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Amor mundi: Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology of world

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Chapter 3

Political community and the contract

Arendt was a critic of two different strands of social contract theory: the quasi-liberal model of the social contract, grounded in enlightened self-interest, associated with Hobbes, on the one hand; and organic models of community grounded in a sovereign people's general will and appealing to generalized compassion, associated with Rousseau, on the other hand.¹ She held that the foundation upon interest or will cannot generate stable, non-violent communities.² *Ex negativo*, Arendt's critique throws light on her own alternative ideas about the nature of the social contract, the political community and the relations between individual and community. Rather than interest, will or sovereignty, I will argue, her horizontal model is predicated upon opinion, promise and power as action-in-concert.

1. The general will and enlightened self-interest: Rousseau and Hobbes

Arendt's rejection of the perspectives on community in the social contract theories of Hobbes and Rousseau can best be explained by focusing on the pivotal concepts of respectively interest and will, more particularly enlightened self-interest and the general will. As the generally acclaimed first modern political philosopher, Hobbes aspired to solve the question how citizens are to live together peacefully which arose when religious justifications of sovereignty no longer sufficed. This made him shift the locus of sovereignty from God to a secular entity, the Leviathan or absolute monarch, through the construct of a social contract. His version of the social contract is, says Arendt, a vertical

¹ Although Arendt is highly critical of both of these theories, she is obviously closer to Rousseau than to Hobbes. Both she and Rousseau are republican thinkers and favour civil participation.

On differences and similarities between Arendt and Rousseau, see: Canovan, 1983, 287-89; Markell, 1997; Cooper, 1976, section IV; Herb, 2001.

² For Arendt's challenges of Rousseau's and Hobbes' assumptions: Canovan, 1992, chapter 6; Villa, 1996, 72-77, 247-48; Markell 1997; Wagner, 2003.

one³, that is, a contract between individuals (citizens) and a sovereign ruler. Hobbes regards the absolute sovereignty of a ruler as the final guarantee of peace, security and safety. Arendt particularly takes issue with Hobbes' assumption that the public or common good or interest is derived from, so in fact subservient to, according to Arendt, private interests and with his celebration of the pursuit of enlightened self-interest as the sole political virtue. Individuals' private interests, concerning the protection of their lives, physical safety and property, Hobbes argues, coincide with the public or common good, which is the safeguarding of citizen's safety and the support of the accumulation of property. Politics, therefore, is merely regarded as a means for the protection of the pursuit of private interests. Out of enlightened self-interest, individuals decide to bind themselves into a political community by submitting to an absolute sovereign, the Leviathan, who 'overawes them all'⁴. The sovereign offers protection against being killed in exchange for the monopoly on killing and absolute obedience or submission of his or her subjects.

Arendt criticizes Rousseau's social contract for its appeal to the constructs of the general will and the people, and for his invocation of a politics of compassion.⁵ His 'fundamental problem' is the question how citizens can live together in freedom. This is possible only under the condition that the person 'may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.'⁶ The solution his social contract provides, is basically to shift the locus of sovereignty and rule from the Hobbesian absolute ruler to the people. This means that the people becomes both the subject and the object of its own rule. This means it rules and is ruled by itself. Rousseau identifies that which provides the ground and legitimacy of the people's sovereignty as the general will (*volonté générale*). The political community, i.e. the people and its general will, is to be acquired and preserved through the perpetual struggle, individually and collectively, against the will of all (*volonté de tous*), that is, the sum of all particular wills of the citizens which not necessarily serve the common interest. Rousseau presupposes that the general will and the people are grounded in human nature, consisting in passion, in the double sense of 'pathos', feeling, emotion or sentimentality as well as the capacity to suffer, and more particularly in compassion, the 'innate repugnance against seeing a fellow creature suffer'⁷ and the capacity to 'suffer-with'.⁸ Rousseau regards

³ 'Civil disobedience', CR, 86. Strictly speaking, this is incorrect: the subjects do not enter into the social contract with the monarch, but among themselves. However, though the initial contract is a vertical one, once it is established it becomes horizontal: the monarch exerts absolute power over his subjects.

