physical necessity and man-made violence. By conceptualising freedom as liberation from both necessity in the private sphere and inequality inherent in rulership Arendt tries to present it as a fact of everyday life (Arendt, 1993: 145, 146). For Arendt, freedom as a fact of everyday life belongs to the political realm. We cannot even conceive of



action and politics without assuming that freedom exists. In fact, according to Arendt, freedom is the *raison d'être* of politics and without it political life is meaningless.

In this sense, freedom in the public realm also means that, in public, individuals are neither ruling nor being ruled. This equality of neither ruling nor being ruled in the public realm is different from our understanding of equality today. This ancient idea of equality that Arendt employs is not the equality of conditions, and in this sense not related to justice. Equality in the public realm means being and acting among peers and thus presupposes the existence of unequals. Individuals are equal in the public realm as citizens and they are free to distinguish themselves and unfold their unique character through action. In this sense, equality in the public realm is the equality of distinction and it is the very essence of freedom.

Arendt does not derive equality in the public realm from any previous pre-political condition like human rights or human nature. On the contrary, equality of distinction is an artificial or constructed equality between human beings making both equality and individuality possible (d'Entreves, 1994: 144; Villa, 1992: 713-714). In this sense, for Arendt, public life or politics in general is not a product of some natural predisposition or innate trait shared by all human beings (d'Entreves, 1994: 144). As d'Entreves says:

Political equality for Arendt is not a natural human attribute, nor can it rest on a theory of natural rights; rather, it is an artificial attribute which individuals acquire upon entering the public realm and which is secured by democratic political institutions. As she remarked in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, those who had been deprived of civil and political rights by

the Nazi regime were not able to defend themselves by an appeal to their natural rights; on the contrary, they discovered that, having been excluded from the body politic, they had no rights whatsoever (d'Entreves, 1994: 145).

Furthermore, it takes courage to leave the shelter provided by the private realm and disclose one's self in the public realm before one's equals. According to Arendt, courage is the political virtue *par excellence* because, on the one hand it is not life that is at stake in the public realm, but on the other hand the acting individual by entering into the public realm accepts his/her physical appearance (Arendt, 1958: 36; Arendt, 1993: 156).

The public realm, that is, what is common to human beings by virtue of being human, has two meanings for Arendt. First, it is the realm of appearance where individuals see and hear each other when they act and speak. In this sense the public realm constitutes reality for human beings. They see and hear each other and thus they are assured of the reality of what they are doing and saying. As Arendt puts it:

Everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance –something that is being seen and heard by others as well as ourselves- constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life –the passions of hearth, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses- lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance ... Each time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy, we bring them out into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality which ... they never could have had before. The presence others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves (Arendt, 1958: 50).

Second, public realm means the human artifact made by human hands and human affairs arising from the relations between individual human beings. In this sense “the term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it” (Arendt, 1958: 52). The public realm as the common world between individuals bestows a degree of permanence and remembrance on the acts of those individuals. Thus the “public realm offers a plurality of perspectives unavailable in privacy, and partly because it offers a permanence of remembrance” (Pitkin, 1981: 333). The public realm is like a table between people, which at the same time separates and unites those sitting around it (Arendt, 1958: 52-53). Hence for Arendt, what constitutes reality in a common world is not the common nature of human beings but the fact that everybody is concerned with the same subject matter from different positions without losing their identity.

The distinction between the private and the public realm is important in Arendt’s thought because it describes where to locate action and politics or, in other words, the context where political actions should take place. As d’Entreves puts it:

By establishing a space between individuals, an in-between which connects and separates them at the same time, the world provides the physical context within which political action can arise. Moreover, by virtue of its permanence and durability, the world provides the, temporal context within which individuals lives can unfold and, by being turned into narratives, acquire a measure of immortality (d’Entreves, 1994: 142).

Thus Arendt conceptualises the public realm as the proper place for political action. In the public realm individuals are free from both necessity and rule by others. Furthermore, for her, since human beings are ‘political animals’ as distinct from

other living beings, the public realm is the space for the highest possibility of human existence. As political beings, human beings are able to act politically and acting politically means that one discloses his/her unique identity in the public realm where mutual recognition and principle of equality rules. Thus, in the public realm since each person knows others and knows that he/she is known by others, through action human existence is illuminated (Kateb, 1983: 8).

In depicting the political experiences of the ancient Greeks, Arendt is not trying to recommend us the way they structured their political realm. Rather, as Villa claims, she is underlining the difference between the political sphere and the economic or household realm (Villa, 2000: 10). Villa maintains that:

Arendt's point is that, strictly speaking, ruling has nothing to do with *genuine* [emphasis original] politics, since it destroys the civic equality – equality of rights and participation ... - that is the hallmark of *political* [emphasis original] relations and a democratic public realm (Villa, 2000: 10).

Consequently, through the distinctions she articulates between *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, opinion and truth, freedom and necessity, equality of distinction and equality of conditions, human nature and human condition, Arendt formulates a basic distinction between political activities and pre-political activities. In this context, public realm characterised with freedom from necessity and rule emerges as the realm, where the highest existential achievement of human beings could be realised. It is through the medium of action, which is the activity rooted in the human conditions of plurality and natality that this existential achievement of human beings comes into being. Thus, Arendt designates a proper realm for every human activity

within *vita activa* and since she believes that what differentiates human beings from other beings is their capacity to act places action at the highest rank within the hierarchy of activities pertaining to *vita activa*. As such, it is through action unfolded in the context of an authentic public realm that political life becomes possible and meaningful. However, according to Arendt, besides its function in constructing identity, on the one hand, action has some predicaments and, on the other hand, it has lost its political character with the emergence modernity.

## CHAPTER III

### ACTION

The distinction Arendt makes between the public realm and the private realm points to the proper context in which politics should take place. As political beings, human beings have the ability to act, and action within the context of the public realm is what constitutes Arendt's understanding of politics at the preliminary level. In order to construct and explain her understanding of the political, Arendt returns to the ancient Greeks' political experiences. By going back to the ancient Greek *polis* at the pre-Socratic School period, Arendt tries to find out the original meaning of politics that has been hidden under the shadow of tradition for so long a time. For Arendt, it was possible to understand the original meaning of politics because the Western tradition was broken with the emergence of totalitarianism as an unexpected and unprecedented phenomenon.

Totalitarianism according to Arendt has destroyed our previous categories of thought which enabled us to understand the reality of the world and specifically the political phenomenon. In her own words totalitarianism has "clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgement" (Arendt, 1953: 379). Thus, "she argues that totalitarianism is not only a political crisis but also a 'problem of understanding'" (Disch, 1994: 12). Totalitarianism is a problem of understanding in the sense that we can no longer "reconcile ourselves to reality" by

means of our previous categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgement after its occurrence (Arendt, 1953: 377).

In order to diagnose this problem of understanding one needs to achieve what Arendt calls ‘thinking without a banister’; that is, “thinking without traditional concepts that are no longer adequate to the phenomena they purport to explain” (Disch, 1994: 144). Then thinking without a banister enables one to proceed with the critical categories that are inspired by one’s engagement with a phenomenon, rather than thinking with imposed categories (Disch, 1994: 144). Arendt believed that it is within the capacity of human beings to think without a banister because, for her, the essence of human beings is beginning:

Even though we have lost yardsticks by which to measure, and rules under which to subsume the particular, a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand without preconceived categories and to judge without the set of customary rules which is morality (Arendt, 1953: 391)

For Arendt essence of human beings is beginning since natality, the fact that every individual born into the world is a newcomer, is a human condition. As a newcomer every individual has the capacity to start anew (Arendt, 1958: 9).

In order to understand the political phenomena of the modern world and tell what is the original meaning of politics, Arendt constructed a “new political lexicon” (Disch, 1994: 31). With this new political lexicon, she transformed the human condition of plurality; that is, there is a plurality of agents in the political realm, none

of whom is ever the same as another, from an “intrinsic ‘weakness’” of the human condition to a source of power (Arendt, 1958: 134; Disch, 1994: 31).

Plurality is the most important word in this new political lexicon of Arendt. According to Arendt, plurality is “the condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life” (Arendt, 1958: 7). In this sense, plurality indicates not only that there is a multiplicity of human beings in the world, but also that they are all the same, in the sense that every individual born into this world is unique and thus different. Arendt argues that

human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who come before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough (Arendt, 1958: 175-176).

For this sameness of being different is a fact of human existence, human interconnectedness, which comes into being through the medium of action, is possible. Without the human condition of plurality, action cannot constitute a web of human relationships in the worldly space between individuals in the public realm. In other words, political life depends upon the human condition of plurality. Accordingly, the human condition that corresponds to action is plurality.



### 3.1. Action's Relation with Identity

In Arendt's thought manifestation and constitution of the individual identity and through it complete experience of freedom as a daily actuality are the most vital achievements of action in the public realm. In this sense, the significance of action in Arendt's understanding of politics could be comprehended appropriately only by analysing action's relation with freedom and individual identity.

