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Freedom to act : how the denial of Arendtian Humanness enslaves individuals into violence

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Citation

Consigny, C. (2024). *Freedom to act : how the denial of Arendtian Humanness enslaves individuals into violence.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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“The vehement yearning for violence, so characteristic of some of the best modern creative artists, thinkers, scholars, and craftsmen, is a natural reaction of those whom society has tried to cheat of their strength.”

- Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958 (p. 204)

Freedom to act : how the denial of Arendtian Humanness enslaves individuals into violence.

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Bachelor Thesis

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Word count: 7940

Embargo option : Public

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I. Introduction

“We must remember that the main purpose of the trial and execution is not to save the soul of the accused but to achieve the public good and put fear into others” (quoted in Kamen 1998:174).” (Kalyvas, 2000, p. 4). This 1578 quote from a Spanish Inquisitor gives a clear idea of the governing mindset driving their colonization. In the Guatemalan case, the 36 year long war tore apart any community ties that had survived the 500 years of colonial oppression. The government at the time turned to state terror in order to crush any potential uprisings. 400 rural villages burned to the ground, 40 000 forced disappearances and an estimated 150 000 to 200 000 of civilian deaths are the numbers that represent the levels of atrocity the country went through in these times. Coming from a state conviction that the rebels were indigenous and supported by the entire population, the massacre was perpetrated against all. This was also made possible by the colonial legacies of deeply rooted racism and belief that the Maya were inferior which eased the morals of the bloodstained governments (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico 1999, 325, as found in Kubota, 2017). Despite the 1996 peace accords, hyper-violence still plagues the streets of Guatemala, which are now the playground the *pandilleros* (also called *mareros*), term that refers to the youth involved in bloodstained gangs.

As the post-colonial discourse has made abundantly clear : independence is not nearly enough to allow previously colonized states to evolve in a way that fit western ideals of peace. Violence traumatizes and its consequences do not simply vanish once peace accords are signed (Ramiah & Hewstone, 2013, p. 527 ; Collier, 2009). However it is obvious that violence is first and foremost a complicated act to commit by people originally socialized not to do so. As such, I would like to dedicate this paper’s literature review into analyzing what are the causes of violence, and why it persists. After careful consideration of the scholarly discourse, it becomes clear that violence is pushed through a variety of factors, thus making the environment one grows in the determinant of future criminal behaviour. Violence can be explained by genetics, parental abuse, structural inequalities or various group processes which the literature extensively covers.

Concurrently, I find Hannah Arendt’s 1958 *The Human Condition* hold valuable insights as to how individuals are forced into violence. In her rendition of humanness and the world, she argues that violence is pre-political, and that once individuals have the opportunity to participate in the world through the public sphere (*polis*), they no longer have any use for violence. In order

to get to that point however, one must be free to attend this *polis*. I find the analysis of violence through the lens of freedom particularly interesting. Violence being criminalized, one would assume individuals are not free to commit such acts. On the contrary, I will be arguing that individuals are not free to evolve without brutality. They are not free to commit anything but violence, meaning they are forced into it when trying to make their way into the world. Combining the brutality of Guatemalan *maras* (gangs, also referred to as *pandillas*) plaguing the country, together with Arendt's tools, I am looking to highlight what exactly enslaves the population into the vicious cycle of violence. In essence, I would like to ask can Arendt help us explain why violence persists in Guatemala? After summarizing the current academic discourse, I will be recounting Arendt's conditions to fulfill one's human condition. Going from the *animal laborans* that needs to be freed from its biological necessity in labour ; *homo faber*'s need to be freed from meaninglessness of work in order to participate in the public sphere of action ; finally, the man of action's need to be freed from the consequences of his doings, should they be poorly perceived by others. These conditions allow for the renewal of acts and initiatives, thus creating a healthy public sphere where human affairs can be decided of and enacted through speech and persuasion, and where violence does not have its place. Following this, I will be applying these thoughts to the Guatemalan society, to understand how it has found itself enslaved in violence. Finally, I will be highlighting the initiatives that are already in place, which help in restoring the abandoned population's humanness.

II. Literature Review – Theories of violence

There are two aspects to violence that I think must be understood in order to fully grasp the intricacies of societal fracture : how are individuals pushed to cruelty and how does this violence become a structural issue through its intergenerational transmission? And finally, why does this violence persist overtime ?

