

POLITICS, DEMOCRACY AND THE SOCIAL QUESTION

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Abstract

The object of the paper is to discuss Arendt's concept of politics, as completely distinct from the concept of social, and her concept of democracy. I argue, on referring namely to Claude Lefort's analysis, that the concept of politics was developed by Arendt in opposition to her concept of totalitarianism, in which certainly there is its value. However, it does not take in account the complexity of the idea and real development of modern democracy. In some respects, Arendt's concept of democracy is very radical, even revolutionary, while in other respects it is conservative and even reactionary. I argue that modern democracy can not be conceived only as a purely political phenomenon, but also as a social world of relations governed by – to use Tocqueville's expression – the principle of «equality of conditions». Therefore, it does not seem either possible or desirable to separate democratic politics from the “social question”. But it is important to understand that the latter, in turn, should not be separated from the free exercise of political rights, legal conflicts of interests and open public debates. Thus, I assume that democracy needs a larger concept of politics than the one Arendt proposed, a concept which, in a way, includes the «social question» without by no means betraying the importance of civic freedom. Such a concept was proposed by Lefort for whom politics is primordially a projection of a whole «form of society».

Keywords: politics, democracy, totalitarianism, modernity, social question, revolution, form of society.

Is Arendt's concept of politics suitable to explain the contemporary condition of democracy? Can it provide us – and it is certainly not the same question – with a regulating idea of what democracy (democratic politics) should be? Is it in concordance with the modern meaning of democracy? Or, maybe, with a post-modern one? I will try to answer these questions, although the answer can be neither simple nor unequivocal. The relation between Arendt's concept of politics and what we usually mean by democracy – or, at least, by modern democracy – is particularly ambiguous. In some respects, her concept of politics is extremely democratic, while in other regards it is clearly undemocratic. It presents, indeed, a curious mixture of approving and disapproving, progressive

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and reactionary attitude towards the reality of modern democracy and towards its very idea.

In my analysis, I will refer especially to the thought of Claude Lefort. The confrontation of his thought to that of Arendt seems to me both natural and instructive: the two authors are known as critics of totalitarianism, classics of the reflection on the totalitarian phenomenon, but also as those who devoted most of their attention to rethinking what politics is and the proper meaning of the political itself. There are, no doubt, many similarities between their ways of thinking, namely between the ways in which they conceived and criticized totalitarianism. But the differences between their approaches are equally striking, especially as to what exactly politics is and, consequently, as to the meaning of modern democracy. Lefort was perfectly aware of these similarities and differences as well – he expressed it in a text devoted to Hannah Arendt, «Hannah Arendt et la question du politique», in his *Essais sur le politique, XIX–XX siècles*¹. Subscribing, to a large extent, to her concept and criticism of totalitarianism, he marks there his distance to her concept of politics, revealing its anti-modern and, *in fine*, anti-democratic character. According to Lefort, what is troubling in Arendt's thought and what, finally, marks its failure is its lack of interest in the process of modern democracy, or its incapacity to think it out. Is Lefort right? In fact, his remarks on Arendt's concept of politics are very scarce. Let us reconstruct the main lines of this concept, following Lefort as far as it is possible, but going beyond his statements.

Lefort is certainly right in emphasizing the link between Arendt's concept of politics and what she defined as totalitarianism. Strictly speaking, Arendt's concept of politics was elaborated in the exact opposition to her concept of totalitarianism. In her view, totalitarianism meant, all in all, a dissolution, a suppression of politics.² Certainly, totalitarianism can be seen as the supremacy of politics over all other spheres of life, as an extreme politicisation of society and of privacy itself. But such an extreme politicisation is paradoxically tantamount to a complete depoliticisation, to the elimination of politics as such, or as a specific domain of activity. In Arendt's interpretation, totalitarian policies, suppressing the difference between the individual, society and the state, submitting all spheres of social and private life to the ideological central power, resulted in fact from the victory of the social over the political. In other words, totalitarianism would be an extreme, but logical consequence of the emergence of mass society, preoccupied much more by economical issues than by freedom³. From that Arendt draws the conclusion that the most important, if not the only, guarantee against the totalitarian deviation would consist in maintaining the radical distinction between the social sphere, defined by labor and production, and the politics, defined by free action, autonomous from any necessities.⁴ This means in particular that politics should have nothing to do with the so called social question, or the question of socio-economic emancipation and distributive justice. In exactly this point Lefort, although broadly sharing Arendt's views as to the nature of totalitarianism, as to the disappearance of politics within it and the necessity of

the autonomy of politics in a non-totalitarian regime, apparently does feel no sympathy to her position.

Before, however, considering the essential points of the divergence between the two authors, let's examine Arendt's concept of politics in the light of what we usually mean by modern democracy – regardless of what Lefort himself says in the matter.

