

ARENDR, LYOTARD  
AND THE POLITICAL REALM

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Abstract

In *The Lectures on Kant's Political Theory*, Hannah Arendt argues that Kant's *Critique of Judgment* contains the seeds of a political theory. She relates the reflective judgment of taste to political judgment and action. Action, as the quality of freedom in the world of appearances, is the condition of plurality. Arendt examines the political implications of Kant's critical thinking and the thought that critical thinking presupposes universal communicability. This communicability implies, according to Arendt, a concrete sociability. Kant's *sensus communis* would refer to an empirical community, a public realm of a plurality of social individuals, rising up spontaneously, provisionally and unexpectedly.

The task of the political in Lyotard's view, however, is to testify to the *différend*, i. e. to suppressed genres of discourse. This crucial heterogeneity is ontologically inherent in communication because in expressing one phrase you deny all other phrases to become manifest and therefore they cannot be taken into account. Every linkage, every phrase, is a triumph of one genre above all other genres of discourse. We shall argue that the different conceptions of Arendt's and Lyotard's acknowledgement for «difference» and plurality lead to different views on the public sphere and being-in-community. According to Lyotard, the Kantian *sensus communis* is a suprasensible Idea, a touchstone, without attaching any reality to it. In making the *sensus communis* concrete, the universal shareability, lying at the basis of this *sensus communis*, would blatantly annul the differences between people. Therefore, Lyotard wants to dismantle the illusion of a concrete community in order to avoid one genre wronging the other by solving the *différend* in the idiom of only one of both parties, i. e. one genre becoming totalitarian and no longer testifying to the different genres. Because Lyotard radicalizes the *différend* in this way, the *sensus communis* can only be a suprasensible Idea and not a concrete sociability as Arendt presupposes. In rethinking the public sphere, this paper ratifies the importance of Arendt's elaboration of the public realm as a concrete community in contrasting it with Lyotard's transcendental view on togetherness.

**Keywords:** Hannah Arendt, Lyotard, Kant, political theory, plurality, communication.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper highlights the importance of Hannah Arendt's subversive interpretation of the Kantian *sensus communis*, providing a feasible background to criticise the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. In *The Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt argues that Kant's *Critique of Judgment* contains the seeds of a political theory, in relating the reflective judgment of taste to political judgment and action. Arendt examines the political implications of Kant's critical thinking and the idea that this thinking presupposes universal communicability which implies, according to Arendt, a concrete sociability. Hence Kant's *sensus communis* would refer to an empirical community of social individuals, rising up spontaneously, provisionally and unexpectedly. Not only does this 'community sense' make political, historical and moral judgments possible, it also proves that we are essentially and naturally social beings.

However, the task of the political in Lyotard's view is to 'testify' to the *différend*, i. e. to the oppressed genres of discourse or to a conflict that cannot be resolved by a dominant idiom, due to the absence of a common language. Lyotard contends there is always a *différend* between two phrases, because only one of them can become actualized. As a result, the heterogeneity of genres of discourse becomes ontologically inherent in communication. For Lyotard, politics is about acknowledging the *différend* as if in politics it would only be enough to raise awareness for this *différend*.

What centrally distinguishes Arendt from Lyotard is that the latter conceives the *sensus communis* as a transcendental Idea, a Kantian touchstone. Therefore, Lyotard criticises Arendt's view of a *sensus communis* as a real, empirical society. Although she indeed provides an unusual<sup>1</sup> Kantian interpretation of the power of judgment and the *sensus communis*, she does not forget the quest for a public, political space. That is why we will propose a political and socially manageable alternative of the *sensus communis* by dint of Hannah Arendt's view. As she claims, the affective community cannot be thoroughly meaningful if this community is perceived exclusively as an Idea since it is only in communicating with each other in a public sphere that objects and our actions become meaningful.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Arendt's Reading of the Sensus Communis

In her Kant Lectures, Arendt is mainly interested in elaborating Kant's notion of politics. Since Kant has never written a political philosophy, Arendt searches the origins of his political philosophy where we least anticipated it. She claims that Kant elaborates it in his Third Critique and principally in the characteristics of the power of judgment. This reinterpretation of the Third Critique is markedly an elaboration of the Arendtian idea on politics as an amalgam of speech and action in a space of appearances or a public space. It is vitally important that Arendt is likely to contradict the traditional representation of judging in solitude between me and myself. Quite the reverse, the activity of judging and politics is

constituted by the sound concept of plurality. It is not 'man' inhabiting the earth, but 'men' (the Romans, the political people par excellence, would say 'inter homines esse' which underlines the interdependency of men). Plurality is the condition of human activity, because we are all the very same in being human without ever being identical to one another. Judging is specifically a political activity, rooted in the *sensus communis*, a community sense, as even the ancient Greeks knew.<sup>3</sup> But Kant's novelty lies in the fact that the revelation of the common world is given by a totally subjective phenomenon, that is to say taste. As Arendt claims:

