

## Plurality, Promises, and Public Spaces

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One of the annoying tendencies that postmodernists have picked up from modernist forebears is to think in simplistic binary oppositions. There were *the* moderns, and *the* ancients. Today there are the modernists and the postmodernists. Apparently, the ideological and theoretical debates suggest, one must be either with modernity or against it. But of course there are critical positions on modernity that are hard to classify as postmodernist. Hannah Arendt offers one of these. Marx and Foucault offer others.<sup>1</sup>

Dana Villa is thus quite right to challenge both Benhabib's attempt to turn Arendt into a modernist and Kateb's rejection of her as an anti-modernist. Benhabib's and Kateb's are serious and intelligent readings, but they are guided by sides taken in a quarrel that was not precisely Arendt's. Her work might better be read, indeed, as a resource for getting out of this particular, increasingly stifling, argument in political theory.

In responding to Villa's and Eli Zaretsky's provocative engagements with Arendt, I want to argue first, that an Arendtian "way out" of both the frustrating postmodernist/modernist debates and of our present political predicament depends on faith in political action, not principled refusal. Second, I want to suggest in this regard that we will do better to approach public life as the result of Arendtian political action rather than its precondition; this is, I think, the crucial lesson her work has to offer the discourse dominated today by Jurgen Habermas. Finally, as we think both with Arendt

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<sup>1</sup> With deeper and richer conceptions of the history, epochal change, and the modern era itself, these other critics suggest higher standards for what it would mean to transcend an epoch. See "Postmodernism as Pseudohistory" in my *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

and in critique of Arendt about the troubled distinction of public from private, I want to suggest that we keep in mind not only her crucial stress on plurality as both the heart of the human condition and the premise and point of public life, but also her less developed account of promises as means for plural human beings to bind themselves through action, creating solidarities rather than discovering them on the more deterministic bases of pre-existing similarities. As Arendt wrote of political power, the most distinctively human sort of power:

In distinction to strength, which is the gift and the possession of every man in his isolation against all other men, power comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another. Hence, binding and promising, combining and covenanting are the means by which power is kept in existence; where and when men succeed in keeping intact the power which sprang up between them during the course of any particular act or deed, they are already in the process of foundation, of constituting a stable worldly structure to house, as it were, their combined power of action. There is an element of the world-building capacity of man in the human faculty of making and keeping promises.<sup>2</sup>

## I

Arendt's critical engagement with modernity turned on the ways in which emergent social conditions--notably what she called "the rise of the social" but also the related development of totalitarianism--undermined a needed distinction of public from private.

The term "public," Arendt wrote, "signifies two closely interrelated but not altogether identical phenomena: It means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. ... Second, the

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<sup>2</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 175.

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.”<sup>3</sup> Public space, thus, is the crucial terrain of the humanly created as distinct from natural world, of appearance and memory, and of talk and recognition. It is open in precisely the way the household is closed; the two are complementary as the human condition is complementary to the realm of things.<sup>4</sup> In private life, Arendt asserted, biological commonalities rule; in public life people appear as full individuals.<sup>5</sup> The disclosure of “who” someone is, as distinct from “what,” takes place through their public acts; “it can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity.”<sup>6</sup> This is part of the significance of the idea of publicity (in the sense of the first definition above). Yet, Arendt thought, it is only in possessing specific private locations that people gain the distinction which, along with equality, is a condition of public life. This is crucially linked to her view that it is in public life that people are able to see (and create) the common world by looking at the things and relationships between them from their many different vantage points.<sup>7</sup>

Arendt defined the public realm against what she saw as a viable private sphere of the household, especially in a smallholder economy. What she saw in the modern world was not a rise of the private, but a collapse of the public/private distinction, and with it the basis for the kind of public life she so deeply valued. The rise of “the social,” the instrumental organization of society to pursue material ends, was a challenge to both private and public. It tended, she argued, to “devour” even “the more recently established sphere of intimacy.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 50, 52.

<sup>4</sup> “The objectivity of the world--its object- or thing-character--and the human condition supplement each other; because human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence.” *The Human Condition*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *The Human Condition*, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> *The Human Condition*, p. 179.

<sup>7</sup> *The Human Condition* p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> *The Human Condition*, p. 45.

As Zaretsky suggests, the distinctive of public and private shifted meaning with changing institutional structures. The modern understanding of this dichotomy was shaped by the rise of states (especially states constructed according to the ideal of the nation-state), and public/private was widely construed as analogous to state/society. On the one hand, citizens claimed protection of their private affairs from undue state regulation or intervention. At the same time, citizens outside the immediate apparatus of state rule claimed the right to enter collectively into public discourse and action aimed at shaping government. Both publicness and privateness became more significant. The modern idea of person requires both aspects (just as the private affairs of office holders came increasingly to be distinguished from their public roles).

The notion of a realm of privacy from state interference reflected the growth of state power--and thus state potential to intervene in significant ways in the "private" lives of subjects or citizens. It also reflected a new valorization of "private" life. Treated often in both classical and Christian traditions as beneath public concern, the private domain was now in a sense raised above public interference. This happened in two ways that left the notion of a single private realm confused.

First, there was a moral revaluation of intimate relations and everyday life. This included both the realm of intimate relations--notably family and Romantic love--and the realm of work--as in the famous Protestant Ethic.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, work, love, and family may seem closely related as dimensions of "personal" rather than public life, as being a given new dignity as realms of meritorious human performance, and as being held up as domains of human satisfaction. Here "personal" connotes the involvement of the individual human being in face-to-face relations, as well as the realm of privacy.

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<sup>9</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's, 1985; orig. 1904). It is worth recalling that Weber's story here is not only one of rationalization, to which it is sometimes reduced by both followers (like Habermas) and critics (like Villa in the present paper) but also of moral revaluation. See also Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Arendt's scattered comments, especially her brief critical remarks on Rousseau and the Romantics in *The Human Condition*, pp. 38-9; also p. 50.

Secondly, the new domain of privacy from state interference was extended to economic activity in general. Here the meaning changed, though in ways not immediately visible. Indeed, in the mid-twentieth century, Arendt would still feel comfortable lumping together as one domain of “housekeeping” both the intimate relations involved in the substance of life on a personal scale--cooking, making love--and the anything-but-intimate relations of the capitalist economy and corporate organizations. The latter sustained “life” in the sense that they produced its necessities, but they were (and are) qualitatively different as domains of human activity and relationship.<sup>10</sup> As Zaretsky makes clear, this account can be deeply misleading and is all the more surprising for the fact that others in Arendt’s New York intellectual milieu were coming to terms--often aided by marxism--with the distinction of work as personal activity from impersonal economy.