On the one hand or considered at a certain level, Arendt's concept of politics coincides with the idea of radical democracy. First of all, Arendt emphasizes, at the same time, freedom and equality as fundamental conditions of political activity – exactly in the way the theorists of democracy emphasize them as the conditions and main values of any democratic practice. Moreover, in agreement with many democratic theories, Arendt underlines the «artificial», constructed, non-natural character of equality: men are not born as equals, but the art of politics – of democracy – is to treat them as equals, provided they are citizens, and to assure them the legal conditions to act as if they were equals. In other words, the specificity and the very ends of politics – of democracy – are to provide all individuals with the opportunity to *become* equal.⁵ *A fortiori*, Arendt's concept of freedom is in a perfect agreement with the democratic, and not only the liberal, notion of it. She conceives freedom as being essentially freedom *to* – and not simply freedom *from*, i. e. as a positive, and not only negative freedom, as a freedom of acting, of involving oneself in the public sphere, a freedom to co-create the common life. In the end, freedom is for her – as for all democrats – the synonym of self-government. Thanks to this freedom, possible only in being-with-others, individuals transcend themselves or their own particularity, entering the light of the common and public. Although – and this is the liberal moment of Arendt's thought – this transcending of oneself by entering the dimension of the common does not – should not – suppress the exceptionality of the individual and the differences which separate him/her from others.⁶ To sum up, Arendt's concept of freedom, fundamental to her concept of politics, combines the republican and liberal moments comprised in the modern concept of democratic freedom.

Arendt's concept of politics corresponds not only with the general democratic intuitions, but with the very radical ones, when she insists on the necessity, for the authentic politics, to avoid and/or eliminate the difference between the governors and the governed. In other words, when her concept of politics coincides with the idea of a participatory and direct democracy, opposed to a merely representative, parliamentary, or indirect one. As it is known, Arendt criticized the party system founding the modern parliamentarism. In her eyes, only the spontaneous public activity of all concerned citizens fulfils the conditions of the authentic politics, or authentic freedom.⁷ As model examples of such politics and such freedom, she evoked the ancient Greek *polis*, namely the Athenian⁸, but also – in her book on revolution – the *soviets*, which appeared not only at the beginning of the October revolution, before they were broken by the Leninist party, but also during the Hungarian revolution of 1956, which all expressed the popular will of self-government⁹.

Thus, the last point of the coincidence between Arendt's concept of politics and the modern idea of democracy is the positive evaluation of the very idea of revolution – conceived not as a violent change in power, but as a new beginning, the inauguration of a new order of freedom and equality.¹⁰ Insofar Arendt appreciates the revolutionary phenomenon and, what is more, the liberal and egalitarian ideas as the mainspring of revolution, she speaks in favor of modernity with its logics of liberal and democratic emancipation. And it is easy to show that, even when she refers to the idealized ancient Greek model of politics, she perceives it through the prism of the quite modern categories of individual rights and democratic public sphere. Similarly, when she evaluates a critical, innovating, even disruptive – revolutionary – attitude towards tradition, which she applies to Greeks, it is easy to show that, in fact, she prizes in this way an essential moment of what can be called the project of modernity.

However, on the other hand or considering the problem at another level, Arendt's concept of politics appears as decidedly anti-modern and anti-democratic. And the very source of such character of it is just the radical distinction, even the opposition, between the political and social spheres. In fact, while Arendt's concept of politics corresponds with, and even radicalizes the modern idea of democracy understood as a purely political regime, it completely fails in understanding and explaining the modern democracy in its social dimension. Meanwhile, since the classical analysis of democracy by Tocqueville, the latter has been understood at once as a political regime and as a whole form of society, based on the principle of «equality of conditions»¹¹. The equality of conditions is not only the equality of political rights, but also that of opportunities, which include the economical dimension. In other terms, democracy in its modern meaning embraces the «social question» – which, according to Arendt, can only corrupt the free political practice and, ultimately, lead to totalitarianism.¹²

From this point of view, it is certainly not by accident if Arendt's favourite reference remains the ancient *polis*, in which the economic dimension of social life was reduced to the private sphere, clearly distinct from the public or the political one. Certainly, Arendt is far from assuming that social-economic inequalities are quite unimportant to the right functioning of politics, or for freedom. But she states that inequalities at this level, or the poverty, should be overcome by merely technical means which have nothing to do with the authentic politics. Therefore, she states that the «social question» should never become a political one.¹³

Such a statement is obviously in conflict with the real process of the modern democratization, through which the autonomy of politics has always been relative, always related to some socio-economic interests of different groups and classes. Moreover, it is in conflict with the very modern idea of democracy insofar the latter implies the ideas of emancipation and justice through the «equality of conditions».