«The most surprising aspect ... is that common sense, the faculty of judgment and of discriminating between right and wrong, should be based on the sense of taste».<sup>4</sup>

Hence, the most private of the senses becomes the vehicle of the faculty of judgment, which is based on general communicability. How must we comprehend this seemingly paradoxical situation?<sup>5</sup> In order to explain this we must focus on the notion of the spectator and the most seminal characteristics of this spectator, which are imagination, communicability and plurality.<sup>6</sup>

In judging, two mental operations occur which are the operation of imagination and the operation of reflection. The operation of imagination prepares the object for the operation of reflection, which is the actual activity of judging. Our imagination can make objects present in order to judge objects that are no longer present. «Imagination, Kant says, is the faculty of making present what is absent, the faculty of re-presentation. ... If I represent what is absent, I have an image in my mind – an image of something I have seen and now somehow reproduce»<sup>7</sup>, what Kant names representative thinking. Kant explores this faculty of imagination not only in his Third Critique but also in the First Critique. This very same faculty of imagination, which provides schemata for cognition in the First Critique, provides examples for judgment in the Third Critique. These examples are the go-cart [*Gängelband*] of judgment<sup>8</sup>, guiding us in our judgment whereby it acquires exemplary validity. «The judgment has exemplary validity to the extent that the example is rightly chosen».<sup>9</sup> In order to make our judgment valid we must take into account the thoughts of others, what Kant names the *erweiterte Denkungsart*. Due to this enlarged mentality<sup>10</sup>, as the capacity to put ourselves in everyone else's place, judgment is the most political faculty of a human kind. The faculty that makes this enlargement possible is called imagination. «To think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one's imagination to go visiting».<sup>11</sup> The enlarged mentality is the condition for impartiality, a standpoint which makes abstraction from our private interests.

«I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of em-

pathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion». <sup>12</sup>

The ability to judge is consequently an ability whereby mutual assent is possible. Due to this, the subjective determination of one's own judgment will be exceeded and the possibility to impartiality, to a universal position will be accomplished. The two operations of imagination and reflection establish the condition of impartiality, a disinterested delight or an interest in the *uninteressiertes Wohlgefallen*. The disinterestedness, the disposing of your subjective and private interests is crucial for acquiring impartiality. Kantian critical thinking presupposes to take other points of view into consideration in order to aspire to impartiality. The more points of view someone can imagine, the greater the capacity for representative thinking. Interestingly, Arendt does not understand *erweitertes Denken* as the result of rational abstraction of our own or other people's contexts as this applies for Habermas. For him, communication is about reaching a universal judgment through rational argumentation. In contrast, Arendt appeals to the power of imagination to enlarge our thinking in which she takes into account the differences amongst people and their taste. Unlike Habermas, Arendt does not wish to emphasize the cognitive aspect of political judgments because judgments are equipped with an exemplary validity and not a scientific validity. The exemplary validity wants to inspire and convince not by argumentation or proof but by examples, where the singular, particular event is linked to the universal.

This condition of impartiality and of disinterestedness is completely reserved for the spectator, the one who is not involved, contrary to the partial actor participating in the spectacle and searching for doxa or fame. The advantage of the spectator is that he perceives the spectacle as a whole because he can take enough distance from it due to his faculty of imagination. This imagination, given an immediate political role by Arendt, is necessary for making a reflective judgment whereby given, universal rules are absent. Imagination plays a political role for it serves the political representation of the thoughts of others. In *The Crisis in Culture*, Arendt asserts «[t]hat the capacity to judge is a specifically political ability in exactly the sense denoted by Kant, namely, the ability to see things not only from one's own point of view but in the perspective of all of those who happen to be present» <sup>13</sup>. Therefore, the universal viewpoint is occupied, rather by the spectator because it is he who can judge the whole with an enlarged mentality. The condition sine qua non for the spectator to be occupied with is the communicability of his judgments, which creates the space of appearances without which no subject could appear at all. Therefore the public space is inhabited by spectators <sup>14</sup> and not by actors.