The modern idea of “public” has been similarly multivalent. In particular, there has been slippage among references to (a) the state; (b) the political community, often defined as the nation; and (c) a domain of open discourse in which various understanding of collective identities and interests may be brought to the fore. The first two senses tend towards integralist, unitary conceptions of public life and the public good; the latter calls us back to the importance of plurality to publicness. But here the notion of “a” public may be misleading. As Arendt wrote (though her own usage was not consistent), “since the country is too big for all of us to come together and determine our fate, we need a number of public spaces within it.”<sup>11</sup> This interpretation of plurality in the face of scale informs Arendt’s affinity for the local council democracy as an alternative to statist regimes.

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<sup>10</sup> This account is particularly pronounced in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), and contrasts somewhat to the greater attention to the scale of capitalist economic enterprise in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2nd ed., 1973; orig. 1951).

<sup>11</sup> *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972), p. 232. Isaac’s discussion of this dimension of Arendt’s thinking about democracy is helpful; see Ch. 5 of *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

It is easy for the public/private distinction to be shaped by the powerful opposition of collective to individual. Part of the importance of Arendt's work is to remind us that it may be in public that people can be most fully individual. At the same time, however, Arendt's attempt to delineate the importance of action in public appears to denigrate the possibility of comparably important action in private--or at least in personal life. Here Zaretsky rightly points to the limits of a conception of personal life as a realm of determined behavior focused on economic production and biological reproduction.

Despite--or perhaps because of--its ambiguity, the public/private distinction became a central feature of liberal political theory and ideology (with the difference between modern and classical versions too seldom remarked). Liberalism was always a theory of the limits of politics as well as of political (and prepolitical) rights. As Zaretsky suggests, various forms of challenge to and reworking of this division became a staple of European social thought, with none more influential than that incorporated in marxism.<sup>12</sup> Zaretsky helpfully identifies three major criticisms of this dimension of liberalism: (a) Marx's critique of the way economic activity and resulting class division vitiated the public/private dichotomy, (b) the point made from many directions that liberalism failed to attend to the significance of nation, race, and other non-class identity issues, and (c) the argument that "the personal" either is intrinsically political, or at least is so relevant to politics that it must not be treated as a separate realm.

Though far from a marxist, Arendt accepted, as Zaretsky argues, the force of the first criticism and engaged many of the same historical and sociological issues as Marx and some marxists. Arendt was one of the major intellectual voices for the second line of critique. And she was at once engaged by the third and deeply troubled by it.

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<sup>12</sup> Zaretsky may somewhat overstress the dominance of marxism in Arendt's Parisian and New York milieux, and its centrality to her own intellectual orientation. Marburg and Berlin were also powerful shaping milieux, and existentialism and a variety of other currents of thought were important alongside social democracy and marxism New York, as well as in Germany.

Arendt saw the weaknesses of liberalism but adamantly defended the notion of a need for separate spheres.<sup>13</sup> As she stressed forcefully in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the key feature distinguishing totalitarianism from mere tyranny is that the former works directly on private life, not merely limits public life. This is not just a matter of contrasting intentions, but of distinctively modern capacity. Modern sociological conditions offered rulers the possibility to reach deeply into the family in particular and personal life in general, to engineer human life (in both the everyday and the specifically Arendtian meanings of the term) in ways never before imagined. This sociological capacity, this new form of power (of which Foucault was to become a preeminent analyst) was matched and abetted by changes in culture and philosophy that also attended the infusion of the social into politics.

Arendt would never endorse social engineering, and against such threats, would certainly protect privacy. Even more, she would protect the personal and distinctive from absorption into the impersonal. But she would not assimilate the notion of the personal to that of the private as Zaretsky does. We commonly think of politics as impersonal and private life as the realm in which at least potentially we can be true to ourselves as individual persons. But Arendt is concerned to show us that this is not so; it is precisely in public that we come fully into ourselves, that we achieve a fullness of personality, that we disclose our personal identities. On her account we must not equate the personal with the psychological. This is why Arendt was ambivalent about the third line of critique of the liberal public/private distinction. Consider the term “identity politics,” currently used to refer at once to public performances that create or disclose identity, and to political struggles based on claims to identities settled in advance. The former fit with Arendt’s vision and the latter are sharply contrary to it. We need not agree with Arendt’s claim

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<sup>13</sup> Though Arendt was no simple neoKantian, this aspect of her thought shares much not only with Kant but with such neoKantian proponents of the necessary differentiation of value spheres as Weber and later Habermas.

that the realms of labor and biological reproduction are altogether determined and devoid of potential for real creativity and disclosure of personality to grasp the force of this distinction. At the same time, we would do well to follow Zaretsky in questioning whether Arendt's argument about the importance of public life, especially politics, must be taken to refer to a distinctive institutional domain rather than to action itself (in her strong sense of the word). The language of "spheres" may mislead. If we are speaking about a mode of establishing relationships between human beings, then publicness can be instantiated in a variety of social spaces by no means all of which are institutionalized as political by their relationship to the state. Publicness can be created wherever people are related by their undetermined speech and action. Some public spaces may be institutionally supported or protected, but such institutionalization is not a precondition of publicness.

## II

It is perhaps with such a broadened understanding in mind that, for all his distance from the Enlightenment, Villa appeals in the concluding line of his paper to "the light of the public." Villa clearly does not mean to follow Habermas in making this almost synonymous with "the light of reason." Habermas takes "the public" to refer to an institutionally protected and procedurally defined "sphere" that is the crucial setting for communicative rationality.<sup>14</sup> This account has been widely contested, perhaps most especially on the grounds that no such integrated, comprehensive, unitary public sphere can exist under contemporary sociological conditions,<sup>15</sup> and in any case is not desirable

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<sup>14</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989; orig. 1962).

<sup>15</sup> In the present chapter, I shall use "sociological" to refer the broad domain of relationships, practices and institutions often called "social," in order to maintain a distinction from Arendt's very different and somewhat idiosyncratic use of the term "social."

even as a regulative ideal because of the inattention to difference and identity that it presumes.<sup>16</sup> Villa extends this critique.

