

HANNAH ARENDT, REVOLUTION & DEMOCRACY

Master Thesis Political Philosophy

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Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Chapter 1: The Revolutionary Spirit, Modern Politics and Democracy</i>	8
1.1 The Revolutionary Spirit as Constitutive of Modern Politics	9
1.2 Arendt's Sociological Critique of Modern Politics	12
1.3 Arendt's Institutional Critique of Modern Politics	15
<i>Chapter 2: The Deliberative Model of Democracy</i>	19
2.1 Habermas' and Benhabib's Model of Deliberative Democracy	19
2.2 Arendtian Building Blocks for the Deliberativist Project	22
2.3 Arendtian Obstacles in the Deliberativist Project	25
<i>Chapter 3: The Agonistic Model of Democracy</i>	30
3.1 Honig's and Villa's Model of Agonistic Democracy	30
3.2 Arendtian Building Blocks for the Agonistic Project	32
3.3 Arendtian Obstacles in the Agonistic Project	36
<i>Chapter 4: Democratic Theory and the Limits of Arendt's Revolutionary Thought</i>	41
4.1 Arendt's Mediation of the Deliberativist and Agonistic Projects	42
4.2 Arendt's Revolutionary Conception as a Mixed Form of Government	43
4.3 Disenchanted the Radical Democratic Idealism of the Deliberativist and Agonist	46
<i>Conclusion</i>	48
<i>Bibliography</i>	51

INTRODUCTION

“The history of revolutions – from the summer of 1776 in Philadelphia and the summer of 1789 in Paris to the autumn of 1956 in Budapest – which politically spells out the innermost story of the modern age, could be told in parable form as the tale of an age-old treasure which, under the most varied circumstances, appears abruptly, unexpectedly, and disappears again, under different mysterious conditions, as though it were a fata morgana. There exist, indeed, many good reasons to believe that the treasure was never a reality but a mirage, that we deal here not with anything substantial but with an apparition, and the best of these reasons is that the treasure thus far has remained nameless. Does something exist, not in outer space but in the world and the affairs of men on earth, which has not even a name? Unicorns and fairy queens seem to possess more reality than the lost treasure of the revolutions.”

Hannah Arendt¹

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Hannah Arendt’s contribution to the study of revolutions did not simply arise out of a fortuitous curiosity and it is not merely one theme among others in what is often characterized as her highly idiosyncratic thinking. Arendt’s narrative of revolutions, it is said, is of another “moral universe” than the one which characterized her account of totalitarian domination.² The experiences and events which these two concepts imply, totalitarianism at one extreme and revolution on another, might seem to come from different universes but they took place in one and the same modern world. The former represents the destruction, the latter stands for the promise, frailty and potency of modern politics. For Arendt they are modernity’s most important stories to be told. But since totalitarianism is – in her own terms – a radically antipolitical phenomenon, it is equally not an overestimation to regard revolutions and their historiography as the chief inspiration of what Arendt’s conception of modern politics.

Arendt’s narrative of revolutions, moreover, tell us in what sense she shared the modern commitment to democracy. While she never systematically engaged in democratic theory, her political thought in general and narrative of revolutions in particular continues to have a major influence on contemporary democratic theory. This thesis confronts Arendt’s narrative of revolutions and the conception of modern politics that emerges from it with contemporary appropriations of her thought by deliberative and agonistic democrats. The two currents of democratic theory represented by the “deliberativist” on one hand, and the “agonist” on the other, are highly indebted to Arendt. But they present normative models of democracy which are diametrically opposed to each other and give remarkably contradictory interpretations of Arendt’s thought. Whereas deliberativists like Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib offer a

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1963), p. 5 (hereafter referred to as *BPF*)

² Jonathan Schell in the Introduction to Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, [1963] 2006), p. xiv (hereafter referred to as *OR*)

consensus-based model of democracy which stresses the deliberative and moral elements in Arendt's political theory, agonists like Bonnie Honig and Dana R. Villa offer a conflict-based model of democracy stress its agonistic and aesthetic outlook.

Habermas, for instance, contends that Arendt's theory of action "serves to systematically renew the Aristotelian concept of *praxis*."³ He argues that Arendt establishes a connection between communicative action directed at the formation of a "collective will" and the legitimate production and authorization of law in her reading of the American Revolution. This relationship, between communicative power and the genesis of law, is, in turn, at the heart of Habermas' model of deliberative democracy.⁴ Likewise, Benhabib uses the Arendtian notions of "natality, plurality and narrativity" to account for the discursive practices of a politics of justice and identity which is firmly grounded in a universalistic account of morality.⁵ The deliberative practices she valorizes are mediated by the exercise of an Arendtian faculty of judgment. Although Arendt theorized the significance of reflective judgment in matters of politics on the basis of Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment, this capacity for judgment is, as Benhabib puts it, "not just [the capacity to tell] the beautiful from the ugly [...]" but rather *the* moral foundation of Arendt's conception of modern politics.⁶ The exercise of judgment, then, is central to a consensual democratic politics of deliberation, grounded in a thick morality. Habermas and Benhabib highlight the communicative and consensual elements in Arendt's theory of action, realign her politics with both Aristotelian and Kantian moral propositions and ultimately put these traits at the center of deliberative democracy.

By contrast, Bonnie Honig identifies Arendt's account of action with an agonistic spirit that conditions and institutionalizes politics through the agent's (moral) faculties of promising and forgiveness, but never renders it secure from further rupture, contestation and resistance. Rather than the deliberativist focus on the discursive rationalism and proceduralism of legislative, judicial and administrative institutions, the agonistic perspective diagnoses, accommodates and celebrates the "paradox of politics" in multiple "sites of contestation" and

³ Jürgen Habermas, 'Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power', in *Social Research* 1 (44) (1977), p. 7

⁴ Jürgen Habermas *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 147 - 148

⁵ Seyla Benhabib 'Judgment and the Moral Foundations of Politics in Arendt's Thought', in *Political Theory* 1 (16) (1988), pp. 29 -51

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39

dismisses the attempts of deliberativists to resolve this paradox along formalized norms of deliberation and reciprocal dialogue.⁷ From another agonistic point of view, Dana R. Villa reformulates Arendt's peculiar stance towards morality in politics and stresses the aesthetic and performative character of action in its stead. He locates it near Nietzsche's agonistic account of action "beyond good and evil", and insists that Arendt took greatness and glory to be the ultimate political standards. Moral agency, from this theatrical perspective, serves to "tame" the fierce agon that is the essence of politics, but does not provide an independent ground for political action.⁸ In other words, whereas the deliberativist interpretation of Arendt envisions a morality-based politics that *resolves* conflict through deliberative procedures, the agonistic interpretation endorses an aesthetics-based politics that *glorifies* conflict between clashing agents and institutions. This is what constitutes, at the outset, the debate between these opposing democratic currents and their appropriations of Arendt's political thought.

The opposition between deliberative or agonistic political action and their locus in morality or in aesthetics notwithstanding, both the deliberativist and the agonistic projects converge in one important respect, namely, in their appropriation of Arendtian concepts and categories for their own democratic commitments. But I take their singularly democratic readings to address a third opposition or ambiguity in the interpretation Arendt's political theory: as ultimately elitist or as radically popular.⁹ For while Arendt surely was not an anti-democrat, it is by no means clear that her conception of modern politics is distinctively democratic. The problem arises, then, to what extent Arendt's political theory is susceptible to each of these rivaling democratic interpretations. If we take her narrative of revolution as expressing Arendt's own conception of modern politics, then how well do these deliberative and agonistic democratic interpretations stand up to scrutiny? In other words, the central research question I propose to consider is this: *Can the deliberative and agonistic models of democracy do justice to the conception of modern politics that arises out of Hannah Arendt's narrative of revolutions?*

⁷ Bonnie Honig *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law & Democracy* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009); 'The Politics of Agonism: A Critical Response to "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche and the Aestheticization of Politics"' by Dana R. Villa', in *Political Theory* 3 (21) (1993b), pp. 528 – 533

⁸ Dana R. Villa 'Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche and the Aestheticization of Politics', in *Political Theory* 2 (20) (1992), pp. 274 - 308

⁹ The characterization of Arendt's thought as elitist is found, e.g., in the interpretations of Hannah Fenichel Pitkin and Sheldon Woldin. Cf. Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) p. 144

To be sure, theorists engaging with Arendt's work have often departed from as much as they are indebted to her insights. Moreover, the opposing traits in her political theory, on which each interpreter puts his own emphasis in contradistinction to another, all have their undeniable place and salience in her thought. The purpose of my confrontation of Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics with the deliberative and agonistic models, then, is not so much to identify the stronger contenders in the interpretive debate, but rather to illuminate the ambiguities and perplexities and contradictions which make Arendt's thought fascinating but which possibly limit the extent to which it fits the democratic purposes of these theorists. My focus on Arendt's narrative of revolutions is especially appropriate in this context, since Arendt's engagements with democratic theory, expressed in her infamous argument for the "council system", is a direct corollary of her studies on revolution.¹⁰ Confronting Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics with these democratic theories enables us to scrutinize Arendt's ambivalent relationship to democracy.

In the first chapter of this thesis a reconstruction of Arendt's conception of modern politics on the basis of her narrative of revolutions is given, in which I consider whether this conception is distinctively democratic. I do so by presenting "the revolutionary spirit" as constitutive for modern politics, after which an interpretation of Arendt's sociological and institutional critique of modern politics, and its concomitant loss of the "revolutionary spirit" is given. In preliminary fashion, I shall argue that Arendt did not have a distinctively democratic conception of modern politics, but combines it with republican, aristocratic and anarchic-utopian elements.

In the second chapter I confront Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics with the deliberative model of democracy found in the writings of Habermas and Benhabib. An exposition of the deliberativist project is given, after which I consider the crucial building blocks as well as the obstacles Arendt's political theory provides in their endeavors. This enables me to judge the congeniality of the deliberative model with Arendt's own conception of modern politics. In similar vein, chapter three provides an analysis of Honig's and Villa's agonistic challenge to the deliberativist project and their appropriation of Arendt's thought. Should Arendt's insistence on the centrality of deliberation be read within a broader, agonistic conception of politics? I start with exposition of the agonistic model of democracy, and

¹⁰ *OR*, chapter 6

continue with an examination of the points of convergence and departure between Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics and the agonistic project.

In chapter four I shall return to Arendt's narrative of revolution and focus on her proposal of a system of councils or "elementary republics", giving an interpretation of the republican, aristocratic, democratic and anarchic-utopian elements in her conception of modern politics. My purpose is to expose what limitations Arendt's revolutionary conception presents to contemporary democratic theory. For all four theorists I engage with in this thesis, though with their own reservations, endorse the view which portrays Arendt as a "radical democrat".¹¹ I shall defend my contention that the singular characterization of Arendt as a radical democrat is inaccurate, and expose the critical commitment Arendt makes to democracy in combination with other elements and forms of government. In conclusion, the recollection of my main arguments and observations answer the question to what extent the deliberative and agonistic models of democracy do justice to Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics.

¹¹ Cf., e.g., Habermas (1977), p. 11 note 13

CHAPTER 1

THE REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT, MODERN POLITICS AND DEMOCRACY

“Events, past and present, - not social forces and historical trends, nor questionnaires and motivation research, nor any other gadgets in the arsenal of the social sciences – are the true, the only reliable teachers of political scientists, as they are the most trustworthy information for those engaged with politics. Once such a spontaneous uprising as in Hungary has happened, every policy, theory and forecast of future potentialities needs re-examination.”

“Revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning.”

Hannah Arendt¹

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When Hannah Arendt published the second, enlarged edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1958, she wrote in *The Meridian* – her publisher’s newsletter – that the newly included epilogue ‘Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution’ expressed “a certain hopefulness,” and that the events in Hungary “had taught [her] a lesson.”² The hopeful lesson from Hungary was that its people, despite being under the sway of totalitarianism, had demonstrated that genuine revolutionary action was still conceivable in the twentieth century. Arendt believed that the Hungarian people, “in their most glorified hour”,³ showed that modernity’s great revolutionary tradition still stored an alternative set of institutions for government, a system of councils, in which spaces for genuine politics could emerge. Regardless of the brevity of the councils’ existence or the fate of the Hungarian revolt over time, their reality as spontaneous happenings convinced Arendt of the continued political salience of revolutions in the modern age.

