

# The Social Question and Councils in Arendt's On Revolution

MA Thesis

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## Introduction

Why return to Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution*? Revolution is the political phenomenon most closely associated with freedom. For Arendt, it marks the moment when individuals discover themselves as agents of beginning, when the collapse of an old order opens a space for collective world-building. *On Revolution* explores this foundation of freedom, where acting in concert becomes both the means and the substance of political life. Revolution, in this sense, does more than disrupt; it unites. It brings people together across social divisions to pursue a common project and poses the possibility of higher freedom—freedom as action, as participation, as the power to call something new into being.

But this celebration of revolutionary freedom is not without paradox. As Arendt writes, “an act can only be called free if it is not affected or caused by anything preceding it and yet... it immediately turns into a cause of whatever follows.”<sup>1</sup> In seeking to institutionalize freedom, most notably through constitution-making, revolutions confront a contradiction: the founders themselves have no authority for what they undertake. This makes them ‘unconstitutional.’ Freedom, it seems, undoes itself when it tries to stabilize. At the same time, Arendt sees in this moment of crisis the potential for a radically participatory form of politics—what she calls council democracy. Councils emerge during revolutions as spontaneous, horizontal spaces of decision-making, yet historically they vanish, supplanted by the return of centralized, representative systems. For Arendt, this disappearance marks the loss of the revolutionary spirit and the erosion of public freedom.

This thesis examines the limits of Arendt's vision of council democracy by focusing on a fundamental tension at the heart of her thought: her exclusion of the Social Question from the

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt, H. (1963/1990). *On Revolution*. Penguin Books, p. 184. Hereafter referred to as OR.

realm of the political. While she powerfully affirms freedom as collective action and self-governance, her formulations of the councils seemingly restrict access to this freedom to those who are not subject to necessity. In her view, poverty, labor, and economic concerns belong to the private realm and threaten to corrupt political life. Yet this division forecloses the possibility of equal participation from the outset. If freedom depends on the absence of necessity, then many are excluded from the start.

This exclusion raises questions about who can appear in public, who has time and voice to participate, and what counts as a legitimate political issue. As critics such as Margaret Canovan have pointed out, Arendt's councils risk becoming arenas dominated by the already privileged. While she acknowledges that "this passion of freedom... can arise only where men are already free in the sense that they do not have a master,"<sup>2</sup> she later suggests participation is simply a matter of personal choice. But the opportunity to participate is itself politically produced—it cannot be assumed. Moreover, Arendt's refusal to consider social and economic concerns as political overlooks the ways in which these issues structure who can act and what can be discussed.

This project argues that Arendt's treatment of the Social Question not only reflects a historical misreading of the revolutionary councils but also undermines the inclusivity and radical potential of council democracy. By excluding economic and social concerns from the political realm, she constructs conditions of equality that are formally universal but materially exclusionary. In doing so, Arendt limits the transformative power of revolution and forecloses the very freedom she seeks to preserve.

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<sup>2</sup> OR, p. 125.

## On Revolution

*On Revolution* is a book about political foundations and the human capacity to achieve them. It does so by comparing the French and the American Revolution, and why one “ended in disaster” and whereas the latter was so “triumphantly successful.”<sup>3</sup> This thesis will look at the intersection of both of their failures. For the French Revolution this failure consists in foregrounding the Social Question, the misery of the people, over the foundation of freedom, creating a lasting constitution. For the American Revolution, they somewhat succeeded in creating a lasting constitution but failed to create a system that is truly participatory beyond elections. In other words, they failed to create spaces in which freedom – the mediation of opinions and collaborative decisions – can be exercised for ordinary citizens, not just the representatives of the government.

Freedom for Arendt means to call something into existence that wasn’t there before. It makes possible the transformation of the world. As such, revolution can be understood as a moment of higher freedom.<sup>4</sup> The space that opens up through tearing down an old system makes individuals realize their capacity to generate a new one, to be an agent and creator. It is a common project and for the time being is able to surpass distinctions and inequalities that usually separate people. It demands cooperation, deciding together what the new order should look like. It arises from mutual promises and a set of shared principles rather than force or violence. For Arendt, revolution is understood not in the conventional sense and must be distinguished from a rebellion, putsch or coup d’etat by that it creates a *Novus Ordo Saeclorum*:

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<sup>3</sup> OR, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Kalyvas, A. (2008). *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt*. Cambridge University Press, p. 205. See also for the change of the meaning of revolution from *The Human Condition* (HC) to OR: Where in HC it was subordinated to action, sometimes used interchangeably, and referred to freedom from necessities of life as well as compulsion by others. In OR, it becomes more precisely about new beginning and natality as it relates to participation in public affairs, p. 202, and OR, p. 32.

a fundamentally new order in which the relationship between ruler and ruled is changed – not merely who is in power.<sup>5</sup>

Liberation and freedom are not the same for her: “liberation may be the condition of freedom but by no means automatically leads to it.”<sup>6</sup> This hints at the fact that without liberation, and that is the liberation from tyranny foremost but also from the master that is poverty, freedom cannot be exercised. Nonetheless, there are more requirements for freedom to be possible than just liberation. For one, that is a space in a literal sense for it to be practiced, but also as I will show, practices that make the ‘exchange among equals’ in an unequal society possible. Both liberalism and Marxism have failed to understand “the distinction between liberation (the removal of impediments to action) and freedom (the exercise of capacities for participation in collective self– government).”<sup>7</sup>

### *The French Revolution*

For Arendt, the French Revolution failed because it became corrupted by the Social Question. This happened when the monarchy fell in 1792, and the First Republic was established. With the end of tyranny, the previously oppressed, that is, for Arendt, politically oppressed, were freed. However, the “inescapable fact was that liberation from tyranny spelled freedom only for the few and was hardly felt by the many who remained loaded down by their misery.”<sup>8</sup> Those few who gained freedom did so because of the “conspicuous difference of social condition,”<sup>9</sup> they did not suffer from poverty and misery like the overwhelming majority.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Landes, J. B. (1995). *Novus ordo saeculorum: Gender and public space in Arendt’s revolutionary France*. In B. Honig (Ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (pp. 195–219). Pennsylvania State University Press.

<sup>6</sup> OR, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Isaac, J. C. (1994). Oases in the desert: Hannah Arendt on democratic politics. *American Political Science Review*, 88(1), 1pp. 156-157.

<sup>8</sup> OR, p. 74

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Arendt explains that America and France both knew poverty but experienced it quite differently. In America, the possibility of agrarian expansion presented the opportunity for affluence, while in France, this situation did not exist. Rather it was urban misery. See Fehér, F. (1987). Freedom and the ‘social question’ (Hannah Arendt’s

Precisely *because* of poverty, “the great master,”<sup>11</sup> the poor do not gain freedom, that is access to the government and to deciding about the political fate of the republic. Those who did not, formed revolutionary governments and became representatives. But rather than foregrounding the ‘foundation of freedom,’<sup>12</sup> that is creating a lasting constitution, they focused on the misery of *le peuple* proclaiming laws in their name rather than ‘the French Republic.’ The word *le peuple* gained an additional meaning to that of not participating in government – that of the low people, equivalent to misfortune and unhappiness. For Arendt, this presents a turning point in the Revolution. Previously, it was merely a project of the upper and middle class to eliminate of tyranny. But when the Jacobins took over from the Girondins, they mobilized the mass of poor people to join their cause and foregrounded their misery.<sup>13</sup>

Why did the representatives prioritize the Social Question over creating a lasting constitution? Arendt offers multiple explanations: For one, it is the poor themselves who “burst upon the political domain,”<sup>14</sup> bringing with them concerns that for Arendt belong to the private sphere, namely those of necessity, as they are not concerned with the form of government. They also are somewhat responsible for the heightened level of violence (Reign of Terror): “Their need was violent, and... it seemed that only violence could be strong and swift enough to help them.”<sup>15</sup> This stood in the way of freedom not only because it took the focus away from the constitution, but also because violence itself prevents the emergence of freedom. Freedom can only arise from common deliberation, not violence – they cannot coexist ontologically.

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theory of the French Revolution). *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, p. 4. See also Pitkin, H. F. (1998). *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*. University of Chicago Press, p. 224.

<sup>11</sup> OR, p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 216.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly enough, the Girondins, though typically remembered as more moderate/conservative, advocated for political and civil rights of women, people of mixed race, and enslaved people. See Landes, p. 213

<sup>14</sup> OR, p. 91

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

Given the dictate of their bodies, I do not think Arendt thought of the poor as the true culprit – she does not grant them enough agency to change the objective of the Revolution consciously. They<sup>16</sup> were merely there, and this was unfortunate. Arendt accounts agency to the course of the Revolution itself, calling it “the mighty current of the Revolution”.<sup>17</sup> Through this lens, the poor became visible in a new way – to those who rose to power after the end of the monarchy, the representatives under leadership of Robespierre.