In this regard, Villa rightly challenges Benhabib's reading of Arendt as "almost-Habermas." Though Habermas is perhaps not quite as Habermasian as Benhabib, the two converge on a conception of the public sphere that is challenged by a reading of Arendt that places more stress on plurality, on performative action, and on the possibility of making and remaking the common world by means of mutual commitments. The difference of such commitments from the kind of agreements posited by the notion of communicative action is significant. Arendt's "commitments" cannot be grasped entirely on the model of truth. They are acts of world-making, not discovery or description. They do not depend on a prior establishment of "post-conventional" moral reason, or on the triumph of rationality at an individual level. The American Founders, Arendt says of her favorite example, grasped that they need not rely on the proposition that people were good outside society, nor on a claim that they were already similar to each other or bound to each other as members of a nation. "They knew that whatever men might be in their singularity, they could bind themselves into a community which, even though it was composed of 'sinners', need not necessarily reflect this 'sinful' side of human nature."<sup>17</sup>

While Villa rightly challenges those of Arendt's critics and admirers alike who want to read her as advocating this sort of singular public sphere, he places much more emphasis on the obstacles she saw in the way of recovering that kind of public life than on the openings she discerned for other kinds of public practices and public spaces. In particular, he reads her demonstration of the debased character of much modern public life as though publicness always came before politics in her arguments. It is at least equally plausible, however, to read Arendt as suggesting that public space cannot exist

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<sup>16</sup> See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," and other chapters in C. Calhoun, ed.: *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 174.

without politics, that it is called into being by politics as a specific kind of activity between people. Politics, in other words, can be about the making (and remaking) of public space as much as about what we do in it--let alone what we decide about matters of "the public good."<sup>18</sup>

In this respect, Villa is surely right to present Arendt as a theorist of modernity, not only of politics in general. Her tone was, as he suggests, often tragic, though his sharpest conclusion--that her analysis led her to posit that modernity has brought an end to politics proper --is overdrawn. Much as Arendt admired the Greeks, she did not see real politics as something achievable only on their ground. Not only was she no simplistic advocate of a return to the classical polis, she found more to encourage her in modern political activity than Villa allows. It is not necessary to read the account of the French Revolution in *On Revolution* as describing a slippery slope leading inevitably to totalitarianism and to a post-political world in which the only responsible action must be resistance. Here Villa seems to accept a more integralist reading of *the* public sphere than Arendt requires (or it seems than his own political values encourage), only to turn it into a straw man to be knocked down by modernity so that political action in public is no longer a possibility for the postmodernist. This forfeits one of the advantages of the Arendtian account of public space (in contrast to the Habermasian language of *the* public sphere). Arendt's term more readily allows us to see the possibilities for political action instantiating multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting public domains.<sup>19</sup> This does not mean that polities do not face the challenge of how to reconcile these multiple arenas of public activity in necessarily singular decisions (the issue to which Habermas's notion of the public sphere points), but this dimension of decision making--necessary to

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<sup>18</sup> I do not want to suggest that this reading is in sharp contradiction to Villa. Villa stresses another side of Arendt to the near-exclusion of the one I wish to bring out, but he does not deny it.

<sup>19</sup> In this I move in the opposite direction from the comparison Seyla Benhabib offers in "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal tradition, and Jurgen Habermas," in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, *op cit*.

states--Arendt suggests, is distinct from the broader domain of public action which is not for her defined by the state.

*On Revolution* is, in this connection and indeed in general, a more important Arendtian text than either Villa or especially Zaretsky recognizes.<sup>20</sup> For all the pathos of its final pages and the Romantic wishful thinking of Arendt's admiration for council democracy, the book is not only an exposition of lost opportunities and tragedies. It is also an account of politics as action in which institution-building is a central moment, and an available response both to chaos and to the supplanting of public life by social engineering. The Hungarian revolution of 1956 failed, on Arendt's analysis, not because modernity doomed it, but because the larger and more powerful Soviet Union invaded Hungary.

Villa rightly stresses Arendt's account of politics as performance, and importantly distinguishes this from an expressivist view of politics (or of action generally). This performative view helps us to see action--including especially action in public space--as in part self-making.<sup>21</sup> This suggests problems for a sharp and easy distinction of public from private, with the production of identities and interests relegated to the latter. Here Zaretsky rightly notes that Arendt goes to the opposite extreme from most current thought. If it is common to see the truly "personal" as being presented or forged in private, Arendt sees action, speech, and disclosure as quintessentially public and indeed

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<sup>20</sup> It is particularly unfortunate that Zaretsky ignores *On Revolution*. Surprisingly, he writes that "The key to my reading is the question of the public and the private. Because of this emphasis, I am going to restrict myself to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *The Human Condition* (1958)" (ms. p. 2). *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1977; orig. 1963) bears directly on the nature of public action and its relation to social and/or private concerns, and presents an importantly different side of Arendt's thinking precisely on the issues Zaretsky addresses.

<sup>21</sup> This is at the heart of Arendt's much-remarked "agonistic" account of politics. See especially Bonnie Honig, "Toward an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity," in B. Honig, ed.: *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). The notion of performativity helps to stress the dimension of "self-making," which is clearly part of Arendt's concern, more than the term agonism, or competitive "showing" of oneself; in Arendt's words "the passionate drive to show oneself in measuring up against others," *The Human Condition*, p. 194. Arendt is, of course, intensely interested in disclosure and appearance (following Heidegger as well as Greek guides), but also in creativity and individuation.

as properly political. Her account troubles commentators by virtue of its apparently radical reduction of the significance of the private. Zaretsky has considerable company, then, when he suggests that private life is the true ground of freedom, but it is hard to see this as so clearly Arendt's view.<sup>22</sup> Private life is clearly *a* ground for free action (or better, a condition), but to privilege it as *the* ground is problematic. Along with Habermas, Zaretsky places the private very sharply prior to public life, as though people became full individuals in their private lives before entering the public realm. This is not Arendt's view. Given what Zaretsky suggests is contemporary society's lack of social support for individuality, identity, and personal autonomy, this account comes close to implying that we can only work to repair social conditions and not act freely in public.<sup>23</sup>

### III

Villa gets us only part of the way out of this radical limitation on political action, because (perhaps too much influenced by the rhetoric of postmodernism) he persists in a unitary understanding of modernity that is at odds with Arendt's more internally complex one. Influenced by Kateb's reading of Arendt as antimodernist, Villa accepts the notion that she argues, thus, that "the problem presented by modernity is that it destroys the conditions necessary if political action is to fulfill its existential vocation."<sup>24</sup> We might equally argue, though, that it is precisely in such a crisis that political action is most crucially needed to create new "conditions."

Villa's concern is to avoid the "policing" of political theory by the notion that critique (and critical textual hermeneutics) is of necessity either "immanent" or "rejectionist." That is, he seeks to bring out the possibility--and indeed importance--of a mode of critique that does not rest on finding in the arrangements it challenges a "progressive element" or tendency that can be enhanced as the basis for change, and

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<sup>22</sup> Zaretsky, ms. pp. 30, 32.

<sup>23</sup> Zaretsky ms. p. 20. Here Zaretsky's account of the loss of basis for public life comes surprisingly close to Villa's, given their otherwise different orientations.

<sup>24</sup> Villa ms. p. 2; see also pp. 26-8 where Villa more clearly affirms Kateb's reading.

simultaneously does not evacuate the perspective of a critic-in-the-world in favor of some completely negative, disconnected, critical view from nowhere, from the past, or, with Nietzsche, “from another planet”. For Villa, the primary exemplar of such an alternative mode of critique is Foucauldian “resistance” to existing conditions and tendencies. I have little doubt that Villa is right to see resistance as one of Arendt’s critical strategies, and to locate it in this tradition.<sup>25</sup> The questions remain, however, whether Arendt believed that modernity made resistance the only viable or responsible stance (either in general, or at least after totalitarianism). Has more positive political action really lost its necessary conditions? Relatedly, we might ask whether in agreeing that “immanent” and “rejectionist” critiques do not exhaust the field of possibilities, resistance is the only other option.