II. 1. What pushes to violence

The psychiatrics discourse finds that most violent attitudes are associated to antisocial personality disorders (ASDP) (DeBrito, 2021, p. 3). Individuals with such personality disorders are ones that suffer from affective associative struggles. In essence, they lack empathy and do not feel anxious emotions such as guilt or remorse. These mental deceptions prevents them from

connecting with others, hence facilitating the resort to violence. While violent outburst are often associated to psychopathic personalities, it is important to highlight that ASDP emerges from a gene and environment interplay. As such, genetical predispositions that affect the neurodevelopment of the brain isn't sufficient by themselves in creating violent individuals (Fairchild et al., 2019 , p.). The environment and context in which a person is brought up matters just as much, if not more. In the same way that supportive environments manage to curb the effect of genetical predispositions conduct disorders can also spark just from highly negative environments, without any genetical contribution (p. 6). In essence, the psychology discourse is adamant to point out that abusive environments enchain children to a sort of path dependency leading them to violence.

Martens et. Al. (2007) find that committing vicious acts is in itself difficult for human beings. While 19th century Freudian ideals argue that violence is inherent to the human nature, contemporary scholars find that most individuals require practice in order to commit strong violent acts (Martens et. Al., 2007). Indeed, sociologists and political scientists agree with the psychological narrative that individuals are pushed to violence from their different environments. Parental socialization plays a strong role in shaping their children's proponent to violence. The cycle of violence theory (Widom, 1989) is key in understanding the phenomena. Children victim of parental abused are more likely to indulge in crime as an adult. In the same way in which psychiatry show that psychopathy and conduct disorder are most likely to emerge from toxic environments, the cycle of violence theory highlights the vicious mechanism that traps individuals in animosity. Intergenerational transmissions of violence and neglect portrays how self-sufficient the cycle of violence is. However, it must be mentioned that culture and neighbourhood situations act as moderating factors. Socio-economic factors have a high impact on youth violence. High inequalities in resource distribution, low opportunities for development and education, and poverty are all factors that perpetrate violence (L. Comas-Diaz et. Al. , 1998). Structural disadvantages and rough environments tend to worsen the effect of child abuse. Especially peer delinquency, which acts as a driving force in determining one's involvement in violent criminality (De Brito, 2021 ; Comas-Diaz et al., 1998). Group processes play a massive role in encouraging individual animosity. Littman & Paluck (2015) find that groups manage to do so through two processes. They increase motivation, by offering rewards and the feeling of belonging as an important member. They also reduce aversion by creating a wider distance from the victims or by making violence

normative. Creating a stark divide between both groups is an efficient way of releasing group members from their morality refraining them.

On the other hand, what Kalyvas (2000) is quick to point out is that belligerents in civil wars often do not enjoy such distance. Indeed, violence is exercise between people who already have a shared relatively amicable history : community members, neighbors or ex-friends (p. 2). As such, he looks to explain how these conflicts escalate to violence. The involvement of civilians in these conflicts are essentially what makes them so traumatic and impactful for a society as a whole. Civilian support and collaboration are often the determining factor in success for one side or the other (p. 4). Civilian support is gained through material or non-material benefits, meaning that loyalty and affiliation can be determined through similarities in ideologies, but that often is the case only in the early stages of civil wars. Once the conflict escalates, the only incentive that leads individual's attitudes is pure survival (p. 6). People turn to violence to ensure their well-being and their family's as well. Of course, in blood-stained wars most families will have gone through tragic losses. As such, vengeance also becomes a trigger that draws individuals to violence. In fact, he finds that as these wars strain in already-polarized societies, many turned the war to their advantage and used it to get their personal justice for past events. These remain, however, a strategic choice to make. Retaliation is possible from both sides. This highlights how violence plagues families, how animosity passes down through different generations only worsening the hostile atmosphere.

II. 1. The persistence of violence

The general research that seek to find solutions and frameworks to curb the effects of violence often struggle to account for the contextual complexity of specific countries, especially Latin American nations. L. Comas-Diaz et. Al. (1998) advocate for the use of 'psychology of liberation' when working with post-colonial Latin-American reconstruction. The inequality in resource distribution is an important factor in the region's conflicts, however the causes cannot be limited to it : ethnic and cultural factors matter tremendously, even if they have been set aside in the discourse (p. 778). Ignoring the consequences of social economic struggles and oppression limits analysis, thus preventing appropriate responses. The reclaiming of such traumas was pioneered by Fanon (1967) and fueled Paulo Freire's (1967, 1970, 1973) works (p. 780). In essence, psychology of liberation insists that healing processes can only be successful if attention is paid to all of the symbolic losses from a culture and identity (p. 783). In fact, De Courson et al.