Those representatives were appalled by the corruption they observed at court and concluded that the poor exemplified “innate goodness.”<sup>18</sup> This comes from Rousseau, who assumed that man is good in the state of nature and that it is society which corrupts him. The poor were perceived as outside of that society. The representatives glorified their misery and reacted with compassion, which to Arendt has nothing to do with political virtue but rather is a perversion of solidarity. The issue lies in the fact that this compassion “abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located,”<sup>19</sup> meaning that mediation of the personal into worldly interests becomes impossible.<sup>20</sup>

The Social Question became the new common cause tying poor and wealthy together and justifying the representation of the former by the latter. They needed a new metaphysical order to justify the revolutionary government that formed.<sup>21</sup> God was to the monarchy what the ‘general will’ of the people became to the First Republic.

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<sup>16</sup> Who the people precisely are, Arendt is vague about: sometimes she refers to them as sans culottes, sometimes menu people see OR, pp. 293-294.

<sup>17</sup> OR, p. 49.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>20</sup> Klein, S. (2016). *The Work of Politics: Radical Democracy, Political Economy, and the Twentieth Century Welfare State* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Chicago, p. 158.

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Fehér, p. 5.

### *The problem of Sovereignty*

Since the representatives and the people were no longer united by a common cause, that is the liberation from tyranny, they needed a new “special effort... , an effort of solidarization which Robespierre called virtue [..., It] meant to have the welfare of the people in mind, to identify one’s own will with the will of the people.”<sup>22</sup>

The advantage of this general will is that it is one and indivisible, just as the nation that is shaped after its model. It served as the foundation to the monolithic character of the French revolutionary power system and took it from an inconsistent separation of powers to their absolute centralization. In contrast to America, which had the advantage of a power vacuum of sorts since the American colonies were only externally guaranteed by the Crown, France had a strong sovereign – the prince – to oppose. The general will as *une* and *indivisible* from which the nation was modelled provided just that. It posed as the metaphysics legitimizing the nation as sovereign, just as the Crown had its legitimacy through divine power.

For Arendt, this is dangerous for two reasons. Firstly, because it meant the unification of power and authority. What the French failed to do in 1792 was to create stability, and this is partly because their constitution was not on a stable foundation, because it was based on the will of the people. In other words, the state *itself* had no authority but was purely bound to the people.<sup>23</sup>

The issue with this was that it presupposed the existence of government. By emphasizing the people rather than the republic meant that the constitution as well as day-to-day political decisions would be influenced by this ever-changing general will.

In contrast, Arendt emphasizes the objective quality of the American constitution, which does without the idea of a collective will or a homogeneous capacity to act. It is a “written document,

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<sup>22</sup> OR, p. 74– 75.

<sup>23</sup> The Americans did it better, because they gave power to the government but authority only to the law.

an enduring objective thing, which, to be sure, one could approach from many different angles and upon which one could impose many different interpretations, which one could change and amend in accordance with circumstances, but which nevertheless was never a subjective state of mind, like the will.”<sup>24</sup> What she says here is that while the American Constitution can be interpreted in various ways, making it somewhat open, it nonetheless cannot fundamentally change according to the will of the people – its foundation was separate and came to be in a somewhat protected manner that is not subject to immediate change if the will demands it to be.

The second reason refers to the impossibility of genuine opinion formation under rule of a general will. There is “decisive incompatibility between the rule of a unanimously held ‘public opinion’ and freedom of opinion.”<sup>25</sup> Opinion for Arendt is something that is individual and needs mediation – action is precisely about that. By replacing the word ‘consent’ with the word ‘will’, this deliberation and exchange ends. This is because the will “to function at all, must indeed be one and indivisible”<sup>26</sup> since, following Rousseau’s teachings, it would otherwise be inconceivable.

For her plurality of opinions is an essential feature of humanity and cannot be eradicated from the public sphere.<sup>27</sup> It led to commonality being defined not by institutions or common experiences but rather by the assumption that there is a universal will that all people share and thus can legitimize the political body in the present as well as the future. A political system needs to have incorporated exchanges of opinion, more so for her that mediation is the foundation of politics. The will of all as sovereignty imposes a hierarchical rulership and

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<sup>24</sup> OR, p. 157.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 76.

<sup>27</sup> This is also because of her experience of Nazi-Germany that led her to write *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. She is deeply afraid of oneness and the eradication of plurality, since for her this uniformity is a core feature of totalitarianism.

enforces sameness instead of plurality in the public space. It is deeply apolitical to Arendt. Thus, it becomes private, which to her is the sphere of darkness, dependence, and inequality.<sup>28</sup> The point is that compassion and pity<sup>29</sup> have no place in the political realm, and only solidarity does because it is “a principle that can inspire and guide action.”<sup>30</sup> They are related but distinct concepts to her. Compassion, which she describes as “the most powerful and perhaps the most devastating passion motivating revolutionaries,”<sup>31</sup> confirming “the ‘natural’ bond between men which only the rich had lost”<sup>32</sup> is a passion that is not suited for politics, since it can only comprehend the suffering of one person, and not a whole class or people. It functions through proximity. Pity in difference, Arendt describes as the perversion of compassion, a sentiment that functions only through distance and is aimed at general suffering, thus abstracting from the particular, and for Arendt, leads to an insensitivity of reality.

Solidarity poses an alternative to pity. It partakes in reason and hence can comprehend generality, and for Arendt, even an entire multitude extended to all of mankind. Simultaneously this means that it “may appear cold and abstract, for it remains committed to 'ideas' – to greatness, or honour, or dignity – rather than to any 'love' of men”<sup>33</sup> which is why pity and compassion were perhaps what the men of the Revolution invoked reacting to the cruelty they observed from the court rather than true solidarity. Arendt concludes with Montesquieu and appeals to his insight that virtue must also have its limits.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Kalyvas, pp. 210-222.

<sup>29</sup> Her understanding of pity, compassion, and virtue is influenced by Heidegger and key to further critique of sovereignty as guaranteed by the people and their ‘general will’. She does not explicitly mention him in *On Revolution*, but based on Elisabeth Young–Brühl’s biography *Hannah Arendt, For the Love of the World* I trace these ideas to him. Hobsbawm has criticized *On Revolution* for having “a certain lack of interest in mere fact” and a “preference for metaphysical construct or poetic feeling over reality.” See Hobsbawm, E. J. (1973). *Hannah Arendt on Revolution*. In *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* (pp. 201–208). Pantheon Books.

<sup>30</sup> OR, p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>34</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see Fehér, pp. 20-22.

## *American Revolution*

### Introduction to American Revolution MORE

Arendt provides an exemplary account of extraordinary politics. Her account of ordinary, normal politics, that is, what happens after Revolution and founding anew, seems much less concrete and precise.<sup>35</sup> This might be true if one only looks at *On Revolution* or *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. However, while Arendt's account of the extraordinary is what she is well known for, she did not fail to elaborate on what comes after. A comprehensive theory needs to not only account for the first moment, that is the original founding but also the second one, concerning and stabilizing the foundation.<sup>36</sup> The critical issue becomes how to preserve the exercise of freedom beyond the generation of the founders, to make it a practise accessible to 'average citizens'. This is the central concern for Arendt in regard to the American Revolution. For this to be possible, Arendt emphasizes that boundaries need to be laid down and rules defined so that the 'passion for public freedom' and the pursuit of public happiness' is possible not just for the Founders but for "generations to come."<sup>37</sup> She credits the eighteenth-century revolutionaries with understanding that only a constitution, the culmination of extraordinary politics and a higher moment of freedom, could do so. Though she was deeply invested in theorizing the political, Arendt did not advocate for the complete politicization of society. She maintained that to safeguard stability and continuity, the expansive tendencies of politics must be held in check.<sup>38</sup> Politics, in her view, should be restrained in both its reach and ambition. This is precisely why she emphasized the necessity of normal politics. According to Arendt,

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<sup>35</sup> Kalyvas, p. 254; Canovan, M. (1978). The contradictions of Hannah Arendt's political thought. *Political Theory*, 6(1), p. 21, Honig B., (1993). *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Cornell University Press, pp. 93-94, Kateb, G. (2000). Political action: Its nature and advantages. In D. Villa (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (pp. 130–148). Cambridge University Press, p. 135.

<sup>36</sup> Kalyvas, p. 255. See also for a discussion of Arendt's account of normal politics compared to Weber's and Schmitt's.

<sup>37</sup> OR, p. 126.

<sup>38</sup> Kalyvas, p. 256.

the established public sphere “is limited by those things which men cannot change at will. And it is only by respecting its own borders that this realm, where we are free to act and to change, can remain intact, preserving its integrity and keeping its promises.”<sup>39</sup> She opposed the idea of total politics or a permanent revolution.