Villa is not concerned only to widen the space of critical orientations beyond immanent and rejectionist. He would (it seems) like to rehabilitate the Nietzschean negative critique that is currently decried (and rejected) as “rejectionist.” He does not agree that “the worst possible sin ... is to engage in ‘totalizing’ or rejectionist criticism--that is, to take a critical stance which is so distanced that it enables the critic to place all these hopes, values, and institutions under suspicion.”<sup>26</sup> But Villa seems here too quick to equate the notion of immanent critique with Michael Walzer’s call for critics to identify with the basic hopes, values and institutions of his or her society. Immanent critique is not just about finding common ground with at least some dimensions of the social or cultural formation one criticizes. It is also about recognizing the embeddedness of critique in historical and sociological settings--a point of which Arendt was intensely aware. The tradition of critical theory that praises immanent critique does so in part because it values the self-reflexive capacity to offer an account of its own conditions.

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<sup>25</sup> “Rebellion” is a close and at least equally apt term, and rightly suggests a more active stance than “resistance.” Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus, and Modern Rebellion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> Villa ms p. 3.

The challenge to totalizing critique, accordingly, is that it cannot make sense of itself--including what it is in modern society, for example, that allows Nietzsche to try to take the critical stance of “seeing things as if from another planet.”<sup>27</sup> Totalizing critique courts the charges of (a) performative contradiction, (b) claiming to be without history, and (c) claiming to be literally disinterested and without meaningful motive.

Arendt finds little in her analysis of modernity that inclines her towards Habermasian optimism. She finds much that suggests that resistance is often the most responsible critical stance. But she refuses, I think, more firmly than Villa, the stance of “totalizing” critique of modernity; treats it as more complex; and sees more potential for meaningful political action than he avers. Whether this makes hers an “immanent” critique is another, and ultimately less interesting, question.

Villa’s argument has two main moments. First, he shows nicely that Arendt does not subscribe to the relatively naive goal of ending alienation. She sees certain forms of worldly estrangement as not only inevitable but as productive of positive goods and distinctive characteristics of human individuality and capacity for action. Being at home in the world is thus a problematic goal, and being altogether at home in the world without sacrificing crucial capacities for political action is something that perhaps only some of the Greeks achieved. Villa’s exposition is admirable here, and seems quite in tune with Arendt.<sup>28</sup>

The second moment in Villa’s argument is the more problematic contention that distinctively modern “world alienation” is tied to an elimination of the prospects for authentic politics and public life because it eradicates the necessary feeling for a common world. Here Villa has some good points, but overstates his case and makes Arendt too

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted by Villa, ms. p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting, though, that this more complex account of alienation does not set Arendt altogether apart from other theorists. Hegel does not pursue any simple end to alienation, and certainly not a merging of boundaries into some manner of undifferentiated at-homeness, but a complex sort of transcendence. Marx worked with a variety of different terms in his effort to describe the necessity and creativity of certain forms of objectification or estrangement while retaining critical purchase on alienation; see John Torrance; *Alienation, Objectification, Estrangement* (London: Methuen 1975).

much of a postmodernist. Villa cites Arendt as observing “the destruction of the common world,” and on this basis concluding that authentic public life and political action are no longer possible.<sup>29</sup> As support for his claim, Villa cites two passages in *The Human Condition*, neither with detailed quotation. Both, in fact, bear out Zaretsky’s point that Arendt ought often to be read with Marx in mind--or at least with a recognition that she, like Marx, is thinking through a critique of liberalism on historical and sociological grounds.<sup>30</sup> Both passages are worth exploring more fully.

The first passage comes from Arendt’s discussion of property in the section on the public and the private realm. Arendt describes in this subsection how “private” had originally meant not something positive, but rather being deprived of things essential to a truly human--and therefore public--life:

to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an “objective” relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself.<sup>31</sup>

This privacy--a privation of solid relations to others--leads to the loneliness of mass society in which individuation is as impossible as social solidarity (Arendt cites Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd*). Now privacy does not sound very attractive in this passage, but Arendt goes on to single out one crucial feature of the private realm we must regret losing. This is property. By property, she says, she emphatically does not mean wealth, “because the wealth of any single individual consists of his share in the annual income of society as a whole.” What she means is the ownership of a place in the world that is at once a basis for individuation and a solid location from which to act in public.

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<sup>29</sup> Villa ms., p. 5, pp. 25-28.

<sup>30</sup> Villa is sufficiently far from an interest in Marx (not to mention Hegel and others) that he can describe Nietzsche and Heidegger simply and without question as “*the* two greatest thinkers and critics of modernity” (ms. p. 2; emphases added).

<sup>31</sup> *Human Condition*, p. 58.

“Originally, property meant no more or less than to have one’s location in a particular part of the world and therefore to belong to the body politic, that is, to be the head of one of the families which together constituted the public realm.”<sup>32</sup> It is therefore, no accident that the “disappearance of the public realm should be accompanied by the threatened liquidation of the private realm as well.”<sup>33</sup>

Villa’s second citation is to the last paragraph of the section on world alienation that opens the concluding part of *The Human Condition*. Here Arendt has just described the great events that usher in modernity and the further transformations that follow the French Revolution and the entry of the social into the political realm. She has argued (congruent with Villa’s emphasis on how much she shared Heidegger’s critique of the subjectification of the modern world) that Marx was mistaken to see self-alienation (the ways in which capitalist labor dehumanizes people by turning them against themselves) as the hallmark of the modern age.<sup>34</sup> That hallmark is, instead, world-alienation, the loss of a sense of integral relationship to and care for a common world. People had been integrated into the world when, through the family unit, they had own individual pieces of it as property and been enduringly identified with those pieces of property. Capitalist

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<sup>32</sup> *Human Condition*, p. 61. In claiming the basis of “original meaning” for her interpretation of the significance of property, Arendt employs one of her favorite rhetorical tropes. Her claims about the “original” meanings of words are sometimes dubious and, in any case, carry little weight in determining whether her interpretations and conceptualizations are helpful. She often makes good points by means of a bad claim to what words originally meant.

<sup>33</sup> *Human Condition*, p. 60. Arendt is here engaged in a somewhat tendentious argument with Marx, interpreting his hope for a “withering away” of the state as a call for the withering away of the public realm (cf. my remarks at the outset about the multiple meanings of public and private and the potential for confusion and/or manipulation).