After the events in Hungary, she embarked upon a comparative study on the French and American Revolutions which was eventually to become “her most sustained encounter with the social contract tradition”⁴ and would crystallize her conception of modern politics more fully. In particular, her narrative of revolutions provided Arendt with the occasion to touch upon the modern commitment to democracy. In anticipation of the democratic interpretations of her deliberativist and agonistic appropriators, this chapter seeks to answer the question, *What conception of modern politics emerges from Hannah Arendt’s narrative of revolutions, and is this conception distinctively democratic?*

¹ Hannah Arendt, ‘Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution’ in *The Journal of Politics* 1 (20) (1958), p. 8; *OR*, p. 11

² Cited in Jonathan Schell’s Introduction to *OR*, p. xviii

³ Arendt, ‘Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution’ (1958), p. 43

⁴ Villa (1996), p. 60

In order to answer this question, my discussion will first provide an exposition of what Arendt understands to be “the revolutionary spirit” and why this spirit is constitutive of modern politics. Second, an interpretation will be given of Arendt’s *sociological* critique of modern politics as it actually developed into a form of mass politics in the aftermath of the French and American Revolutions. Finally, I will turn to Arendt’s *institutional* critique of modern politics and argue that she embraces democracy as a form of government, but does not make it the distinctive hallmark nor the primary feature of modern politics. The “lost treasure” of the revolutionary tradition with which Arendt seeks to challenge our conception of modern politics contains republican, aristocratic as well as anarchic-utopian elements that complement and contest the modern commitment to democracy. As a result, her revolutionary conception of modern politics, apart from its fruitful insights, raises certain limitations for the endeavors of democratic theorists, which I shall assess in the subsequent chapters.

1.1 The Revolutionary Spirit as Constitutive of Modern Politics

Arendt’s narrative of revolutions centers around her “ultimate effort to understand the most elusive and yet the most impressive facet of modern revolutions, namely, the revolutionary spirit [...]”⁵ She proposes to reconstruct the revolutionary tradition not in terms of an all-encompassing process of historical necessity, but in the mode of “remembrance” about those rare stories of the modern age in which we are concerned with the freedom of political action, that is, with the activity of human life which “engages in founding and preserving political bodies.”⁶ Her strategy of narration is intended to grasp the autonomy of politics and political action – its structure and dimensions – insofar as it is discernible from the spirit of revolutionary events. In Arendt’s political thought, historical reflection and discussion on the phenomenon of revolution enables the appreciation of the spirit of action, and its potential to alter our conception of politics under the conditions of modernity.

That revolutions and the spirit to which they give rise are not only the outstanding instances but constitutive of modern politics in general, is stressed by Arendt when she argues that they “are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning.”⁷ For the problem of politics, in Arendt’s view, *is* the problem of beginning, which strikes at the root of her conviction that the human capacity for political action is, more than

⁵ *OR*, p. 36

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 8 (hereafter referred to as *HC*)

⁷ *OR*, p. 11

any other activity of human life, ontologically conditioned by the fact of natality – Saint Augustine’s great insight that every individual is born in this world with an innate freedom to begin something new.⁸

The problem of beginning presents itself in the course of revolution as it engages in both liberation and the foundation of freedom, for “it is frequently very difficult to say where the mere desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ends, and the desire for freedom as the political way of life begins.”⁹ Liberation, put negatively, only provides the preconditions for the foundation of freedom, such as the protection of civil rights and liberties, but freedom, on Arendt’s account, is specifically understood as “the political way of life.” The revolutionary interplay between liberation and foundation leads, however, to the paradox that a revolution cannot attain its end of foundation without succeeding in liberation, yet the process of liberation itself – “whose fruits are absent of restraint and possession of the power of locomotion” – may frustrate this end to the extent that it degenerates into violence and terror and hence runs counter to the very essence of the power of locomotion and the freedom of beginning and initiation from which it springs.¹⁰

Further, the problem of beginning comes to the surface in the revolutionary act of proclaiming a *constitutio libertatis*, since “[those] who get together to constitute a new government are themselves unconstitutional, that is, they have no authority to do what they have set out to achieve.”¹¹ This paradox of modern politics – which caused Rousseau to remark that “*il faudrait des dieux*” in order to bestow legitimacy on republican foundations – is not confined to the revolutionary momentum of establishing a *constitutio libertatis*, but poses the challenge of founding a body politic whose institutions are stable enough to stand the test of time.¹² On Arendt’s account, the problem of beginning extends itself to the task of securing the authority of the *novus ordo saeculorum* over the course of generations. This task is to be done without resorting to extrapolitical standards, divine sanctions or metaphysical absolutes, but by building up a certain reverence for its revolutionary origins and by promoting its own

⁸ “This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before.” Cf. *HC*, p. 177

⁹ *OR*, p. 23

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 23 - 24

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 176

¹² Cited in *ibid.* p. 176; *ibid.*, p. 224

continuous augmentation, that is, by assuring the power to reconstitute and amend the republic's institutions of public freedom.¹³

The revolutionary spirit, Arendt tells us, carries within itself the problem of beginning as the constitutive paradox of modern politics itself, which arises from the perplexity that:

“if foundation was the aim and the end of revolution, then the revolutionary spirit was not merely the spirit of beginning something new but of starting something permanent and enduring; a lasting institution, embodying this spirit and encouraging it to new achievements, would be self-defeating. From which it unfortunately seems to follow that nothing threatens the very achievements of revolution more dangerously and more acutely than the spirit which has brought them about.”¹⁴

The challenge of modern politics, then, is to keep alive the revolutionary spirit of action without rendering its own achievements futile, without surrendering to the *seeming* irreconcilability of the conservative and innovative sides of the paradox of politics. This means that a republic's stability and durability, according to Arendt, need not be threatened by the “pathos of novelty” that results from its foundation but, to the contrary, may actually nourish its preservation so that genuine political action does not “remain the privilege of the founders [...]”¹⁵ The challenge is to transform the spirit of action born of the exceptional event of revolution into a permanent passion for public freedom and public happiness. This challenge sets the task of establishing and preserving accessible public spaces where this passion can be displayed by a plurality of men and in which their continued, *active* allegiance as members of a body politic is assured.¹⁶

Arendt's narrative of revolutions, however, is as much a diagnosis of the forces that have caused “the failure to remember” and to sustain the revolutionary spirit, as it is a passionate plea to come at a reevaluation of this spirit. She traces the forces that are destructive of this modern spirit of action back to the wake of the French and American Revolutions itself and in her diagnosis of modern society in general. I will now reconstruct Arendt's sociological critique of modern political life as it actually developed from the 18th century revolutions onwards.

¹³ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 103

¹⁴ And this perplexity, “[has] not only produced Robespierre's bewildered and desperate theories about the distinction between revolutionary and constitutional government [...] but has haunted all revolutionary thinking ever since” and was, as Arendt points out, expressed quite dramatically by Jefferson when he wrote: “God forbid we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion.” Cf. *OR*, pp. 224 - 226

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 31 – 32; p. 224

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 226 - 230

1.2 Arendt's Sociological Critique of Modern Politics

The causes of the loss of the revolutionary spirit can be detected from the course of revolutionary events on both sides of the Atlantic, and they are illustrative and anecdotal in Arendt's account of "the fate of the political" under the conditions of modernity. Arendt's sociological critique of modern politics is above all a fierce critique of mass politics and mass democracy, and its inherent hostility to the spirit of political action itself.¹⁷ In this context, her narrative of revolutions points to the emergence of "the social question" in revolutionary France and the role this question was to play in its endless failures to found and preserve public freedom. In no less dismissive terms, Arendt addresses the American shift from public freedom and public happiness – the revolutionary foundation of which succeeded against the background "of the primordial crime upon which the fabric of American society rested", that is, "the terrible truth" of its institution of slavery – to private welfare and material prosperity as antithetical to the revolutionary spirit of action.¹⁸

The social question, which Arendt presents as the problem of poverty, is destructive of the revolution's aim to found freedom, since it introduces the notion of necessity into politics.¹⁹ Yet the latter's "*raison d'être* is freedom, and its field of experience is action,"²⁰ which in Arendt's ontological scheme is juxtaposed to the realm of necessity. Arendt seeks to exclude the notion of necessity as the "chief category of political and revolutionary thought" since revolutions, in her view, are precisely those rare events in which the freedom of action can claim an autonomous position from those activities of human life which are ruled by the category of necessity, labor and work, and which function in terms of instrumentality.²¹ So when the masses of the poor "burst onto the scene of politics" in the course of the French Revolution, it was no longer the foundation of freedom, but the satisfaction of life's necessities that came to determine our conception of modern politics.²²

The trap of the social question – concerned with the poor man's release from misery and his desire for abundance, his "mirage in the desert of misery" – is that it reduces politics to

¹⁷ Jeffrey C. Isaac, 'Oases in the Desert: Hannah Arendt on Democratic Politics', in *The American Political Science Review* 1 (88) (1994), p. 156

¹⁸ *OR*, ch. 3; p. 60; p. 104

¹⁹ In this context, necessity does not refer to the irresistibility of the "laws of history" but to the biological needs and urgencies of the life process itself.

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, 'Freedom and Politics: A Lecture', in *Chicago Review* 1 (14) (1960), p. 28

²¹ *OR*, p. 43; *HC*, pp. 144 - 158

²² *OR*, p. 50

political economy.²³ It marks the modern “rise of the social” at the expense of the integrity of both the public and the private realm, and provokes a ceaseless instrumentalization of politics.²⁴ Further, it unleashes a stream of passions and sentiments in the public, political realm hostile to the passion for public freedom that animates a well-ordered republic; these are the passions of compassion, pity and rage.²⁵

As the social question calls for the emancipation of Rousseau’s natural man of innate goodness, who is struck by misery or its image around him, these antipolitical sentiments come to the surface and assert their tremendous force by tearing off the protective mask of our public *persona*, that is, in their abolition of the crucial distinction between *homme* and *citoyen*. But when compassion takes up the fight against misery and want, Arendt tells us, it is perverted into pity and envy and eventually transforms into rage. This rage is the engine of cruelty and terror and expels revolutions from the realm of freedom into the realm of necessity, until they have degenerated into violent wars upon hypocrisy.²⁶

The point of Arendt’s argument here is that the “demand that everybody display in public his innermost motivation, since it actually demands the impossible, transforms all actors into hypocrites; the moment the display of motives begins, hypocrisy begins to poison all human relations.”²⁷ Arendt is concerned to preserve the protective distance which is provided by the mask of each actor’s *persona* in the public realm, for as soon as we try to expose the passions of our hearts publicly and seek to reveal our deepest motivations, we act in vain.²⁸ The only result of this romantic-expressivist rebellion against the sterile rationalism of modernity can

²³ “For abundance and endless consumption”, Arendt writes provocatively, “are the ideals of the poor: they are the mirage in the desert of misery. In this sense, affluence and wretchedness are only two sides of the same coin; the bonds of necessity need not be of iron, they can be made of silk. Freedom and luxury have always been thought to be incompatible, and the modern estimate that tends to blame the insistence of the Founding Fathers on frugality and ‘simplicity of manners’ (Jefferson) upon a Puritan contempt for the delights of the world much rather testifies to an inability to understand freedom than to a freedom from prejudice.” Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 130

²⁴ “The social realm, where the life process has established its own public domain, has let loose an unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural; and it is against this growth, not merely against society but against a constantly growing social realm, that the private and intimate, on the one hand, and the political (in the narrower sense of the word), on the other, have proved incapable of defending themselves.” Cf. *HC*, pp. 38 – 50; *OR.*, p. 130

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 2

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 50

²⁷ Hence Arendt, in reference to the story of Billy Budd, argues that “absolute goodness is hardly any less dangerous than absolute evil.” Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 72

²⁸ Here, as in many other respects, Arendt is deeply influenced by Kant whom said: “[A] human being cannot see into the depths of his own heart so as to be quite certain, in even a *single* action, of the purity of his moral intentions and the sincerity of his disposition, even when he has no doubt about the legality of the action.” Cf. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, In: Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, M. Gregor (editor / translator), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [1797/1996]), p. 155

be that the compassion of the *engagés* turns into rage of the *enragés* and hence in the destruction of the realm of politics itself. This is why Arendt's revolutionary thought favors an "impersonal" and disinterested conception of political agency and human plurality, one in which only the individual's public and legal *persona* and none of his private and biological conditions or passions of the heart are politically relevant.²⁹

That the American Revolution escaped the trap of the social question and the devastating power of antipolitical motives and passions that accompanies this trap,³⁰ does not imply that it has been able to preserve the revolutionary spirit and the passion for public freedom and public happiness. For despite the remarkable, albeit insufficient success of the Founding Fathers in devising and establishing stable institutions, the preservation of the revolutionary spirit of action alongside other activities and spheres of human life, Arendt argues, has been troubled from the very beginning of the Revolution.