The failure of the American Revolution consists precisely in that it “had given freedom to people but failed to provide a space where it could be exercised”<sup>40</sup>. The revolutionary spirit – the space that opens up in revolutions to rethink the organization of politics – must be preserved while simultaneously creating stability and transitioning from extraordinary to normal politics. This is Arendt’s concern as well as that of the Founding Fathers. What Jefferson initially suggested but Arendt rightfully identifies as an awkward attempt is that the Constitution would be written anew, repeatedly. This, in a way, happened in France and was very much disapproved by her. While the American Constitution has proven to be somewhat stable but the activities of freedom – expressing, discussing, deciding – are reserved for the representatives because there was no space for these activities to be exercised for the rest of the people.

Because of this lack of spaces, public freedom turned into civil liberties, public happiness turned into individual welfare, and the public spirit turned into public opinion. Democracy became about the rule of this public opinion. However, to Arendt this public opinion, by which I understand her to say a more or less a same opinion, is not just a sign of crisis but fundamentally incompatible with freedom. This is because freedom refers precisely to the formation and exchange of opinions, which can by Arendt’s definition belong exclusively to individuals: “The same is not true for questions of interest and welfare, which can be

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<sup>39</sup> Arendt, (1993). “Truth and Politics,” *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. Penguin., pp. 263-264.

<sup>40</sup> OR, p. 235.

ascertained objectively, and where the need for action and decision arises out of the various conflicts among interest groups.”<sup>41</sup> Here she clarifies the relation of interests to opinions.

She asserts that in the UK and the US, the party system has “worked sufficiently well to ensure stability and authority” because their constitution “rests on a division of power among the various branches of government.”<sup>42</sup> The oppositional party being a built-in institution of government ensures a strong system of checks and balances, creating more power in total rather than weakening each other.<sup>43</sup> For this to create and not destroy stability is only possible if the nation, as well as the nation as sovereign, is not conceived as one and indivisible.

This is one of the reasons why to her the American Revolution was ultimately more successful than the French one: Not just were they able to remain committed to solidarity rather than compassion but their success consisted also “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.”<sup>44</sup> The men of the Revolution in America understood government in the image of individual reason: they aimed to unify the people only in foreign concerns but to keep distinct in domestic ones. The Founding Fathers were able to achieve a separation by giving power in the government but authority only in the law modelled after Roman Law, inspired only by “first principles”, which are “truths which we hold to be self-evident.”<sup>45</sup> They are what is *a priori* to the constitution and guide everything that comes thereafter.

This is why she argues vociferously against the party system, particularly the multiparty system, because it lacks the checks and balances, accusing it of ‘ready-made formulas,’ warning against the danger of politics collapsing into mere administration. The modern party is

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<sup>41</sup> OR, p. 269.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>43</sup> Montesquieu, [More](#)

<sup>44</sup> OR, p. 153.

<sup>45</sup> See Fehér, p. 4– 6.

characterized by its “autocratic and oligarchic structure, its lack of internal democracy and freedom, its tendency to ‘become totalitarian’, its claim to infallibility.”<sup>46</sup> It can be described as democratic only insofar as it is aimed at popular welfare, which has become private happiness. Public happiness, that is, debating and deciding together, has even in the two-party system vanished. Through this lens it can be called oligarchic as participating in government is reserved for the few.<sup>47</sup>

Her point is that this system can only attempt to represent the citizens’ interest or welfare, but restricts them to participate in action and form their own opinions because there is no space to do so. In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution this meant, that for the sake of stability, “the end of government was the welfare of the people, and that the substance of politics was not action but administration.”<sup>48</sup> An alternative can be found in the council system.

Arendt mentions slavery in *On Revolution*, in the context of the apparent lack of misery that characterized American poverty. She calls out that while they were poor, they were not miserable, but nonetheless, there was the threat of being overlooked – and it is this “darkness rather than want [that] is the curse of poverty.”<sup>49</sup> This darkness refers to lives being without consequence. But for Arendt, this is “privileged knowledge”<sup>50</sup> which was accessible only to those who do not suffer from it, which is why it remained without consequence in the American Revolution.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>47</sup> See also: Sitton, J. (1994). Hannah Arendt’s argument for council democracy. In L. P. Hinchman & S. K. Hinchman (Eds.), *Hannah Arendt: Critical Essays* (pp. 309–334). State University of New York Press., p. 309.

<sup>48</sup> OR, p. 273.

<sup>49</sup> OR, p. 70.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>The poor, when they became rich, did not develop “a passion for distinction and excellence” but rather “succumbed to the boredom of vacant time” and invested wealth only into their private life and self-preservation, Ibid.

Pity, as a reaction to misery, is not a definitive reaction. This becomes clear when looking at those who definitely suffered not only from poverty but also from misery in America – slaves.

She says:

“We are tempted to ask ourselves if the goodness of the poor white man’s country did not depends to a considerable degree upon black labour and black misery – there lived roughly 400,000 Negroes along with approximately 1,850,000 white men in America in the middle of the eighteenth century. [...] For if Jefferson, and others to a lesser degree, were aware of the primordial crime upon which the fabric of American society rested [...] they did so because they were convinced of the incompatibility of the institution of slavery with the foundation of freedom, not because they were moved by pity or by a feeling of solidarity with their fellow men.”<sup>52</sup>

Slavery presents the Social Question in America, but because it was justified by scientific racism etc., it was not thought of as such, and neither was it in Europe at the time. Through this lens, the civil war can be interpreted as a Revolution with the aim of solving the Social Question – and just like the French Revolution, it was violent.<sup>53</sup> Slavery’s abolition, which formally happened through a presidential decree, the Emancipation Proclamation, can be interpreted as an invasion of the political into the private, something that she only grappled with in later essays.<sup>54</sup>

### *The Social Question as a matter of administration*

The reason why Arendt so resolutely rejects the prioritization of the Social Question by the French is not only because she believes that this pushes aside the most urgent task, drafting the constitution, but also because, for her, poverty cannot be solved through politics:

“Since revolution had opened the gates of the political realm to the poor, this realm had indeed become ‘social’. It was overwhelmed by the cares and worries which actually belonged in the sphere of the household and which, even if they were permitted to enter the public realm, could not be solved by political means, since they were matters of

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>53</sup> It may be called a Revolution in an Arendtian sense because it was also concerned with forms of government – it is in question whether she would call the French Revolution after 1792 a Revolution or whether she just calls it so because it would be confusing, as it has become common sense.

<sup>54</sup> Source missing

administration, to be put into the hands of experts, rather than issues which could be settled by the twofold process of decision and persuasion.”<sup>55</sup>

The Social Question is for her a matter of administration, and a matter for experts, but not one that the Revolution should be committed to. An administrative welfare state, in which politics become mere bureaucracy rather than exchange of opinion, for her hinges upon the conflation of private and public, or state and society. These matters were not solely to be solved through administration: at the base lies her claim that the Social Question can be resolved with technology,<sup>56</sup> which she asserts to be ‘politically neutral’. Nonetheless, in one of her final works *Crises of the Republic*, she assigns technology its own trajectory, which follows its own “inexorable laws, compelling us.”<sup>57</sup>

Now while I agree with Arendt that the foundation of the general will was not sufficient ground to a lasting form of government as the French Revolution demonstrates, I believe that her take on ‘cares and worries’ is somewhat clouded with what Hannah Pitkin calls her treatment of the Social as Blob: Arendt depicts it as “a living, autonomous agent determined to dominate human beings, absorb them, and render them helpless...an evil monster from outer space [despite insisting] that human institutions are humanly made, and that it is therefore up to us to change them.”<sup>58</sup> The deeper issue is simply put the capacities and constraints of human agency in initiating change. As Hobbes said, humans are both “matter” and “artificer” of a “commonwealth”, implicating institutions, norms, and culture.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> OR, p. 81.

<sup>56</sup> OR, p. 65.

<sup>57</sup> Arendt, H. (1972). *Crises of the Republic*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich., p. 183.

<sup>58</sup> Pitkin, pp. 3-4.

<sup>59</sup> Hobbes T. (1978). *Leviathan: Of the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (M. Oakeshott, Ed.). Collier, p. 19.

Arendt was late in life at a conference in Toronto, dedicated to her work, confronted by her friend Mary McCarthy, who questioned this separation of social and political as so many readers of Arendt have:

“What is somebody supposed to do on the public stage, in the public space, if he does not concern himself with the social? That is, what’s left?’ ... On the other hand, if all questions of economics, human welfare, busing, anything that touches the social sphere, are to be excluded from the political scene, then I am mystified. I am left with war and speeches. But the speeches can’t just be speeches. They have to be speeches about something.”<sup>60</sup>

In her answer, she concedes that issues of public conversation are subject to change over time, but that there nonetheless will always be ones “worthy to be talked about in public.”<sup>61</sup> Pressed further, she conceded that public debate should deal with those issues “which we cannot figure out with certainty.”<sup>62</sup> The issue is that what should and should not be subject to debate, and what is the experts’ and administrators’ responsibility is itself a political question. These things themselves are perhaps best put into the hands of experts, but should nonetheless be discussed and mediated in a public space – security vs efficiency, etc.