Human beings, who are all the same by virtue of being distinct, reveal their distinctness through the medium of words and deeds. Through action and speech, "men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men" (Arendt, 1958: 176). In this sense, action has an existential supremacy over the other activities of human beings, and on the other hand cannot and should not part company with speech (Kateb, 1977). Hence, Arendt argues that, without speech, action would lose its revelatory character, that is, it would lose its subject or doer (Arendt, 1958: 178). Thus, in Arendt's thought, speech and action are considered coequal (Walsh, 2002: 4).

The existential supremacy of political action comes from its being the medium through which individuals disclose their unique identities in the public realm. "Action is the highest form of life, in which a person demonstrates his abilities, exhibits his equality with others, and exercises his freedom" (Bernauer, 1985: 12-13). According to Arendt, freedom as a fact of everyday life belongs to the political realm and it is not possible to conceive of action and politics without assuming that

freedom exists (Arendt, 1993: 145-146). In this sense, for Arendt, freedom is the *raison d'être* of politics and freedom's field of experience is action (Arendt, 1993: 145-146).

Freedom, as Arendt conceptualises it, is different from inner freedom and it is not a phenomenon of the will (Arendt, 1993: 151). Understanding freedom as free will, for her, has the dangerous consequence of equating freedom with sovereignty (Arendt, 1993: 163-164). When freedom is understood as sovereignty, freedom of a group or individual comes at the expense of others' freedom (Arendt, 1993: 163-164). Therefore, for freedom to exist, two conditions should be fulfilled. First, individuals should be liberated from the necessities of life, and second, a common public space, in other words, a politically organised world into which every individual can insert him/herself by word and deed, should exist (Arendt, 1993: 148-149). Hence "we become aware of freedom through intercourse with our peers when we meet with them in word and deed" (Arendt, 1993: 148).

However, not every form of human intercourse or community is characterized by freedom. For freedom in the sense of acting politically to exist there should be relations of equality between individuals (Arendt, 1993: 148). Only when domination is absent can the revelatory character of action manifest itself within the intersubjective realm among individuals. This revelatory character of action signifies "a second birth" that occurs when "with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world" (Arendt, 1958: 176). Thus, for freedom to fully exist it should appear as action in the worldly space between individuals (Kateb, 1977: 147, 148). In other words, the existential achievement of action is paradigmatic of freedom.

Accordingly, for Arendt, our private lives, devoted to concern with the necessities of life and characterized by relations of domination, lack the light of the public world. It is only in the public world that we encounter the shining reality of being among our peers; that is, being in the “web of human relationships which exists whenever men live together” (Arendt, 1958: 184). As Bernauer puts it, “this freedom is linked to a courageous departure from the hidden status of private life and to an entry into the pursuit of excellence, in the company of and, thus, visible to others” (Bernauer, 1985: 13). For Arendt maintains that freedom is the “free man’s status, which enabled him to move, to get away from home, to go out into the world and meet other people in deed and word” (Arendt, 1993: 148). Consequently, the “revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* [emphasis original] others and neither for nor against them - that is, in sheer human togetherness” (Arendt, 1958: 180).

The second birth we experience when we insert ourselves with word and deed into the human world makes explicit who we are. For Arendt, since the human beings are conditioned beings and it is not possible for them to know their nature, we cannot know “what” we are. We cannot look upon ourselves objectively from a point outside ourselves. However, through words and deeds, we can disclose who we are to the other individuals that share the same public space with us. In this sense, the identity of an individual is not given but must be achieved through action because action is the activity that illuminates human existence and is what differentiates human beings as political beings from other living beings (Arendt, 1958: 26, 27; Honig, 1988: 83; Kateb, 1983: 8). Arendt maintains that:

Disclosure of “who”... is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, 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 (Arendt, 1958: 179).

Thus human beings cannot know “what” they are and an individual cannot know and wilfully disclose “who” he/she is, that is his/her unique identity. One cannot master over the identity he/she discloses to the others with whom he/she shares the public realm because identity is constructed in and through action. It is the characteristic of action among the other activities of human beings that action is boundless and unpredictable. When they act, individuals insert their words and deeds into an already existing web of relationships constituted by the deeds and words of others. For this already existing web of relationships contains “innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions”, action almost never achieves its aim (Arendt, 1958: 184).

However, although it does not achieve its aim, action ‘produces’ stories with or without intention (Arendt, 1958: 184). Since one cannot control the consequences of his/her actions, for Arendt, the subject of a story is both its actor and its sufferer, but not its author (Arendt, 1958: 184). Only another one who has witnessed the actor’s words and deeds could tell the story of him/her. For this reason that one cannot be the author of his/her story, who we are, that is, our identity, appears only to the others that we are among while we are acting. For this being known by others and knowing others to be possible “there must be a worldly place, sustained by a common commitment to worldliness” (Kateb, 1977: 148). Hence, it is essential for

the revelatory character of action and speech to manifest themselves, that there is perseverance of the worldly “in between”, which is the public realm consisting of the web of human relationships and human artifice is essential.

To conclude, in Arendt’s thought the identity of an individual as distinct from his/her private self is an achievement of his/her actions in the public realm. In other words, rather than being something given identity is attained in the public realm. Therefore, for “who” someone is to come into being, the existence of a political community constituted by one’s peers is necessary. It is only in the worldly space between individuals that the human existence gains its full meaning through words and deeds that are the experience and achievement of freedom. Neither individual identity nor freedom could be found in the inner self, rather public self counts as the source of both identity and freedom.

Apart from the way Arendt theorises action as the medium through which freedom and identity could be achieved, an analysis of how Arendt approaches to modernity and its consequences for action are crucial for understanding the context of action in contemporary world. For the purpose of coming to terms with the consequences of modernity for action in the next section an analysis of modernity will be presented.

### 3.2. Consequences of Modernity for Action

In order to understand Arendt's conceptualization of the political, it is essential to come to terms with how Arendt understands modernity. In Arendt's political thought, her assessment of the prospects of modernity for the political realm comprise a very important place. Modernity has resulted in action's decline within the hierarchy of activities of *vita activa* and ushered the way towards "thoughtlessness" of the modern individual.

Arendt had a "negative appraisal of modernity" (d'Entreves, 1994: 3). Her negative judgement on what modernity has brought us as political beings capable of changing the world through acting upon the intersubjective web of relationships is shaped by her assessment of totalitarian forms of government. Totalitarian forms of government, that is Nazism and Stalinism, were, according to her, the results of the crystallization of certain elements that characterize the modern age. These elements inherent in modernity manifest themselves in the political sphere in the form of thoughtlessness. According to her, thoughtlessness is "the needless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of 'truths' which have become trivial and empty" (Arendt, 1958: 5). Hence, she has defined the central theme of her book *The Human Condition* as thinking about what we are doing (Arendt, 1958: 5-6). Thoughtlessness in this sense is one of the primary characteristics of the modern age (Arendt, 1958:5). In order to understand the political evils of the twentieth century and the thoughtlessness that modernity has brought about, it is essential to conceive how Arendt understands modernity through an analysis of its key features.

“World alienation” is the first key feature of modernity that had a significant role in the emergence of thoughtlessness as a modern malaise. Arendt claimed that “property is the most elementary political condition for man’s worldliness” and therefore expropriation and world alienation coincide (Arendt, 1958: 252-253). With the exposure of individuals to the exigencies of life through expropriation, they became alienated from all cares and worry that do not immediately follow from the life process itself (Arendt, 1958: 255). The process of wealth accumulation that expropriation enabled has a circular relation with the life process that it feeds. Within this circular flow, according to Arendt, there remains no place for the world, hence world alienation (Arendt, 1958: 255). World alienation refers to the alienation of human beings from the world that is common to them by virtue of separating and connecting them at the same time. With the rise of capitalist economy individuals became alienated from the worldly “in-between” since material concerns related to the survival of the individual and maintenance of the species interested them foremost.

The loss of common sense is the second key feature of modernity. As a consequence of Cartesian doubt and Descartes’ philosophy of introspection, common sense became an inner faculty without any world relationship. Arendt maintains that “this sense was now called common merely because it happened to be common to all. What men now have in common is not the world but the structure of their minds, and this they cannot have in common, strictly speaking, their faculty of reasoning can only happen to be the same in everybody” (Arendt, 1958: 283). Moreover, reason turned out to be “reckoning with the consequences” and the results of this process within one’s self was now deemed to yield the truth (Arendt, 1958: 283). This loss of

common sense is closely related to the world alienation in the sense that for Arendt, as a sense that goes beyond our five senses, common sense is the sense, which enables individuals to orient themselves towards the common world. In this sense world alienation has contributed to the loss of common sense since, without a worldly space common sense lost the realm where it was used.