The trouble is that the initial success of the republic's revolutionary foundation has always carried the ambiguity of the public and private sides of what Jefferson referred to as the "pursuit of happiness" in the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence. The question of whether the locus of happiness is to be found in politics and in the presence of one's peers in the public realm or within "the privacy of a home upon whose life the public has no claim", has clearly been answered in favor of none of the two given the emergence of the hybrid social realm.³¹ Hence the revolutionary tradition – and its spirit of public freedom and public happiness residing in the "joy of action" – rests, together with its potential to alter our conception of modern politics, in oblivion. In its stead, the American dream – "the dream of a 'promised land' where milk and honey flow" – and its extraordinary realization resulting from the rise of technology, has ingrained so deeply into the American mindset with the result that politics, stripped from its intrinsic worthiness and autonomy, has become the serf of what Arendt calls a society of masses, consumers and jobholders.³²

²⁹ The former discursively discloses "who" the individual is, the latter merely "what" he is. This means that Arendt's revolutionary thought stands in sharp contrast to the romantic-expressivist conception of political agency and several forms of contemporary, particularly feminist theories of identity politics. On this important insight, in which he stands alone among the interpreters I discuss, see Dana R. Villa *Politics, Philosophy, Terror. Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 124

³⁰ For which, with a view to its institution of slavery, it would pay the price of Civil War (1861 – 1865) nearly a century after the Revolution. A point not elaborately addressed by Arendt because of her idealization of the American Revolution. Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), p. 160

³¹ *OR.*, p. 120

³² *Ibid.*, p. 130 – 131; *HC*, pp. 126 -135

Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether we must judge Arendt's sociological critique of modernity and modern politics as exemplary of her alleged "sociological deficit",³³ it has become clear that Arendt's revolutionary thought resists the reduction of politics to the socio-economic administration of mass societies, as well as self-expressivist conceptions of political agency which do not discriminate between our political and legal personality and our private traits and conditions as individuals. I will now turn to Arendt's institutional critique of modern politics and examine how her narrative of revolutions challenges the outlook of modern political institutions. This invites us to clarify, even if precursory, Arendt's own commitment to democracy.

1.3 Arendt's Institutional Critique of Modern Politics

More than any sociological development or historical trend, the loss of the revolutionary spirit of action is due to the fact that it "failed to find its appropriate institution."³⁴ The inadequacy of contemporary political institutions is that they do not provide open and accessible public spaces in which every citizen with a passion for public affairs can engage with his peers "in the mode of acting and speaking" and may genuinely become a "participator in government."³⁵ Instead of institutionalizing the spirit of action, Arendt tells us, our political institutions are above all the institutions of mass politics – political parties, competitive elections, parliamentarism – which are characterized by their oligarchic structure and fundamental misconception of the concept of "democracy":

"That representative government has in fact become oligarchic government is true enough, though not in the classical sense of rule by the few in the interest of the few; what we today call democracy is a form of government where the few rule, at least supposedly, in the interest of the many. This government is democratic in that popular welfare and private happiness are its chief goals; but it can be called oligarchic in the sense that public happiness and public freedom have again become the privilege of the few."³⁶

Arendt opposes our seemingly democratic institutions because of their inherently oligarchic mode of recruitment, their preoccupation with material interests and their being animated not by well-considered opinions and judgments, but by capricious moods.³⁷

³³ That is, the charge that the essentialism of Arendt's phenomenology is, in Bikhu Parekh's formulation, "so concerned to emphasize the autonomous nature of each activity and form of experience that she loses sight of their internal connections." I will address the merit of this criticism in the subsequent chapters. Cf. Bikhu Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (London: The MacMillan Press, 1981), p. 184

³⁴ *OR.*, p. 272

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 210

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 261

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 261

A politics of moods and interests functions, of course, through the medium of representation, which, deciding over “the very dignity of the political realm itself”, has turned out to be a resurrection of “the age-old distinction between ruler and ruled which the Revolution had set out to abolish through the establishment of a republic [...]”³⁸ The problem is that the institutions of representative government do not provide robust and accessible public spaces at the grass-roots level, nor encourage such sites of speech and action as crucial complements to its own preservation. Taken together with the predominance of socio-economic concerns as the subject-matter of politics, the institutions of liberal democracy and representative government give rise to a mass politics in which democracy, far from embodying genuine self-government, is nothing more than a façade. Such a mass democracy reduces politics to “ritualized spectacles” of a grand bargaining process of material interests by means of the ballot-box. In the electoral process, the constitutive relationship between representative and voter clearly mirrors the bond “of seller and buyer”, where the latter’s power “resembles rather the reckless coercion with which a blackmailer forces his victim into obedience than the power that arises out of joint action and joint deliberation.”³⁹

Further, the “public debate” of a mass democracy is characterized by the “obvious phoniness” of its sound bites and one-liners in the one-way traffic from professional politicians to their electorates, rather than by genuine political argument and deliberation between political equals occurring in a variety of discursive settings.⁴⁰ Instead of providing entrances to those citizens eager to participate in government, the political institutions of a mass democracy aim at the “constantly and universally increasing equalization of society” on a variety of socio-economic, that is, nonpolitical metrics. Such a society, then, is not characterized by the plurality of its citizenry, but is composed of normalized masses.⁴¹ In this so-called democratic system, the rule of “public opinion and mass sentiments” excludes the very possibility for individual citizens to “exert their reason coolly and freely” in the exchange of the irreducible plurality of opinions and in the concurrence on a common course of action for the sake of the common good. It is hardly surprising, then, that the revolutionary spirit of action cannot sustain itself in a mass democracy where there is no adequate institutional embodiment that gives the people the opportunity “of *being* republicans and of *acting* as citizens.”⁴²

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 228 - 229

³⁹ Isaac (1996), p. 157; *OR*, p. 261

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 268

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 269

⁴² Ibid., p. 245.

Tempting as it may be, from these observations we are not entitled to conclude that Arendt's institutional critique represents the familiar complaint, albeit in her own sweeping and rather burlesque terms, of a radical democrat against the poor record of genuine political participation under the institutions of liberal democracy and representative government. Arendt's reluctant commitment to democracy lies in its misconception as the distinctive feature of the modern, egalitarian society whose prime virtue is social justice, while it is essentially a form or mode of government, that is, the form in which the public realm is organized, which ought to contribute to political freedom.⁴³ Thus understood as a form of government, Arendt embraces democracy as indispensable to a conception of modern politics that is capable of preserving the revolutionary spirit. Its principal contribution to such a conception is that it institutionalizes "the modern and revolutionary tenet that all inhabitants of a given territory are entitled to be admitted to the public, political realm."⁴⁴

Yet this principle of universal access does not make democracy the distinctive hallmark of a conception of modern politics that seeks to resurge the revolutionary spirit of action. For the revolutionary spirit, Arendt insists, cannot be adequately understood through the polarization and dichotomization of key concepts and terms in our political vocabulary, democracy not excluded. Confronted with the conservative and innovative sides of the paradox of modern politics that underlies the revolutionary spirit of action, Arendt observes,

"[The] very fact that these two elements, the concern with stability and the spirit of the new, have become opposites in political thought and terminology [...] must be recognized to be among the symptoms of our loss. [...] And the chief characteristic of this modern, revolutionary vocabulary seems to be that it always talks in pairs of opposites [...]. How ingrained this habit of thought has become with the rise of the revolutions may best be seen when we watch the development of new meaning given to old terms, such as democracy and aristocracy; for the notion of democrats *versus* aristocrats did not exist prior to the revolutions. To be sure, these opposites have their origin, and ultimately their justification, in the revolutionary experience as a whole, but the point of the matter is that in the act of foundation they were not mutually exclusive opposites but two sides of the same event, and it was only after the revolutions had come to their end, in success or defeat, that they parted company, solidified into ideologies, and began to oppose each other."⁴⁵

The modern tendency to idealize democracy and make it the quintessential feature of modern politics in contradistinction to and mutual-exclusiveness with other forms, aspects and compositions of government as for instance aristocracy, is to be counted "*among the symptoms of our loss*" of the revolutionary spirit of action.

⁴³ Parekh (1981), p. 172; *OR*, p. 217; *HC*, p. 199

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 263

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 215

This contention is not only exemplary of why Arendt's political theory stubbornly defies all categories and labels, it also explains, I think, why her revolutionary thought advances a conception of modern politics whose structure and dimensions are miscellaneous and deliberately equivocal. With respect to its form of government, this conception of modern politics is a peculiar account of *mixed and not distinctively democratic government*. Arendt's own composition of political institutions incorporates and seeks to "combine meaningfully" elements of republicanism for the sake of a body politic's stability; democracy for the sake of universal access of the "people" to the political realm; aristocracy for the sake of the republic's actual well-functioning through the insulation of the political realm from the "masses"; and an anarchic-utopian critique of the very notion of "government" in order to overcome the modern recourse to the distinction between ruler and ruled.⁴⁶

In chapter four, I turn to the institutional corollary of Arendt's narrative of revolutions, that is, to an assessment of her infamous proposal of a system of councils or "elementary republics" which challenges the paradigm of liberal democracy and representative government, and their functioning on the basis of the party-system. Addressing Arendt's argument in favor of a system of councils, there is ample opportunity to arrive at a more precise understanding of the ambiguous interplay of the republican, democratic, aristocratic and anarchic-utopian elements that compose Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics. Having argued that Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics is decoupled from socio-economic administration, advances an impersonal conception of political agency and incorporates democracy without making it its distinctive hallmark, I shall first address the models of democracy of both her deliberativist and agonistic appropriators in the next two chapters.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 216 – 217; p. 253; p. 271; Isaac (1994), p. 158. In chapter 4 I focus further on the crucial distinction between "masses" and the "people".

CHAPTER 2
THE DELIBERATIVE MODEL OF DEMOCRACY

“L’avenir est ce qui n’existe encore que dans notre pensée, il nous semble modifiable par l’intervention in extremis de notre volonté.”

Marcel Proust¹

*

Hannah Arendt’s political theory offers important building blocks for the construction of normative models of democracy, but it also raises serious obstacles in such endeavors. In this respect, Jürgen Habermas’ and Seyla Benhabib’s account of deliberative democracy and discourse ethics count as notable examples. This chapter examines how these leading scholars in democratic theory take their cue from Arendt’s writings, and how their model of democracy fits with the conception of modern politics that has emerged from Arendt’s narrative of revolutions.² My purpose is to answer the question, *To what extent is the deliberative model of democracy congenial to Hannah Arendt’s revolutionary conception of modern politics?* My discussion proceeds as follows. First, a general exposition of the deliberative model of democracy is provided, in which the basic elements of the deliberativist project are set out. Second, I address which facets and elements of this model are derived from Arendt’s political theory in general and congenial to her revolutionary conception of modern politics in particular. In this context, the communicative or narrative structure of action, the centrality of promises, agreement and consensus, and the mediating function of reflective judgment are identified as the main building blocks for the deliberative model of democracy. Finally, an assessment of the deliberativist departure from Arendt is given, in which I argue that her revolutionary thought raises major obstacles in the recourse of deliberativists to universal moral principles that follow from their rational proceduralism, their reliance on a theory of volition, and their realignment of politics with socio-economic administration.