So far, I have exclusively spoken of a universal viewpoint, such as Kant would presume<sup>15</sup>, but Arendt does not endorse this universality. The approach taken by Arendt is quite different from Kant's expression because Arendt uses the word 'general' instead of claiming a Kantian universal position. Arendt contends that «[t]he greater the reach – the larger the realm in which the enlightened individual is able to move from standpoint to standpoint – the more 'general' will be his thinking»<sup>16</sup>, whereas Kant points out to a way of thinking that «... indicates a man with a *broadened way of thinking* if he overrides the private subjective conditions of his judgment, into which so many others are locked, as it were, and reflects on his own judgment from a *universal standpoint*...»<sup>17</sup>. Hence, for Arendt, impartiality is not the result of some higher standpoint that would actually settle the dispute by being altogether above the *mêlée*<sup>18</sup> whereby the different thoughts of others are reduced to one universal standpoint. Arendt prefers a *specific* or *special* validity, that is to say not universal, in contrast to a Kantian universal validity.<sup>19</sup> As a result, the concept of impartiality determines a general standpoint. Obviously, this is not strictly conform to the Kantian transcendental philosophy but the difference with Kant does not lie in the aspect that Arendt would not perceive the *sensus communis* as a transcendental Idea since she stresses the *possible* thoughts of others and not the actual ones; she differs in assigning a *general* standpoint to impartiality and not a Kantian universal standpoint. In this way, she contributes to the elaboration of a public, political domain renouncing a universal reason in order to maintain the differences between and the uniqueness of people. As such, hypothetically speaking, her rapprochement to generality may thus function as a renunciation from a universal validity constituted by a universal reason and cognitive propositions. No doubt, Kant would never assume concepts and cognitive propositions lying at the basis of an aesthetic judgment, but his adherence to a universal position indicates an internal tension between his theory of judgment and his exposition of the concept of history as a perpetual progress towards freedom or peace, as Arendt also mentions in her Kant Lectures.<sup>20</sup> This becomes especially clear when we arrive at the closing paragraph of the Kant Lectures.

«In Kant himself there is this contradiction: Infinite Progress is the law of the human species; at the same time, man's dignity demands that he be seen (every single one of us) in his particularity and, as such, be seen – but without any comparison and independent of time – as reflecting mankind in general. In other words, the very idea of progress – if it is more than a change in circumstances and an improvement of the world – contradicts Kant's notion of dignity. It is against human dignity to believe in progress».<sup>21</sup>

Arendt is concerned with human worth and dignity which demands the removal of metaphysical fallacies, in particular the metaphysical idea of history as a perpetual progress, because «[j]udgment is rendered not by the collective destiny of mankind but by 'man alone', the judging spectator

who stands before nature unencumbered by metaphysical dreams and illusions»<sup>22</sup>.

In matters of politics everything depends on publicity which is the key to a political thinking based on representative thinking, general communicability and a sense shared by all of us. Men are interdependent not only for their bodily needs but also for their mental faculties such as judging. As a result the capacity of judging is dependent upon the existence of other men and implies communicability in order to make a valid judgment.

«For men in the plural, and hence for mankind ... it is a natural vocation... to communicate and speak one's mind».<sup>23</sup>

What is constituted in judgments is the world as a communicative, social world. In judging something beautiful, you demand that everyone ought to judge the object beautiful.<sup>24</sup> The idea of a *sensus communis*, a universal sense (*Gemeinsinn*) as a sort of sixth sense, is presupposed by our judgment of taste as a necessary condition for the universal communicability of our feelings.

«[W]e must [here] take *sensus communis* to mean the idea of a sense *shared* [by all of us], i. e., a power to judge that in reflecting takes account (a priori), in our thought, of everyone else's way of presenting [something], in order *as it were* to compare our own judgment with human reason in general. ... Now we do this as follows: we compare our judgment not so much with the actual as rather with the merely possible judgment of others, and [thus] put ourselves in the position of everyone else, merely by abstracting from the limitations that [may] happen to attach to our own judgment. ... Now perhaps this operation of reflection will seem rather too artful to be attributed to the ability we call *common* sense. But in fact it only looks this way when expressed in abstract formulas. Intrinsically nothing is more natural than abstracting from charm and emotion when we seek a judgment that is to serve as a universal rule».<sup>25</sup>