<sup>34</sup> With this in mind, we can see more clearly some of the reasons for the work/labor distinction in Arendt. As Zaretsky (ms. pp. 23-4) notes, the issue is partly one of the importance of cultural meaning to work--work makes culture, in a sense, as well as making things. It is perhaps overoptimistic, however, to suggest that it is only subordination that deprives work sometimes of meaning (and I think a somewhat problematic assertion to put in the mouths of E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams). Both (like Marx) idealized craft production, which fits Arendt’s category of work rather well. Both saw the routinization of craft production, deskilling, and similar trends as linked to the subordination of workers, but as challenges to the meaningfulness of work even beyond that. For this reason, an end to simple subordination in itself does not restore to work its full potential as a meaningful mode of human productivity. Moreover, as important as cultural meaning is to work, it is in action that cultural performativity flowers as the making of a common world. World-alienation, the loss of this common world or estrangement from it, is thus a loss of human connection profoundly distinct from the alienation that reduces work to mere labor.

expropriation had ended this. Capitalism created a continuous process of “further expropriations, greater productivity, and more appropriation.”<sup>35</sup> Capitalism thus extended the compulsion of “natural” life processes to all of society, where previously certain classes had the opportunity to escape it. A key point here is that unlike action (though sometimes following from it), process, as Arendt understands it, simply *proceeds* and therefore undermines “world durability and stability.” The rise of society involves not just the growth of capitalist economies, and the entry of economic concerns (like the eradication of poverty or the “wealth of nations”) into the political realm. It involves also the collectivization of human beings. At least some people had hitherto been individuals supported as heads of family households, now all people become first nationals and then simply humans. Society itself “became the subject of the new life process, as the family had been its subject before.”<sup>36</sup> But where the family supported proper individuals, nations and global humanity support undifferentiated, collective beings defined by and devoted to life processes. Now comes the passage in which Arendt suggests, to Villa, the destruction of the common world:

...the process of world alienation, started by expropriation and characterized by an ever-increasing progress in wealth, can only assume even more radical proportions if it is permitted to follow its own inherent law. For men cannot become citizens of the world as they are citizens of their countries, and social men cannot own collectively as family and household men own their private property. The rise of society brought about the simultaneous decline of the public as well as the private realm. But the eclipse of a common public world, so crucial to the formation of the lonely mass man and so dangerous in the formation of the

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<sup>35</sup> *Human Condition*, p. 255.

<sup>36</sup> *Human Condition*, p. 256.

worldless mentality of modern ideological mass movements, began with the much more tangible loss of a privately owned share in the world.<sup>37</sup>

Clearly, Arendt is not in favor of these modern trends. But should she be read as asserting “the withdrawal of the political, its dispersion throughout the social body” and on this basis that real political action must be replaced by mere resistance?<sup>38</sup> Villa here is eliding Arendt’s position with Lyotard’s.

What Arendt has argued is that longstanding conditions for individuation and action in public have been undermined. But are the previous conditions the only conditions? Political action, for Arendt, can be both world-making and self-making (though as Villa rightly observes with regard to the latter, not in ways subject to complete intentional control). Why should Arendt not be read as suggesting that the undermining of the traditional social sources of individuation and public life create the occasion for a political project to found new such sources? Indeed, the crucial phrase in the quoted passage may be “...if it is permitted to follow its own inherent law;” this surely suggests that action still has a chance to upset or alter ongoing social processes.

Villa takes his extreme position partly because he accepts from other interpreters of Arendt a conception of her emphasis on public space much too close to Habermas’s account of the public sphere. “What binds Arendt’s contemporary critics and admirers together,” Villa writes, “is the unquestioned assumption that she stands for the recovery of a single, institutionalized public sphere.”<sup>39</sup> Villa’s essay helpfully brings out the problems Arendt sees posed for any such vision by the “de-worlding” of contemporary

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<sup>37</sup> *Human Condition*, p. 257. The reason why men cannot be citizens of the world as of their countries is tied to Arendt’s understanding of the nation as a substitute for the family. Where families supported ‘real’ individuation, nations offer participation in an individuated collectivity, a bad substitute but at least some individuation; the world of humanity as a whole must be defined by what all people have in common which is only material life processes, rather than by what differentiates them.

<sup>38</sup> Villa, ms. p. 27.

<sup>39</sup> Villa ms., p. 25. This very claim is a bit extreme in the late 1990s. It is true of Benhabib, perhaps, and of some communitarians who seek to adopt Arendt. But it is certainly no longer an unquestioned assumption. See, for example, the essays by Dietz, Honig, and Bickford in B. Honig, ed.: *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

public life and “modernity’s relentless subjectification of the real.” But he sets up something of a straw man when he tells us that after “‘the end of the common world’...-- for Arendt the defining event of the modern age--the prospects for an authentic, comprehensive, and relatively permanent public sphere fall to just about zero.”<sup>40</sup>

To his credit, Villa hastens to add that this is not to say that Arendt gives up on action, politics, or “publicity” in the Kantian sense. Indeed not (though his own elisions of her position with postmodernism on the next page nearly say as much). But why set up the standard that public life must be “comprehensive,” “unitary,” or “single”? Arendt does indeed give reasons why she thinks permanence is important--that deeds may be remembered--though this is a goal more than a condition. But it is not clear that she is-- or on the basis of her theory would have reason to be--terribly worried about the loss of the other adjectives. She could, it seems to me, suggest that the Greek public sphere was able for various reasons (including scale) to be more comprehensive, single, and unitary (at the level of each polis), and that public space in other settings and on other bases will have less of these characteristics. But even in Greece, or in the founding of America, Arendt does not praise singularity. On the contrary, she argues that the common world--the world that lies between people--of necessity must appear in multiple aspects and not be reduced to singularity (for example by the triumph of economic, life-process definitions). “The end of the common world has come,” she wrote just before taking up private property in the section considered above, “when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective.”<sup>41</sup> Precisely because of her agonistic approach to public life, her emphasis on contestation and plurality, Arendt has much less interest in the unity of a public sphere than, say, Habermas.

#### IV

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<sup>40</sup> Villa ms., p. 26.

<sup>41</sup> *Human Condition*, p. 58.

Much more clearly than Arendt, Habermas does indeed think in terms of a unitary, bounded and internally integrated public sphere. Arendt's usual term, "public space," leaves the "shape" of public life more open. This is partly because she emphasizes public action and agonistic, theatrical performance much more than Habermas (as Villa rightly notes). Such public action can create institutions, as in the founding of the American Republic. But as action it is unpredictable. Its publicness comes from its performance in a space between people, a space of appearances, but it is in the nature of public action to be always forming and reforming that space and arguably the people themselves.