2.1 Habermas’ and Benhabib’s Model of Deliberative Democracy

The deliberative model of democracy advances a proceduralist conception of modern politics that seeks to integrate the “liberal” view of politics as determining the strategic content and legal basis on which governmental and administrative activity is conducted in the interest of

¹ Marcel Proust, *La Fugitive: Albertine Disparue* (Paris : Flammarion, 1986), p. 4

² There are, of course, significant differences *within* the deliberativist, as well as the agonistic current of democratic theory and in their individual interpretations of Arendt’s political theory. These differences notwithstanding, I think it is possible to identify them as two competing interpretations of Arendt’s political and revolutionary thought and permit myself to present them in two more or less conjoint pictures.

society, with the “republican” view of politics as not merely mediating interests but as constituting society’s self-understanding and embedding it in the objective legal order of a republic.³ The deliberative model of democracy, then, does not singularly perceive society in the liberal image of a transacting market and its citizens as self-interested individual rights-bearers, nor in the republican image of an ethical community with ties of solidarity among self-expressivist citizens. The deliberativist meets these conceptions “halfway” in conceiving society as a discursive political community with a variety of formal and informal communicative settings “in which a common will is produced, that is, not just ethical self-clarification but also the balancing of interests and compromise, the purposive choice of means, moral justification, and legal consistency-testing.”⁴

Habermas presents the deliberative model as a *procedure* for the democratic process of such a discursive political community. On his account, politics has basically two overlapping and interacting functions. First, it mediates the bargaining process of (im)material interests within the legal confines of individual rights. Second, politics constitutes society’s collective and citizen’s individual self-understanding in ethical and cultural terms within an objective legal order. In order to serve this twofold purpose of modern politics effectively and authoritatively, the democratic process ought to comply with procedures of rational deliberation and communication in a variety of discursive settings, notably in parliamentary institutions and the informal sites of the public, political sphere of a civil society which resides between the state and the market.⁵ Through the institutionalization of democratic deliberation and argument, the deliberativist clears the way for a merger of the republican and liberal views into a consensual account of politics, since, as Habermas puts it,

““Dialogical” and “instrumental” politics can *interpenetrate* in the medium of deliberation if the corresponding forms of communication are sufficiently institutionalized. Everything depends on the conditions of communication and the procedures that lend the institutionalized opinion- and will-formation their legitimating force.”⁶

Moreover, deliberative procedures, if “sufficiently” institutionalized, are “[the] most important sluices for the discursive rationalization of the decisions of a government and an administration bound by law and statute.”⁷

³ Jürgen Habermas, ‘Three Normative Models of Democracy’, in Steven M. Cahn (ed.), *Political Philosophy. The Essential Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 527

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 531

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 532

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 533

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 533

When are deliberative procedures and its conditions of communication “sufficiently” institutionalized and why is this of such importance to the deliberative model of democracy? Its importance lies in the deliberativist presumptions that the legitimate production and authorization of law depends on the *rationality* of deliberative procedures, as well as the continuous discursive recognition government institutions depend upon for their effective functioning. These deliberative procedures are sufficiently institutionalized if the conditions of communication are such that an “ideal speech situation” is attainable in the practice of collective opinion- and will-formation.⁸ That is, a communicative context which is free from distorting elements, such as ideology or manipulation, and gives pride of place to “the forceless force” of the better argument in the process of rational deliberation, so that eventually “validity claims” can be made.⁹

This *ideal-typical procedure* of undistorted deliberation is conditioned by the “intersubjectivity” of communicative interaction. This refers to the plurality of discursive actors involved in the democratic process. In Benhabib’s words, intersubjectivity means that our common life world and the political institutions within it are conditioned “by the interplay of commonality and perspectivity” of individual citizens, or, as Habermas puts it, by the fact that “every interaction unifies multiple perspectives of perception and action of those present, who as individuals occupy an inconvertible standpoint.”¹⁰ The deliberative model of democracy relies on a “communicative” or “narrative” conception of action that aims at *consensus* over the norms, laws and principles governing a body politic.¹¹ These norms, laws and principles, in turn, are intersubjectively ascertained according to the model’s ideal-typical standards – undistorted communication, reciprocal dialogue and argumentation, moral judgment and representative thinking, etc.¹² Politics, in the deliberativist conception, is the business of achieving consensus and agreement in response to various kinds of problems affecting the whole of society, and the best way to achieve this is to comply with its ideal-typical procedures for “the medium of deliberation” The deliberative model, finally, presents these discursive political communities as democracies that are essentially “self-regulating and self-criticizing institutions of deliberation as well as decision-making.”¹³

⁸ Cited in Margaret Canovan, ‘A Case of Distorted Communication. A Note on Habermas and Arendt’, in: *Political Theory* 1 (11) (1983), pp. 105

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 534; Cited in Canovan (1983), p. 105 - 107

¹⁰ Benhabib (2000), p. 56; Habermas (1977), p. 8

¹¹ Benhabib (2000), pp. 125 - 126

¹² Benhabib (1988), p. 5

¹³ Benhabib (2000), p. 209

2.2 Arendtian Building Blocks for the Deliberativist Project

Within the rather technical and formalistic deliberativist jargon, it is possible to discern some crucial elements derived from Arendt's political theory and her revolutionary conception of modern politics in particular. These are the communicative structure of political action and power (i), the centrality of promises and agreement (ii), and the role reflective judgment plays in the process of rational deliberation directed at agreement (iii).

(i) In the deliberativist reading, the communicative structure of action refers to the fact that deeds and actions need a reasoned linguistic expression in order to obtain their peculiarly human reality in the world. Arendt formulates the communicative structure of action, in which speech is an inseparable part of the actor's deed, as follows:

“Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do.”¹⁴

Not only does communicative action allow for the disclosure of human plurality and individual identity, which leads Benhabib to maintain that “action *is* disclosure in speech”,¹⁵ it also generates a specific kind of power by which citizens, as communicative agents, *empower* those holding an office of government through the discursive recognition of their position.¹⁶

For the deliberativist project, this kind of communicatively generated power is an essential counterpart to the strategic and instrumental view of action and power as propounded by Weber, which fails to make adequate phenomenological distinctions between power, force and violence.¹⁷ The authority of the state, which comprises all sorts of coercive functions and operates on this strategic and instrumental logic, ultimately relies on the communicative power of citizens: through their discursive recognition of state institutions, i.e. their supportive opinions, can administrative power be exercised. This is why Arendt, following Madison, argues that all governmental authority “in the last analysis rests on opinion [...]”¹⁸

¹⁴ *HC*, pp. 178 - 179

¹⁵ Benhabib (2000), p. 112

¹⁶ Habermas (1977), p. 7

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 3 - 4

¹⁸ *OR*, p. 220; cited in Habermas (1977), p. 7

(ii) Nearly all of her appropriators, deliberativists and agonists alike, have pointed out that Arendt's narrative in *On Revolution* expresses a consensual account of politics much akin to the deliberative model.¹⁹ The valorization of consensus is undeniably part and parcel of Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics, for she maintains that the ability to reach an agreement is central to both the foundation and the preservation of a body politic. This ability reflects what Arendt calls the "power of promise", of which she writes most eloquently:

"There is an element of the world-building capacity of man in the human faculty of making and keeping promises. Just as promises and agreements deal with the future and provide stability in the ocean of future uncertainty where the unpredictable may break in from all sides, so the constituting, founding, and world-building capacity of man concern not so much ourselves and our own time on earth as our 'successor', and 'posterities'. The grammar of action: that action is the only human faculty that demands a plurality of men; and the syntax of power: that power is the only 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."²⁰

As this passage demonstrates, promises, agreements and consensus indeed appear to turn out what Benhabib calls "*the normative core of the Arendtian conception of the political* [...]."²¹ Habermas, however, reproaches the power of promises and agreements as Arendt's retreat to "the venerable figure of the contract", rather than giving priority to her "concept of a praxis, which is grounded in the rationality of practical judgment."²²

(iii) But we need not share his disappointment, for political action and deliberation – whether displayed in the momentous promise of a revolutionary foundation or in the less remarkable consensus over the annual policy of an association of students or artisans – is crucially dependent on what Arendt conceived as our faculty of reflective (rather than practical) judgment. Action and deliberation, in Arendt's understanding, always involve and are constantly mediated by the exercise of our mental capacity for reflective judgment, which she appropriated from Kant's *Third Critique*, his theory of aesthetic judgment. According to Arendt, Kant unnecessarily restricted his theory of reflective judgment to the realm of aesthetics, while this capacity is the "most political" of our mental faculties. To the extent that political questions are questions of right and wrong conduct, this implies, or so Benhabib argues, that reflective judgment is the quintessential *moral* foundation of Arendt's political

¹⁹ See, e.g., Villa (1999), p. 128; Villa (1992), p. 279; George Kateb *Hannah Arendt : Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Oxford : Robertson Press, 1984); Benhabib (2000), p. 189

²⁰ *OR*, pp. 166 - 167

²¹ Benhabib (2000), p. 166 (original italics)

²² Habermas (1977), pp. 23 - 24

theory, and a crucial building block for the deliberativist project, since it provides the gateway to “a procedure for ascertaining intersubjective agreement in the public realm.”²³

The crux in Kant’s theory of reflective judgment is his appeal to our *sensus communis*, the common sense with which differently situated individuals seek to transcend the subjectivity of their standpoints through comparison with the potential, rather than the actual, views of others on the validity of an opinion on this or that matter. The task is to arrive at an intersubjectively valid opinion or judgment on a *particular* appearance (which cannot be subsumed under a pre-given *universal* or absolute) through the mental representation of the standpoint of others. As Arendt interprets Kant’s “discovery” of judgment in political matters:

“Political thought is representative. I form an opinion in considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not. The more people’s standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion.”²⁴

Hence Arendt contends that the “power of judgment rests on a potential agreement with others”.²⁵ This mode of “representative thinking” with an “enlarged mentality” is inextricably intertwined with the power of promise, since a promise cannot be made without a certain consensus or agreement, even if that promise underlies an agreement to disagree or a partial give and take compromise on this or that particular matter or detail. For the deliberativist project, Arendt’s appropriation of Kant’s theory of judgment confirms the deliberativist maxim that one’s action, in order to become action in concert with others, should be capable to “woo their consent”, and is as such at the core of their standards of deliberation.²⁶

These Arendtian building blocks for the deliberative model of democracy, however, do not prevent their departure from Arendt’s political theory and her revolutionary conception of modern politics in several crucial respects. I shall now turn to the obstacles that Arendt’s thought raises in the construction of the deliberativist model.

²³ Benhabib (2000) p. 189

²⁴ Cited in Villa (1999), p. 97

²⁵ Benhabib (2000), p. 189

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 190

2.3 Arendtian Obstacles in the Deliberativist Project

The deliberativist departure from Arendt – the insistence on the need “to think with Arendt against Arendt”²⁷ – lies in the obstacles her political theory raises in the deliberativist recourse to universal principles of morality (i), their reliance on a theory of volition (ii), and their integration of politics with socio-economic administration (iii). Let us first consider the moral universalism of the deliberativist project, which follows directly from their employment of Arendt’s interpretation of reflective judgment.

(i) The trouble with the deliberativist reading of Arendt’s account of “representative thinking” – through which well-considered political judgments and opinions enable the formation of consensus – is that it seems to conceive such judgments and opinions as setting the stage for the intersubjective disclosure of moral absolutes. As Habermas puts it “[we] allow ourselves to be convinced of the truth of a statement, the rightness of a norm, the veracity of an utterance [...]”²⁸ His intention is clear: he seeks to bridge the traditional gap between truth and opinion, theory and practice, and philosophy and politics. He does so by establishing the truth of principles and maxims according to a rational procedure of dialogue, instead of in the solitariness of moral reasoning that characterizes much of the tradition of political philosophy.²⁹ Although Arendt valorizes *factual* truth as “nonpolitical boundaries” which provide the proper context for joint deliberation, she is profoundly suspicious, not only of morality, but of truth and “validity claims” in matters of politics strictly speaking. For universals and absolutes, by definition, are not in need of and hence rule out political persuasion and the exchange of opinions. Claims to moral truth, moreover, are simply unascertainable in politics, where the “fundamental relativity” of human affairs reigns over the public realm, no matter how infallible the design of rational procedures of deliberation.³⁰

Hence in the aforementioned passage on reflective judgment, Arendt argues how representative thinking enables us to arrive at a “*more valid*” opinion, but never a “validity claim” or the ascertainment of a universal moral maxim or principle. This explains the deliberativist charge that Arendt had an “antiquated concept of theoretical knowledge”

²⁷ Benhabib (1988), p. 31

²⁸ Habermas (1977), p. 6

²⁹ See Canovan (1983), p. 106; Paul Nieuwenburg, ‘Learning to Deliberate: Aristotle on Truthfulness and Public Deliberation’, in: *Political Theory* 4 (32) (2004), p. 450

³⁰ Cited in Villa (1996), p. 95; *LM*, vol. 1 ‘Thinking’, p. 19; *OR*, p. 91. Arendt insists that the validity of our opinions “can never extend further than the others in whose place the judging person has put himself for his consideration.” And again, “all authority rests on opinion”, not on absolutes. Cited in Villa (1992), p. 292

(Habermas), and “was misled by a quasi-intuitionist concept of moral conscience on the one hand, and an unusually narrow concept of morality on the other” (Benhabib).³¹ Arendt’s obstacle in the deliberativist project is indeed that:

“There is a resistance on [Arendt’s] part to justificatory political discourse, to the attempt to establish the rationality and validity of our beliefs in universal human rights, human equality, the obligation to treat others with respect. Although Hannah Arendt’s conception of politics and of the political is quite inconceivable, unintelligible even, without a strongly grounded normative position in universalistic human rights, equality, and respect, one does not find her engaging in any such exercises of normative justification in her writings.”³²

Although it is highly disputable, to say the least, that Arendt’s political theory is “quite inconceivable, unintelligible even” without the company of a thick universalistic morality, it is true that Arendt always resisted the philosophical attempt to arrive, in her own words, “at a halfway plausible theory of ethics”.³³ Yet I think this is Arendt’s merit, for the philosophical endeavor to generalize and universalize all kinds of rights, principles and maxims up to the highest levels of abstraction, whatever their substantive praiseworthiness, does not contribute to their experience as a *worldly reality*. Moral universalism distracts us from Arendt’s great insight that “freedom, wherever it existed as a tangible reality, has always been spatially limited.” And this freedom, which her narrative of revolutions celebrates, “is only possible among equals, and equality itself is by no means a universally valid principle but, again, applicable only within limitations and even within spatial limits.”³⁴