The third key feature of modernity is the victory of the *animal laborans*. The Cartesian reason that “man can at least know what he makes himself” has paved the ground for the rise of the activities of *homo faber*; that is, activities of making and fabricating to the highest rank within the hierarchy of *vita activa*. However, since scientists make only in order to know, the hierarchy between means and ends has changed. Means became more significant than the end. Thus “how” has been substituted with “what”, means with ends, and process with products. In other words, the fabricating activity has been deprived of its absolute measure. This shift of emphasis from use and use objects to the production process also changed the meaning of what had been held as useful until that time. Now, useful became “what helps stimulate productivity and lessens pain and effort”; hence the ultimate standard of measurement became happiness and the highest good, life (Arendt, 1958: 309). This development marks the victory of *animal laborans* and the rise of the activity of laboring to the highest rank among the activities of *vita activa*. In the modern age, “the only thing that could now be potentially immortal ... was life itself, that is, the possibility of everlasting life process of the species mankind” (Arendt, 1958: 321). Life has become the highest good in the modern age because the secularity of the modern world is not the same thing as worldliness. Arendt maintains that “secularity does not mean a new and emphatic interest in the things of this world” (Arendt,



1958: 252-253). Rather, “modern man, when he lost the certainty of a world to come, was thrown back upon himself and not upon this world ... thrown into the closed inwardness of introspection, where the highest he could experience were the empty processes of the reckoning of the mind, its play with itself” (Arendt, 1958: 320). In this way the victory of the *animal laborans* furthered world alienation and loss of the common sense.

The political significance of these key features of the modern age, that is, world alienation, the loss of the common sense, and the victory of the *animal laborans*, is that they culminated in the rise of the mass society. The process of wealth accumulation that expropriation set free brought with it the possibility of transforming wealth into capital through labor. This possibility of transforming wealth into capital through labor had a twofold result. It resulted, first, in the rise of the capitalist economy and second, in the tremendous increase in labor productivity which led to the liberation of labor power through the emergence of a free laboring class. Thus a society of laborers devoid of worldly concerns and common sense has emerged. Hence, according to Arendt, the rise of society and the emergence of the life of the species as the highest good are parallel developments because, for her, society is the public organisation of the life process. This public organisation of the life process is released through economics, that is, activities of collective housekeeping. Economic activities originate from the housekeeping activities that were performed in the ancient world. With the rise of these activities to the societal level and the development of capitalist economy, life process, which these activities were oriented to preserve, had been organised at the public level.

For Arendt, from the perspective of the political realm, society's victory in the modern age meant three things: first the substitution of behaviour with action; second, substitution of bureaucracy with personal rulership; and third, the substitution of the social realm with the public realm. Since society is the public organisation of the life process, through it the life process is channelled into the public realm. As a result, the rise of society banished action and speech into the sphere of the private and intimate.

What happened in the modern age with the rise of society is that the public realm, in the sense of an intersubjective sphere both separating and relating the individuals, disappeared. The modern age is marked by the loss of the public realm. Due to the conformism inherent in mass society there emerged what Arendt calls the multiplication of the same perspective (Arendt, 1958: 57-58). This "singularity of multiplication" damages the reality of the public realm. The reality of the public realm arises from the fact that everybody sees and hears the same thing from a different position. If the same perspective is multiplied then everybody sees and hears from the same position, which in turn does not create any difference from the perspective of a single individual. Thus, as a result of the multiplication of the same perspective, also the plurality of the public realm is rendered meaningless. Hence, for Arendt, what constitutes reality in a common world is not the common nature of the human beings, but the fact that everybody is concerned with the same object from different positions without losing their identity.

For Arendt, the rise of a third realm, that is, the social realm, besides the public and political realms blurred the distinction between these realms. The rise of the

social realm blurred the distinction between the public and private realms because expansion of the housekeeping activities from the private to the public realm marks the emergence of social realm. Thus, the economic activities that were taking place in the domain of the household are no longer confined to the private realm. This shift of activities from the private to the public sphere changes the character of both realms. For the ancient Greeks, the private was thought of in terms of deprivation - deprivation from the freedom of the public realm. However, with the rise of the social realm, the private became to be considered as the realm where the intimate is sheltered and individual distinction is realized, as opposed to the social realm that harbors the activities of “collective housekeeping” (Arendt, 1958: 28, 29). Thus, the non-privative traits of privacy, that is, supplying the necessities of life and hiding from the public realm has changed their character. Supplementation of necessity became a collective concern for the sake of mankind as a whole. Public realm as the realm where individual distinction was achieved lost its distinctive character and against the invasion of social realm individual distinction escaped to the private realm where it lost its original meaning.

Society is characterized by a single opinion and common interest as if it is one large family. There is no more the plurality of opinions as was the case in the public realm. The interest of every individual is subsumed under one common interest. This common interest of society is the well-being and progress of mankind. In this sense, the achievements of individual human beings are considered to be mere contributions to the progress of mankind, rather than representations of their unique identities.

The mode of rule in society is rule by no one. No particular group or individual rules the society. But this rule by no one does not mean that there is no rule. It is the bureaucracy which rules the society. This rule by no one exercised by the bureaucracies of the modern age is the most social form of government, where members of society conform to a single opinion and the common interest of the society.

The conformity characterizing the lives of individuals in the society causes them to behave rather than to act. This is because society normalises its members to such an extent that action is substituted by behaviour. Contrary to action, behaviour does not enable an individual to start something anew, rather it signifies the repetition of the same act by different individuals. Hence, mass society controls all its members equally. Modern equality in mass society is the legal and political recognition of the fact that society has invaded the public realm. Equality as sameness is sustained in the social realm, while difference and distinction are confined to the private realm. Therefore, the modern equality of conditions is different from the equality of status that was prevalent in the public realm at the time of the ancient Greeks. The public realm in the ancient Greek world was the realm where equality of distinction, equality in the sense of living among one's peers, prevailed. In the modern age, difference is situated in the private realm and is realized through the privative acts of privacy rather than any activity exercised in the light of the public realm (Arendt, 1958: 38, 58, 62-63). The emergence of intimacy as a reaction against the invasion of the social realm marks this transformation of the private realm.

The rise of society accompanied a parallel development - the emergence of economics as the social science *par excellence*, with its technical tool of statistics. In statistics, acts and events through which the meaningfulness of our everyday lives is disclosed, appear as deviations. According to Arendt, as the population increases, on the one hand the possibility of deviation decreases, and on the other hand the validity of statistical analysis increases. In this sense, far from being an indicator of the harmony of interests in society, statistical uniformity is evidence of the fact that it is the social rather than the political that constitutes the public realm.

Consequently, according to Arendt, the developments that ushered the way toward modernity culminated in a modern malaise, that is, thoughtlessness. With the alienation from world, loss of common sense and the emergence of the life process as the highest good that could be achieved, modern individuals became apolitical and disinterested citizens. The supreme activity of human beings, action in the political sense effaced from the life of the ordinary citizens and the hierarchy within the activities of *vita activa* reversed to the benefit of labor. While in the ancient Greek world action comprised the highest rank within the hierarchy of the activities of *vita activa* for its having an existential supremacy over the other activities, now labor became the highest activity. It was within this context that the great political evil of twentieth century, totalitarianism, came into being.

### **3.3. Arendt's Understanding of Morality and Judgment**

According to Arendt, action, the most humane activity of human beings, has a two-fold predicament. Action is irreversible and boundless in terms of its consequences (Arendt, 1958: 236). Accordingly, Arendt proposes two “moral precepts” for action: forgiving and promising (Arendt, 1958: 245). While redemption from the predicament of the irreversibility inherent in action is possible through our faculty of forgiving, redemption from the predicament of the unpredictability inherent in action is possible through our faculty to make and keep promises. Both of these faculties depend upon the human condition of plurality since “... no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself” (Arendt, 1958: 237).

The role of the faculty to forgive and the faculty to make and keep promises establishes a set of principles in politics which are different from the moral standards of the Platonic notion of rule. In the Platonic notion of rule, the rulership's legitimacy depends upon the domination of the self (Arendt, 1958: 237, 238). However, Arendt argues that actors cannot be held responsible for their actions. Even a single deed or word could start processes which are not controllable by the actor, because when we speak and carry out our words and deeds they enter into an already existing web of relationships. Our words and deeds create re-actions in the worldly space between individuals and, in turn, these re-actions create their own processes through their own re-actions. It is with the ability to forgive that human beings release themselves from the consequences of what they have done (Arendt, 1958: 237). “Without being forgiven ... our capacity to act would ... be confined to one

single deed from which we could never recover” (Arendt, 1958: 237). For this reason, forgiving enables us to continue to act by “constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly” (Arendt, 1958: 240).

Our faculty to make and keep promises enables us to “set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, island of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men” (Arendt, 1958: 237). Hence, by being bound by promises, individuals become able to keep their identities, for without promising they “would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart” (Arendt, 1958: 237).

Regarding the darkness of the human heart, Arendt argues that the innermost motives of human beings that action springs from cannot be known (Arendt, 1968: 92-93). Political actions “emerge into their space from an opaque and impenetrable darkness, which is the human heart” (Vollrath, 1977: 166). Vollrath maintains that according to Arendt,

events and occurrences, emerging from the dark, appear in the world because men themselves emerge from the dark as doers of deeds. They reveal themselves, but what they reveal is not a reason hidden behind the events. Only the phenomena themselves are manifest, and no character other than that of their actual existence in their phenomenal space can be assigned to them (Vollrath, 1977: 167).