(2023) also find that history matters in the presence of violence in a specific neighborhood (p. 6). Violence persists despite potential economic improvements, as it relies on the ‘perceived needs’ one must provide for oneself. Indeed, self-provision is referred to by the scholars as the ‘threshold of desperation’. The authors argue that violence does not perpetrate violence in itself, but it is rather a question of gain and loss equilibrium (2023, p. 6). One is pushed to violence once violence is the only way to achieve a set goal. Economic conditions are thus tremendously important when accounting for violence. Precarity breeds brutality as it is a fertile ground for exploitation. In addition, precarity will also deny individuals of basic needs and property, giving them very little to lose when engaging in conflict. This feeds into the equilibrium : the gains are greater as one has close to nothing to lose. However, it is also argued that as violence increases, it may discourage individuals to partake, as the costs exceed the gains (De Courson et al., 2023, p. 6). Only, the cycle of violence comes into play when violence forces individuals to feed into a ‘toughness reputation’, without which they would simply be exploited by the perpetrators of brutality.

As such, it becomes clear that violence can also be explained as being a means to an end. This is exactly in accordance to Hannah Arendt’s rendition of violence in *The Human Condition* (1958). She asserts that violence is pre-political : it is a way men ensures their survival when they are denied the privilege of the public sphere. The public sphere, the highest form of humanity is where human affairs are decided of and directed through persuasion, through speech. A place where violence does not have its place, where it is, ideally, useless. What I would like to do now is bring Arendt into the narrative of how a community can move away from violence. Drawing from Arendt’s theory that violence is pre-political, I am looking to understand what are the conditions that must be fulfilled to reach an appropriate public sphere. It is my understanding that for one to reach the *polis* (public sphere), freedom must be attained. As such, I will be rooting my analysis in the Arendtian theorization of freedom, in order to understand what must be done to foster a safe and healthy political era. Following this, I would like to apply it to the case of Guatemala, which has been suffering constant hyper violence since the 16th century Spanish colonization. In essence, I am questioning in what way Arendt’s theorizations of the conditions needed to foster an appropriate public sphere allow us to understand how flawed the current Guatemalan system is, which sustains and worsens the hyper violence of their society. What tools does Arendt give us to understand what makes a peaceful society? Can she help us explain why violence persists in Guatemala?

III. Arendtian thought and re-thinking Guatemalan violence

The Human Condition (1958) defines violence as pre-political. The public sphere, the *polis*, is a space of speech and action amongst others. It is a place where matters are decided through persuasion and negotiation (p. 26). Participation in the public sphere in Greek times was only possible through property ownership. Owning land alone is not exactly what is meant by property here. It is rather the ownership of a household in which one was head. This provided the *pater*, the head, slaves to labor for its biological necessities, thus freeing them from the hassle of animal survival. Property ownership in Greek antiquity offered freedom. From what I understand, freedom is a necessary condition to the *Polis* (1958, pp. 30 ; 31). The public sphere gives freedom, but you must also be free in order to attend the *polis*. Violence, is the instance that precedes freedom. It is a mean in order to achieve such freedom (1958, p. 31). The release of violence, the end of it, comes from the public sphere : the political. Once the *polis* is reached, violence becomes obsolete. This is why I believe deep diving into Arendt's theorization of freedom is highly relevant to answer our question. Furthering the idea that violence comes to an end once the *polis* is reached, by understanding the exact conditions to foster such a sphere and instance, we can see exactly how undermined the Guatemalan society is, as it does not allow for the fulfilment of any of these conditions, thus trapping it in violence.

III. 1. Freedom to engage in the Public Sphere

The greatest personification of freedom is Arendt's cherished *polis* (public sphere). It is the very enactment of the highest form of humanity : speech (p. 27). It is the space where one is entitled to decide of the affairs of the community, themselves included. Men are free, because they may have a voice and power in leading society a certain way. It is only possible because the public sphere is not a space for violence, for coercion, but rather for persuasion. Ideally, if affairs go a certain way, it is because citizens of the *polis* have decided so, on a common accord. They were free to follow a single person's opinion, and were not forced to. This is the whole idea of the *polis*, which is why it puts such an importance on speech.

Arendt presents the three main conditions to humanness in her 1958 piece : *The Human Condition*, and must all be part and present in men's life for them to achieve the prodigy of humanness. The three are as follows : Labor, Work, Action. All three are intertwined with each other, and have relevance in every single aspects of human life. The concept we are focusing on

here freedom. She argues that in order to be truly free, one must have surpassed all limitations imposed upon us by biology. Despite being intellectualized beings, we still suffer from the humiliation of being animals. We are still tamed by nature's demands. No matter how far we are capable of going, we will always be brought back to these natural obligations. The question is whether we can curb these limitations, so as to not be overwhelmed by them. Work brings the solution, the 'help', for the *animal laborans* to escape its dependence on necessity. These tools take on the role slaves were forcefully assigned in antiquity. However, work must be fueled by meaning. Freedom from meaninglessness is brought through human relationships, which allows for the first steps of the political public realm. This web of relations and stories encourage individuals to participate in the *polis*. Finally, living amongst others can only be sustained through forgiveness. Human relationships are prone to disagreements, mistakes or backfiring. Without redemption, one would always be tied to its previous actions, and would never be allowed to evolve and improve. These three conditions allow for the appropriate functioning of the public sphere, freed from violence.