⁴ Hobbes, 1985 [1651], part I, chapter 13, 185.

⁵ 'The social question', OR, §3-4.

⁶ Rousseau, 2003 [1762], book I, chapter VI, 8-9.

⁷ Rousseau, 1984 [1755], part I, 99.

⁸ OR, 75.

compassion as a felicitous leftover of natural feelings, that is, of passions in the state of nature, uncorrupted by society. Whereas for Hobbes instrumental reason, which for him means ‘reckoning with consequences’⁹ enables a community of self-interest, for Rousseau passion is the foundation of compassion, the people and subsequently of community.¹⁰

Solipsism

The political appeal to enlightened self-interest, or interest in general, and to the general will, or the will in general, has disastrous political consequences in Arendt’s view. Why? She mentions four properties the invocation of the will and interest share: subjectivism, unity, sovereignty and naturalism.¹¹ Arendt’s first objection concerns the ‘extreme individualism’¹², or subjectivism, solipsism or monologicity inherent in approaches of the social contract based on interest, whether or not enlightened, and the will, whether or not general. Despite their very different representations of the state of nature - for the one a peaceful, paradisiacal condition, supportive of compassionate feelings; for the other a civil war-like and hellish situation ruled by fear, mutual suspicion and hostility - both Rousseau and Hobbes envisage individuals in the state of nature as living in isolation. They apparently conceive of the isolated individual as primordial and community as secondary.¹³ Rousseau’s ‘noble savage’ is a solitary creature. And according to Arendt Hobbes’ self-interested individual by nature ‘will consider his advantage in complete isolation’.¹⁴ For Hobbes, individual rationality consists in calculating, or ‘reckoning with consequences’. Individuals’ interests are by nature conflicting and non-cooperative, since there exists ‘neither fellowship nor responsibility between man and man’¹⁵. In the state of nature, ‘men have no pleasure, (but on the contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all.’¹⁶

Hobbes’ and Rousseau’s solipsist conception of human nature is also reflected in the absence, respectively prohibition, of civic discourse. The, real or anticipated, dialogue with others is replaced by the monologue of introspection, or at most the silent dialogue between me and myself. The fact that the Hobbesian inner dialogue appeals to reason, the

⁹ Hobbes, 1985 [1651] part I, chapters 4 and 5, 111: ‘Reason (...) is nothing but Reckoning that is, Adding and Subtracting) of the Consequences of generall names agreed upon.’ Arendt seems to be fond of this phrase, cf. HC, 172, 283, 300, 320, 322.

¹⁰ For Arendt on Rousseau, see ‘The social question’, OR, §3-4.

¹¹ I borrow the first three from Markell, 1997, 381-84.

¹² BPF, 163.

¹³ Herb, 2001, 61.

¹⁴ OT, 139.

¹⁵ OT, 140.

¹⁶ Hobbes, 1985 [1651], part I, chapter 13, 185.

Rousseauian dialogue to (com)passion, does not change the fundamentally similar structure of interiority. The Hobbesian human being is not by nature endowed with a sense of community. The only way the isolated self is ever able to establish a community is through introspection. Introspection, ‘to read oneself’ will show the individual according to Hobbes ‘the similitude of the thoughts, and Passions of one man to the thoughts, and Passions of another.’¹⁷ The rules and standards by which to establish and judge the political community are ‘inclosed in the inwardness of man, open only to introspection’¹⁸. What the individual will discover in particular is his own capacity to kill and hence the fear to be killed.¹⁹ Enlightened self-interest means that the individual subsequently applies reason to her discovery of this commonality. Through deduction and calculation, she concludes that her long-term interest is served best when all transfer their freedom to the sovereign. The violence or awe, which is required to safeguard individual’s life and limbs against others, and to prevent the disintegration of the community, is proportional to the individual’s lack of a sense of community. For ‘[i]f it does not belong to the concept of man that he inhabits the earth together with others of his kind, then all that remains for him is a mechanical reconciliation by which the atomized Selves are provided with a common ground that is, essentially alien to their nature’, Arendt argues.²⁰