For the reason that what is going on in the darkness of the human heart can not be known and that action is contingent, irreversible and uncontrollable, and more fundamentally because action is unique and *sui generis*, Arendt believes that “the

application of responsibility to action compromises this uniqueness by subjecting action to judgement according to standards external to it, standards derived from ‘some supposedly higher faculty or from experience outside action’s own reach’ (Honig, 1988: 84).

What Arendt proposes instead as a kind of moral judgement in the realm of politics is “judging - certainly not in the juridical or moralistic sense of the delivery of a value perspective but in the sense of a recreation of shared reality from the standpoint of all involved and concerned” (Benhabib, 1990: 182, 183). As such Arendt developed her own theory of judgement by appropriating Kant’s ideas on aesthetic judgement in his *Third Critique*. As Disch puts it, “what Arendt seeks in the *Third Critique* is a possible justification for principled contextual thinking - a means by which to take a stand without attempting to resolve or disguise the ambiguity and contingency of any response that one makes to a situation that unfolds within the web of human plurality” (Disch, 1994: 141).

It was Arendt’s experience of totalitarianism and her views on modernity that motivated her to theorise on a political form of thinking, that is, judgement (d’Entreves in Villa, 2000: 247). According to Arendt, our inability to understand the unprecedented events that totalitarianism gave rise through pre-established categories of thought also disabled us from judging them. Yet, we did not -as a result of these events- lose our capacities to understand and to judge. Rather, they destroyed our accepted standards of judgement (d’Entreves in Villa, 2000: 247). As a remedy for the destruction of our accepted standards and yardsticks to understand and judge, Arendt resorted to imagination (d’Entreves in Villa, 2000: 247; Kateb, 1983: 38).



Thus, Arendt turned to the faculty of imagination and Kant's idea of taste in the *Third Critique*. Since in Kant's concept of taste Arendt found a model of critical thinking that confronts phenomena without any preconceived system, it suggested to her a model of thinking without a banister (Disch, 1994: 145). As Kateb puts it

taste is purely disinterested; it is free of life interests and moral interests, and any care for use. Its exercise requires distance, and distance is established when we do not seize what we admire, but 'let it be as it is, in its appearance'. What is expected of us is Kant's 'disinterested joy'. Taste is an emanation of judgement; judgement in this context, is 'being prepared to meet the phenomena'. In order to be so prepared, thinking (in Arendt's sense) must cleanse the mind of rigid preconceptions and the mechanical habit of subsuming disparate phenomena under the same rule or generalisation" (Kateb, 1983: 166).

Accordingly, in Kant's conception of aesthetic judgment, Arendt discovered a procedure for ascertaining intersubjective agreement in the public realm. In her essay, "The Crisis in Culture", she wrote:

The power of judgement rests on a potential agreement with others, and the thinking process which is active in judging something is not, like the thought process of pure reasoning, a dialogue between me and myself, but finds itself always and primarily, even if I am quite alone in making up my mind, in an anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement. From this potential agreement judgement derives its specific validity.

Judgment's validity depends on an anticipated communication with others through which the thinking process active in judgement proceeds. In this thinking process the judging individual knows that he/she should judge in a way that would lead to some intersubjective agreement. Stronger the potential intersubjective agreement, more valid or powerful the judgement of the individual. For this kind of a judgement that

is oriented towards an intersubjective agreement in the public realm be exercised, Arendt maintains that two conditions should be met:

On the one hand, that such judgement must liberate itself from the 'subjective private conditions' that is from the idiosyncracies which naturally determine the outlook of each individual in his privacy and are legitimate as long as they are only privately held opinions but which are not fit to enter market place, and lack all validity in the public realm. And this enlarged way of thinking, which as judgement knows how to transcend its individual limitations, cannot function in strict isolation or solitude; it needs the presence others 'in whose place' it must think, whose perspective it must take into consideration and without whom it never has the opportunity to operate at all ... judgment, to be valid, depends on the presence of others (Arendt, 1993: 220).

According to Arendt, this mode of judging, of being able to think in the place of everybody else, is a specifically political ability. She maintains even that judgment may be one of the fundamental abilities of man as a political being in so far as it enables him to orient himself in the public realm, the common world (Arendt, 1993: 221). In this sense, the specific political virtue of judging is that, as a process of thought, it starts from particulars and operates without subsuming single events under certain general categories (Kateb, 1983: 38).

As such, the political way of thinking, according to Arendt, should operate through faculty of imagination. It is only by the faculty of imagination that one could make present the standpoints of others to him/herself. For Arendt, imagination has a twofold function: distancing and bridging. As Arendt puts it:

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as

though it were our own affair. This “distancing” of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding for whose purposes direct experience establishes too close a contact and mere knowledge erects artificial barriers (Arendt, 1953: 392).

By removing the things that are too close and bridging the things that are too far away, imagination, enables one to think representatively. According to Arendt, representative way of thinking, thus, entails that one should train his/her imagination to go visiting (Arendt, 1982: 43). In this sense, representative thinking, for Arendt, is an enlarged way of thinking or in her own words, it is “to think with an enlarged mentality” (Arendt, 1982: 43). However, representing the standpoints of others by visiting those standpoints imaginatively is not empathy (Disch, 1994: 158-159). The term “visiting” implies that one should try to see the common world from where others look. It does not imply that one should try to see the common world with others’ eyes. While visiting, one should try to understand how world opens up to others by remaining still in his/her own identity. As a result, enlargement of mentality works through a process of making present to one’s unique self a plurality of different perspectives from which the common world appears differently. As she puts it:

Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of *being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not*. The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion [emphasis mine] (Arendt, 1993: 241).

The actual presence of others is a prerequisite for the faculties of judgment and representative thinking to operate at all. According to Arendt, “critical thinking is possible only where the standpoints of all others are open to inspection” (Arendt, 1982: 43). Therefore, Arendt “foregrounds human plurality as the phenomenological ground not only of freedom and action, but of judgment as well” (Villa, 1999: 95). Plurality is the phenomenological ground of judgment, since human beings are worldly beings. Arendt maintains that human beings not only live in the worldly space that they have erected by their own efforts as *fomo faber*, but they are also “of the world”: “living beings, men and animals, are not just in the world, they are *of the world*, and this precisely because they are subjects and objects – perceiving and being perceived – at the same time (Arendt, 1978: 20, 22). Hence, for Arendt, being and appearing coincide and appearance varies according to the standpoint and the perspective of others (Arendt, 1978: 19, 21). Since being and appearing coincides, human beings cannot understand what is beyond the realm of appearances. “Understanding” entails reconciling ourselves to the reality and reality due to its “phenomenal nature” is an achievement of publicity (Arendt, 1978: 22). In this sense, no transcendental morality could be imposed on human beings as they are acting and appearing beings. As a result, Arendtian morality is an “of the world” morality and it is phenomenologically situated in the political realm itself.

This worldly theory of judgement that is oriented towards intersubjective agreement among the individuals needs the public realm to be realised. Taking into consideration the standpoints of others by training one’s imagination to go visiting while remaining in his/her identity cannot be achieved without recognising that including one’s self everybody in the public realm occupies the same status and a different

standpoint with respect to any subject matter whatsoever. By remaining in his/her own identity while considering a given issue, every individual thus asserts and manifests his/her uniqueness as a distinct person. Since the individual identity is an achievement of action and action is the field of experience of freedom, Arendtian understanding of judgement and morality does not impede or impair freedom as a daily actuality. Thus Arendt situates the meaning of morality in the public realm together with action, freedom and equality. Although for her modernity has banished action from the public realm and totalitarianism has destroyed our previous categories of political thought, with a theory of judgement that starts from the particulars and proceeds without pre-given categories individuals can find a way out from this situation. This kind of a morality urges individuals to act in a way that would contribute to the achievement of an intersubjective agreement on a given issue. However, in order to achieve this, individuals should act together in a consistent and cooperative manner. Finally, this idea of acting together leads us to what Arendt calls power. Hence in the next chapter her understanding of power and its interconnectedness with action will be examined.

## CHAPTER IV

### POWER

Hannah Arendt's understanding of power is unique and in this sense quite different from the conventional understanding of power in political science. In Arendt's approach power is actualised whenever a group of human beings come together and act in concert. As long as the group keeps together in the manner of acting and speaking together, where words are used to disclose reality and deeds are used to establish relations and create new realities, power is actualised (Arendt, 1958: 200).

By contrast, in political science, generally power is defined as "the ability to make people (or things) do what they would not otherwise have done" (McLean and McMillan, 2003). Power is usually defined around three main problematics: will, decision-making and interest (Deveci, 1999: 24, 25, 26). According to the problematic of will power is conceptualised as one's will power. For instance, Weber in his book *Economy and Society* defined power as "the probability that one actor in a social relationship will ... carry out his own will" against resistance from others (Miller, 1991: 398). Secondly, within the framework of decision-making problematic power is conceptualised as an observable and overt phenomenon in decision-making process on a particular issue. Political scientists of pluralist persuasion and among them specifically Dahl argued that "an exercise of power is a relation in which one

actor C makes an observable attempt to cause another actor R to do what C intends but that R would not otherwise do” (Miller, 1991: 398). The pluralist understanding of power is criticised by being ‘one-dimensional’, that is, ignoring the cases where there are no observable challenges or overt attempts for exercising power (Lukes, 1974; Miller, 1991: 398). Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz argued that for a ‘two-dimensional’ analysis of power covert exercises of power that are not directly observable should be taken into consideration:

For instance, C might exercise power by controlling the agenda , thereby limiting discussion, debate, and decision-making to ‘safe’ issues which do not threaten C’s interests. Or C might be able to take advantage of biases built into the political system that tend to favour C’s interests over R’s. Or again R, anticipating defeat and/or reprisal, might be unwilling to challenge C on a particular issue (Miller, 1991: 398).