III. 1. A. Labor: biological enslavement

Labor is a burden. We are individuals, but first, we are humans, animals. There are certain acts we must do in order to survive. That is what the *animal laborans* does : he survives. He must eat, sleep, drink, reproduce. But if one must eat, then he must provide. He must make. He must labor in order to survive its biological destiny, which is to eventually die, ideally as late as possible. These tasks are time consuming. In essence, when you have nothing but the inherent need to provide for yourself, you find it becoming your life's mission. When being forced into precarious life conditions, the main priority of any individual is to survive.

In order to avoid such time consumption that would not leave room for many tasks, the Greeks relied heavily on slavery. A slave's work would be to provide for the master, to ensure that the master is fed, clothed and that the property that makes him a master is cared for and maintained. While the master is still not entirely excused from its biological limitations, these are eased by the presence of slaves, for it can just consume the product of the slave's labor (p. 121). This is wealth, not in the sense of accumulation of riches, but rather in owning property. Property in which you can have a safe, private, space to be an *animal laborans*. Having the privacy to be subject to all animal desires and intimacy (pp. 30 ; 31). I would argue that wealth is, in essence, time and space

because of these two aspects. You need the time to be something other than an animal, to be freed from the constraints of being one, but simultaneously you need the space to take care of your biology, so as to ensure health. Health is another aspect in which its mastery is quintessential to freedom. To be ill means to be restrained by your body. Now, I understand from such assertions that one plagued by illness unable to attend such gathering, is not free. They are forcefully detained in the limitations of their body. Similarly, one that does not have the time or resources to participate in the public sphere because the urgency of necessity forces them to only provide for themselves, is not free. They are enslaved by their own primal desires. Finally, one that is unable to attend the *polis* because they are forced, through violence, to provide and serve another, is not free. They are enslaved by others. As such, in the Greek era, freedom had a cost : a life freed from the *animal laborans*' constraints can only be paid for by another life reduced to service as an *animal laborans* (pp. 119-120).

III. 1. B. Freedom from necessity, through work

Work is the second human condition : it is the work of our hands, as opposed to the labor of the body for the *animal laborans*, which builds the world we are part of (Arendt, 1958 p. 136). The key establishment of work is durability, immortality. The making of things that will outlive us. A testimony of our passage, our contribution to the advancement of society as a whole. The human that lives in the work condition is referred to as the *homo faber*. Arendt draws a clear distinction between the *animal laborans* and the *homo faber* when she writes “ the *animal laborans*, which with its body and the help of the tame animals nourishes life, may be lord and master of all living creatures, but he still remains the servant of nature and earth ; only *homo faber* conducts himself as lord and master of the whole earth.” (1958, p. 139). Only once the necessities of the laborer are tamed, can humans enter the sphere of work. It is a well-fed and able body that can go and concentrate on skills aimed at producing objects that are not made for consumption. Objects that are useful, but not essential to survival. In essence, I would argue that attaining the sphere of work is a luxury in itself. Yet, as we continue reading, it becomes evident that it is also a condition to allow the *animal laborans* to free itself from the chains of its biological limitations. With the workmanship and specialization of each individual, the *homo faber* is able to create and build.

Now with the tools and instruments created by work, we are able to lighten the burden the laborer is initially meant to suffer through. Per Arendt's words : "Tools and instruments ease pain and effort and thereby change the modes in which the urgent necessity inherent in labor once was manifest to all. They do not change the necessity itself, they only serve to hide it from our senses." (p. 125). I interpret this as the idea that tools alleviate the workload, for it does not have to take such a toll on our health (the dangers of hunting for example) or take so much of our time. Some tools created by the *homo faber* serve the *animal laborans* in its constant quest to fulfill the urgent demands of nature (pp. 144 ; 145). As such, the laborer is now free to become the worker and continue fabricating, this time with the intention to create rather than serve.