The only tenable approach to the distinction between the social and the political is an attitudinal one. Engagement in the public/political sphere entails transforming or rather translating a partial and limited perspective of a class or group into a common goal. What counts as a public issue is decided based on whether a matter that may seem partial to a group can be made a common public concern, not in a fraudulent way, but by showing how it relates to broader issues than it may appear.<sup>63</sup> In distinction to this approach, Arendt wants to draw the line based on issues/themes, and while she acknowledges that these are subject to history and what is

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<sup>60</sup> Arendt, H. (1979). On Hannah Arendt. In M. A. Hill (Ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*. St. Martin’s Press, p. 315.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* p. 317.

<sup>63</sup> Benhabib, S. (1993). *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Rowman and Littlefield, p. 156.

political and what administrative, can change, but there will nonetheless be political and pre-political issues.

Particular interests, that do not belong to the public sphere for Arendt, are more than an expression of will – as *inter-est*,<sup>64</sup> they are "the manifestation of the world or rather parts of the world which certain groups... or classes had in common because they were situated between them."<sup>65</sup> Thus, they are what make a shared world and become spaces of common appearance and judgment.<sup>66</sup> This gives them a double face: they retain their association with subjective, instrumental purposes while also becoming a common object, subject to judgment that goes beyond its instrumentality.

While she comes to this conclusion, she simultaneously, in other moments, fails to execute this argument and falls back into economics as sheer administration. Welfare measures have the potential to be ones of worldly mediation – a pension, for example, provides someone with a particular location through this shared object. It creates a group with common goals in the political sphere. As such, it can be seen as a precondition for action.<sup>67</sup>

Action cannot arise without tangible products – those very products of work, which were created for instrumental use but in themselves create a tangible world. The domain of work, while separate from the activities of action, thus creates lasting objects. Beyond making the space of appearance and judgment possible, they can also stimulate conversations that are in fact action: they generate relationships and stimulate discussion beyond technical usefulness. Though she asserts it to be otherwise at times, I believe Arendt overall cares more about the

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<sup>64</sup> Literal translation (Latin) – *it is between/among*; interestingly, interest (verb) means *to participate*

<sup>65</sup> OR, pp. 163-164.

<sup>66</sup> See HC, p. 182 and Klein, pp. 158-168. He demonstrates how class and property also have this double face: while relating to instrumental means, they have an outer face, they *appear*, opening up a space for mediation and judgment. See also Zerilli, L. (2005). *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. University of Chicago Press, p. 105.

<sup>67</sup> For more see Klein, pp. 140-174.

form of the political than its content, as long as it relates to a somewhat common concern.<sup>68</sup> Action is about its activities, debating, and deciding. *What* is discussed, I believe, is secondary. The constitution would solely define the former, whereas the latter is defined by what in that moment is required to discuss.

The third element of the trifecta in the Human condition, labor, is somewhat separate from the public sphere but nonetheless a condition for it. It is solely occupied with reproductive activities – that is to produce and reproduce what is absolutely necessary, the means of life. These activities to Arendt are without significance since they are devoid of freedom and choice. They refer to the metaphysical principle of necessity, which by extension is also required for the “collective life of the polis.”<sup>69</sup> Marx developed a similar distinction, but, in contrast to Arendt, sought to overcome this distinction of freedom and necessity.

To conclude, Arendt downplays how welfare institutions can appear as potential objects of shared public action. This leads to her conclusion that capitalism is a “fully expropriated mass society”<sup>70</sup> and that worldliness in such a society is severely limited. This is because she sees a lack of worldly objects and locations to which individuals could relate, resulting in loneliness which in turn makes them vulnerable to totalitarian ideologies. Klein argues that she wrongly concludes so, because she underestimates the worldly mediations of expropriation itself. He suggests instead they welfare institutions can in fact expose the structures of domination in which they are implicated.<sup>71</sup>

Social questions may in this light be seen precisely as those occupied with questions regarding labor – questions of reproduction, and conditions of production. Without labor, there is no work and no action. Work builds on labor, and since action builds on work, they thus both build on

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<sup>68</sup> Klein, p. 150.

<sup>69</sup> Wolin, S. S. (1983). Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political. *Salmagundi*, 60, p. 8.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>71</sup> Klein, pp. 172-176.

labor. For this reason, it makes no sense not to discuss these conditions in the public realm. Labor itself is something almost everybody needs to think about – a collective concern even if it is performed in an isolated manner.

## Council Democracy

Councils, “organs of order as much as of action,”<sup>72</sup> were fundamentally against the prescriptive approach of the party– system since it “left out of account the average citizen’s capacity to act and to form his own opinion.”<sup>73</sup> Who is the average citizen to form one’s own opinion in a society rife with inequality?

Arendt posits the council system as the only democratic alternative to the party system, with principles in sharp opposition to those of the party in many respects. The multi-party system<sup>74</sup> for Arendt is based on class interests and ideology (or *Weltanschauung*). As shown above, this prohibits genuine action for her. The councils supposedly would not have this issue as their participants show up as individuals and present their opinions. She supposes that group interests (interests are general and can only arise in a group context; opinions are individual) would not corrupt the councils. However, with respective classes intact, would the individual’s opinion not inherently be influenced by their general class interest? In other words, does she assume that the councils are neutral arenas in terms of social power? She asserts that it is possible for ‘parties’ to form within the councils:

“But these groups of men holding the same opinion within the councils would not be parties, strictly speaking; they would constitute those factions from which the parliamentary parties originally developed. The election of a candidate would not depend upon his adherence to a given faction, but still on his personal power of persuasion with which he could present his point of view.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> OR, p. 263.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>74</sup> The multi-party system is decisively different to Arendt than the Anglo-American two-party system.

<sup>75</sup> Arendt, H. (1958). *Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution*. *The Journal of Politics*, 20(1), pp. 31– 32. Hereafter referred to as TI.

What she is saying here is that what I would summarize as essentially charisma overpowers association with a faction, and that these factions, which may have underlying class interests, do not have a strong impact in the political arena of a council. “The councils would control the parties, they would not be their representatives.”<sup>76</sup> The question that arises is what this ‘personal power of persuasion’<sup>77</sup> is contingent on, and what how accountability works in this relationship built on trust.<sup>78</sup> I will argue that several factors are crucial: Firstly it is necessary to discuss what concept of equality Arendt envisions to guide the councils – how differences of social power are to be dealt with so that they do not translate into political power and influence one’s ‘personal power of persuasion’. The second aspect relates to participation: At times, Arendt makes it clear that action is pleasure and its activities is what makes us individuals but also fully human – in fact she goes so far as to say that a mass society forms when people stop doing so which increases the likelihood of totalitarianism. At other times, she asserts that freedom from politics – negative freedom – is ‘the greatest Christian heritage’ and that one should only participate if they want to.

She problematizes isolation but does not illustrate how to deal with it since she abstains from offering a blueprint on how councils should actually work. Most importantly, she neglects issues of judgment regarding the council system. By politicizing social questions many of these tensions can be resolved: if material equality is not a concern that is attempted to be solved by political means the council system is doomed to reproduce a general interest, sameness and

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p. 31. She references Lenin’s need to emasculate the soviets (the Russian word for council) at the beginning of the Russian Revolution, since more trust was placed in the “Social Revolutionaries” than in the Bolsheviks – the council system threatened the party.

<sup>77</sup> What is furthermore in question is the role of proximity: is trust contingent on knowing someone’s face, seeing them in action? Apart from obvious limitations such as ability of speech and language, rhetorics, appearance (gender, race), what about time? Getting voted into the councils in the first place seems to hinge upon one having time to know one’s voters, to be able to campaign for trust. Arendt does not explain this aspect whatsoever.

<sup>78</sup> She only points to pride of being elected, based on records of the Hungarian Revolution. See Free Europe Committee. (1957). *The Revolt in Hungary: A Documentary Chronology of Events Based Exclusively on Internal Broadcasts by Central and Provincial Radios, October 23, 1956–November 4, 1956*. New York.

rule of the few, precisely because the mass who suffers from misery is doomed to prioritize labor and work over what Arendt understands as political questions and action – the *vita activa*. Material inequality limits participation, but participation is also required to make certain issues visible. Since she did deal with some of these in detail in other texts, the following section will attempt to bring these topics together, identify Arendt’s blind spots and tensions, and offer solutions to some of them.

### *Structural organization*

Arendt refrained from offering a detailed blueprint of how a council democracy should supposedly work, pointing to others that were doing so.<sup>79</sup> The purpose of her account was rather to demonstrate that there is an alternative to representative electoral democracy. The empirical examples she provides are somewhat brief: in *On Revolution*, she mentions the Paris Communes,<sup>80</sup> which she describes as self-governing bodies with the purpose of enlightening citizens about the principles of the constitution.<sup>81</sup>

Witnessed by Marx himself, he understood that this *Kommunalverfassung* (communal constitution) could amount to “the political form, finally discovered, for the economic liberation of labour”, although or because it was designed only to be “the political form of even the smallest village.”<sup>82</sup> Nonetheless, he eventually concluded that this political form, the communes, contradicted all notions of a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. For Arendt, this is because these notions were modelled after highly centralized forms of governments, such as nation-states, and thus contradictory to the councils, which were the opposite of centralized. This is why Marx (according to Arendt) concluded that they could only be “temporary organs

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<sup>79</sup> Unfortunately, she does not cite these accounts.