(ii) Habermas repeatedly interprets Arendt’s account of action, power and deliberation in terms of volition. Understanding communicative action as a kind of “[praxis] of those who talk together in order to act in concert”, Habermas maintains that in Arendt’s conception,

“The fundamental phenomenon of power is not the instrumentalization of *another’s* will, but the formation of a *common* will in a communication directed to reaching agreement.”³⁵

Common opinion- and will-formation, as we have seen, is indeed the central business of a consensual account of politics, and it underlies the deliberativist concern to incorporate the concept of popular sovereignty (democracy) into their model through its domestication in deliberative procedures and stress its “co-originality” with human rights (constitutionalism).³⁶

³¹ Habermas (1977), p. 22; Benhabib (1988), p. 31

³² Ibid., p. 194

³³ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, *Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 216 (hereafter *LM*)

³⁴ *OR*, p. 267

³⁵ Habermas (1977), p. 21; p. 4

³⁶ Habermas (2005); Seyla Benhabib *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Honig (2009), p. 29

Yet on Arendt's account, opinions always remain strictly individual, never give rise to what Habermas calls "common convictions", and "the faculty of the will", she maintains, is "[the] trickiest and the most dangerous of modern concepts and misconceptions."³⁷ Of course, every single action involves volition, which Arendt calls "a mental organ of the future", but she denies the will its primacy in the field of politics: "Freedom as related to politics is not a phenomenon of the will."³⁸ For the significance of the will is its "power to command, to dictate action", which "is not a matter of freedom but a question of strength or weakness."³⁹ If the essence of the will is that it must control and command with full strength, then it runs counter to the essence of political action, since the freedom of action and beginning is characterized by its unpredictability, irreversibility and uncontrollability.

This uncontrollability stems from the fact that "men never have been and never will be able to undo or even to control reliably any of the processes they start through action."⁴⁰ The price of freedom, then, is that we must carry what Arendt dramatically calls "the burden of irreversibility and unpredictability", which means that *the freedom of action is always the freedom of non-sovereignty*.⁴¹ Sovereignty, "the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastery", is diametrically opposed to the uncontrollable process-character of action. As it seeks to control and command according to the dictates of the will – whether it be called the general will of Rousseau or the common will of Habermas – sovereignty can only amount to a negation or, worse still, suppression of the plurality by which every political community is characterized.⁴² The only remedies by which a plurality of men can attain a limited form of sovereignty is through their power to promise, their power to erect "isolated islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty [...]".⁴³

(iii) In several respects, Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics can be discerned from the "republican" view that has been modified and incorporated into the deliberative model of democracy. Indeed, Habermas goes as far as to identify Arendt as the

³⁷ Cited in Canovan (1983), p. 111; *OR.*, p. 217

³⁸ *BPF*, pp. 151 - 152

³⁹ *LM*, Vol. 2 'Willing', p. 13, p. 15

⁴⁰ *HC*, p. 232

⁴¹ "If we look upon freedom with the eyes of the tradition, identifying freedom with sovereignty, the simultaneous presence of freedom and non-sovereignty, of being able to begin something new and of not being able to control or even foretell its consequences, seems almost to force us to the conclusion that human existence is absurd." Cf., *HC*, pp. 232 – 235.

⁴² *HC*, p. 234; Jean-Claude Poizat, *Hannah Arendt: Une Introduction* (Paris: Pocket Agora, 2003), p. 126

⁴³ *HC*, p. 244; p. 236 – 238; James Martel, 'Can there be politics without sovereignty?', in: *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 2 (6) (2010), pp. 153 – 166

prime representative of this republican conception of politics,⁴⁴ the merit of which he sees in that “[it] preserves the radical democratic meaning of a society that organizes itself through the communicatively united citizens and does not trace collective goals back to “deals” made between competing private interests.”⁴⁵ But the deliberativist does not concur with what I have called Arendt’s resistance to the reduction of politics into the socio-economic administration of mass societies. Benhabib, for instance, maintains that:

“Arendt’s attempt to separate the political from the economic via an ontological divide between freedom and necessity is [...] futile and implausible. The realm of necessity is permeated through and through by power relations: power over the distribution of labor, of resources, of authority, and so on. There is no neutral and nonpolitical organization of the economic; all economy is political economy.”⁴⁶

This charge, of course, begs the question twice over. First, by substituting Arendt’s concept of power – arising out of the communicative interaction of a plurality of political equals – for a concept of power which is derived from material *forces* – natural, social and economic – as she puts socio-economic inequalities on the agenda of politics. Second, Arendt’s sociological critique of modern politics is precisely that *all politics has become political economy*, with the result that politics has lost every measure of autonomy alongside other activities of human life. In similar vein, Habermas, like nearly every student of Arendt’s thought, is at pains to dismiss her sociological critique, which expresses “a conception of modern politics which, when applied to modern societies, leads to absurdities.”⁴⁷

Hence the deliberativist bypasses the “absurdities” of this Arendtian obstacle through the incorporation of the “liberal” conception of politics into the deliberative model in terms of “[the] legal institutionalization of an economic society that is supposed to guarantee an essentially non-political common good through the satisfaction of the private aspirations of productive citizens.”⁴⁸ Public and private happiness, it turns out, have an equal share in the conception of modern politics that underlies the deliberative model of democracy.

⁴⁴ Habermas (2005), p. 528; p. 531

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 530

⁴⁶ Benhabib (2000), pp. 158 -159

⁴⁷ Habermas (1977), p. 15. “Allein, das Interesse, das Hannah Arendt an dem Phänomen der Revolution bekundet, ist eigentümlich beschränkt. [...] Sie nimmt den Vorgang der Revolution in den klassischen Rahmen einer Rotation der Staatsformen zurück und löst genau den Zusammenhang auf, der die Revolution der Neuzeit zu dem macht, was sie sind: die systematische Beziehung zwischen politischen Umwälzungen und der Emanzipation gesellschaftlicher Klassen. Natürlich kann Hannah Arendt die Tatsachen nicht leugnen. Aber sie macht die spezifische Verschränkung der Revolution mit dem, was sie im Wortschatz des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts bürgerlich distanziert und zugleich karikativ herablassend “die soziale Frage” nennt, zum Kriterium der Verunreinigung eines rein politischen Vorgangs.” Cf. Jürgen Habermas ‘Die Geschichte von den zwei Revolutionen’ in *Philosophisch-politische Profile* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), p. 223

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 532

In this chapter I have reconstructed the deliberative model of democracy and addressed several Arendtian building blocks and obstacles in their endeavor. On the one hand, the deliberative model of democracy is congenial to Arendt's conception of modern politics in their emphasis on the communicative structure of action, that is, the fact that speech is both a crucial form and a necessary component of political action. Further, the deliberativist project corresponds to Arendt's insistence on deliberation and debate in the political process, and the importance of subsequent consensus, promises and agreement. Finally, it has made clever use of Arendt's turn to Kantian reflective judgment, and the mediating function of the mode of "representative thinking" that is involved in this type of judgment.

On the other hand, the latter point of convergence is at the same time a point of departure for the deliberativist project, since Arendt's account of reflective judgment is not susceptible to the kind of moral justification and universalization embarked upon by the deliberativist. The deliberativist interpretation of Arendt as concerned with common will formation is not accurate, and this inaccuracy is further expressed in their employment of a theory of sovereignty, which Arendt's revolutionary thought vehemently rejects.⁴⁹ Finally, there is a strong reproach on the deliberativist part toward Arendt's decoupling of politics with socio-economic administration.

As much as Arendt's narrative of revolutions and her account of politics both inspires and provokes refutation by deliberative democrats, however, she does so with their agonistic counterparts, who seem to give a radically different picture of Arendtian politics. I shall now turn to an assessment of the agonistic model of democracy and see how their interpretation fits with Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics.

⁴⁹ Thus "[the] great and, in the long run, perhaps the greatest American innovation in politics as such was the consistent abolition of sovereignty within the body politic of the republic, the insight that in the realm of human affairs sovereignty and tyranny are the same." Arendt is not referring to sovereignty in an international context, but addressing the divisibility and balancing of power, in contrast to volitionist theories of sovereignty, in the internal structure of the US Constitution (hence she mentions its abolition "within the body politic"). Cf. *OR*, p. 144; Martel (2010)

CHAPTER 3
THE AGONISTIC MODEL OF DEMOCRACY

“Politics means conflict.”

Max Weber¹

*

The deliberativist identification of politics with consensus formation, its preoccupation with the rationality of public discourse, and the formalism of its procedures and institutions, have caused allergic reactions among those “radical democrats” who regard such a consensual understanding of politics as its very denial. In its stead, they advance an “agonistic” conception of politics which “seems to provide a welcome return to the repressed essence of democratic politics: conflict.”² Moreover, agonists like Bonnie Honig and Dana R. Villa refute the idea that the deliberativist project takes Hannah Arendt’s political theory, and its concern for dialogue and agreement, to its logical conclusion, claiming instead that Arendt herself had a predominantly agonistic conception of politics.³ This chapter examines the agonistic challenge to the deliberative model of democracy, and sees whether support can be found for a politics of contestation and dissent in Arendt’s narrative of revolutions. Analogous to my discussion of the deliberativist project, the question I seek to answer is, *To what extent is the agonistic model of democracy congenial to Hannah Arendt’s revolutionary conception of modern politics?* First, an interpretation of the agonistic model of democracy and its basic features is provided. Second, I address three Arendtian building blocks for the agonistic model, namely, the performative structure of action, the indispensability of political conflict and contest, and the moral safeguards promising, forgiveness and judgment provide in this conflict-based approach to democratic politics. Finally, the “moral danger” of Arendt’s purification of politics from moral and economic concerns, as well as her prevention of the dispersal of the agon outside the political realm and its publicly oriented, “disinterested” conception of political agency are identified as the main obstacles to the agonistic project.

3.1 Honig’s and Villa’s Model of Agonistic Democracy

The agonistic model of democracy presents a conception of modern politics which centers around the positive valorization of playful political conflict. Agon, the Greek term for competition or match, *is* the phenomenological essence of the realm of politics. Agonistic

¹ Max Weber, *Parliament and Government*, cited in Villa (1996), p. 107

² *Ibid.*, p. 108

³ Villa (1992)

democrats conceive of politics as an open-ended process in which fruitful tensions and clashes between agents, identities, ideas and institutions are encouraged to be expressed and displayed, to be constantly regenerated and reformulated. The agonistic project, indeed, sees “incessant contestation” as “the battlecry” of politics.⁴

Agonistic democratic theory is to a large extent a reaction toward the formalism, proceduralism and rationalism of liberal democracy and its deliberativist variations. It resists their tendency to present streamlined pictures of political agents as autonomous individuals and rational, unified selves, and to impose formal and logically coherent procedures on the democratic process of state institutions and associational life. In a way, the agonistic model of democracy is an anti-model, deconstructs rather than constructs democratic prototypes. It encourages the disruption of the *status quo* of formal institutional arrangements both from within and from the outside (e.g., by social movements), for the agonist argues that without a strong spirit of activism and resistance, established actors and institutions “invariably close political spaces and engender coercive and exclusionary political practices.”⁵ The agonist, in Honig’s words, tells us “that the stories of politics have no ending, they are never-ending” and warns us that no political institution, practice or settled interest can be taken for granted.⁶ In the public realm of a democratic society, nothing exists which is not open to contest, revision and reinterpretation. In politics, there will never exist a background consensus which puts certain issues or institutional settlements “off the agenda”, as the political liberal might hope to achieve. Everything is always open for conflict, in fact, political conflict occurs ceaselessly “in a dizzying array of venues” on an endless variety of issues. Villa formulates the agonistic challenge as follows:

“Contemporary agonists remind us that the public sphere is as much a stage for conflict and expression as it is a set of procedures or institutions designed to preserve peace, promote fairness, or achieve consensus.”⁷

From a contemporary perspective, the agonistic challenge is said to be all the more important as citizens in liberal democratic regimes appear to become more and more docile subjects of juridical and administrative functions of an ever-growing state apparatus, as well as passive recipients of the disciplinary effects of society. This is why the agonistic model of democracy adopts a “performative” or “aesthetic” conception of action which enables the individual to