III. 1. C. Freedom from meaninglessness, through plurality

As work and fabrication is supposedly done in isolation (p. 161), the *homo faber* is at risk of meaninglessness, wordlessness. The fabricator is only capable of striving for immortality if it is done amongst others. While fabrication and work is done in isolation, human artifice can only be appreciated with and through others. *Homo Faber* participates in building a human realm, but its recognition can only be achieved through plurality. It is through this plurality that individuals can gather the power to push forward ideals through persuasion rather than force. The fabrication gets its life and relevance through speech and action found around, through and within it. Indeed "Power preserves the public realm and the space of appearance, and as such it is also the lifeblood of the human artifice, which unless it is the scene of action and speech, of the web of human affairs and relationships and the stories of engendered by them, lacks its ultimate *raison d'être*" (Arendt, 1958, p. 204). As such, it becomes clear that while one could remain a fabricator without others, his fabrications would not be of much value amongst the world. Value is given through the exchange markets' negotiations which is a form of public sphere, though it remains apolitical. It is however, a way of being esteemed by society, through the recognition others allocate to your work (p. 160). The bridge between work and action is drawn through plurality and human relationships. Action needs recognition and glorification (p. 179). This can only happen once meaning is given to individuals and creations. Without speech and action to bind together individuals, there would be no enaction of one's identity, no recognition of a shared world that the *homo faber* works to create. Without the web of human relationships, the *homo faber* would be trapped in isolation, rendering its work almost obsolete as its immortality would not be known. To be accomplished in action is to be freed from meaninglessness. I understand from this that to claim, to be given, a

place in society is to be welcomed as active constructor of the world, of our world. Without such recognition, one would only have the capacity to create and to destroy, but no power amongst others, no purpose relevant outside oneself (p. 204).

III. 1. D. Action: freedom from consequence

Action is defined as taking initiative, to have the confidence and tools to begin, to lead, and maybe finally, to rule (Arendt, 1958, p. 177). This is only possible amongst others, through plurality. Speech is the enactment of action in society. Action, without disclosure, without a name attached to it is nothing : it simply becomes a mean to an end. This would make it production, excluding it from the realm of action (p. 180). Restoring the individual behind the action is a question of human dignity. I understand that linking one to its actions is key to sustaining relationships, and encouraging good deeds. Action and speech bind people together through interest and meaning.

However, the web of relationships has conflicting wills and intentions, which can prevent action from achieving its purpose. So while action is never possible in isolation, plurality itself can restrain, prevent freedom even. Evolving amongst others means that your actions will be displayed in the space of appearance, where your story will be told and interpreted by others. Once it is out, it is no longer yours to cater (p. 190). As such, plurality also brings a level of accountability. Others will hold you accountable for your actions, sometimes restricting your freedom to act. Being able to act and gain public admiration fulfills (p. 180). The loss of public admiration because of an unwelcomed deed would be too great a risk. Irreversibility is as much a threat to action as the biological imprisonment of the *animal laborans*, or the meaninglessness of the *homo faber*'s work (pp. 236-237). What saves humanity from irreversibility is the power to forgive. Forgiveness works to guarantee the durability of human relationships (p. 237), as it allows for trial, error and evolution (p. 237). Redemption is a freeing agent, but it is not opposite to punishment (p. 241). This is where Arendt draws the distinction between experience shaped transgressions, ones that individuals were not necessarily aware of committing, and intentionally evil actions. Punishment and forgiveness go hand in hand, as Arendt clearly spells out that what is unpunishable is simultaneously unforgivable, and vice-versa. The only reluctance I have with this side of the theorization is the ambiguous nature of 'intentionally evil actions'. From what the literature review pointed out, cruelty is mainly created through toxic environments, which plays

into Arendt's writings that experience shapes moral codes (p. 238). However, I would argue it ambitious and unrealistic to assume that ill-action is constantly done without knowledge. I would tend to see it as more of a spectrum, between pure mistakes and intentional transgressions.

Forgiveness is concomitant with the power of promise. With the release that redemption offers, men can act as free agents to change and improve, which entrusts them with the capacity to start anew (p. 240). Promises account for the unpredictability of the future, thus fostering trust and security in the public realm (p. 237). The unpredictability which characterizes men who are unable to be entirely certain of their future, combined with the struggle to predict the effect one's action could have on others with which you share plurality, crowns the capacity to make promises as the essential requirement for the durability of human relationships. As previously stated in the sections of freedom in labour and work, living amongst plurality allows for self-sufficiency as a society : with each *homo faber* specialization allowing for the creation of tools to free the *animal laborans* ; the interactions of human relationships freeing the *homo faber* from meaninglessness and lack of purpose ; with the participants of the *polis* being freed from the irreversibility of poorly perceived actions by others. This prevents men from being entirely reliant on themselves, but allows one to experience true Arendtian freedom. Paradoxically, the price of plurality and the burden of fostering a healthy political environment is denying men from their right to be sole master of their actions, as these will have consequences, whether they be forgiven or not (p. 244). Arendt's ability to ensure the cohabitation of constant oxymorons brilliantly accounts for the complexity of human affairs. The interplay of promises and forgiveness allows for the presence of faith and hope, which our German philosopher holds in highest regard for human existence (p. 247). These guarantee the immortality of human relations, as they allow for the constant re-birth of initiative, creativity and action (p. 247).