One must have 'common' sense in order to make a judgment of taste. Kant says «the beautiful, interests [us] only [when we are] in society... A man abandoned by himself on a desert island would adorn neither his hut nor his person...»<sup>26</sup>. Providing that judgments always reflect upon others and their taste and takes their possible judgments into account, Kant can claim that taste *is* a *sensus communis*, a shared sense.<sup>27</sup> Although he contends that man's urge to sociability is natural and is hence, a property of his humanity<sup>28</sup>, «[t]his interest, which we indirectly attach to the beautiful through our inclination to society and which is therefore empirical, is, however, *of no importance for us here*, since we must concern ourselves only with what may have reference a priori, even if only indirectly, to a judgment of taste»<sup>29</sup>. Although Kant is not likely to devote attention in elaborating this sociability within the scope of his Third Critique, Arendt is primordially interested in society and in a political, public space of appearances. Therefore she takes one step further in examining the reflective judgment of taste in relation to this society whereby she gives the *sensus*

communis an anthropological mark. It is necessary to constitute a 'real' community, for men can live nor judge outside this society. Providing that the political implication of critical thinking is communicability, Arendt can assert that «communicability obviously implies a community of men who can be addressed and who are listening and can be listened to»<sup>30</sup>. She offers a certainly more apparent divergence from the Kantian transcendental view when she presumes that the community sense is not endowed with supersensible qualities.

«Judgment, and especially judgments of taste, always reflects upon others and their taste, takes their possible judgments into account. This is necessary because I am human and cannot live outside the company of men. I judge as a member of this community and not as a member of a supersensible world...»<sup>31</sup>

For this assumption, which deviates severely from Kant's interpretation of the *sensus communis* as a transcendental Idea, Arendt has experienced severe critique, not in the least from the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, which we will explore in the next paragraph.

### 3. Lyotard's reading of the *Sensus Communis*

In his article *Survivant* Lyotard criticises Arendt because, for her, a civil society can produce spontaneously empirical modes of organisations. Providing that Arendt perceives in this capacity the echo of a concrete power of judgment shared by everyone, togetherness can constitute a political and social alternative.<sup>32</sup> For Lyotard this is an erroneously sociological reading of the Kantian *sensus communis*. In conceiving it as a concrete and social consensus of «we», Arendt risks the elimination of other voices, which is a logical reaction of Lyotard to Arendt, since he is so adhered to the *différend*. In perceiving the *sensus communis* as a regulative idea with an «as-if» character, it becomes an object of a transcendental Idea and not at all an empirical object. This confusion into an experience of the *sensus communis* can lead, according to Lyotard, to a claim to a totalitarian ideology because every consensus or every empirical being-in-community is an uncritical linkage between different phrases for he claims that the communicability is throughout transcendently.<sup>33</sup> I definitely would not force the matter so far as to blame Arendt for pleading totalitarianism for she is, what we can call, the advocate of democratic thinking inasmuch as it preserves the differences among men. Whether Arendt's reading of the *sensus communis* is on the contrary a refreshing approach, is not something Lyotard wants to take into consideration for he contends that we must not query the being-together from the susceptibility of real persons but we must query the *être-ensemble* from the susceptibility of the *non-être*, that what has not yet been articulated.<sup>34</sup> That is why Lyotard will argue in his *Lectures d'enfance*: «Where Arendt is realistic, Kant is analogist, that is to say *enfantin*»<sup>35</sup>. This means as much as saying that Arendt's concrete sociability cannot testify to the *différend*, while Kant and Lyotard, by perceiving the *sensus communis* as a transcendental as-if



idea, remain critical and are able to respect the *différend*. But because of our critique on Lyotard – the inescapability of the *différend* – we can perceive in Arendt's political philosophy an important account to the differences among human beings in a well-balanced proportion with the pursuit for shareability. Decisions about taste can be made, but this affective community does not therefore have to be a fixed, determinate given, but rather a sociability which preserves the differences between the self and the other and which leaves open the possibility to connect phrases as to avoid terror. She herself speaks of a «potential agreement» and an «anticipated communication with others with whom I know I must finally come to some agreement»<sup>36</sup>. The hermeneutical approach of Hans-Georg Gadamer will prove very helpful in upgrading Arendt's political interpretation of the *sensus communis*. In Part I of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer claims that Kant «depoliticizes» the idea of *sensus communis*, which formerly had important political and moral connotations. According to Gadamer, Kant's formal and narrowed concept of judgment empties the older, Roman-rooted, conception of the full moral-political content it once had. Kant, as it were, strips «common sense» of the richness of its Roman and thus more political meaning.<sup>37</sup> It is in the motion of 're-politicization' of the *sensus communis* by going back to its original Roman sense that Arendt can read Kant's Third Critique politically. From these different readings of Kant, we can conclude that Arendt has given the most cogent interpretation of the *sensus communis* since she does not give up the quest for a real public space, while Lyotard is more attracted to a transcendental approach which leaves out any empirical interest in a society.