<sup>80</sup> They arose when soldiers of the National Guard seized power of the city after complete defeat of the French Army in March 1871 against the Germans, refusing the authority of the Third Republic, which had been called out in the previous September. This new form of government lasted from March 18th to May 28th, 1871, until it was defeated by the French Army in the *Semaine Sanglante*, or so-called ‘Bloody Week’.

<sup>81</sup> Those would namely be public freedom, public happiness, and public freedom. See OR, p. 221

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* p. 257.

of the revolution.”<sup>83</sup> What is curious to Arendt is the consistent rise of councils in revolutions, despite an apparent lack of tradition or continuity. Nonetheless she asserts that nobody in a position of power ever took it seriously as a permanent form of government, when it was clearly the form of politics that provided more freedom than the multi-party system which prevailed. She provides another, more detailed empirical account of councils in an article about the Hungarian Revolution<sup>84</sup> in which Revolutionary (political concerns) and Workers’ Councils (economic concerns) were formed.

“the same organization which for more than a hundred years now has emerged whenever the people have been permitted for a few days, or a few weeks or months, to follow their own political devices without a government (or a party program) imposed from above.”<sup>85</sup>

She focuses on the Revolutionary councils and leaves the question whether they are suitable organs for economic concerns open, but says “it is quite doubtful whether the political principle of equality and self-rule can be applied to the economic sphere of life as well.”<sup>86</sup> There she also argues against trade unions because of their association to a party and poses the Workers’ Councils as alternatives to them.

Arendt also describes councils that formed based on neighborhood, or in coffee houses, universities, among writers and artists, workers, the army, civil servants etc. This list somewhat suggests homogeneity within the councils themselves and leaves unclear whether and how these councils should interact with one another. Does a writers council have any role at all for the political or is it merely the space through which writing matters and the participants’

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.; Marx, K. (1871). *Der Bürgerkrieg in Frankreich*. Stuttgart., pp. 71, 76.

<sup>84</sup> See TI, pp. 5-43.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p. 28

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 29. She further says: “It may be that ancient political theory [which?], which held that economics, since it was bound up with the necessities of life, needed the rule of masters to function well, was not so wrong after all. For it is somehow, albeit paradoxically, supported by the fact that whenever the modern age has believed that history is primarily the result of economic forces, it has come to the conviction that man is not free and that history is subject to necessity”.

opinion about them are mediated? It appears contradictory to the purpose she envisions of the councils, specifically their seemingly exclusive political function. Secondly, it is then in question whether Arendt imagines that an individual participates in multiple councils – the one that is specifically dedicated towards the ‘purest’ political issues, as well as ones that matter to one’s personal life. This cannot be answered through Arendt because she did not offer a blueprint. If council democracy and communes<sup>87</sup> were to be put into practice, these are questions worth asking.

All she says in terms of organization is that they were able to organize among one another, beginning a process of co-ordination and integration through “the formation of higher councils of a regional or provincial character, from which finally the delegates to an assembly representing the whole country could be chosen.”<sup>88</sup> For Arendt, who essentially describes federalism here, this federal principle, that “of league and alliance among separate units, arises out of the elementary conditions of action itself.”<sup>89</sup> These assertions are vague. The aspect she illustrates the most is how the delegates are chosen, though in questionable ways. What are the elementary conditions of action? How will this league and alliance come to life, and what will the collaboration between higher and provincial characters look like?

America succeeded in many ways but failed in some regards also. One of those is the lack of inclusion of town-halls, an institution that was already existing in many places, into the constitution.

With posing action as freedom and constitutive of pleasure, does Arendt imagine that everyone should participate in these councils? No, after all she asserts that freedom can also refer to

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<sup>87</sup> The way I read Arendt, council democracy refers to the form of government, whereas the communes refer to the structural, geographical setting in which council democracy takes place. Depending on population density, not everybody can live in communes, whereas council democracy supposedly includes everyone.

<sup>88</sup> OR, p. 267.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

freedom from politics – people who do not want to participate do not have to: “one of the most important negative liberties we have enjoyed since the end of the ancient world, namely, freedom from politics, which was unknown to Rome or Athens and which is politically perhaps the most relevant part of our Christian heritage.”<sup>90</sup> This seems contradictory to her entire account of freedom and how performing it makes us fully human. Negative freedom seems to merely secure people’s individual well-being and rights, or more so, only function if these rights are safeguarded.

What is ultimately up for debate is whether this voluntary approach to politics is not entirely against her vision of council democracy. Who are the people who do not want to participate in politics? Is it truly the case that they do not want to, or is it also a feeling of not being able to make a difference, thus not seeing a point in occupying themselves with it?

### *Criteria for participation*

She describes the people forming the councils as another form of elite, namely the political elite, those who took initiative and selected and organized themselves.<sup>91</sup> With the higher councils she imagines they choose one another based on their political qualities such as trustworthiness, personal integrity, capacity for judgment and physical courage.<sup>92</sup>

She lists another criterion mentioned in a newspaper, that is, that among elected men none would “misuse their power” and “think only of his personal position.”<sup>93</sup> To her, this is “more a criterion of qualification than of morality. Whoever misuses power or perverts it into violence, or is only interested in his private affairs and without concern of the common world, is simply not fit to play a role in political life.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 280.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 277.

<sup>92</sup> TI, pp. 30-31.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> HC, p. 31. She mentions that this principle – “confidence of the working people” – was also what should be kept in mind when electing the representatives into the higher bodies rather than “Party affiliation”.

She imagines the councils to choose their representative in the higher council based on a special trust – one that is based on their suitability to politics to be proven within the councils.

“No doubt if fully developed, would have assumed again the shape of a pyramid which, of course, is the shape of an essentially authoritarian government. But while, in all authoritarian government we know of, authority is filtered down from above, in this case authority would have been generated neither at the top nor at the bottom, but on each of the pyramid's layers; and this obviously could constitute the solution to one of the most serious problems of all modern politics, which is not how to reconcile freedom and equality but how to reconcile equality and authority.”<sup>95</sup>

This passage makes clear that what is distinct about this form of government is, for one, the generation of authority, which inevitably brings us back to the law and its highest form, the constitution. For Arendt, authority should not lie in the people but in the law, as I have pointed out through her account of the French and American Revolution. The constitution is necessary for the functioning of the councils, but it is also supposedly a product of them. That is *the* paradox of founding. Linda Zerilli draws on Rousseau to discuss this fundamental tension in political founding: for just institutions to take shape, a civic– minded spirit must already be present. Yet, that civic spirit is usually something laws are meant to cultivate.<sup>96</sup> As Bonnie Honig puts it, following Rousseau: “you cannot have good laws without good people, and you cannot have good people without good laws.”<sup>97</sup>

Furthermore, it needs to be open to a certain extent so that it is not reserved for the founders but possible for future generations to renew appropriately with new conditions. Again, it is difficult to imagine the exact functioning of this process, since Arendt did not bother to illuminate how it would empirically work out – what the exact relationship of the higher and lower councils would be, how often they would meet, whether one gets compensated for their time, how it would not lead to the professionalization of politics etc. The point is that she

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<sup>95</sup> OR, p. 278

<sup>96</sup> Zerilli, p. 169.

<sup>97</sup> Honig, B. (2001). *Democracy and the Foreigner*. Princeton University Press, p. 20.

imagines the process of politics that occurs within these layers to be so unique that it would be able to reconcile the grave problem of equality and authority.

She emphasizes that the same men, politically so capacious, would fail at administrative tasks such as factory management. She charges the councils for trying to do these tasks which they are unsuited for, failing, and thus gaining a bad reputation overall as incompetent.

“For the qualities of the statesman or the political man and the qualities of the manager or administrator are not only not the same, they very seldom are to be found in the same individual; the one is supposed to know how to deal with men in a field of human relations, whose principle is freedom, and the other must know how to manage things and people in a sphere of life whose principle is necessity.”<sup>98</sup>

Here, their political quality is simultaneously their downfall and the reason why party apparatuses/electoral multi-party democracies were successful over them. It is precisely the separation of private and public, the invasion of social questions, that presents the downfall of the councils for Arendt.

The second limitation does not relate to the qualities of participants but rather the content of the councils: what is supposed to be discussed there. I argue that she limits their potential by restricting them to only political concerns, in the narrow sense that she understands the term, instead of also including social ones. This goes back to her separation of private and public/political and her belief that some issues are sufficiently met by being administered by experts, whereas others need or more so deserve to be brought up in public debate. But what of issues that are not yet deemed worthy of public debate but in retrospect are very much so – issues such as the question of slavery, of women’s rights, of trans rights? What counts as a common concern is ultimately decided by the participants themselves. If something is thought of as a private matter or a minority issue, it can be made into a public one by contestation.