III. 2. Denial of the Human Condition fulfillment and the enslavement to violence: the Guatemalan reality

From the assumption that the Guatemalan insurgency was entirely supported by the Maya, the conflict worked to destroy an entire civilization's identity and sense of self-worth by unleashing blind violence on them (Comas-Díaz et al., 1998). The war also left behind millions of displaced who immigrated to the capital city in search for a potential future, only to be forced into overcrowded and underregulated informal settlements, with no social involvement by the

government (Deweever-Plana, 2013). The lack of social public policies was imposed by the IMF expecting the economy to flourish under strict liberal measures (Deweever-Plana, 2013, p. 294). With very little opportunities of development accessible to the population, and the traumatic violences endured that is perpetrated on the following generations through parental struggles : gangs bloomed. Hyper violent *Maras* that gather youth from all over the city are currently at the center of criminality in the country. Today, it has become the enactment of Guatemalan violence with an average of 18 murders a day. Their constant growth doesn't seem to be phased despite the amount of non-profit organization initiatives or government decrees declaring war on these gangs.

After centuries of intense brutality, an Arendtian public sphere freed from violence is far from the animosity that continues to stain every aspect of Guatemalan lives. This precarity enslaves them in the pre-political, preventing the population from fostering an appropriate public sphere in which violence wouldn't have its place. Arendt gives us the tools to understand why violence persists in Guatemala. The population is denied access to instruments and initiatives that would allow them to be free. Considering Arendt's theorizations of the conditions needed to achieve a peaceful public sphere, I can clearly see that the Guatemalan population is kept in submission by the system, in a never ending cycle of violence, preventing them to fulfill entirely their human condition.

All in all, I believe there are three main factors enhancing the proliferation of the *maras* in the country : the economic exclusion through the lack of development opportunities ; the social strain through the heavy mistrust towards the governing bodies amongst the population and the constant stigma that surrounds the 'troubled youth' ; and the political exclusion through the lack of time and correct environment to enable civil engagement. I believe these three factors each resonate with the three conditions to Arendtian freedom. Economic exclusion submits the Maya population in their condition of laborers, forcing them to focus on survival rather than fulfillment. Individuals that have a better access to education and were able to cater their skills and specialization to become valuable *homo fabers* , still suffer from the fracture of society which today, lack the space and resources to encourage participation in human affairs. Finally, with Guatemalan institutions being so poorly seen by its population, the *polis*' survival is compromised. The population has very little trust left in their government, which I see as a symptom of the preservation of an obsolete regime, preventing the birth of new initiatives.

III. 2. A. Surviving the Guatemalan precarious living conditions: the enslavement of the Animal Laborans and the Preventing of work

After carefully reading her work I believe that in order to allow freedom for a population, governments must provide the necessary support that enables individuals to spend time on more than surviving. Despite Arendt arguing for the excellence of a few, disregarding the wellbeing of all (1958, pp. 38 – 50), I would argue that the state must take on the role of the Greek slave and provide to their populations the guarantee that they will be fed, clothed and rested, while still having the time to attend other occupations, such as education. The education rates in Guatemala are amongst the lowest in the world, with only 40% of 11 year olds having reached the standard alphabetization. Providing for themselves and their families is an *animal laborans* necessity, which makes it complicated for the youth to thoroughly attend schooling. This cumulated with the fact that only 2.8% of the GDP is re-invested in the education sector makes it clear how inadequate the current academic structure of the country is (Education | Guatemala | U.S. Agency for International Development, 2014, n.d.). I am taking the liberty here to link the passage between labor, to work to education. To learn a skill and be able to use it effectively to create and participate in society allows for the completion of one step of humanness for Arendt (1958). In practice, I read it as a way of claiming purpose and finding one's place in a community. It is also a way of being valued. While goods are exchanged on the market for specific prices, the end result is the same : one's produce being valued is an enactment of the fabricator's skill, thus the fabricator itself, being valued (p. 161).

Reducing economic exclusion and giving the youth development opportunities should also be done through making accessible the learning of specific skills and professions. Allowing the *Homo Faber* to flourish by supporting it in its necessities and creativity is essential to offering development opportunities. However, Guatemala is currently based on a high productivity economy (factories and agriculture), which also denies the laboring class their *Homo Faber* development. The division of labor which followed the rise of productivity with the industrial revolution is characterized by repetitive tasks with no need of skill or knowledge. This method of production discreetly pushes back the majority of individuals in their laborer's position (pp. 121-124). They are not valued for their specialized skills, but rather for their capacity to thoughtlessly follow instructions in the assembly of an end product. Considering these implications, it is obvious that factory workers are not free to develop skills that would make them valuable. Instead, they

are exchangeable by others that could accept cheaper pay and worse conditions. This only aggravates the precarity of these jobs, as individuals have very little leverage to negotiate better pay or recognition. Encouraging the teachings of skills through schooling or other programs would help in empowering laborers, but as of now, Guatemalans are still entrapped in their *animal laborans* condition.