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Myriam Revault d'Alonnes even utters the words «Lecture non académique, non exégétique, non orthodoxe. Lecture 'infidèle' ...» (Revault d'Allones (1991), *Qu'est-ce que juger?* P. 1).
- <sup>2</sup> See: Arendt (1989), *The Human Condition*, p. 14–15.
- <sup>3</sup> Arendt, H. (1977) *The crisis in culture*. In: *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 221: «The Greeks

- called this ability [to judge] φρόνησις, or insight... [T]his judging ... has its roots in what we usually call common sense».
- 4 Arendt (1989), *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p. 64. (Further, this edition will be referred to as *Kant Lectures*.)
- 5 As Arendt says: «The following question arises: if taste is the most private sense, why then should taste be elevated and become a vehicle of the mental faculty of judgment?» (Arendt (1989), *Kant Lectures*, p. 64).
- 6 In his interpretative essay of the *Kant Lectures* (same edition), Ronald Beiner claims that Arendt wrote two theories of judging, the first centering around representative thought and enlarged mentality of political agents, the second focussing on spectatorship and retrospective judgment of historians and storytellers. I would rather presume that Arendt actually never wrote two theories, but that it is more a question of emphasis, because in judging we are both an actor and a spectator. See also: Rancière (2007), *The emancipated spectator*: «We have to acknowledge that any spectator already is an actor of his own story and that the actor also is the spectator of the same kind of story».
- 7 Arendt (1989), *Kant Lectures*, p. 79.
- 8 Kant, I. (1963) *Critique of Pure Reason*. Ttrans. N.K. Smith. New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 151.
- 9 Arendt (1989), *Kant Lectures*, p. 84.
- 10 Arendt rephrases Kant's notion of *erweiterte Denkungsart* as 'enlarged mentality'.
- 11 Arendt (1989), *Kant Lectures*, p. 43.
- 12 Arendt, H. (1977) *Truth and politics*. In: *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 241.
- 13 Arendt (1977), *The crisis in culture*, p. 221.
- 14 We cannot say, as Pythagoras did, 'the' spectator because spectators always exist in the plural.
- 15 See: Kant (1987), *Critique of Judgment*, p. 60, 161–162. (Further, this edition of the *Critique of Judgment* will be referred to as *CJ*.)
- 16 Arendt (1989), *Kant Lectures*, p. 43.
- 17 Kant (1987), *CJ*, p. 161.
- 18 Arendt (1989), *Kant Lectures*, p. 42, paraphrase.
- 19 As Arendt says: «Hence judgment is endowed with a certain specific validity but is never universally valid» (Arendt (1977), *The crisis in culture*, p. 221).
- 20 This paper will not elaborate Kant's concept of history since a more detailed elaboration lies outside our scope.
- 21 Arendt (1989), *Kant Lectures*, p. 77.
- 22 Beiner R. *Interpretative essay*. In: *Kant Lectures*, p. 127.
- 23 Arendt (1989), *Kant Lectures*, p. 40.
- 24 Kant (1987), *CJ*, p. 86.
- 25 *Ibid*, p. 160.
- 26 Arendt (1989), *Kant Lectures*, p. 67.
- 27 Kant (1987), *CJ*, p. 162.
- 28 *Ibid*, p. 163, paraphrase.
- 29 *Ibid*, p. 164. [Italics added.]
- 30 Arendt (1989), *Kant Lectures*, p. 40.
- 31 *Ibid*, p. 67.
- 32 Lyotard (1991), *Survivant*, p. 86–87: «Que la société civile puisse ainsi produire spontanément des modes d'organisations qui protègent les libertés individuelles ou locales concrètes – ici particulièrement importantes parce qu'elles concernent l'enfance – contre une loi décrétée loin de l'expérience... Arendt entend dans cette capacité l'écho d'une puissance de juger concrètement, radicalement, sans théorie ni critère, et qui est partagé par tout esprit. ... l'être-ensemble par lui-même puisse constituer une alternative politique et sociale au totalitarisme...».

- <sup>33</sup> Tacq (1997), *Een hedendaagse Kant. De invloed van Immanuel Kant op contemporaine denkers*, p. 99–100.
- <sup>34</sup> Lyotard (1991), *Survivant*, p. 87.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 69: «Où Arendt est realiste, Kant est analogiste, c'est-à-dire “enfantin”».
- <sup>36</sup> Arendt (1977), *The crisis in culture*, p. 220.
- <sup>37</sup> See: Beiner, R. (1989) *Interpretative Essay*. In: *Kant Lectures*, p. 136; Gadamer, H.-G. (2004) *Sensus communis*. In: *Truth and Method*. London–New York: Continuum, p. 24–29.