Thirdly, Steven Lukes challenges these two, one and two dimensional, views of power by a ‘three-dimensional view which he formulates around the interest problematic (Lukes, 1974). According to Lukes, if C is affecting R’s interests in some morally significant or ‘non-trivial’ way, that is, if C is affecting R’s interests in some adverse way, C is exercising power over R (Ball, 1993: 550; Deveci 1999: 25; Lukes, 1974: 26). Lukes argues that ‘interest’ should be understood in a radical way by drawing upon the distinction between objective and subjective interests (Lukes, 1974). For him, R may have mistaken beliefs about his/her interests and this could be the result of social structures’ effect on shaping his/her interests and will. However, Lukes’ claim that apart from the subjective interests that are shaped by the social structures, individuals or groups do have objective interests further complicates the analysis of power relations. In his approach Lukes tries to eliminate the uncertainty

about the meaning of power by replacing this difficulty with the uncertainty about the meaning of interest (Deveci, 1999: 26).

In all these approaches to what power is, it is assumed that an exercise of power involves impeding or impairing another's autonomy and hence is based on domination. Arendt's understanding of power differs from all these conventional conceptions power in political science and political sociology because her formulation rejects any kind of relation that includes domination. For Arendt, force, persuasion, authority, coercion and manipulation, being relations of domination, are not forms of power. Since she departs from the approaches that associate power with relations of domination, her understanding is built upon the principle of equality among individuals and the possibility of acting together and in this sense, it is an original description.

Arendt's conception of power is very closely related to her conception of action. She even defines power by employing the meaning of action. According to Arendt, power is "the human ability to act in concert" (Arendt, 1972: 143). Compared to action, power is considered as a much less important issue in her thought, having remained in the shade of action for most of the period since she first presented her ideas. This is due to the fact that action is usually interpreted as the focal point in Arendt's political thought. Yet, indeed, as I will try to demonstrate they are closely interrelated, and action without power retreats from the intersubjective space between individuals, a retreat which is not desirable because action always needs recognition by others in a public context. Thus, essentially action should always be in line with "acting in concert".



#### 4.1 Power, Space of Appearance and the Public Realm

Arendt maintains that power exists only in sheer actuality. Power is there as long as the individuals are together in the manner of acting and speaking together (Arendt, 1972: 143). This togetherness in the form of acting and speaking together means being with others; that is, being neither for, nor against others. For it is only when individuals are neither for nor against others that the “revelatory character of speech and action comes to the fore” (Arendt, 1958: 180). To put it more specifically:

Power is actualised only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds are not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities (Arendt, 1958: 200).

In this sense, the nature of the deeds and words appearing in the public realm when individuals are acting together is an important condition for power to exist at all.

Since power “remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together”, it is not the property of an individual; rather it belongs to a group of individuals (Arendt, 1972: 143). Although power can belong only to a group of individuals, it is “not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity” for it “is always a power potential” (Arendt, 1958: 200). Power’s being a power potential means that it “can only be actualised but never fully materialised” (Arendt, 1958: 200). What Arendt means by power, as something that can only be actualised and thus exists only in actuality can be understood from her explanation of Aristotle’s notion of *energeia*,

that is, “actuality”. According to Arendt, these kinds of activities effect and produce nothing beside them. These activities “do not pursue an end and leave no work behind, but exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself” (Arendt, 1958: 206). It is from the experience of *energeia* that the term “end in itself” derives its meaning (Arendt, 1958: 206). For power is a potential that exists in actuality; it “springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse” (Arendt, 1958: 200).

Power in Arendt’s thought gains its significance through its relation to what Arendt calls “space of appearance” and through this to the public realm. For Arendt, power “is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence”(Arendt, 1958: 200). Space of appearance is an “in-between” between the acting and speaking individuals that constitutes our sense of reality by providing a space where the acts and speeches of individuals are seen and heard by other individuals. According to Arendt, this space of appearance

comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore *predates and precedes* the all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organised ... it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. *Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever* [emphasis mine](Arendt, 1958: 199).

Thus, since the space of appearance predates and precedes the formal constitution of the public realm, it is also power which lies at the root of the public realm. Arendt’s public realm depends on the capacity of individuals to act in concert for its very

existence, and cannot exist even in an uninstitutionalised form without power constituting it. Furthermore, the space of appearance is only potentially there when people are together. Mere togetherness of individuals in a spatial context does not necessarily entail that power will spring up between them. For the space of appearance to come into being, this plurality of individuals coming together in spatial terms should act and speak together in such a way that their activities disclose realities and establish relations. In this sense, not every form of human togetherness generates a space of appearance between them, and when it is generated, its existence is bound up with the individuals' ability to continue acting in concert.

For Arendt, it is the peculiarity of the public realm that “it ultimately resides on action and speech” (Arendt, 1958: 200). To be more specific, the public realm as different from the social and private realms depends on individuals' acting and speaking together. For this reason it “never altogether loses its potential character” (Arendt, 1958: 200). The public realm always remains as a potential space of appearance. The public realm, in the final analysis, depends on power because, in Arendt's words, “what keeps people together after the fleeting moment of action has passed (what we today call “organization”) and what, at the same time, they keep alive through remaining together is power” (Arendt, 1958: 201). To put it differently, “power preserves the public realm and the space of appearance, and as such it is also the life-blood of human artifice, which, unless it is the scene of action and speech, of the web of human affairs and relationships and the stories engendered by them, lacks its ultimate *raison d'être*” (Arendt, 1958: 204) - hence the significance of power for human affairs.

#### 4.2. Power contra Strength, Force, Authority and Violence

Arendt differentiates her own understanding of power from strength, force, authority and violence. While drawing distinctions between these four concepts she particularly focuses on the relation of power with violence which is a relation of mutual exclusion. It is through the medium of her comparison between power and violence one can come to terms with the role of power in political communities in a more articulate way. Taken together with the significance of power for the space of appearance and hence the public realm, that can be understood from the passages in *The Human Condition*, the significance of power for the political communities that she expresses in her essay *On Violence* reveals an indispensable role for power in the political realm. In other words, absence of power is a negative situation for Arendt because such vacuum might easily be filled with violence, especially if authority has lost its role which is the case in modern times. The very existence of the political rests on the human capacity to act in concert, to be together in the manner of acting and speaking together.

Strength for Arendt is the quality or property inherent in an individual or object that exists independent of factors external to the individual or object. In this sense, strength has a peculiar independence and designates something in the singular. In terms of its relation to power, Arendt maintains that “the strength of even the strongest individual can always be overpowered by the many, who often will combine for no other purpose than to ruin strength precisely because of its peculiar independence...it is in the nature of a group and its power to turn against independence” (Arendt, 1972: 143).

Arendt suggests reserving the term force to indicate the energy released either by physical or social movements. In other words it “should be reserved...for the ‘forces of nature’ or the ‘force of circumstances’ (*la forces des choses*) (Arendt, 1972: 143-144). In this sense, she departs from the general understanding of force in political science, where it is often equated with violence. Generally speaking, force and its relation to power is articulated as follows: “Force in its narrow sense implies a control of the body rather than the person. We may kill, bind, or render comatose without being able to get a person’s actions to conform our will. Only when they comply because of the threat of force can the relationship be called power” (McLean and McMillan, 2003). Here the term force implies “to force somebody by means of violence to do what another wills”. Well aware of this implied meaning, Arendt differentiates force from violence in terms of their essential features.

Authority for Arendt is characterised by the “unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey” (Arendt, 1972: 144). Authority is a command and obedience relation and hence presupposes a hierarchical order between those who obey and those who are in command (Arendt, 1993: 93). Since it requires unquestioning recognition on the part of those who obey and a hierarchical relation between those who obey and those who command, both coercion and persuasion are excluded from relations of authority. Trying to persuade someone to obey a command means that the hierarchical order has lost its potency and the one in the position of command treats the other as an equal (Arendt, 1972: 144). Both sides of a relation of authority, that is, the ones who obey and the ones who command, have stable places in this relation and they recognise the legitimacy and rightness of the hierarchy between them (Arendt, 1993: 93). In this sense as an unquestioned command and obedience

relation, authority, according to Arendt, can be vested in persons and offices (Arendt, 1972: 144). Furthermore, in comparison to other forms it can be argued that Arendt is sympathetic to authority.