Rousseau’s general will is no less solipsistic. It essentially excludes the exchange of opinions. ‘[T]here is no possible mediation between wills’²¹, Arendt writes. Indeed, In Rousseau’s ideal state, introspection takes the place of communication and dialogue between citizens, since in his view communication undermines, rather than supports, community. Discussion, Rousseau held, only serves to produce factions and disagreement and thus to threaten the stability and unanimity of the people. Only through silent self-examination, i.e. ‘think[ing] only [one’s] own thoughts’²², will the individual discover his own opinion uncontaminated by those of others, that is, he will discover the common good as dictated by the general will. What is probably more important is that there is actually no need for deliberation in Rousseau’s ideal state, since all citizens are of the same

¹⁷ Introduction of *Leviathan*, Hobbes, 1985 [1651], 82. Arendt refers to these sentences in HC, 299. *Read thyself* is Hobbes’ translation of The Delphic maxim *Nosce teipsum* - the Latin translation of γνωθι σεαυτόν, know yourself.

¹⁸ HC, 299

¹⁹ Hobbes, 1985 [1651], part I, chapter 13, 183-84; OT, 142.

²⁰ ‘What is existenz philosophy?’, EU, 181. Actually, this is Arendt’s criticism of Heidegger’s solipsism. She argues that Heidegger’s concept of the Self is predicated upon ‘absolute isolation’ or ‘absolute Self-ness, its radical separation from all its fellows’ whence a ‘mechanical reconciliation’ is needed to forge a bond between atomized selves.

²¹ OR, 76.

²² Arendt, BPF, 163; cf. Rousseau, 2003 [1762], book II, chapter III, 18.

opinion, which indeed expresses the general will.²³ Likewise, compassion excludes deliberation. As an innate, natural affect, it is experienced directly, without the mediation of speech.

Unity

Equally, both Hobbes and Rousseau regard the community, i.e. the Commonwealth, respectively the people, as a unity. Despite the fact that in Hobbes one man or woman, namely the Leviathan, rules over the many and in Rousseau the many bind themselves into a single general will, both conceptualize the resulting community as a homogenous unity. For Hobbes the political community or Commonwealth is embodied in the Leviathan, binding people together as a body uniting its various parts, as the telling frontispiece of *Leviathan* shows. The unity of the commonwealth is imposed upon the citizens with the aid of the threat of violence since the Leviathan binds people together by ‘overaw[ing] them all.’²⁴ Plurality is repressed, since it refers to the violence of the state of nature, the ever-present potential of a war of all against all. Likewise, for Rousseau, the general will necessarily consists of a unity.²⁵ The faculty of the will is ‘one and indivisible’²⁶. The political community is identified as the sovereign people, thereby substituting unanimity for the plurality of the citizens. Rousseau represents the people as a collective I or personality, what he calls a *moi commun*²⁷, which he illustrates by the metaphor of the body as well. Arendt points out that compassion, the rule of which she rejects in the political sphere, shares this very logic of unity. It unites both the subjects and objects of compassion, that is, those who do not suffer themselves but feel compassion towards those who do, on the one hand, and the masses, suffering from poverty, on the other hand. This unification is threefold, according to Arendt. First, virtue, defined as ‘selflessness’ or ‘the capacity to lose oneself in the suffering of others, rather than active goodness’, unites the privileged among themselves.²⁸ Second, compassion unites the objects of compassion, *le peuple toujours malheureux*, the suffering masses, *les misérables* or *les hommes faibles*, by ‘lump[ing] them together into an aggregate’.²⁹ And finally, Arendt argues, compassion is supposed to unite both groups, i.e. the compassionate and the sufferers, in a grand solidarizing gesture,

²³ Rousseau, 2003 [1762], book II, chapter III; OR, 76; BPF, 163-64.