This conceptualization offers clear advantages for thinking about the place of plurality in the public sphere. By comparison, Habermas creates problems by placing identity-formation prior to entry into the political public sphere, and by denying importance to the "disclosure" of identity that Arendt regards as one of the most important features of public life. The public sphere of rational critical discourse can work, Habermas suggests, only if people are adequately prepared for it through other aspects of their personal and cultural experience. Habermas briefly discusses how the rise of a literary public sphere rooted in the rise of novel-reading and theater-going publics contributed to the development of the political public sphere, but he does not follow through on this insight. He drops discussion of the literary public sphere with its 18th century incarnation, that is, as soon as it has played its role in preparing the path for the rise of the Enlightenment political public sphere. He does not consider subsequent changes in literary discourse and how they may be related to changes in the identities people bring into the political public sphere. Neither does he consider the extent to which the best education for politics and public discourse takes place in politics and public discourse, not before either.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Arendt, in "On Authority," (in *Between Past and Future*, New York: Penguin, 1977; orig. 1961), pp. 118-9, asserts that education is not an appropriate stance for rulers towards the public, because members

More generally, Habermas does not adequately thematize the role of identity-forming, culture-forming public activity. He works mainly with a contrast between a realm of private life (with the intimate sphere as its inner sanctum) and the public sphere (of civil society), and assumes that identity is produced out of the combination of private life and the economic positions occupied in civil society. He offers little attention to or space for the performative dimensions dear to Arendt (and described by Villa). He does not see public life as transformative of the individuals who participate in it, or indeed as an occasion for them to be more fully individual than in the economy or many other aspects of civil society. If anything, his public sphere calls on participants to leave their individuality behind in favor of deliberation on the putatively singular public good, relying only on universal rationality.

Once we abandon the notion that identity is formed once and for all in advance of participation in the public sphere, however, we can recognize that in varying degree all public discourses are occasions for identity formation and disclosure (that is, for doing things that reveal who we “really” are to others and how we matter to posterity in ways that are beyond our conscious intentions). This is central to the insight of Negt and Kluge in their appropriation of the phenomenological notion of “horizons of experience” as a way of broadening Habermas’s approach to the public sphere.<sup>43</sup> Experience is not something exclusively prior to and only addressed by the rational-critical discourse of the public sphere; it is constituted in part through public discourse and at the same time continually orients people differently in public life. We can distinguish public spheres in which identity-formation figures more prominently, and those in which rational-critical discourse is more prominent, but we should not assume the existence of any political public sphere where identity-formation (and reformation) is not significant.

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are adults and ready for discourse. But this is a matter of minimal criteria. Her performative approach suggests clearly how participants in public life may seek more excellent identities and capacities.

<sup>43</sup> Negt and Kluge, *The Public Sphere and Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

Excluding the identity-forming project from the public sphere makes no more sense than excluding those of "problematically different" identities. Few today would argue (at least in the broadly liberal public spheres of the West) against including women, racial and ethnic minorities, and virtually all other groups clearly subject to the same state and part of the same civil society. Yet many do argue against citizenship for those who refuse various projects of assimilation. It is not just Germans with their ethnic ideas about national citizenship who have a problem with immigrants. The language of the liberal public sphere is used to demand that only English be spoken in Florida, for example, or that Arabs and Africans conform to certain ideas of Frenchness if they wish to stay in France. And for that matter, many other arguments--e.g. that only heterosexuals should serve in the military--have much the same form and status. They demand conformity as a condition of full citizenship. Yet movement of people about the globe continues, making it harder to suppress difference even while provoking the urge. In a basic and intrinsic sense, if public performance has the capacity to alter civil society and to shape the state, then its own democratic practice must confront the questions of membership and the identity of the political community it represents.<sup>44</sup>

Habermas is, ultimately, a much more "liberal" thinker than Arendt. His theory relies on the hope of transcending difference rather than the provision of occasions for recognition, expression and interrelationship. Habermas does not see plurality as comparably basic to human life in general or specifically to the project of public life and therefore to democracy. Plurality is not a condition of private life or a product of quotidian personal tastes, in Arendt's view, but rather a potential that flowers in creative public achievements. Arendt accepted the classical Greek restriction on public

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<sup>44</sup> Habermas confronts these issues in his account of "constitutional patriotism," inspired by the problems of post-1989 German unification. He tends, however, to presume nationality as a backdrop and simply to idealize the *rechtsstaat*, and "civic" against "ethnic" nationalism. See "Citizenship and National Identity: Some Reflections on the Future of Europe," *Praxis International*, 12 #1 (1992) and "Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic Constitutional State," in Amy Gutman, ed: *Multiculturalism: Exploring the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Rev. Ed. 1994).

participation precisely because she thought few people could rise above the implicit conformity imposed by a life of material production to achieve real distinction in the realm of praxis. But given modern sociological conditions, Arendt did not support such exclusion (though neither was she in any sense “anti-elitist”). “The trouble lies in the lack of public spaces to which the people at large would have entrance and from which an élite could be selected, or rather, where it could select itself.”<sup>45</sup>

Part of the point of linking the distinction of public from private to that of praxis from mere work or labor is to present the public sphere as something more than an arena for the advancement or negotiation of competing material interests. This image is carried forward in Habermas's account with its emphasis on the possibility of disinterested rational-critical public discourse and his suggestion that the public sphere degenerates as it is penetrated by organized interest groups. To presume that these will be only different policies for achieving objectively ascertainable ends--let alone ends reducible to a common calculus in terms of a lowest common denominator of interest--is to reduce the public sphere to a forum of Benthamite policy experts rather than a vehicle of democratic self-government. This is clearly not something Habermas intends to praise. Yet it is not as sharply distant from his account of the public sphere as it might at first seem. One reason is that Habermas does not place the same stress as Arendt on creativity. He treats public activity overwhelmingly in terms of rational-critical discourse rather than identity-formation or expression, and somewhat narrows the meaning of and significance of plurality and introduces the possibility of claims to expertise more appropriate to technical rationality than communicative action. It is in this sense, that Arendt suggests that modern intellectuals, unlike 18th century *hommes de lettres*, are generally part of the social and often agents of the state and of social engineering.<sup>46</sup> Part of the background to this problem lies in the very manner in which public is separated from private in the 18th

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<sup>45</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 277; note the plural, “spaces.”

<sup>46</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 122.

and early 19th century liberal public sphere which is the basis for Habermas's ideal-typical construction.