Violence, according to Arendt, as distinct from power and force has an instrumental character. However, she claims that phenomenologically it is close to strength (Arendt, 1972: 145). Violence for her is close to strength “since the implements of violence ... are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute for it” (Arendt, 1972: 145). In this sense, modern technological developments have had a profound effect on the use of violence as a substitute for strength to the point that “no political goal could conceivably correspond to their destructive potential (Arendt, 1972: 105).

Arendt asserts that the violence works through the category of means-end (Arendt, 1972: 106). When used in the realm of human affairs, the great danger violence poses is that the means used to justify violence and reach its goal could overwhelm its end (Arendt, 1972: 106). In this sense, compared to the unpredictability of action’s results, violence introduces into the realm of human affairs an additional element of arbitrariness with the possibility of its means overwhelming its end.

For Arendt, contrary to the general understanding that they are same, violence and power are opposites (Arendt, 1972: 137,155). This claim is quite extraordinary compared with mainstream definitions because, generally power is assumed to be an

extension of violence or threat of exercising violence While power stands in need of numbers, violence mostly relies on implements (Arendt, 1972: 140-141). Power stands in need of numbers in the sense that the power of the government, conceived as strength of opinion, depends on numbers (Arendt, 1972: 140). Thus, whereas power in its extreme form can be articulated as “All against One”, violence in its extreme form can be articulated as “One against All” (Arendt, 1972: 141). For power and violence are opposites: “where one rules absolutely, the other is absent” (Arendt, 1972: 155). Violence, therefore, has the capacity to destroy power (Arendt, 1972: 152). The loss of power feeds the temptation to substitute power with violence. In Arendt’s words “violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course, it ends in power’s disappearance” (Arendt, 1972: 155).

While differentiating and even counterpoising power and violence, Arendt underlines the significance of power for forms of political organizations and particularly for governments. She maintains that “power is indeed of the essence of all government” and “all political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power; they petrify and decay as soon as the living power of the people ceases to uphold them” (Arendt, 1972: 140, 150). For Arendt, power is the essence of all political communities (Arendt, 1972: 151). It is a potentiality which exists only in actuality and hence has no end beside itself. Thus conceived as *energeia*, that is actuality, power pursues no end beyond itself and hence no work is left behind. This work is embedded in the performance (Arendt, 1958: 206). As Arendt puts it,

the power structure itself precedes and outlasts all aims, so that power, far from being the means to an end, is actually the very condition enabling a group of people to think and act in terms of the means-end category ...

since government is essentially organized and institutionalized power, the current question What is the end of government? Does not make much sense either (Arendt, 1972: 150).

Arendt emphasises that these distinctions are conceptual differences. They are conceptual in the sense that in the real world it is difficult to find such clear-cut distinctions between strength, force, authority, violence and power (Arendt, 1972: 145). Hence violence is generally taken as a synonym for force, or violence is conceived as the “most flagrant manifestation of power”, or authority is defined as legitimate power (Arendt, 1972: 137). What can be concluded from the distinctions Arendt makes between these concepts with regard to power is that it entails neither coercion nor domination nor implements. Rather, power is characterised by mutuality, equality, human togetherness and the realm of opinion. As such, the very existence of political communities depends on power, and when it breaks down they vanish. Violence as a substitute for power can only lead to the final impotence.

#### **4.3. Arendt and the Ancient Greek *polis***

It is clear that analysis of Arendt’s essay *On Violence* and the section on the relation between power and the space of appearance in *The Human Condition* yields the conclusion that power is the essence of the space of appearance, and through it is also the essence of the public realm and thus all political communities. If acting in concert was such a prominent a factor for the existence of the political realm and hence the political for Arendt, then how her strong disposition toward the ancient Greek agonistic politics should be understood? Is it the case that Arendt put forward



two models of politics? If so, one appears to be agonistic and the other is associational and collaborative. If these are two models of politics in Arendt one is based on her analysis of ancient Greek politics whereas the other is based on her definition of power (Benhabib, 1992; d'Entreves, 1994; Disch, 1994; Tsao, 2002; Villa, 1999). At this point, confronted with these questions while trying to come to terms with Arendt's somehow puzzling ideas, one should not overlook the fact that one of these two models of politics originates directly out of her references to the political experiences that once existed in a very distant past: the model of ancient Greek politics Arendt elaborates on is a model of politics which belongs to the pre-Socratic period. Therefore, Arendt's efforts are directed towards reminding her readers the original model of politics before this model has been distorted and transformed by tradition.

Nevertheless, it would be a hasty conclusion to decide that Arendt could have been so careless as to propose a centuries old model of politics for the modern world. Rather, what one needs to notice is that, according to Arendt, after the rupture in tradition which occurred with the emergence of totalitarianism

the task ... is to redeem from oblivion those elements of the past that are still able to illuminate our situation. To re-establish a linkage with the past is not an antiquarian exercise; on the contrary, without the *critical reappropriation* of the past, our temporal horizon becomes disrupted, our experience precarious, and our identity more fragile [emphasis mine] (d'Entreves, 1994: 4).

Thus, it is only with a critical appropriation that the past can be endowed with meaning and significance for the present and become a source of inspiration for the future (d'Entreves, 1994: 4, 31-32). This critical reappropriation of the past is

oriented towards finding out the lost treasures of the past (d'Entreves, 1994: 4). Arendt articulates the critical reappropriation of the past by means of the pearl diver metaphor (d'Entreves, 1994: 31):

Although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallisation, that in the depth of the sea, into which it sinks and is dissolved what one was alive, some things “suffer a sea-change” and survive in new crystallised forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living - as “thought fragments,” as something “rich and strange,” and perhaps even as everlasting Urphanomene (Arendt, 1995: 205-206).

This activity of critical reappropriation of the past that Arendt suggests through the pearl diver metaphor is most visible in *The Human Condition*. While articulating the public-private realm distinction and action, Arendt frequently refers to ancient Greek experiences and practices. However, while concerning herself with these, “throughout *The Human Condition* Arendt deliberately – and *systematically* – attributes to the ancient Greeks a set of beliefs about the nature of politics that are at odds with her own theoretical claims in this same book” (Tsao, 2002: 98). When seen in the light of the larger argument, which includes her formulation of a collaborative understanding of power, “her understanding of action and its limits fundamentally departs from the one she attributes to the Greeks” (Disch, 1994: 31; Tsao, 2002: 98). In the light of these considerations, Arendt’s appeal to ancient Greek politics should not be considered as an inconsistency in her thought, but rather should be regarded as a necessary effort to point out those significant aspects of ancient Greeks’ political life that could illuminate the present and provide a source of inspiration for the future. In this sense, Arendt’s appeal to the *polis* is an activity of critical

appropriation rather than an effort to propose the ancient Greek model of politics for the modern world.

Recall that, according to Arendt, human actions are meaningful by virtue of the fact that they occur within the web of human relationships:

It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose; but it is also because of this medium, in which action alone is real, that it “produces” stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things (Arendt, 1958: 184).

If action could only be comprehended as such through the medium of stories enacted in the web of human relationships, for action to gain meaning, two conditions should necessarily be fulfilled. The first is the disclosure of the agent’s unique identity. Individuals should be willing to make an appearance among others and make visible to others who they are as a newcomer born into the world. The second is the recognition of the agent by the others among whom he/she makes an appearance. It is only when individuals recognize each other as distinct individuals that the story of an actor can be enacted. In this sense, “only when both conditions are met can there be what Arendt called ‘the space of appearances,’ the figuratively ‘in-between’ space ‘where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly’” (Tsao, 2002: 104). As a result, individuals’ mutual acknowledgment and recognition of each other as acting beings lies beneath the existence of the space of appearances and the web of human relationships situated in it. If Arendt’s elaborations on the Greek *polis* are seen in this light, it becomes clear

that she was not praising the ancient Greeks' fiercely agonal spirit. About the public realm of the ancient Greek *polis* Arendt maintains that

their public realm itself, the polis, was pervaded by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds and achievements that he was the best of all (*aíen aristeuein*). The public realm, in other words, was reserved for individuality; it was the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were (Arendt, 1958: 41).

Arendt attributes this highly individualistic conception of action, and hence politics, to the ancient Greeks' belief that lawmaking was not a political activity, that rather it was prior to politics (Tsao, 2002: 109). According to Arendt, "in their opinion the law maker was like the builder of the city wall, someone who had to do and finish his work before the political activity could begin ... To them, the laws, like the wall around the city, were not the result of action but products of making" (Arendt, 1958: 194). For this reason, to ancient Greeks, law did not mean the maintenance of "formal relationships between people" (Arendt, 1958: 63; Tsao, 2002: 109). Hence, in her description of the *polis* as "a kind of organised remembrance", Arendt maintains that

men's life together in the form of the polis seemed to assure that the most futile of human activities, and the least tangible and the most ephemeral of man-made "products," the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable. The organisation of the polis, physically secured by the walls around the city and physiognomically guaranteed by its laws – lest the succeeding generations change its identity beyond recognition – is a kind of organised remembrance (Arendt, 1958: 198).