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<sup>98</sup> OR, p. 274.

There are no a priori boundaries. Thus, a democratic publicity needs to incorporate positive guarantees for minorities or structurally disadvantaged people to participate, so that they are able to convince others, that what used to not count as public concern, should do so now.<sup>99</sup>

My issue with separating the private as the sphere of administration of social and economic questions and the political is that it creates exclusive conditions for the political itself. Participation and content are related: there are people whose lives may only be occupied with what Arendt describes as private concerns. They are nonetheless also implicated in strictly political concerns and should also be able to participate in order to make their ‘private’ concerns heard as potentially public ones. Arendt’s conception of public space is confusing because she seems to desire for everyone to participate in action, but simultaneously asserts that some people are more suited to do so than others. Beyond her performative, personal restrictions, there are structural ones.

Political participation and organization, so the conditions as well as functioning of the councils are interconnected with work and labor, or more precisely, the form of work/labor<sup>100</sup> in which one partakes. This is evident by the fact that some forms of labor tend to unionize, whereas others do not. Factories, for example, provide easier conditions for organizing among the workers since their work is relatable to one another, as well as them all being in the same place under similar conditions. A farmer who works isolated on one’s patch of land is less able to form and also represent one’s interests, and even more so to realize what elements of their struggle are common concerns versus particular, subjective ones. From this perspective it becomes clear how Arendt’s imagined ‘organizational impulses’ that led to the formation of

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<sup>99</sup> See Fraser, N. (1990). Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26, p. 64., [Honig](#)

<sup>100</sup> This refers to the common understanding of work/labor rather than the Arendtian distinction. It is not sufficient to say the activity for which one is paid since labor in Arendt’s terms for many is unpaid reproductive work (but also includes paid work in reproductive areas such as nurses. There is a discussion to be had about the isolating factors of housework, especially in nuclear families.

councils are not available to people equally, though arguably a farmer and a worker do not only have common concerns among each other but also common concerns specific to factory workers and farmers (and then common concerns within those as well – steel workers, dairy farmers etc.). The point is that someone who does work alone and/or is located in a rural, isolated area cannot as easily organize politically and may have to be externally summoned into a council. Logistically this could provide some difficulties.

Arendt's understanding of the public is frequently misunderstood as a spatial or institutional location. However, her conception is more relational than topographical. The public, for her, does not reside in particular media or forums, but rather in the collective of those who act in concert. The distinction she draws between public and private should not lead to the idea that publicness is tied to specific places; rather, it is enacted through collective appearance.<sup>101</sup> This still leaves unanswered the question of isolation.

The account of Joan Landes of the French Revolutionary Pauline Léon, who demanded the right for women to bear arms,<sup>102</sup> demonstrates how Arendt's boundaries between public and private are somewhat arbitrary and in the way of the councils' functioning. Léon shows how women's marches for bread, sugar, and other necessities were what led to their politicization. Additionally, an important side effect of their participation in the public realm for these demands was the quest for such perfectly Arendtian political goals as citizen rights.<sup>103</sup> Women activists like Léon show how the private/public divide is more elastic than many republicans make it out to be. For Léon and Landes, women's and men's participation in domestic responsibility also has the potential of being a site of "worldliness" and building concern for a

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<sup>101</sup> Redecker, E. von. (2021). *Praxis and Revolution: A Theory of Social Transformation*. Columbia University Press, p. 154.

<sup>102</sup> Landes, J. B. (1995). *Novus ordo saeculorum: Gender and public space in Arendt's revolutionary France*. In B. Honig (Ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, p. 205.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

common realm. It can be seen as public in itself because we usually share it with people but nonetheless have our privately owned place in it.<sup>104</sup>

### *Judgment/Relics*

Politics in the councils can be described as a performance: if one wants to disaggregate this very structure, not the councils themselves but how participation occurs, in other words what counts as intelligible, one can resort to critical praxis to build anew the previously exclusive conditions. An example for this would be Drag.<sup>105</sup> The accessibility of the councils is defined not just in a spatial and temporal sense, that is when, how and how often one has to be there but also by the horizon of both actor and spectator – what structures constrain them and do they see a critical, alternative praxis as that or rather as a failure of one that is already established?<sup>106</sup> Similarly to a Drag performer exposing heteronormative structures by mocking through existing, could the poor and minorities whose appearance in the public space is judged differently to that of an average bourgeois participator that qualifies for being a political elite, do so to bring these structures into question. What is required is for this appearance to occur and for it to be legally authorized.

A further restriction is implicit knowledge – how does one go beyond its boundaries and learned patterns<sup>107</sup> precisely in a situation such as post founding: this may be part of the explanation why the councils never persevered – because they were simply too far from the comfortable and known and incompatible with the structures that remained intact and were oriented towards the old form of government. The interrelations between material manifestations of the old government may make its norms and assumptions more tenacious, and make a new beginning not look that new after all. This may be seen as a universal problem of Revolutions: it would be

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<sup>104</sup> HC, p. 48.

<sup>105</sup> Butler, J. (2007/1990). *Gender Trouble*. Routledge Classics.

<sup>106</sup> Redecker, pp. 159-162.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., pp. 77-80.

infeasible to tear down everything, but simultaneously the traces of the old system that can be found everywhere. For the reversal of accomplishments of the Revolutions these relics need to be reflected, criticised, and adjusted, ideally in the self-governing manner of the councils.

One of those structures is rights. Often born out of radical claims and practices of freedom, they tend to become artifacts once institutionalized. Rather than embracing the practices that led to their institutionalization, that is, through an exchange of words and deeds – action – the focus often falls on simply securing them when, actually, rights without freedom do not mean a lot. In fact, the existence of equal rights tends to come at the cost of assimilation, that is, they create the illusion of sameness when in fact they are insignificant unless one is in the position to claim them. Ute Gerhard rightly asserts that rights “cannot be imported or prescribed; they apply only if the people involved are in a position to claim or defend them as rights.”<sup>108</sup> It assumes that spaces of freedom already exist, and that those that previously did not have rights can seamlessly integrate into them. It should be the point not to see rights as an end but rather as a means to move beyond them – to new claims and freedoms. They enable relations to one another.<sup>109</sup> Rights enable to expand the political space, to enrich it by allowing for people to come together equally and bring forward their concerns, to go past structural and participatory limitations to a certain extent. They safeguard the public space.

According to Arendt, human rights are not something people naturally possess just by being human. They do not arise from an innate moral sense or rational thinking about freedom. Instead, she sees human rights as socially and politically constructed—they depend on the shared agreements and mutual recognition that emerge from human relationships, and their continuity depends on the existence of appropriate organs/spaces. From this perspective, rights

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<sup>108</sup> Gerhard J. (2001). *Debating Women's Equality: Feminism, Law, and Politics in the Early Twentieth Century*. Columbia University Press, p. 176.

<sup>109</sup> Zerilli, pp. 120-123.

only have meaning when backed by political communities or institutions. Without a political structure to support or guarantee them, rights lose their force and become empty or irrelevant. Arendt never addresses the radical implications of the discourse of natural rights when embraced by advocates of women, slaves, or the poor. Had she done so, she might have noticed the dilemma posed when those who sought to claim universal rights based on their status as reasoning beings were reminded of their marked, bodily differences, concerning skin color or sexual anatomy.<sup>110</sup>

What remains in question is whether the “frailty of the human mind”<sup>111</sup> in Arendt’s account is universal and independent from other equality aspects or in other words whether the poor are less capable of forming opinion ‘cooly and freely’ and tend to have more frail minds. The latter would suggest Hannah Pitkin’s reading of the Social as Blob, which I do not believe is what Arendt thought of. Rather, I believe she argues that all humans have frail minds to a certain degree and that there are distinct traits, as mentioned earlier, that make some more suited to overcome these frail minds than others. It does not help that Arendt’s account additionally seemingly assumes for the councils to be neutral arenas where social power, that is, differences in status based on race, class, gender, etc., do not translate into political power. Wolin reads Arendt’s refusal to mention efforts by the Greeks<sup>112</sup> that would expand the meaning of equality (isonomia) beyond formal legal rights and to include socio-economic dimensions as pointing to her persistence on political equality as confined among the few. She even goes on to claim that the Greeks’ ‘real’ understanding of equality is for an individual to be free from being

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<sup>110</sup> For a more detailed discussion see Scott, J. (1996). *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>111</sup> OR, p. 227.