⁴ Ibid., p. 108

⁵ Honig (1993), p. 77

⁶ Honig (2009), p. 3; Villa (1999), p. 108

⁷ Ibid., p. 108

come out of his comfort zone, for the agonist “worries that the ordering of the self into a moral, well-behaved subject diminishes its propensity to act creatively and spontaneously.”⁸ Action, in the agonistic reading, has an individuating and innovative potential, it discloses the extraordinary and the unexpected against the mirages of everydayness and the ordinary. Better still, it invites us to look at the world not from established moral codes or patterns of perception, but with an eye for taste, distinction and beauty, with which we might come to detect the extraordinary *in* the ordinariness of every-day life, with which we can “de-exceptionalize the exceptional.”⁹ Performative action protects the realm of politics and our common life world “from a variety of mentalities, attitudes, dispositions, and approaches” that transforms them into an atomistic system: “the will to a system is a lack of politics.”¹⁰

This somewhat exotic picture of the agonistic project might induce us to conclude that the agonist does not care for formal institutions and procedures, and does not sufficiently recognize the indispensability of well-ordered judicial, legislative and executive branches of government.¹¹ Yet while it is true that the agonistic project lends itself well for an empirical analysis of and is generally sympathetic to a politics of all sorts of social movements and initiatives, it is not an antistatist model of democracy. The agonist, if he turns his attention to the politics of formal institutions and to constitutional issues, will rather search for those niches and “sites of contestation” where courses of action can be discerned which run counter to our theoretical expectations.¹² But the agonist invites us to expand our field of inquiry, look to the connections between formal institutions and social constellations, for “engaging the state”, Honig insists, “is a feature but not the essence of democratic politics.”¹³

3.2 Arendtian Building Blocks for the Agonistic Project

What elements in the agonistic model of democracy have their origin in Arendt’s thought? And to what extent are these Arendtian appropriations also discernible from her narrative of revolutions? I propose to address three building blocks: the performative structure of action

⁸ Honig (1993), p. 76

⁹ Honig (2009), p. xviii

¹⁰ Honig (1993), p. 116

¹¹ The charge comes, unsurprisingly, from the deliberative democrat. See the exchange between Benhabib and Honig in Honig (2009), pp. 134 - 137

¹² As for instance when a secretary of state does not stretch and exploit his discretionary powers but invites its own limitations and scrutiny by the judiciary. See the illuminating discussion on Louis Post, the US Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Wilson’s administration, and his role during the Red Scare in *ibid.*, ch. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 135

(i); the indispensability of dissent and contestation (ii); and the moral safeguards of promising, forgiveness, and reflective judgment (iii).

(i) In the agonistic reading, the performative or aesthetic structure of action refers, first, to the fact that the meaning and significance of political deeds, words and events – “the products of action” – reside in the activity itself, and not in some extrinsic “end-product” that follows from the activities of work and labor. Second, the performative structure of action highlights its distinctive character from mere behavior, which is characterized by the moral structure of behavioral patterns, fixed habits and customs.¹⁴ Morality, then, cannot establish criteria *for* and *from* the worldly “in-between” in which political deeds are enacted, for either it derives its substance from “some supposedly higher faculty”, or it consists of the totality of customs (*mores*) which have their proper place in any but the political sphere of life.¹⁵ Arendt theorizes the performative structure of political action as follows:

“Unlike human behavior – which the Greeks, like all civilized people judged according to “moral standards,” taking into account motives and intentions on the one hand and aims and consequences on the other – action can be judged only by the criterion of greatness, because it is in its nature to break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis*.”¹⁶

This is why Arendt, following Nietzsche, celebrates the virtuosity of the classical “agonal spirit, the passionate drive to show one’s self in measuring up against others [...]” and likens political action to the performative arts.¹⁷ She does so not only because “the common element connecting art and politics is that they both are phenomena of the public world”, but because political deeds – like the play of a musician and unlike the durable objects of the creative arts – are dependent on an audience of judging spectators in order to attain a measure of durability.¹⁸ “If left to themselves,” Arendt insists, “[political deeds] would come and go without leaving any trace in the world.” Only the beauty and greatness of action, stored and passed on in the written and spoken word, create the conditions for remembrance with which history gives meaning to the world and to politics. Hence “beauty is the very manifestation of imperishability”.¹⁹

¹⁴ Villa (1992), p. 278

¹⁵ *HC*, p. 246. Hence Arendt maintains that “*mores* and morality [...] are so important for the life of society and so irrelevant for the body politic”. Cf., *OR*, p. 107. This twofold characterization of morality is what explains Benhabib’s charge that Arendt “was misled by [...] an unusually narrow concept of morality [...]” See ch. 2

¹⁶ *HC*, p. 205

¹⁷ See Villa (1996), ch. 3

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194; *BPF*, p. 218

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 218

(ii) As mentioned in the previous chapter, Arendt's narrative of revolutions puts more focus on consensus, agreement and consent than on the agonistic valorization of conflict, disagreement and dissent. The reason, of course, is that no revolution can ever attain its end of founding freedom without reaching a consensus on the basis of which a mutual promise, materialized in a *constitutio libertatis*, is made. It is also quite characteristic, as Honig points out in this respect, that Arendt's narrative of the American Revolution, which she tends to present as an ideal-typical instance of founding freedom, does not mention a single time the resistance and dissent of the antifederalists.²⁰ Yet at the same time we find Arendt concurring with Madison that:

“[When] men exert their reason coolly and freely on a variety of distinct questions, they inevitably fall into different opinions on some of them. When they are governed by a common passion, their opinions, if they are so to be called, will be the same.”²¹

In this regard, her endorsement does not concern, of course, Madison's “rather mechanical” dichotomy between reason and passion, but rather the danger of unanimity, consensus, common convictions and the pitfalls of a so-called “public opinion” which the agonist juxtaposes to the fruitful tensions that arise out of irreducibly individual opinions, and the inevitable dissent that accompanies every passionate debate.

(iii) In appropriating a conflict-based approach to politics and an aesthetic view on political action from Arendt's political theory, the problem arises how the agonistic democratic prevents his model from provoking an irresponsible, ideologically driven or morally indifferent politics which might turn respectful, playful conflict into venom or even violence. The solution seems to lie in the moral safeguards Arendt herself provides to remedy the fierceness of the agonal spirit and the risks of action's inherent uncontrollability. These are the power of promise and forgiveness, as well as the appropriation of Kantian reflective judgment we discussed in the previous chapter.

Promising and forgiveness constitute what George Kateb calls “the internal morality” of Arendt's political theory.²² The retrospective act of forgiveness, on one side, releases “men from what they have done unknowingly”, and the prospective act of promising, on the other, “without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind” is possible: these are action's own “moral precepts” which mitigate the irreversible and unpredictable process-

²⁰ Honig (2009), p. 149 n. 67

²¹ *OR.*, p. 217; see also Dana R. Villa, *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 217 n. 63

²² Cited in Villa (1996), p. 56

character of action.²³ They empower men “[to] counter the enormous risks of action”, it is this “readiness to forgive and be forgiven, to make promises and to keep them” which allows men to enjoy the freedom of action and beginning which life has given them under the conditions of non-sovereignty and contingency.²⁴ These moral precepts, moreover, “are the only ones that are not applied to action from the outside, from some supposedly higher faculty or from experiences out of action’s own reach.”²⁵ In the agonistic encouragement of disruption and contestation, these safeguards of action, as Honig insists, are of cardinal importance to act responsibly in politics, engage in its conflicts courtly, and perform its play playfully.²⁶

Though not necessarily a “moral” safeguard, but rather a political signpost, the agonistic project interprets Arendt’s appropriation of Kant’s theory of judgment as an appeasement of the fierce agonal spirit of politics. On Villa’s account, reflective judgment is what prevents Arendt’s aesthetic conception of action from falling into the excessive subjectivism and heroism found in Nietzsche’s writings.²⁷ Thus, whereas the deliberativist reading interprets Arendt’s turn to Kant as providing the crucial moral foundation of politics, and the gateway to the intersubjective disclosure of moral absolutes, Villa conceives of reflective judgment not as an independent moral ground for performative action, but rather as a safeguard to keep agonistic politics a sane enterprise, to promote the idea that playing the game is more important than winning it.²⁸ Instead of a teleological orientation toward consensus and agreement, the agonist presents *deliberation and debate as the frame of the agon* of politics, and judgment serves to *tame* it, and “democratize” its energetic but somewhat overtly heroic spirit.²⁹ The mode of representative thinking involved in reflective judgment, Villa argues,

²³ HC, p. 237; p. 240

²⁴ HC, p. 245

²⁵ HC, p. 246. Barring, of course, the “unforgivable” of the outbursts of radical evil, and the deceit of false and treachery of broken promises. On this score, however, I have trouble to see what Arendt means when she says that promising and forgiveness are the only moral standards that are not “applied from the outside” or imposed “from experiences out of action’s own reach”, since I myself, and certainly most of us, have learned the “good behavior” of promising and forgiveness on the schoolyard and amongst my siblings, but certainly not in the realm of political action. This point is exemplified in Arendt’s politicization of Jesus of Nazareth, “the discoverer” of the power of promise. Of course not all action is *political* action, but whence the strict distinction between action and behavior? Cf. HC, p. 238 – 239.

²⁶ Honig (1993), p. 85

²⁷ Villa (1999), p. 124. Nietzsche, after all, said that our actions are “*unbegrenzt-individuell*”. Cf., Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom ‘Genius der Gattung’*, in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, fünftes Buch, nr. 354, KSA 3, pp. 592 – 593 (1882/2000) (cited from the reader for the seminar ‘Philosophy of Culture’ 2009/2010, dr. G.T.M. Visser, Faculty of the Humanities).

²⁸ Villa (1992), p. 292.

²⁹ Villa (1992), p. 272. On this score, Honig laments Villa’s presentation as “*taming*” the agon, and thinks that is too singularly focused on judgment at the expense of other moral safeguards and Arendt’s “reverence for institutions.” Cf. Honig, (1993b)

enables us to attain a “disinterested” disposition with an eye for the common world we live in, it “promotes an ethos of independent thought and action, one that is sufficiently impersonal to be both morally serious and publicly oriented.”³⁰

3.3 Arendtian Obstacles in the Agonistic Project

Although the agonist does not depart from Arendt’s political theory as explicitly as his deliberativist counterpart, whose universalistic ambitions necessitates him “to think with Arendt against Arendt”, the agonistic project is not free from obstacles raised by Arendt herself. There remains a kind of “moral danger” in Arendt’s agonistic and performative account of politics and action which hinders the agonist, like his deliberativist counterpart, to bring moral and socio-economic questions into politics (i), and Arendt’s disinterested and impersonal conception of political agency, despite its safeguard toward Nietzschean subjectivism, prevents the dispersal of the agon beyond, and back into the public realm (ii).

(i) Arendt’s moral safeguards for the agonistic project notwithstanding, there sticks a certain unease with her agonistic appropriators on the sanity of Arendt’s conception of modern politics. There is a certain perplexity among her students, the agonist not excluded, that a thinker who lamented the modern loss of common sense with such clarity of mind and who theorized, despite her methodological shortcomings and empirical inaccuracies, the monstrosities of totalitarianism so penetratingly, appears to have severed the intimate relations between the political, philosophical, moral, social and economic realms of life in her own conception of modern politics.³¹ Kateb formulates this unease solicitously when he writes that “the gist of Arendt’s radicalism” is that:

“[Political] action does not exist to do justice or fulfill other moral purposes [...]. The supreme achievement of political action is existential, and the stakes are seemingly higher than moral ones.”³²

“How can morally unlimited action”, he continues to formulate the agonistic discomfort, “be anything but gravely immoral?”³³ For despite Arendt’s safeguards, how does her “internal morality” of action prevent a passionate agonist from becoming morally indifferent toward the injustices of the world, is it not *also* its *raison d’être* to bring justice to our common life world, to emancipate “man” to become a “citizen” and enable him to experience the “joy of action”?

³⁰ Villa (1999), p. 109

³¹ See George Kateb, ‘Freedom and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt’, in: *Political Theory* 2 (5) (1977), pp. 141 - 182

³² Cited in Villa (1996), p. 56

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 56

Is Arendt's purification of the political, moreover, not a "self-defeating" enterprise since one cannot draw boundaries among a sphere of life which is animated by the "boundlessness" of action, as Honig maintains?³⁴ Arendt, indeed, never gave up her position, formulated so provocatively in her narrative of revolutions, that "nothing [...] could be more obsolete than to attempt to liberate mankind from poverty by political means; nothing could be more futile and more dangerous."³⁵ Nearly none of Arendt's students, not even her agonistic appropriators who appreciate an aesthetic approach to politics, seems to support her purification of the political other than in a strictly *attitudinal* sense.³⁶

In my view, one would have to concede with Bikhu Parekh that politics and political action have "[an] inescapable instrumental dimension" and always condition and are conditioned by other spheres and realms of human life.³⁷ Nevertheless, this is no reason why the political scientist can have no empirical signs or theoretical arguments to be vigilant on a ceaseless instrumentalization of politics to the service of moral, social and economic life, and to expose its possible pitfalls. This, I think, has been the *leitmotif* in Arendt's radical critique of modern politics and political philosophy in general, and one of its important lessons raises an obstacle to the agonistic project which finally merits our attention. It concerns Arendt's insistence on an impersonal and disinterested conception of political agency that follows from her appropriation of Kant's *Third Critique*. This disinterestedness, as I argued, safeguards an agonistic politics from the moral indifference that may accompany excessive subjectivism, yet it simultaneously prevents its dispersal outside "the political" strictly speaking, in contradistinction to the agonistic project.