The liberal model of the public sphere pursues discursive equality by disqualifying discourse about the differences among actors. These differences are treated as matters of private, but not public, interest. On Habermas's account, the best version of the public sphere was based on "a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether."<sup>47</sup> It worked by a "mutual willingness to accept the given roles and simultaneously to suspend their reality."<sup>48</sup> This "bracketing" of difference as merely private and irrelevant to the public sphere is undertaken, Habermas argues, in order to defend the genuinely rational-critical notion that arguments must be decided on their merits rather than the identities of the arguers. This was as important as fear of censors for the prominence of anonymous or pseudonymous authorship in the 18th century public sphere. Yet it has the effect of excluding some of the most important concerns of many members of any polity--both those whose existing identities are suppressed or devalued and those whose exploration of possible identities is truncated. It makes politics much more a matter of deliberation on policy, much less an occasion for performative world-making or disclosure of individual identity. In addition, this bracketing of differences also undermines the potential of public discourse for self-reflexivity. The plurality of participants, appearing precisely as different from each other, is a crucial spur to reflection on the identity of each and the significance of their interrelationships.

The conceptualization of public life as a singular sphere can also easily work in more immediately anti-democratic ways. Women, for example, were excluded from the now-idealized public spheres of the early bourgeois era--indeed, ironically more sharply

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<sup>47</sup> *Structural Transformation*, p. 36.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

excluded than in the era of absolutism.<sup>49</sup> The issue of "democratic inclusiveness" is not just a quantitative matter of the scale of a public sphere or the proportion of the members of a political community who may speak within it. While it is clearly a matter of stratification and boundaries (e.g. openness to the propertyless, the uneducated, women or immigrants), it is also a matter of how the public sphere incorporates and recognizes the diversity of identities which people bring to it from their manifold involvements in civil society. It is a matter of whether in order to participate in such a public sphere, for example, women must act in ways previously characteristic of men and avoid addressing certain topics defined as appropriate to the private realm (the putatively more female sphere). Marx criticized the discourse of bourgeois citizenship for implying that it equally fitted everyone when it in fact tacitly presumed an understanding of citizens as property-owners. The same sort of false universalism has presented citizens in gender neutral or gender symmetrical terms without in fact acknowledging highly gendered underlying conceptions.

One alternative is to think of the public sphere not as the realm of a single public, but as a sphere of publics. This does not mean that the flowering of innumerable potential publics is in and of itself a solution to this basic problem of democracy. On the contrary, democracy requires discourse across lines of basic difference. It is important that members of any specific public be able also to enter into others. This does not eliminate the need for a broader discourse concerned among other things with the balancing of different demands on states or different interests. But this discourse can be conceptualized--and nurtured--as a matter of multiple intersections among heterogeneous publics, not only as the privileging of a single overarching public.

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<sup>49</sup> See Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), and "Novus Ordo Saeculorum: Gender and Public Space in Arendt's Revolutionary France," in Honig, *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, and Eley, "Gender, Class and Nation," in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*.

Once we begin to think in terms of such alternative understandings of publics, however, we confront resistance stemming from the way modern notions of *the* public sphere have been rooted in the discourse of nationalism. As Zaretsky suggests, Arendt rightly saw in nationalism a cement for binding central states to atomized societies. Ideas of the public commonly draw from nationalist rhetoric both the capacity to presume boundaries and an emphasis on the discourse of the whole.

It is one of the illusions of liberal discourse to believe that in a democratic society there is or can be a single, uniquely authoritative discourse about public affairs. This amounts to an attempt to settle in advance a question which is inextricably part of the democratic process itself. It reflects a nationalist presumption that membership in a common society is prior to democratic deliberations as well as an implicit belief that politics revolves around a single and unitary state. It is normal, however, not aberrant, for people to speak in a number of different public arenas and for these to address multiple centers of power (whether institutionally differentiated within a single state, combining multiple states or political agencies, or recognizing that putatively nonpolitical agencies like business corporations are loci of power and addressed by public discourse). How many and how separate these public spheres are must be empirical variables. But each is apt to make some themes easier to address and simultaneously to repress others, and each will empower different voices to different degrees. That women or ethnic minorities carry on their own public discourses, thus, reflects not only the exclusion of certain people from the "dominant" public sphere, but a positive act of women and ethnic minorities. This means that simply pursuing their equitable inclusion in the dominant public sphere cannot be either an adequate recognition of their partially separate discourses or a resolution to the underlying problem. Recognizing a multiplicity of publics, none of which can claim a completely superordinate status to the others, is thus a

first step.<sup>50</sup> It would be an exercise of force to authorize only one of these as properly "public," or of some as more legitimately public than others which are held to be "private."

## V

Because Arendt does not tie her idea of public space to the state in the way Habermas does his notion of public sphere, she does not stress any singular point of coming together. The occasions of public action may be multiple, each involving different mixes of people. What is most "comprehensive" is not any such space among concrete contemporaries, but the space of memory, in which the identities of individuals are disclosed in the stories told about them. Such identities require a field of common knowledge within which to be comprehensible, but there is no reason why that field must have strong institutional boundaries (in the way that, for example, an electorate must). To create such institutions is a potentially powerful public act, but public action--including the most authentic politics--is not conditioned on the prior existence of such institutions, boundaries, or internal integration. These come, if they come at all, after.

The Greeks, to whom Arendt turns for help in conceptualizing public life, sought permanence more in the stories told about them than in the institutions they created. Accordingly, important as they are to her idea of public, they do not provide her with the model of a body politic, let alone a modern state. This, she tells us, was presaged by Rome, insofar as the Romans emphasized myths of founding in a way the Greeks never had--partly because the Romans worshipped their institutional framework as such, and partly because the foundation of a new body politic was "to the Greeks an almost commonplace experience."<sup>51</sup> But much as he praised the glory that was Rome, Macchiavelli crucially recognized that modern states were something new and different.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Eley, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures;" Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," in Calhoun, ed.: Habermas and the Public Sphere.

<sup>51</sup> "What Is Authority," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1968), p. 121.

<sup>52</sup> *On Revolution*, pp. 36, 39.

They were institutions seeking stability, yet they were profoundly unstable. The ideal of the eternal nation conflicts with (and sometimes masks) this reality of profound political instability.<sup>53</sup> This is only partly because of the possibility of new attempts at founding, at revolution; it is also so because of the variety of new pressures confronting modern states partly because they have taken on the challenge of attempting to provide social rather than only political goods.

These states--and the commensurate bodies politic conceptualized as nations--are necessarily different from ancient or renaissance city states. The republican project (which we now know ironically as the Republican *tradition*) seeks, Arendt suggests, to regain some of the desirable features of such ancient publics within the institutional context of modern states. Crucially, this project seeks to recover a positive value on politics--participation in public deliberation about public goods. Indeed, Arendt is at pains to show that participation in public life can be itself a good, a source of pleasure and satisfaction. "...the Americans knew that public freedom consisted in having a share in the public business, and that the activities connected with this business by no means constituted a burden but gave those who discharged them in public a feeling of happiness they could acquire nowhere else."<sup>54</sup> This distinguishes her view, and republicanism generally, from liberalism: "Thus it has become almost axiomatic even in political theory to understand by political freedom not a political phenomenon, but on the contrary, the more or less free range of non-political activities which a given body politic will permit and guarantee to those who constitute it."<sup>55</sup>

The great enemy of publicness and the foundation of stable republican institutions, Arendt suggests, is not instability or incoherence per se. It is, rather, "the

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<sup>53</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 159.