<sup>112</sup> Such as the Solonic Land Reforms, see Vlastos, G. (1946). Bnomia. *Classical Philology*, 41, pp. 65-83.

neither a ruler (or superior) nor a subject (or inferior) rather than about fair treatment or equal rights.<sup>113</sup>

We have to distinguish between the principle of equality aiming to establish sameness as the condition for political and social rights and what the *political* principle of equality the way Arendt's understanding aims at. She is precisely against sameness since it is antipolitical. For her, "the equality attending the public realm is necessarily an equality of unequals who stand in need of being 'equalized' in certain respects and for specific purposes. As such, the equalizing factor arises not from human 'nature' [nor from man's] but from outside."<sup>114</sup>

This raises several questions: What are these certain respects and specific purposes? Who decides over them? Feminist perspectives have shown how this leveling after the political principle has led to women having to assimilate to a masculine standard disguised as neutral and universal. However, what is neutral and universal is not a natural given – it is itself a political question to be debated in a public arena. I would argue that there is also a bourgeois standard that working class people have to assimilate to if they want to 'belong': that is for example to be 'well-mannered', educated, well-dressed, professional, etc. In other words, to disguise one's poor origins and appear as a universal agent, modelled after bourgeois ideals. Arendt's criteria for participation can be seen as one version of this. I believe she wants these criteria to be available to everyone, regardless of categories such as class, race, and gender. In practice, however, I argue for this to be hardly achievable without additional considerations.

Arendt wants us to not think of equality based on the Aristotelian principle of 'treating likes alike,' but rather to think about equality as relating different things and not making them the same. The concept Arendt suggests is the *persona*, or political mask, which does not constitute identity, but allows one's 'who' to appear by concealing politically irrelevant traits. It helps

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<sup>113</sup> HC, pp. 32-33, Wolin, p. 7.

<sup>114</sup> HC, p. 215

prevent others from confusing social categories with individuality.<sup>115</sup> This leads to a paradox: each person is unique, yet all share this very quality of uniqueness. “We are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”<sup>116</sup> Plurality, then, is not a moral or natural equality but an *existential* one, rooted in our condition of being-in-the-world with others. It is essential to the human condition but can be destroyed under conditions such as tyranny, totalitarianism, or the collapse of public life.<sup>117</sup>

So what constitutes the plural, unique ‘who’ revealed through action and speech? Arendt argues that identity cannot be described through characteristics or social categories—these are things we share with others. She writes, “the moment we want to say who somebody is... we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others... with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us.”<sup>118</sup> Identity is not captured by personality, roles, or interests, nor by inner essence. It is *public*, and appears when we speak and act among others. Through speech and action, we disclose ourselves—our identity takes shape in the unfolding of a story. As Arendt puts it, stories, “the result of action and speech,” are what “reveal an agent”.<sup>119</sup>

Identity, then, is not just what we say or do, but how we say and do it in response to particular moments. This narrative, a sequence of actions in time, forms the ‘who’ that becomes visible. However, as I’ve argued above, this visibility is shaped by attention, and attention is not neutral. Structural inequalities such as racism, sexism, classism, and heteronormativity shape who gets heard and how. When someone speaks, their voice is filtered through how they look

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<sup>115</sup> OR, pp. 106-107.

<sup>116</sup> HC, p. 9.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., pp. 40-41, 58.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

or sound, and listeners often impose stereotypes or assumptions about their views, values, or credibility.<sup>120</sup>

Stereotypes thus function as a kind of imposed mask doing precisely the opposite of what Arendt's persona ought to achieve. They emphasize 'what' a person is (in terms of group identity), rather than who they are as a unique individual. When someone is only perceived through the lens of group membership – be it race, gender, class, or sexuality – their individuality is blurred or silenced. This kind of perception prevents the distinctiveness necessary for plurality, as Arendt understands it. If a person appears only as a stand-in for a collective identity, they cannot fully emerge as someone with a singular voice or life story. Arendt proposes a kind of political attention that could resist the flattening force of stereotypes. This is an attention, that sees each person first and foremost as equally human, not as a representative of a category. The Arendtian concept of the persona supposedly functions as a neutral framework that allows individuals to appear without being reduced to their group identity. It is meant to equalize differences and deflect attention from irrelevant personal traits, enabling people to be heard as political actors.<sup>121</sup>

But from a critical perspective, this idealized mask is problematic. It has historically been designed with only certain voices and bodies in mind—usually those of white, male, able-bodied individuals. What passes as a “neutral” public identity often reflects the norms and experiences of dominant groups. The abstract individual of liberal theory, for example, tends to be based on male experiences, while women (and particularly women of color) are often expected to speak only as representatives of their social group. In unequal societies, the ability to not be seen in terms of race, class, or gender, in other words, assuming this neutral public identity, is itself a form of privilege. Oppression often manifests through visibility: the way

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<sup>120</sup> Zerilli p. ?

<sup>121</sup> OR, pp. 106-107.

marginalized people are seen only as stereotypes. Conversely, privilege often involves being able to ignore one's own social identity because the structures of the world are already built in alignment with it. The supposed 'neutral' ground of politics, in Arendt's case the councils, is anything but – it reflects deep, historically entrenched assumptions about who counts as a subject worth hearing.

Arendt does not fully develop how her idea of the public persona might be revised to take into account social inequality. She leaves unanswered how her neutralizing mask might still exclude or marginalize certain voices. I argue that precisely by reconsidering Social Questions as political concerns this could be solved by considering social identity – far from being a distraction from political life – as a constitutive part of how individuals appear and speak. Our race, class, gender, and religion are the contexts in which we first learn language, how to speak, and how to be heard. These social formations are not obstacles but rather the preconditions for developing the very capacities of attention and speech Arendt's vision of action depends upon. Opinions are formed in dialogue with others. That is the point of the public sphere and the councils. Even when thinking alone, we imagine how others might judge or respond. This involves trying to see from others' standpoints – not by becoming them, but by imagining how their views might differ from ours.<sup>122</sup> The dialogical structure of thought, being 'two-in-one', enables us to be open to multiple perspectives without dissolving our own identity. Arendt says so herself:

"The more people's standpoints I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion."<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> BPF, pp. 220, 238; Arendt H., (1978). Willing. In *The Life of the Mind* (Vol. 2). Harcourt Brace Jovanovich., pp. 181, 191.

<sup>123</sup> BPF, p. 241.

This imaginative process culminates in judgment, a moment when the thinking ‘I’ and the acting ‘who’ converge. When we judge, we do not merely apply principles – we declare who we are and with whom we stand. Judgment, then, is both personal and political. It reveals our identity not as a fixed essence, but as a constellation of decisions and actions shaped in relation to others. The idea of judgment also relies on distance – a spatial metaphor that implies that we must take a step back from ourselves and others to evaluate fairly.

However, we do not have equal distance to every perspective. Social position shapes how we see and how we are seen. Those who belong to oppressed groups often cannot afford the same aesthetic or detached distance that privileged individuals can take for granted. Being a Jew in fascist Europe, for example, was not an identity one could bracket – it was a political reality that demanded a response, even if it meant violating the public/private divide Arendt otherwise defended. In some circumstances, asserting a social identity is not a retreat from politics but a necessary political act. While Arendt distinguished sharply between the social and the political, she also acknowledged that the world may demand actions that contradict those categories. When social identities are under attack, responding as a member of that identity can be a way of claiming political agency.

Arendt’s account of Kant helps to take this one step further. He expressed genuine excitement about the French Revolution, even though, from a moral perspective, he believed he should condemn it because of its violence. However, as a spectator from a distance, he saw in the Revolution signs of potential progress. These signs were not empirical data to be interpreted by reason alone. Rather, as David Carroll<sup>124</sup> notes, they pointed toward a future possibility – they hinted at something to come, without being able to determine it. From this standpoint, the Revolution did not necessarily prove that humanity was improving. Instead, it sparked *hope* by

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<sup>124</sup>Carroll, D. (1984). Rephrasing the political with Kant and Lyotard: From aesthetic to political judgments. *Diacritics*, 14(3), p. 73-88; Zerilli, p. 151.

revealing new possibilities for the future, as Arendt explains in *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.<sup>125</sup> Even if the goals of the French Revolution, like constitutional reform, failed to materialize, Arendt, quoting Kant, insists that the hope it inspired endures.<sup>126</sup> It can thus be described as revolutionary legacy.

The dilemma is that to reconcile the human capacity for free action with its factual and historical determinations, one presupposes a form of causal analysis that contradicts the undetermined nature of freedom. This is why Kant introduces the notion that "in reason there is an inherent drive to realize reason."<sup>127</sup> This drive describes the existence of an interest that can causally explain our actions, and this presupposes the undetermined, free exercise of cognitive faculties.<sup>128</sup> This in turn means that "every interest...refers to possible practise"<sup>129</sup>. This shows that reason cannot be seen as divorced from the socio-political conditions of its genesis, but rather, to achieve true objectivity, it has to account for its historical realization. The flipside is that these interests must be subjected to critical reflection themselves to confirm that they and the knowledge they inspire do not reify and falsely present social relationships as trans-historical and objective when really they can be challenged and transformed.<sup>130</sup>

One way to think of action and transformation to Council Democracy outside of Revolution, in other words, to subvert in micro ways, is to link wishes to change the world to civil disobedience, interpreting such acts not as isolated reactions but as political efforts that actively shape the world and generate power. This ties civil disobedience to a transformative impulse, echoing the view that action seeks to found or reconfigure a shared world.<sup>131</sup> In Arendt's

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<sup>125</sup> Arendt H. (1982). *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (R. Beiner, Ed.). University of Chicago Press., p. 56.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46

<sup>127</sup> Habermas J. (1971) *Knowledge and Human Interests* (J. Shapiro, Trans.). Beacon Press, p. 201.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, Klein, p. 184.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>130</sup> Klein, p. 185.