(ii) At the beginning of this chapter it has already been mentioned that the agonist rejects the conception of political agency underlying much of liberalism and its deliberativist variations,

³⁴ Honig (1993), pp. 120 – 121

³⁵ *OR*, p. 104

³⁶ That is, an attitude which is oriented toward the public good and not solely toward private welfare: all other spatial and material demarcations between the social, the private and the political are rejected. Cf., e.g., Benhabib (2000), ch. 5. Note, however, that we would do Arendt a great injustice if we would not recognize that her description of the *vita activa* expresses a *hierarchy of activities as opposed to types (of persons)*, and her narrative of revolutions a critique of certain conditions (such as poverty) and not of the person struck by such conditions. This is not unimportant in my own reconstruction of the social question where I speak of the poor man's condition of poverty. Cf. ch. 1; Villa (1996), p. 144

³⁷ Parekh (1981), p. 51. Arendt herself never denied this and one would only have to look at the means (liberation) and ends (foundation of freedom) categories she employs herself in her narrative of revolution to understand that she was profoundly aware of its inevitability, but felt no less compelled to expose its pitfalls. The same holds, though for very different reasons I would say, for Michael Oakeshott's theory of a purposeless civil association.

which tend to favor a moral psychology of individuals as autonomous, rational agents, grounded in more or less coherent and unified selves. Agonists are keen to appropriate Arendt's critique of the "implicit monism" many a philosopher attribute the self, with which they tacitly assume that "behind the obvious plurality of man's faculties and abilities, there must exist a oneness." Hence Arendt's alternative hypothesis: "the subject as multiplicity."³⁸ This alternative conception of political agency, then, extends plurality *among* men into the inner self of man. For this reason Honig argues pointedly that the struggles of the self's multiplicity, like the plurality that characterizes his political environment, are the very sources of its power, a suppression of which can only amount to domination and oppression of one's self and over others.³⁹ But then the agonist continues this line of reasoning with an *encouragement of the public display of this multiplicity*, of the individual's most intimate struggles with his private traits and personal identity, thereby accumulating the agonistic sites of contest. In short, the agonist stretches the agon beyond the public realm, and as it strikes down in the realm of the inner self, he prompts the individual to take the inner agon back to the realm of politics for an outward display of its inner contestations.

From the standpoint of Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics, however, it is this latter step in the agonistic project to which we must object forcefully. The reason why agonistic democrats advocate the agon's dispersal is, of course, that they want to bypass the somewhat homogeneous masculinity of the classical agonal spirit. But as Villa argues, very convincingly I think, this can only amount to another collapse of the distinction between the public and the private, effectively abolishing the protective distance provided by our political and legal *persona*.⁴⁰ Thus when Honig calls for its unmasking through the politicization of "the private realm's natural or constative identities of race, class, gender, and ethnicity", she violates the crucial distinction between, on one hand, *homme* and *femme*, and, on the other, *citoyen(ne)* which Arendt was so keen to preserve.⁴¹

The reason why we must preserve this distinction is not only that such "constative" private traits cannot be amended through man's capacity for speech and distinction and hence are politically irrelevant, but also because it infiltrates the *integrity* of both the public – that which has to appear – and the private – that which must remain hidden. This explains why Arendt,

³⁸ Cited in Honig (1993), p. 83; *LM*, Vol. 2 'Willing'

³⁹ Thus Honig argues that "Arendt rejects autonomy as a value on precisely these grounds." Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 83 - 84

⁴⁰ Villa (1999), ch. 5

⁴¹ Honig (1993), pp. 120 - 121

far from taking a derogatory stance toward the private, household realm as so many of her students have protested, affirms its “sacredness”, since:

“A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense.”⁴²

But above all we must respect Arendt’s transformation of the Heideggerian dialectic between disclosure and concealment because its abolition invites a ceaseless proliferation of identity politics. Its rebellious romantic-expressivist ethos of retribution, in effect, blocks the development of a shared concern for the public world among political equals.⁴³ Recalling Arendt’s account of the “war upon hypocrisy”, we are reminded why the distinction between *homme* and *citoyen* is at the heart of her revolutionary conception of modern politics. It is in this context, then, that we may once more appreciate with Villa Arendt’s theory of judgment and its “disinterested” conception of political agency. For politics is ultimately about how we as citizens think and act with a view to how “*the world should look like*”, and not, as the agonistic project fundamentally misconceives it, how the multiplicity and plurality of our own and other’s individual selves look and feel like:

“In aesthetic no less than in political judgments, a decision is made, and although this decision is always determined by a certain subjectivity, by the simple fact that each person occupies a place of his own from which he looks upon and judges the world, it also derives from the fact that the world itself is an objective datum, something common to all its inhabitants. The activity of taste decides how this world, independent of its utility and our vital interests in it, is to look and sound, what men will see and what they will hear in it. Taste judges the world in its appearance and in its worldliness; its interest in the world is purely “disinterested,” and that means that *neither the life interests of the individual nor the moral interests of the self are involved here. For judgments of taste, the world is the primary thing, not man, neither man’s life nor his self.*”⁴⁴

From these observations it is possible to conclude that the agonistic model of democracy is congenial to Arendt’s revolutionary conception of modern politics in its “aestheticization” of political action, its valorization of dissent and perpetual contest, and its appropriation of several Arendtian safeguards. Nevertheless, the agonistic project shares with its deliberativist counterpart a certain anxiety of its moral sanity and reproaches its exclusion of socio-economic issues from politics. With the notable exception of Villa’s interpretation, the agonist

⁴² And it is precisely for this reason that Arendt affirms the importance of private property, she continues: “The only efficient way to guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity is private property, a privately owned place to hide in.” Cf. *HC*, p. 7; Villa (1996), p. 147

⁴³ Villa (1999), pp. 108 - 110

⁴⁴ *BPF*, p. 222 (my italics)

encourages the dispersal of the agon, effectively muddling Arendt's "purified" conception of modern politics and the distinction between man and citizen on which it operates.

Having given an assessment of both Arendt's deliberativist and agonistic appropriators and the congeniality of their democratic theories with Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics, I propose to turn back to Arendt's own narrative and see what limitations her revolutionary thought and its institutional corollary, a system of elementary republics, imposes on the democratic endeavors of her appropriators from a more general perspective. With that purpose in mind, chapter four enables us to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of Arendt's revolutionary thought and its critical commitment to democracy.

CHAPTER 4
DEMOCRATIC THEORY AND THE LIMITS OF
ARENDRT'S REVOLUTIONARY THOUGHT

"It is not the revolutionary spirit but the democratic mentality of an egalitarian society that tends to deny the obvious inability and conspicuous lack of interest of large parts of the population in political matters as such."

Hannah Arendt¹

*

In the first chapter I have argued that Arendt's is not a distinctively democratic conception of modern politics but that she nevertheless embraces it as a non-exhaustive form of government, its contribution lying in the institutionalization of the principle of universal access to the public, political realm. In this chapter I seek to clarify my contention that Arendt advances a conception of modern politics which entails a peculiarly mixed form of government, with an underlying critique of the notion of government itself. Only with an exposition of the combined elements of republicanism, aristocracy, democracy and anarchic-utopianism are we in the position to give judgments on Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics and its congeniality with the democratic projects of her deliberativist and agonistic appropriators.

Rather than focusing on the specific building blocks for and obstacles in the competing models of deliberative and agonistic democracy, I turn to the institutional corollary of Arendt's narrative of revolutions, the council system, not, to be sure, to provide a full-fledged assessment in terms of its historical and empirical (in)accuracies,² but to its institutional expression of the revolutionary spirit and the limits this spirit imposes on the agonistic and deliberativist currents in democratic theory. My purpose is to answer the question, *What are the general limitations of Hannah Arendt's revolutionary thought for the deliberativist and agonistic currents in democratic theory?*

My discussion proceeds as follows. First, I will argue how Arendt's conception of modern politics mediates, in my view, the normative cores of both the deliberative and agonistic models of democracy, while at the same time marking her point of departure from her appropriators. Second, I take up this point of departure in order to examine how Arendt's argument for a system of councils institutionalizes the revolutionary spirit of action and gives

¹ *OR*, p. 269

² For an analysis of these inaccuracies, cf. John F. Sitton, 'Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council Democracy', in: *Polity* 1 (20) (1987), pp. 80 -100

rise to a peculiarly mixed form of government. Finally, I sum up how Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics and its incorporation of the council system presents limitations on the extent to which her deliberativist and agonistic appropriators can characterize her as a "radical democrat", and appropriate her thought accordingly.

4.1 Arendt's Mediation of the Deliberativist and Agonistic Projects

In the expositions of the deliberative and agonistic models of democracy, two diametrically opposed pictures of modern politics have emerged: the deliberativist expressing the importance of consensus and agreement, the formal institutionalization of political deliberation and debate, and the discursive recognition of offices of government, while the agonist insisted on the fruitful tensions that arise out of perpetual contest and conflict, the fact that no institutional arrangement should or ever will be closed off from possible disruptions. Arendt, in effect, mediates between the deliberativist preoccupation with consensus and agreement and the agonistic urge to stress the vitality that conflict and disagreement bring to the political process, as exemplified in one of her commentaries on American politics:

"America, this republic, the democracy in which we are, is a living thing which cannot be contemplated or categorized, like the image of a thing I can make [...]. It is not and will never be perfect because the standard of perfection does not apply here. Dissent belongs to this living matter as much as consent does. The limitations on dissent are the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and no one else. If you try to "make America more American" or a model of democracy according to any preconceived idea, you can only destroy it."³

This passage throws into sharp relief all this talk about the moral defensibility or even the "moral dangers" of her conception of modern politics, given her explicit commitment to the constitutional embedding of political power and its assurances for the protection of civil rights and liberties, and it reveals with straightforward clarity how Arendt balances the respective valorization of consent and dissent in the deliberativist and agonistic projects.⁴

Indeed, it also reveals Arendt's suspicion of the prototypic modeling so many a democratic theorist embarks upon, for such modeling and architectures run counter to the open-ended, fluid character of politics and democracy. In this sense, one could say that the agonistic project, inasmuch as it abstains from such prototypic design, is more congenial to Arendt's conception of modern politics than anything like the dizzying technicalities, procedures and formalisms of the deliberativist which to me appears as a Habermasian fetishism in democratic theory.

³ Cited in Isaac (1994), p. 161

⁴ Ibid., p. 161

With Arendt's suspicion of such detailed democratic modeling in mind, we are in the position to address her infamous argument in favor of a system of "elementary republics". This argument tells the "strange and sad story" of those councils and associations – the American townships, the French revolutionary clubs and societies, the Paris Commune, the *Räte* of the German Revolution of 1918, the variety of councils of students, workers and artisans in the Hungarian Revolution, etc. – which provided the people, or rather with which the people provided themselves with accessible public spaces in which to experience the "joy of action".