In this passage, the organization of the *polis* refers to the walls around the city and institution of its laws as the product of the activity of making rather than individuals'

acting together (Tsao, 2002: 113). Here the institution of a city-state's laws is "expressly conceived as a kind of 'wall' meant to withstand change from 'the succeeding generations'" (Tsao, 2002: 113). Thus, the ancient Greek notion of *polis* as organised remembrance runs counter to Arendt's assertion that power is the essence of all political communities and "all political institutions are manifestations and materialisations of power" (Arendt, 1972:140, 150). To put it differently, the effort to protect the *polis* as a kind of political organisation from the living power of people stands against the human conditions of plurality and natality in the sense that it aims at capturing newcomers' capacity to act and begin something anew.

In addition to its organisation that aimed at denying succeeding generations a say in its pre-established structure, the *polis* as a kind of organised remembrance - as Pericles argued in the Funeral Oration - is appraised by Arendt as follows:

The polis - if we trust the famous words of Pericles in the Funeral Oration - gives a guaranty that those who forced every sea and land to become the scene of their daring will not remain without witness and will need neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words to praise them; without assistance from others, those who acted together will be able to establish together the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in the present and in future ages (Arendt, 1958: 197).

However, this effort to preserve great deeds by means of remembrance is also contrary to Arendt's ideas on the dependence of the actor on the works of *homo faber* and on the meaning of action arising in the form of stories (Tsao, 2002: 112). Speaking of Achilles, Arendt remarks that

Even Achilles, it is true, remains dependent on the storyteller, poet, or historian, without whom everything he did remains futile; but he is the only

“hero”, and therefore the hero par excellence, who delivers into the narrator’s hands the full significance of his deed, so that it is as though he had not merely enacted the story of his life but at the same time also “made” it (Arendt, 1958: 194).

Trying to preserve the meaning of action solely through its performance, the *polis* as organized remembrance is characterized by extreme individuality. According to Arendt, it was this agonal spirit that turned out to be a destructive power. She claims that “one, if not the chief, reason for the incredible development of gift and genius in Athens, as well as for the hardly less surprising swift decline of the city-state, was precisely that from beginning to end its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence” (Arendt, 1958: 197).

The analysis of Arendt’s ideas on the ancient Greek *polis* as a kind of organised remembrance indicates that this kind of politics was not in conformity with her own theoretical claims on the nature of politics. In Arendt’s thought for the space of appearances to come into being it is essential that individuals should recognise each other as peers who have the ability to act. Hence, the space of appearances, for Arendt, “comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action” (Arendt, 1958: 199). Within this context, togetherness refers to being neither for nor against each other.

Two factors related to the ancient Greek *polis* are at odds with Arendt’s understanding of politics. First, ancient Greeks did not conceive lawmaking, that is, the formal constitution of the *polis*, as a political activity. Rather than conceiving lawmaking as the product of action, they conceived it as a product of making or work. This belief that the constitution of the public realm was a pre-political activity is

against Arendt's claim that power is the essence of the public realm and thus the political communities. Second, ancient Greeks believed that they could bestow permanence upon their action by means of remembrance without the aid of *homo faber*. This belief is against Arendt's claim that actions gain their meanings through the stories, which are reified by the works of *homo faber*. Furthermore, for Arendt, the emphasis on remembrance results in extreme individuality through which individuals strive "to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence" (Arendt, 1958: 197).

If *polis* as a kind of organised remembrance was not Arendt's view of the *polis* or specifically of a viable public realm, then what was her own understanding of the *polis*? For her, "the *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organisation of people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be" [emphasis mine] (Arendt, 1958: 198). Thus, in Arendt's view, the essence of the *polis* is power, and the true space of it is the space of appearances rather than any specific physical location surrounded by city walls.

#### **4.4. Interdependency between Action and Power in Arendt's Thought**

If the ancient Greek city-state as organised remembrance was at odds with her own claims about the nature of politics, how could Arendt's individualistic theory of action and her collaborative understanding of power be reconciled? In order to come to terms with what Arendt's thought suggests as the political, the relation between her

individualistic conception of action and her collaborative understanding of power should be explored. Correspondingly, Arendt's understanding of the theatricality of the public realm and her critique of the Archimedean norm are important in this respect.

According to Arendt, the hypothetical discovery of a point outside earth, that is, the Archimedean point, signifies the assumption that it is possible to act on earth "as though we dispose of it from outside" from this point (Arendt, 1958: 257-268). The discovery of the Archimedean point resulted in the belief that all events are subject to universally valid laws (Arendt, 1958: 257-268). According to Disch (1994), Arendt's political philosophy is grounded upon her critique of the application of such an abstract point in the realm of human affairs. Disch articulates the stance presupposed by the application of an Archimedean point in the realm of human affairs as "Archimedean norm". The Archimedean norm "consists in conceiving of power as leverage and assuming that abstract impartiality is requisite to knowledge" (Disch, 1994: 22). According to Arendt, the problem with the Archimedean model is that within it, it is assumed that impartiality entails absolute withdrawal from worldly interest (Disch, 1994: 12). Hence, according to this model, what yields the truth or true knowledge is abstract impartiality. Within this framework, with abstract impartiality Disch refers to objectivity. According to Arendt, however, objectivity and impartiality have different meanings (Vollrath, 1977: 163). As distinct from objectivity, impartiality is "to say what is"; that is, "to recognise phenomena in their facticity" without assuming an abstract point outside the phenomenal realm (Vollrath, 1977: 163). Since, phenomena, for Arendt, are the content of politics, in the political realm one can come to terms with reality only through understanding phenomena. In



this sense, the way to reconcile ourselves with phenomena is to recognise them in their facticity, that is, impartiality (Vollrath, 1977: 163-164, 167). Therefore, according to Disch, as such, rather than being an abstract one, Arendtian impartiality is one of “situated impartiality” whose medium is our faculty of imagination (Disch, 1994). Arendtian impartiality is situated in the sense that it requires involvement with the phenomenal realm instead of withdrawal from it.

In order to “say what is” and to “recognize phenomena in their facticity” Arendt proposes a model of critical thinking that she explains through the visiting metaphor (Disch, 1994: 2). The visiting metaphor advances a situated but not standpoint-bound conception of judgement (Disch, 1994:2). Thus in Arendt’s thought, impartiality is achieved by taking the standpoints of others into account (Disch, 1994: 13).

Arendt counters the conception of power as leverage that the Archimedean norm entails, with her understanding of power as acting in concert. For her, power is not something that could be exerted over others from a higher and external point; rather it is a kind of solidarity based on mutual recognition and promising between agents (Disch, 1994: 26-89).

Arendt’s emphasis on the human conditions of natality and plurality suggests a deep respect for individuality. However, her individualism differs from competitive individualism. “She argues that ... individuality depends on being recognised by people one respects and recognises in turn ... She affirms that every person is unique but cautions that this individuality only manifests itself in acting in concert with others” (Disch, 1994: 34). Within this context, the “inter-est”, that is, what is “in-

between” acting agents, is a commonality. Arendt’s insistence on argumentation suggests that this commonality does not mean concord or consensus. As she defines it, this inter-est is not a commonality that unites individuals; rather it is one that at the same time both separates and links them. In this sense, what sustains Arendtian solidarity is distance (Disch, 1994: 36). This distance that springs from commonality is preserved by principles. Principles come to light through the medium of action, and remain manifest only in performance. Principles do not motivate action and they are neither achievements of judgement nor they can be used to judge action (Disch, 1994: 38).

As a result, Arendtian solidarity emerges as a principled solidarity. Politics in this context is composed of issues that admit principled disagreement (Disch, 1994: 38). Accordingly, “the articulation of a public space involves committing to an action while acknowledging the possibility of ongoing differences among the participants and providing for the possibility of continuing public criticism” (Disch, 1994: 40). With regard to differences between agents, what Arendt claims by her insistence on commonality as something that both separates and links is that differences are irreducible to a common denominator and hence principled intersubjective dialogue in the public space is continuous (Disch, 1994: 40).

Arendt’s understanding of power as collective action that draws its energy from plurality rather than unity challenges the Archimedean model’s view of power exercised as leverage over others because Arendtian power can exist only in relationships with those others (Disch, 1994: 41,48). The only kind of mastery that such a conception of power enables is promise making, and it further entails that

sovereignty is shared among agents. The relation of promise making to action is that this act of mutual promising “serves to mitigate the uncertainty of acting under the conditions of natality and plurality while protecting those conditions” (Disch, 1994: 49). It is because individuals, while acting together, are both joined together and distinguished from one another in speech and action that power respects the condition of plurality (Disch, 1994: 50). Thus, for through promise making individuals could act together and power could spring up between them, power seems to remedy the unpredictability of action in the public realm. When power provides a relatively stable and permanent public environment, principled action could enter into this realm without being threatened or hampered by domination or in the extreme case by violence.