III. 2. B. Trauma in plurality: the thorn in the Web of relationships

One of the previously mentioned most important aspects of humanness is plurality, and the survival of human relations. The web of human affairs thrives off stories full of meaning and heroic acts. It encourages people to engage in the public sphere and allows its durability. Now if we were to apply this to a society that has been completely torn apart? With the civil war's government relying on the destruction of the Maya identity, on the displacement of millions as a strategy to ensure the countryside was emptied of potential insurgents? With parents being overworked trying to provide for their own, preventing them from being appropriately involved in their children's lives left to fend off for themselves too (A. Winton, 2004, p. 87)? This feeds back into the aforementioned existing literature that highlights the perverse mechanisms of violence. Violence breeds violence. When a society is torn apart, what stories are left to motivate individuals to engage amongst themselves? When Arendt argues that forgiveness is at the center of human affairs, freeing one from the entrapment of consequence, thus enabling constant re-birth and evolution, it sounds feasible and logical. However, when this is applied to atrocities that were committed on a daily basis? When the German scholar herself writes : “[...] men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and [...] they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable” (Arendt, 1958, p. 241), what does that leave us to understand? It becomes clear that the fractured society would need immense efforts to consider trusting their peers.

Even if we were to broaden the analysis and ponder upon what the state could do to facilitate and help the healing of the traumatic civil war, would we find compelling evidence that Guatemalans could receive appropriate support? In a country where 98% of murder cases are closed without further investigation (Deweever-Plana, 2013)? Where 50% of the wealth is still only distributed amongst the 1% richest (Freedom House, 2024.)? Miquel Deweever-Plana (2013), documents the precarious lives of Guatemala city's favelas and sheds light on the level of distrust

aimed at the government. The commanding officers of the cruel civil war walked out, unscathed, and still hold positions of great power in the country. Freedom House classifies the country as one of the most corrupted in the region (2024). The judicial system has very little transparency and is completely obsolete to the reality of the country today. With the constitution dating back from 1963, it barely accounts for the ethnic diversity of the country (Deweever-Plana , 2013, p. 297). The Guatemalan institutions being so poorly praised by its population makes it complicated to envisage the survival of any *polis*. Despite Arendt's (1958) reticence towards bureaucracy, I believe that when applying the ideals of the public sphere to such large populations, straightforward administration that is freed from corruption would be essential in fostering a durable *polis*. In a country where its highest serving members of the judiciary are closely linked to the mega-rich elite and the organized crime leaders (Deweever-Plana, 2013), such bureaucracy is almost unattainable, at least not for another decade. This healthy bureaucracy is the promise of newly elected president Bernardo Arévalo, but I remain skeptical as to its immediate success. Sanitizing institutions that thrive off decades of corruption is an astronomical task to the extent that today's struggling youth will not see any positive effects in the near future. However, the idealization of participating in the *polis* is an essential way of guaranteeing the durability of healthy politics.

The youth is left to make its way into a fractured society, which does not allow for appropriate growth. Simultaneously, the heavy stigmatization of this abandoned violent youth does not help in encouraging public sphere participation. As Winton (2004) writes : “The vilification of young people as potential delinquents has obvious implications for their general well-being, and serves little purpose by way of actually engaging with and tackling what is a complex and multidimensional problem.” (p. 83). This stigma ignores the extent to which young people go to in order to even enter the gangs. *Mara* (local Guatemalan gang name) initiation are often excruciatingly violent in order to ensure the new recruit will be able to commit to extreme gang rules. Alma, a 30 year old ex-gang member strangled a rape victim of the gang as part of her initiation. She then had the choice to be sexually assaulted herself, or be beaten up in order to fulfill the initiation (Deweever-Plana, 2013). As previously stated, violence is not easy to commit, one must be pushed to it. This testifies of the desperation these adolescents feel in trying to make their way into the world with so little prospects.

Aligning this knowledge with the previously analyzed Arendtian (1958) conditions, the mechanisms appear clearly. As of now, the only spheres that seem welcoming to the struggling youth is the *maras*. They offer financial prospects in a situation where the *animal laborans* are struggling to survive. They give recognition where the *homo faber* cannot properly be fulfilled as it is denied the basic education to claim value and esteem in society. Finally, they give identity and support to a population that is so often classified as lost causes or criminals with no future (Winton, 2004). All of which are positive human interactions. They are glorified in the media and play into the need for heroic human stories to encourage human affairs participation. Most of all, they share a common understanding and welcome the lost youth, tricking them into becoming actively involved members. With no other ‘healthier’ alternative, the youth are left fending for themselves, never reaching their potential as men of action.