Although these "elementary republics" never survived the aftermath of revolutions as, in Parekh's analysis, "organized political parties have invariably dismantled and replaced [them] by a centralized state", Arendt believes that they enable us, despite their historical perception "as though they were a romantic dream, some sort of fantastic utopia come true for a fleeting moment [...]", to grasp how the institutionalization of the revolutionary spirit of action would look like, and how it expresses a peculiarly mixed form of government.⁵

4.2 Arendt's Revolutionary Conception as a Mixed Form of Government

Arendt's picture of the council system – which consists of a "new power structure" that expresses a "federal principle" in which multiple layers of councils and assemblies are organized from municipal units up to a federal assembly – has shocked and "chilled the hearts" of many democrats when she asserted that these councils, starting with the local level, should provide "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."⁶ Arendt's invocation an elite, she asserts, is a term with which she has "a quarrel" for its oligarchic connotations, but not, paradoxically and provocatively, for her conviction that "the political way of life never has been and never will be the life of the many [...]."⁷

She argues in favor of a political elite in which only those citizens with a passion for public freedom and public happiness should attend to public affairs, and that "it is the task of a good government and the sign of a well-ordered republic to assure them to their rightful place in the public realm", for it are these citizens, Arendt continues, who are animated by the

⁵ Parekh (1981), p. 169; *OR*, p. 255

⁶ Isaac (1994), p. 157; *OR*, p. 269

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 267

revolutionary spirit of action and who are therefore “politically [...] the best.”⁸ In spelling out the “elitist” structure of these “self-chosen” councils, Arendt gives her proposal an even more ominous and rough turn when she argues:

“To be sure, such an ‘aristocratic’ form of government would spell the end of general suffrage as we understand it today; for only those who as voluntary members of an ‘elementary republic’ have demonstrated that they care for more than their private happiness and are concerned about the state of the world would have the right to be heard in the conduct of the business of the republic.”⁹

Yet Arendt insists, first, that her “elitism” gives rise to plural elites, a political elite is by no means coeval with other elites, such as scientific and literary ones which are composed on the basis of completely different standards, and, second, does not promote an exclusionary political practice.¹⁰ For she simultaneously presents this “aristocratic” system of self-chosen councils as a “direct regeneration of democracy.”¹¹

The reason why she contends that her proposal is both aristocratic and democratic, is that her principle of self-selection is counterbalanced by a principle of self-exclusion, the only criterion is a citizen’s passion for public freedom: “The joys of public happiness and the responsibilities for public business would then become the share of those few from all walks of life who have a taste for public freedom and cannot be ‘happy’ without it.”¹² Moreover, whereas on the one hand she provocatively asserts the denial of “[the] obvious inability and conspicuous lack of interest of large parts of the population in political matters as such” in “[the] democratic mentality of an egalitarian society,” she nevertheless insists on “the average citizen’s capacity to act and to form his own opinion” and hence why this political elite would come from “all walks of life.”¹³

Now despite the apparent self-contradictions in these statements, there is indeed a “consistency at a deeper level” in Arendt’s proposal, for what she is up to in sketching the contours of a mixed form of government which is democratic in its reach, but aristocratic in its functioning, is to counter the vices of mass politics and mass democracy, and the oligarchic

⁸ Ibid., p. 271; Parekh (1981), p. 170

⁹ OR., p. 27; As Parekh points out, Arendt obviously did not mean the abolition of *universal* suffrage, but intended this provocative statement in order to release the “participants in government” from their bonds to the private interests of particular parts of the electorate. Cf. Parekh, p. 171

¹⁰ OR., pp. 270 - 271

¹¹ Ibid, p. 255

¹² Ibid., p. 271

¹³ Ibid., p. 269; p. 256; p. 271

traits of the party-system.¹⁴ Her endorsement of a system of “elementary republics” seeks to avoid, above all, “the equation of ‘people’ and masses.”¹⁵ Hence her employment of the category of masses is strictly sociological and psychological, and Arendt insists throughout her work that mass behavior is to be found among all strata of society.¹⁶ In this regard, one can easily see that Margaret Canovan is far off the mark when she charges that on Arendt’s account “political freedom, which is the all-important glory of human existence, is possible only among an aristocratic leisured class undisturbed by compassion for their serfs, and that it has been lost in the modern age because increasing equality of condition has given politics into the hands of the poor and lowly.”¹⁷ For Arendt maintains that it were the early labor movements, their interest in both political action and economic administration notwithstanding, which “has written one of the most glorious and probably the most promising chapter of recent history.”¹⁸ These were obviously anything but an “aristocratic leisured class”, and Arendt could only lament their loss of passion for politics and subsequent monotony of calls for wage-raises as one more sign of the people, from this walk of life, tending toward the consumerist attitudes of mass behavior and becoming one more interest group among others.¹⁹

It is in this context, then, that we may understand why Arendt, appreciating Jefferson’s concern for the townships and wards and displaying once more her suspicion of prototypic modeling, argued that:

“It would be tempting to spin out further the potentialities of the councils, but it certainly is wiser to say with Jefferson, ‘Begin them only for a single purpose; they will soon show for what others they are the best instruments’ – the best instruments, for example, for breaking up the modern mass society, with its dangerous tendency toward the formation of pseudo-political mass movements, or rather, the best, the most natural way for interspersing it at the grass roots with an ‘élite’ that is chosen by no one but constitutes itself.”²⁰

As Jeffrey C. Isaac argues, the purpose of the council system is to *break up* mass society and to counter the vices of mass politics, but certainly not a wholesale transformation of the

¹⁴ Parekh (1981), p. 172

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 262. An equation Arendt herself makes in many instances of her oeuvre, particularly in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. cf. Parekh (1981), p. 171

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 171; For instance in her critique of the consumerism and snobbishness of the bourgeoisie, cf. *OR*, p. 96

¹⁷ Margaret Canovan, ‘The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt’s Political Thought’, in *Political Theory* 1 (6) (1978), p. 15

¹⁸ *HC*, p. 215; Isaac (1994), p. 166 n. 6

¹⁹ *HC*, pp. 212 - 220

²⁰ *OR*, p. 271

institutions of representative government and liberal democracy.²¹ What Arendt wants to achieve is *the institutionalization of the revolutionary spirit of action at the grass-roots level as a crucial complement to the functioning of representative government*. In doing so she incorporates a flavor of anarchic-utopianism, taking her cue from Proudhon and Bakunin, with which we might come conceive the principle of political equality without resorting to “the age-old distinction” between ruler and ruled and its concomitant misconception of the notion of government.²² But this “people’s utopia” of the council system, however, is ultimately grounded in the framework of a republic, the proper and true form of self-government, which comprises, in Arendt’s revolutionary conception of modern politics, a deep reverence for such representative and judicial institutions as the American Senate and the Supreme Court.²³

4.3 Disenchanted the Radical Democratic Idealism of the Deliberativist and Agonist

Now this peculiarly mixed form of government, does not only question the accuracy of Habermas’, Benhabib’s, Honig’s and Villa’s concurrence to bring Arendt into their own corner of “radical democrats”, for Arendt’s advocacy of “elementary republics”, whatever the future holds in store for its “utopian” potential, at least has the explicit realism “to give substance and reality to one of the most important negative liberties we have enjoyed since the end of the ancient world, namely, freedom from politics [...]”²⁴

Her own laudation of “the political way of life” notwithstanding, she does not share the radical democrat’s rather stubborn idealism, as Parekh formulates it, that “every citizen ought to, generally wants to, and should be encouraged to, participate in the conduct of public affairs.”²⁵ For the wishful-thinking involved in the singularly democratic idealism of both Arendt’s deliberativist and agonistic appropriators is that they will tend to forget or deny the everlasting aversion among “the many” toward the political engagement of and the thrills of the revolutionary spirit animating “the few”, which Arendt so concisely formulated with reference to Crèvecoeur:

“[One] can hardly deny that Crèvecoeur was right when he predicted that ‘the man will get the better of the citizen, [that] his political maxims will vanish’, that those who in all earnestness say, ‘The happiness of my family is the only object of my wishes’, will

²¹ Isaac (1994), p. 156

²² *OR*, p. 253

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 192; p. 212

²⁴ *OR*, p. 272

²⁵ Parekh (1981), p. 169

be applauded by nearly everyone when, in the name of democracy, they vent their rage against the ‘great personages who are so far elevated above the common rank of man’ that their aspirations transcend their private happiness, or when, in the name of the ‘common man’ and some confused notion of liberalism, they denounce public virtue, which certainly is not the virtue of the husbandman, as mere ambition, and those to whom they owe their freedom as ‘aristocrats’ who (as in the case of poor John Adams) they believe were possessed by a ‘colossal vanity’.”²⁶

Indeed, from these observations we may conclude that not only Arendt’s suspicion of prototypic modeling poses limitations on the terms with which the deliberativist and agonist can appropriate her thought, but also her realistic insight into the fact that the revolutionary spirit will inspire the people from all walks of life, but it will certainly not inspire “the many”, “for although Arendt emphasized the role of the élite, she was not an elitist; and although she valued popular participation, she was not a radical democrat.”²⁷

²⁶ *OR*, p. 131

²⁷ Parekh (1981), p. 172

CONCLUSION

Through an exegesis of Hannah Arendt's narrative of revolutions, this thesis has given an interpretation of her conception of modern politics and has confronted this revolutionary conception with the deliberative and agonistic models of democracy. My purpose has been to answer the question, *Can the deliberative and agonistic models of democracy do justice to the conception of modern politics that arises out of Hannah Arendt's narrative of revolutions?*

In order to answer this central research question, I have first reconstructed Arendt's conception of modern politics in terms of the revolutionary spirit of action, and her account of its loss in sociological and institutional terms. On the basis of this reconstruction, I have argued on a precursory account that Arendt's conception embraces democracy as a form of government but is not its distinctive hallmark, she regards the polarization and dichotomization of democracy in contradistinction to the aristocratic form of government as a symptom of the loss of the revolutionary spirit she valorizes so passionately. On Arendt's account, democracy stands in a miscellaneous constellation of diverse elements from as republicanism and the aristocratic form of government.

In the second chapter I have examined the congeniality of the deliberative model of democracy with Arendt's conception of modern politics. I have identified the communicative structure of action, the centrality of deliberation and consensus, as well as the mediating functioning of reflective judgment in the political process as Arendt's main building blocks for the deliberativist project, which expresses a moral, deliberative and consensual approach to politics. But the congeniality of the deliberative model in these respects is significantly downplayed by the obstacles Arendt's political theory raises in the deliberativist ambition to ground their model in moral universalist standards and principles, their recourse to theories of volition and sovereignty, and their reproach of Arendt's decoupling of politics and socio-economic administration.

In the third chapter I have followed the same line of assessment with respect to the agonistic model of democracy, arguing that this aesthetic and conflict-based approach to politics appropriates its Arendtian building in the performative and aesthetic structure of political action, the indispensability of dissent and contestation, and the moral safeguards Arendt provides with her accounts of forgiveness, promising and reflective judgment. The

congeniality of the agonistic model is limited in the “moral dangers” the agonists sees in Arendt’s tendency toward an existentialist account of politics and action which puts moral and socio-economic concerns at distance from the realm of politics. Further, the dispersal and stretching of the agon within and outside the realm of politics is prevented by and runs counter to Arendt’s theory of reflective judgment, which I consider to be a severe limitation in the congeniality of the agonistic project with Arendt’s revolutionary conception of modern politics.

In the last chapter I have returned to Arendt’s narrative of revolutions and considered what general limitations follow from Arendt’s revolutionary conception of modern politics for her deliberativist and agonistic appropriators. I have indicated how Arendt balances the deliberativist focus on consensus with the agonistic focus on dissent, while simultaneously pointing at Arendt’s suspicion of prototypic modeling in democratic theory. Turning my focus to the institutional corollary of Arendt’s narrative of revolutions, that is, her endorsement of a system of elementary republics that challenges the party-system, I have argued that Arendt’s proposal is intended as a crucial complement to and modification of representative government and liberal democracy. It is intended to intersperse the vices of mass society at the grass roots level and to counter the oligarchic tendencies of the party-system. Above all, I have challenged the idea that Arendt’s proposal entitles us to characterize her as a radical democrat, and that her deliberativist and agonistic appropriators cannot claim her company in this respect. I have illustrated my contention that her revolutionary conception of modern politics, and its incorporation of the council system, expresses a peculiarly mixed form of government, with republican, aristocratic, democratic as well as anarchic-utopian elements that challenge the singular modern commitment to democracy, as well as Arendt’s insistence on the importance to accommodate freedom from politics.

On the basis of these observations, it possible to conclude that the deliberative and agonistic models of democracy can only do limited justice to Hannah Arendt’s political theory when they are confronted with the conception of modern politics that arises out of her narrative of revolutions. On the one hand, the deliberativist project captures the consensual tendency of *On Revolution* well, while their model of democracy departs sharply from Arendt’s conception of modern politics in its universalistic and overtly moral ambitions. On the other hand, it is the agonistic project that most concisely represents the need to break up the docile behaviors and moral customs that are detrimental to the revolutionary spirit of action as. Yet

the agonist also trespasses certain limits Arendt has built in her theory on the dispersal of the agon. Taken together, I think it is fair to conclude that Arendt balances the respective orientation on consensus and conflict in the deliberative and agonistic models of democracy. However, the congeniality of these democratic theories with Arendt's revolutionary conception of modern politics is severely limited by her suspicion of prototypic modeling, particularly evident in the deliberativist project, and both currents' tendencies to bypass Arendt's own critical commitment to democracy, particularly with a view to her "aristocratic" argument to accommodate freedom from politics and her decoupling of modern politics from socio-economic administration.

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