<sup>131</sup> Redecker, pp. 187-190.

framework, isolation strips individuals of the capacity for political action. She draws a distinction between isolated life, associated with the animal laborans and its immersion in biological necessity, and the political condition, which depends on acting and speaking in concert with others. This capacity for action only becomes meaningful within a shared web of human relations. As Arendt emphasizes, this interrelatedness enables individual acts to gain public resonance and consequence.<sup>132</sup>

This “web of connections,” or *Mitwelt*, provides the necessary context in which actions can be intelligible and responsive. When such actions refer to each other in a sustained way, a more intense form of collectivity emerges—what Arendt terms power. This power depends on the presence of others and constitutes what she calls the space of appearance, which arises wherever people come together to act and speak. It is inherently fragile, vanishing when people disperse.<sup>133</sup> Judith Butler’s discussion of Drag performers operates within this same logic. These individuals act within subcollective spheres where recognition is possible. Even in marginal or precarious contexts, political appearance and power can arise. Butler describes such figures as taking action within a subcollective cosmos of recognition, which resonates with Arendt’s notion of power as something that springs up between people acting together.<sup>134</sup>

Political acts are sustained by subcollectives and social niches that support continuity. These smaller formations are crucial for politicization in a broader sense. Michael Warner attributes a world-making function to such counterpublics, highlighting their role in generating alternative discourses and publics that challenge dominant norms.<sup>135</sup> An historical instance of this is, as mentioned earlier, the participation of women in revolutionary France, where figures like Léon created forms of radical political expression within both public revolutionary forums

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<sup>132</sup> HC, pp. 188, 199-200.

<sup>133</sup> HC, p. 153.

<sup>134</sup> Redecker, p. 191.

<sup>135</sup> Berlant, L., & Warner, M. (1998). Sex in public. *Critical Inquiry*, 24(2), p. 561.

and feminist counter-discourses. Their performative political acts transcended the legal and moral constraints of republicanism.

The complexities of emancipation of a certain group that is disadvantaged were may best be understood by Arendt's discussions of Jewishness. In *The Jew as Pariah*, she exposes the contradictions and unintended consequences inherent in the project of Jewish emancipation using Kafka's novel *The Castle*. While emancipation is meant to secure legal and political equality—ensuring Jews are recognized as human beings in their own right rather than compelled to imitate non-Jews or pursue superficial social advancement—it is continually undermined by the demand for assimilation. This demand often entails the erasure of one's Jewish identity. Initially, K., the main character, attempts to assimilate, striving to become "indistinguishable" by simply claiming basic human entitlements such as "home, work, family, and citizenship."<sup>136</sup> However, his efforts reveal that assimilation does not guarantee recognition of fundamental rights. As someone rendered superfluous, he finds himself unable to live a normal life or gain membership in society, since these rights have become contingent, exceptional privileges granted at the discretion of authorities.<sup>137</sup>

Arendt draws a parallel critique in her analysis of stateless persons, turning her attention to the contradictions in the eighteenth-century concept of the Rights of Man. These rights were considered universal and inalienable, independent of social or political status, assigned by virtue of being born as was the case in France. Yet, in practice, stateless individuals—stripped of national affiliation—were unable to claim them. In a world structured by national sovereignty, these so-called universal rights proved to be rights only for those who belonged

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<sup>136</sup> Arendt, H. *The Jew as Pariah: A Hidden Tradition*. In J. Kohn & R. H. Feldman (Eds.), *The Jewish Writings*, Schocken Books, p. 291.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 290-297; Gündoğdu, A. (2014): *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights. Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants*. Oxford University Press, pp. 203-206.

somewhere. For the stateless, human rights amounted to exceptional rights dependent on the goodwill of others, rather than guarantees grounded in any enforceable legal framework.<sup>138</sup>

In both cases, Arendt offers a critical perspective that challenges the assumptions underlying equality, citizenship, and human rights in the modern nation-state. She scrutinizes the notion of political belonging and highlights how modern humanism, with its ideal of an abstract, universal humanity, often ignores the exclusions it perpetuates. Yet, Arendt does not reject the concepts of equality or human rights outright. Instead, she calls for their reconsideration in light of the realities they fail to address, aiming to reconstruct them in a more grounded and inclusive way.

There exists an inherent tension between human rights and the institutions designed to protect them—a tension that stems not only from the potential of these institutions to betray their foundational commitments, but also from the capacity of human rights to be invoked in contesting and reshaping the institutional status quo. The Arendtian perspective does not reject foundationalism out of loyalty to the current human rights framework; rather, it seeks to understand how new rights claims gain legitimacy without relying on pre-existing authority. By interpreting modern rights declarations as public affirmations of the principle of *equaliberty*,<sup>139</sup> Arendt's approach managed to both avoid foundationalist and anti-foundationalist extremes by emphasizing how this principle acquires universal force through its continual rearticulation in diverse historical and political settings.

Thus it is helpful for a vision of democratic cosmopolitics—a political and ethical orientation shaped by struggles against rightlessness and efforts to reimagine human rights beyond the confines of territorial sovereignty. This vision calls for serious engagement with the

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<sup>138</sup> OT, p. 293.

<sup>139</sup> This is Montesquieuan, see Gündoğdu, p. 210.

complexities of global politics, particularly the paradox of expanding human rights frameworks alongside the increasing number of people who lack access to those very rights. The task is to confront these challenges without falling into what Arendt termed either “reckless optimism,” driven by desperate hope, or “reckless despair,” fueled by paralyzing fear.<sup>140</sup> Instead, a form of critical thinking that embraces complexity and ambiguity offers a more productive path. It resists simplistic, linear narratives of human rights as inevitable progress, while also rejecting fatalistic critiques that see rights as inherently bound to oppression and sovereign violence.<sup>141</sup>

In this light Arendt’s federal principle for the councils may be considered as valuable or even necessary beyond national boundaries – not just for matters that go beyond these boundaries such as migration but also the climate etc. For Arendt, there is arguably no better form to discuss any political subject (what about war and genocide). This goes beyond the scope of the paper but remains an open question: if extended onto a global scale what new challenges would the council system face, would its form need to be adjusted and its content be open to all issues? Is this even possible in capitalism? By posing these questions one realizes that all issues that were raised in this Thesis would only be intensified if extended onto a global scale.

## Conclusion

A central difficulty in reading Arendt lies in the internal complexity and tensions of her political thought. This thesis has aimed to take those tensions seriously – not as signs of theoretical failure, but as points of productive engagement. As Arendt herself understood, the contradictions within a thinker’s work often reflect the historical and conceptual difficulties they sought to confront. Rather than seeking resolution, this project has attempted to clarify

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<sup>140</sup> OT, p. vii.

<sup>141</sup> For a detailed account of rights and migration see Gündoğdu

what is at stake in her distinctions, especially that between the social and the political, and how these distinctions shape her theory of revolution and council democracy.

Arendt's insistence on the foundational character of revolution – as the moment in which a new beginning becomes possible – carries with it both promise and limitation. While she powerfully articulates the need for a constitution that can stabilize freedom over time, she also restricts access to this founding moment by excluding concerns she deems pre-political. In doing so, she risks preserving only a partial form of freedom, one formally open to all but materially accessible to few. The Social Question, in her analysis, is reduced to a matter of administration, rendering invisible the structural conditions that delimit who can appear and act in public. As this thesis has argued, such an approach fails to account for how social and economic inequality constrain the very capacity for judgment and political presence that council democracy presupposes.

By drawing out the latent exclusions within Arendt's vision, this thesis has aimed to show how political equality, if understood solely as a matter of legal or institutional form, remains insufficient. What is required is a broader conception of equality – one that recognizes how differences in labor, status, and recognition shape political capacity itself. The councils, as Arendt imagines them, may hold the potential to overcome the limitations of party-based systems, but only if rethought in terms that address not just who participates, but under what conditions such participation becomes meaningful.

Ultimately, this project has sought neither to dismiss nor to idealize Arendt's theory of revolution, but to situate it within its own paradox: the attempt to ground political freedom on conditions that, if left unexamined, threaten its very realization. In tracing this tension, the aim has been to continue the kind of thinking Arendt herself demanded—critical, non-dogmatic,

and attentive to the fragility of beginnings. The continued relevance of *On Revolution* lies not in the solutions it offers, but in the questions it forces us to confront anew. In this sense, Arendt's work remains unfinished – not because it is incomplete, but because it belongs to a tradition of thought that must always be begun again.

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