IV. Discussion: Initiatives that work towards freeing the youth from brutality

While we have seen that the violence plagued country is enslaved in the situation through systems that prevent the fulfillment of the *animal laborans*, *homo faber* and man of action, I want to finish this thesis by acknowledging what are the informal initiatives that can help curb the issue. I believe that through storytelling and shifting narrative, the issues of high social exclusion through stigmatization of the youth can be tackled. Working to glorify the state as a place with which change can happen needs to be done. The lack of opportunities for change does not incentivize the youth to take action and reclaim their lives. Simultaneously, centering the discourse on the skills, innovation and energy the youth brings to debates can empower adolescents to take part in civil society and get a sense of purpose. In order to ensure speech and persuasion runs smoothly, the youth must be appropriately educated on their state of being as well as their country’s situation. This feeds back into the psychology of liberation narrative (Comas-Díaz et al., 1998). Being aware of the mental processes one goes through from growing up either in extreme conflict or in the aftermath of such destruction is essential. Indeed, it allows to understand how centuries of indigenous disregard have led to such strong inequalities and enslavement to poverty.

Additionally, The disregard of the youth’s opinion on policy procedures have prevented appropriate structures from being put together to curb the issue. Reclaiming identity also entails listening to the concerned individuals. A. Winton (2004) turns to the Guatemalan youth themselves to root her policy advice in order to curb post-conflict gang violence. They suggest the youth

should be more involved in sanitizing communities (A. Winton, 2004, p. 90). An example would be increasing dialogue in order to ensure the prospect gang members know exactly what they are about to join. Guidance about these issues and how to navigate them offered by ex-gang members is argued to be valuable in de-mystifying the attractiveness of joining these groups. Making it clear that the enrolling teenagers are victims of years of internalized trauma is also a essential to facilitate parental support and decrease social stigma (p. 91). Most of all, they need to have access to alternative groups in which they can develop a sense of purpose and belonging in a healthy and positive way. An example of such groups is *Jovenes Adelante*, community educational projects in which children and teenagers are offered trainings and activities aimed at strengthening community bonds through team work and consciousness raising (p. 94). Above all, these groups provide safe places in which the adolescents can meet, connect and have fun, which are almost non-existent in these areas. In terms of wanting the government to act in order to curb the violences, the youth is adamant : they have no hope for any type of government implication. They have no trust in their institutions to make them safe, going so far as considering the police as nefarious as the *maras* (p. 91).

V. Concluding Remarks

One must be free to achieve all of its human potential in order to participate appropriately in the political. A political in which violence yields no power, where it has no relevance. This public sphere only guided by persuasion and negotiation depends on the fulfillment of the conditions of humanness in order to be effective. It demands for individuals to be freed from their biological necessities, so as to allow them the time and health to attend activities other than survival. It is to fabricate and participate in the building and binding of the world. This ability then enables one to claim recognition and identity amongst others with the produce of their work. This esteem offers men a place in the world, a place amongst others. As such, it is also to be freed from meaninglessness in order to enjoy an active participation in human affairs. Finally, it is to be allowed to evolve and change, without fearing the consequence of action. Forgiveness allows for the constant birth of new ideas and initiatives, thus aiding in the immortality and survival of such public sphere. This durability though, can only be sustained through trust. Trust in others thanks to the ability of promise, and trust in thorough and transparent bureaucracy to sustain the *polis*. To ensure that individuals will partake in plurality, action and speech, the glory of the deeds done

must be told, so as to show the capacity of what the future holds. All of these factors are needed to foster a healthy public sphere, freed from violence. Now as we applied it to Guatemala, we see these conditions left uncared for. The precarity of informal settlements that have welcomed the civil war refugees are not prosperous to the enactment of Arendtian freedom. The lack of economic opportunities reduce individuals to their *animal laborans* condition, in a constant struggle to survive. The lack of education prevents men from gaining specialization in work, hence restraining their ability to claim esteem and admiration, for their work is not valued. The trauma from years of violence makes it incredibly complicated to have strong community bonds, as it still triggers brutality, straining any attempt of bonding. As for state institutions, they enjoy close to no trust or admiration from the population. It comes to no surprise since they are accused to intentionally perpetrate such conditions, so as to keep the population under control. In conclusion, I would argue that Guatemala can be considered a tyranny in Arendtian language : “[...] the outstanding characteristic of tyranny was that it rested on isolation – on the isolation of the tyrant from his subjects and the isolation of the subjects from each other through mutual fear and suspicion – and hence that tyranny was not one form of government among others but contradicted the essential human condition of plurality, the acting and speaking together, which is the condition of all forms of political organization.” (Arendt, 1958, p. 202). As of now, Guatemala is in no way prosperous to a healthy public sphere, as its system hinders the freedom needed to participate in politics. Guatemalans are, hence, denied their Arendtian humanness. They are not free to practice peaceful politics, thus they are forced into violence, into tyranny.

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