<sup>54</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 119.

<sup>55</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 30. This is the insight Bonnie Honig follows up in her helpful *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

social.” Canovan points out two strands in Arendt’s idiosyncratic usage of this term.<sup>56</sup> Most crucially, Arendt refers to the realm of “housekeeping,” the *oikos* enlarged (even including very large scale economic activity). Secondly, though, she also refers to “high society,” and intends comment on the characteristic vices and over-reliance on manners, and it is in this sense that society lives on in the general pursuit of social connection. Pitkin has extended these observations, showing further Arendt’s criticism of the social vices of lying and hypocrisy, and the unfreedom imposed on someone who is forced by society to appear not for her own acts but as a representative (a woman, for example, or a Jew).<sup>57</sup> Above all, Pitkin suggests, Arendt’s category of “the social” is cognate with Heidegger’s *das Man*. Both refer to people in general, as distinct from specific others. But where Heidegger’s *das Man* is an ontological universal (not unlike George Herbert Mead’s “generalized other”), Arendt’s “social” is historically specific. It is the distinctive bearer of mass culture and desire as it emerged in the modern era. “Arendt’s society was to be a historically variable phenomenon, humanly created and maintained in concrete, determinate ways at particular times, and humanly challengeable--not in the mind, by philosophical insight, but in the world created by joint political action.”<sup>58</sup>

Arendt’s usage of “the social” is also connected to the idea of civil society, however, and it shows such society in a much less flattering light than most recent work. “Society,” she writes, is “that curious and somewhat hybrid realm which the modern age interjected between the older and more genuine realms of the public or political on one side and the private on the other.”<sup>59</sup> On this point, Arendt is emphatically distinct from Habermas, who not only links politics more closely to the state, but situates the politically

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<sup>56</sup> Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1974), esp. pp. 105-9; see also her *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) which revises the earlier book on some particulars, but not this one, and which offers a helpful reading of the centrality of problems Arendt addressed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to Arendt’s later work.

<sup>57</sup> Hanna Pitkin, “Conformism, Housekeeping, and the Attack of the Blob: The Origins of Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social,” in B. Honig: *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*.

<sup>58</sup> Pitkin, “Conformism, Housekeeping...,” p. 73.

<sup>59</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 122.

significant public sphere as “the public sphere of civil society.”<sup>60</sup> The eighteenth century salons and coffee houses he idealizes elicit a much more ambivalent response from Arendt. It is not that Arendt fails to recognize the pleasures of sociability, or that she never considers that successful public action like that of the American founders might require social supports. The issue, rather, is freedom. Civil society is first and foremost a realm of freedom *from* politics. But public freedom is freedom *in* politics. It is in this connection that Arendt praises Montesquieu for maintaining “that power and freedom belonged together; that, conceptually speaking, political freedom did not reside in the I-will but in the I-can.”<sup>61</sup>

Real freedom, then, consists of freedom to enter into public life. This is a space of appearances, and in this space, Arendt echoes John Adams, people are motivated by “the passion for distinction.” Republics thus share more spirit than Montesquieu suggested with monarchies, in which honor is a driving pursuit. The virtue of the passion for distinction Adams called “emulation” or the “desire to excel another,” and the vice he called “ambition,” which aims at distinction on the basis of power (that is, domination by force) rather than achievement. These, Arendt suggested, are indeed the chief virtues and vices of political man.<sup>62</sup>

## VI

Emphasis on the pursuit of distinction immediately recalls Arendt’s central argument, that the public is a realm of plurality, not sameness. For successful collective action, for solidarity achieved through public life, “homogeneity of past and origin, the decisive principle of the nation-state, is not required.”<sup>63</sup> What is required, it would appear, is (a) the presence of other people, (b) the capacity for communication with those people, and (c) the eagerness to pursue distinction though achievement. Prior

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<sup>60</sup> Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, *passim*.

<sup>61</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 150.

<sup>62</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 119.

<sup>63</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 174.

institutional arrangements of either private life (e.g. property) or public life (e.g. the agora) may facilitate public action, but it is hard to see Arendt regarding them as conditions. To do so would violate her basic understanding of action itself, and of natality.

Indeed, she argues that political action “may be started in isolation and decided upon by single individuals for very different motives,” but it “can be accomplished only by some joint effort in which the motivation of single individuals ...no longer counts. ... The joint effort equalizes very effectively the differences in origin as well as in quality.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, the private (and social) characteristics of political actors lose their significance in their shared public undertakings. Those actors themselves--and certainly their motivations--may even be remade. At its most dramatic, their political action can found completely new political institutions that were not even foreseen by their creators at the beginning of their revolutionary action. This is the power of promises as a central component of political action, that--albeit only on extraordinary occasions--people may triumph over the reduction of politics to mere struggles and the consequent debasement of public life.

It is hard, then, to accept Villa’s reading of Arendt’s anxiety over the ways in which modernity compromises public life as an argument against attempting new beginnings, or in favor of resistance as the only responsible political stance. While political action takes place in the space of appearances between people, and depends on publicness, it does not depend on the authority of any particular body politic, or the coherence of any existing public sphere. Indeed, “no revolution ever succeeded [and] few rebellions ever started, so long as the authority of the body politic was truly intact. Thus, from the very beginning, the recovery of ancient liberties was accompanied by the [attempted] reinstatement of lost authority and lost power.”<sup>65</sup> But, in a stronger sense,

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 155.

“authority, as we once knew it, which grew out of the Roman experience of foundation and was understood in the light of Greek political philosophy, has nowhere been re-established.”<sup>66</sup> Not even, Arendt suggests, by the revolution that came closest, that in the United States. But at the same time, she refuses to read this as a sign of closure, rather than a return to a basic if problematic openness: “For to live in a political realm with neither authority nor the concomitant awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power, means to be confronted anew, without religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of behavior, by the elementary problems of human living-together.”<sup>67</sup>

We confront these “elementary problems of human living-together” with more or less help from our historical inheritance and sociological context. Confronting them, though, we always have the opportunity to act in public, in communication and sometimes contest with each other, and to try to give institutional form to the public life we achieve.

We achieve the power to act successfully, to create beyond our individual capacities or intentions, by our ability to make promises to each other. This is the elementary joining-together that confronts the elementary problems of human living-together. “The grammar of action: action is the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men; and the syntax of power: that power is the only human attribute which applies solely to the worldly in-between space by which men are mutually related, combine in the act of foundation by virtue of the making and the keeping of promises, which, in the realm of politics, may well be the highest human faculty.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> “What Is Authority,” in *Between Past and Future*, p. 141.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *On Revolution*, p. 175.