What are the reasons of such discordance? Is it due to Arendt's hostility to the modern? Still, as I have tried to point out, her concept of politics is very modern in some respects. Even her critique of the modern

historicism or belief in progress seems hyper-modern rather than conservative since it is lead at the name of freedom and novelty of event. No, it is not the modern spirit that lacks in Arendt's thought. What lacks there, is rather the sensibility to the social in all its complexity. In fact, the distinction, turning into opposition, that Arendt establishes between the social and the political is very doubtful and can be said quite arbitrary. Her concept of the social is incompatible with both Marxian and liberal interpretations of our every day activities, especially work. She oversees the part of action or *praxis* comprised in the social-economic sphere. In particular, her concept of labor – as serving only to maintain and reproduce life – neglects both the creative dimension of any acting on nature and the importance of human relation tied up when working together. In short, Arendt's error in conceiving the social is to neglect the part of freedom contained in it, or its capacity to transcend itself, to turn into politics, namely into political conflicts.

Correspondingly, her main error in thinking politics would be to conceive it as a kind of Heaven free from any social burden, and so from any substance. One could conclude that her concept of political is much more esthetical than ethical. Free creation and beauty would be more essential for political action than any substantial collective goal – quite like in Nietzsche.

With a kind of heroism, Arendt looks for «purity», for «pure» freedom and politics, refusing to consider the obscure, social and material origins of action and the links between all spheres of human life and activity. At a deeper, ontological level, she refuses dialectics, preferring non-dialectical oppositions which prevent her from thinking the interconnections or correlations between the social and the political.

In all these respects, Lefort's political philosophy is very different and much more in concordance both with the real process and with the very idea of the modern democracy. Lefort manages it thanks to the distinction – absent from Arendt's reflection – between the politics (*la politique*) and the political (*le politique*). Democracy, in opposition to totalitarianism, implies – as in Arendt's views – a separation between politics and society, or between the sphere of political power in the narrow sense, and the spheres of economy, law, science, culture, education, etc. But this separation is a result of the previous constitution of democracy as a form of society – and this constitution itself is *political*.¹⁴ Within the political constitution of democracy as a form of society, the special role of politics is to represent society to itself. Political sphere in a narrow sense and, more particularly, political conflicts between different actors and groups, or parties, become in this way a stage on which citizens can represent, recognize and seek to solve their vital problems. So, the border between politics and the social sphere is permeable: all social, cultural and economic conflicts can and should appear on the political stage. And, *vice versa*, politics can, and should, act on different social phenomena and problems, providing an interpretation and seeking a solution to them. Within democracy as a form of society politics and the social sphere are then separate but necessarily interconnected. This interconnection is assured by the fact

that in democracy power is – as Lefort puts it – an «empty place», i. e. nobody can identify himself with the power or dominate the political stage for a long time.¹⁵

There is no space here to present the whole concept of democracy and of politics/political elaborated by Lefort. I refer to his thought only to outline a different possibility, comparing to that of Arendt's, of perceiving the status of politics and its relationship to the social. A way of thinking which is certainly no less anti-totalitarian than the one proposed by Arendt, but is unambiguously pro-modern and pro-democratic. I do not conceal that this perspective, or Lefort's position, is more appealing to me.

However, the last point is to find out whether such a position can be, today, more than a moral postulation. Is a theory such as that of Lefort still capable of explaining the dynamics of contemporary societies and the status of democratic activities within them? In fact, there are many signs of crisis or retreat of democracy nowadays, also in so called «advanced democratic countries». It is legitimate to ask if, in our globalizing, post-communist and post-modern world, where politics seems helpless against economics, turning into a mere spectacle, where the party system is broadly contested and where political activity is regenerating mainly in the form of local movements; where differences between individuals are easily accepted, but as easily turned into new inequalities – if in such a world the ambiguous, democratic/antidemocratic concept of politics proposed by Arendt is not more relevant than the really democratic and modern Lefort's vision.

References

- ¹ Lefort, C. (1986) *Essais sur le politique. XIXe et XXe siècles*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- ² See: Arendt, H. (1951) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.
- ³ Ibid. See also: Arendt, H. (1963) *On Revolution*.
- ⁴ See: Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*.
- ⁵ See: *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ See namely *The Human Condition*.
- ⁹ *On Revolution*.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Tocqueville, A. de (1835/1840) *De la démocratie en Amérique*.
- ¹² See: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *On Revolution*.
- ¹³ *On Revolution*.
- ¹⁴ See: Lefort, C. (1981) *L'invention démocratique. Les limites de la domination totalitaire* (1981); Lefort, (1986), op. cit., particularly the essay *La question de la démocratie*.
- ¹⁵ See namely: Lefort, *La question de la démocratie*.