In addition to Arendt’s critique of the Archimedean norm, it is also the theatricality of the public realm that illuminates the relation between Arendtian action and power. This aspect of the public realm in Arendt’s thought is suggested by her appraisal of the affinity between politics and the performing arts on the one hand and her emphasis on the concept of *persona* on the other. According to her, politics bears a resemblance to the performing arts since dependence upon further acts to keep it in existence marks out the state as a product of action (Arendt, 1993: 153). Arendt claims that the freedom inherent in action is best illustrated by Machiavelli’s concept of *virtu*. Virtuosity as an excellence attributed to the performing arts exists in the performance of the act itself. Thus, as in the performing arts, individuals need an audience to show their virtuosity; in the political realm, acting agents need the presence of others. In this sense, agents in both cases need a publicly organised space and depend on the presence of others to perform at all (Arendt, 1993: 153). This

similarity that Arendt draws between the performing arts and politics is in accordance with her argument that publicity, that is, being seen and heard by others, is an essential attribute of the public realm (Arendt, 1958: 50-58).

Furthermore, Arendt differentiates the acting individuals, who are in need of an audience to display their virtuosity, from private individuals through her analysis of the concept of *persona*. The term *persona* originally belongs to the language of theater and later it is carried by Romans into legal terminology. “In its original meaning, it signified the mask the ancient actors used to wear in a play” (Arendt, 1968: 102). The mask had two functions: “it had to hide, or rather to replace, the actor’s own face and countenance, but in a way that would make it possible for the voice to sound through” (Arendt, 1968: 102). In its Roman sense, *persona* meant legal personality and signified the distinction between the private individual and citizen.

According to Arendt, it is through action that individuals disclose their unique identities. However, as Villa maintains, “this self-disclosure is not the externalisation of an inner potential nor an expression of one’s ‘true’ self. Arendt’s focus on the impersonal qualities of political action is not intended to promote the idea of selflessness; rather, it serves to highlight the distinction between the public and the private self” (Villa, 1999: 140). As distinct from the private self, public self is an attribute of action and publicity. In this sense the identity revealed and constituted in action is a public identity. For power is what constitutes and preserves the public realm and the space of appearances that it includes, there is an interdependent relation between action and power. Freedom –which is the *raison d’etre* of politics for Arendt-

inherent in action can manifest itself only where and when power keeps individuals together in the manner of acting and speaking together.

By “the impersonal qualities of political action”, Villa refers to Arendt’s insistence that free action can only spring from a principle. For action to spring from a principle, which can not be manifested by any end achieved, by action, it is essential that the acting individual should wear a public mask and thus orient him/herself to the public realm. Thus, for Villa, Arendt, by linking freedom of action to the inspiration of principles, seeks to depersonalize politics (Villa, 1999: 140). Thus, as Villa puts it,

Arendt’s emphasis on the importance of roles, masks, and principles demonstrates the presence of “intersubjectivity”, but in the specific form of a theatrical conventionality. She is drawing our attention to a “narrative web of interpretations” of a very particular kind, one focused on a distinct set of phenomena: public words and deeds (Villa, 1999: 141).

Accordingly, for it is only through the intersubjectivity of the public realm that the identity that an individual discloses through the medium of words and deeds becomes visible to the others and only to others. Thus, in its most basic function, action, that is, disclosure of the agent, needs to be oriented towards the “inter-est” between people for it to generate a story of its own. Hence, it is only the others who witnessed a person’s actions who can tell the story of an individual, and so the identity of an individual as distinct from his/her private self is an attribute of publicity. Since every unique identity, that is, “who” someone is, is the result of the disclosure of the self in a public context, for Arendt plurality is not only the condition of political action and speech but it is also their achievement (Villa, 1992: 717). In other words, power as the constitutive element of political communities is grounded on plurality and also preserves it by providing the conditions under which action

could be directed towards the intersubjective realm in a principled way. Within this context, Arendtian politics emerges as antiteleological in the sense that it does not aim at reducing differences to a common denominator and reaching one common opinion through argumentation. (Villa, 1992: 718). Arendt values intersubjective argumentation situated in a narrative web of interpretations rather than a kind of politics that seeks consensus (Villa, 1992). Hence for her both action and power are ends in themselves.

As a result, the theatrical dimension of the public realm in Arendt's thought, which emanates from her understanding of the acting individual as a persona and of the publicity of the public realm, signifies that action should be oriented towards producing a narrative web of interpretations through public words and deeds. This sort of a web of relationships secures mutual recognition between acting individuals and enhances solidarity based on mutual promises formed around intersecting interpretations. Since every acting individual in the public realm is also the spectator of others' acts and every spectator sees the phenomena from his/her position in the world, interpretations produced by action never absolutely overlap. Therefore, theatricality of the public realm suggests a politics of continuous intersubjective argumentation, which does not culminate in any result beyond itself.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSION**

Hannah Arendt's ideas on the political faculties of human beings and the events and developments that shaped Western history are no doubt hard to reconcile with for her readers. Arendt has written as a marginal mind from within Western world while she was trying to reconcile herself with the reality of the world she lived in. In this sense, her thought stimulates the readers to think critically on what we are doing and what is happening in the contemporary world. Rather than guiding us into the light by providing a comprehensive perspective on the fundamental problems of political life, her political thought reminds us the "finitude of our horizon, the localness of our 'intuitive ideas and principles' the parochial nature of the 'end of history' or ideology" (Villa, 1999: 178-179). In this regard, Arendt's political thought confronts us with the question of "what is the political?" (Villa, 1999: 179).

In this thesis I tried to come to terms with this question of "what is the political?" by evaluating Arendt's ideas on the public realm, action, judgment and power. Throughout this study I realized that it is possible to see Arendt's conception of power as a defining aspect of the political alongside with her definition of action. Defined as the individuals' ability to act in concert, Arendt's conceptualization of power depends, at the most basic level on our faculty of action. However, action also depends on power to be exercised as an activity that has an existential supremacy over

the other activities of human beings. In this sense there is an interdependency relation between action and power in Arendt's political thought. It is only where and when action and power mutually support each other in a worldly space between individuals that politics could take place.

In addition to our faculty of action, power depends on our faculties to make and keep promises, to judge and to imagine. Power as the ability of individuals to act together in concert constitutes and keeps in existence the space of appearances and through it, the public realm. However for power to be the ground on which political communities are established, individuals should, on the one hand, form a solidarity based on mutual promising and on the other hand, act in accordance with a political morality that presupposes taking into consideration the standpoints of others who share the same public space with them. While promising brings a remedy for the unpredictability of action, the kind of political morality that judgment and training one's imagination to go visiting suggests that action should be principled and oriented towards an intersubjective dialogue between individuals. Furthermore, action as the medium through which freedom and individual identity are achieved and manifested gains its meaning in the public realm, that is, in the realm that depends on the living power of individuals to exist and to be preserved at all.

Thus, by virtue of the interdependency relation between them, power provides continuity, durability and certainty in the human affairs without impairing plurality and without introducing domination. Under conditions where respect for plurality is lacking and domination –even violence- reigns action retreats from the public realm and individuals as political beings become impotent. Being a witness to



totalitarianism, which signifies the extreme case that could happen when power and action has been effaced from the realm of human affairs through the use of terror and violence, it is quite sensible that Arendt founds her understanding of politics so strongly on power and action and the interconnectedness between them. Thus the kind of politics that Arendt's thought suggests as a politics of continuous intersubjective argumentation based on mutual recognition and promise making seems to stand as a safeguard against the emergence of totalitarian forms of government. In this sense, about the interdependency of power and action Arendt also provides us a cautionary remark. If power is replaced by any of its alternatives like violence and force, action also becomes not only meaningless but extremely difficult to be actualized. This is because without the judgment, evaluation and the meaning provided by the public realm –power relations– action will appear to risky, especially in terms of its consequences.

However, this politics of continuous intersubjective argumentation is an antiteleological model of politics in the sense that it does not aim at consensus. Rather Arendt maintains that both power and action are ends in themselves and politics should not and could not be used as a means for other non-political goals. For her *raison d'être* of politics is freedom and it could only be achieved in the performance of political acts. In this sense Arendt's understanding of politics is based on a strong emphasis on the existential achievement of action and power. She consistently and insistently excludes the issues of social and economic justice from politics. While formulating the distinction between the private and the public realms, Arendt refuses to deal with the questions of inequality and domination in the private realm. Her critical approach to the nature of human affairs is confined to what goes on in the

public realm. This is due to her assumption that economics as the social science *par excellence* and rapid technological developments in the modern age will solve for the most part the social and economic problems that she regards as pre-political or apolitical issues.

Today it has become clear that without the guiding thread provided by the results of political deliberation and pressure from organized groups that aim at affecting the decision making procedures with respect to issues of economic and social justice, neither economics nor other sciences can solve these problems. In this sense an antiteleological politics of intersubjective dialogue does not offer for the masses of people who strive for their livelihood and social conditions. When approached from this perspective, Arendt's understanding of politics could, unfortunately, easily be regarded as a luxurious occupation that takes place between individuals who have nothing to worry about with respect to pre-political or apolitical problems of life.

Nonetheless with her insistence to situate the meaning of action, judgment, power, freedom and identity in the public realm and her stance against the use of domination in the realm of human affairs, Arendt gives support to the idea that power should reside in people and people should have the right to determine their own destinies. In this respect, Arendt's understanding of politics has a close affinity with democratic principles although it might be hard to reconcile her ideas with the actual procedures through which democracy is actualized in contemporary world.

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