²⁴ ‘Civil disobedience’, CR, 87.

²⁵ Rousseau, 2003 [1762], book I, chapter VI, 9: ‘Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.’ For Arendt’s view on the indivisible unity of the people, see OT, 73-79.

²⁶ OR, 76.

²⁷ ‘Common me’, ‘self’ or ‘identity’. Rousseau, 2003 [1762], book I, chapter VI, 9.

²⁸ OR, 80-81.

²⁹ OR, 85.

aiming to recover the supposed authentic and natural bond which society has lost.³⁰ For example, the Jacobin Rousseau-inspired politics of compassion demanded from its actors, the compassionate, the identification of their own will with the will of the people they claimed to represent, the sufferers.³¹

Next, Arendt severely attacks Hobbes' 'liberal' assumption of any 'harmony of interests', the belief that the private and the public interest may ever 'happily coincide'.³² Instead, she argues that private and public interests are opposed and should be kept distinct and should be mutually protected from the encroachment of the concerns of the other sphere, in order to maintain its specific mode of dignity and happiness. More concretely, Arendt argues that what gets lost in the identification of the public with the private interest, is the mediation of 'worldly institutions which th[e] people ha[ve] in common'³³, such as the law 'which determines the rights and wrongs of the individual interest with respect to public affairs.'³⁴ Likewise, the immediacy with which compassion is felt encourages direct and spontaneous action without the interference and mediation of institutions or the tedious and lengthy discursive political process of discussion, persuasion and negotiation.³⁵ '[T]here is no possible mediations between wills as there is between opinions'³⁶, Arendt writes. She, on the contrary, attributes great importance to mediating institutions, such as constitutions³⁷ and proposes standards which 'lie outside of men (...) something men have in common in a worldly reality perceived by the senses or by the mind.'³⁸

Naturalism

A third similarity between Hobbes and Rousseau is their shared naturalism. Both take a natural, vital faculty as the foundation of community. For Hobbes, individuals are 'naturally equal', because of 'the equality of fear resulting from the equal ability to kill possessed by everyone'.³⁹ The vital interest all human beings have in common, is, therefore, self-preservation, the protection of life and limb. Enlightened self-interest simply means that

³⁰ OR, 81.

³¹ OR, 74-75.

³² Arendt, 1977, 'Public rights and private interests', 105.

³³ OR, 76.

³⁴ OT, 139.

³⁵ OR, 85-87. Empathy and compassion are distinguished from what Arendt calls enlarged mentality or representative thinking. According to Arendt, the latter do not, like the first, destroy plurality.

³⁶ OR, 76.

³⁷ OR, 164.

³⁸ HC, 299.

³⁹ 'On violence', CR, 165. Cf. Hobbes, 1985 [1651], part I, chapter 13, 183-84; OT, 140.

the person's vital private interests are transferred onto the public interest. For Rousseau, seeing someone suffer is felt instantly, spontaneously and seemingly non-discursively, by virtue of our capacity of compassion.⁴⁰ This is indeed a natural fact, which occurs as a consequence of our biological make-up. The Rousseauan politics of compassion arises out of the sight of someone suffering, typically from hunger, and this is felt as an immediate call for direct and spontaneous action. 'The cry for bread will always be uttered with one voice. In so far as we all need bread, we are indeed all the same, and may as well unite into one body.'⁴¹ Indeed, both Rousseau and Hobbes represent the political community as an organism, quite literally a body politic, namely as respectively the 'multi-headed one'⁴² and the biblical monster Leviathan that incorporates its subjects as a body incorporates its organs. Arendt is worried about the singularity and indivisibility suggested by this image of the polity as a 'a mass that moves as one body and acts as though possessed by one will'.⁴³ This image is very similar to Arendt's nightmare of totalitarian rule, which she describes as 'One Man of gigantic dimensions'⁴⁴.

Sovereignty

Finally, although in Rousseau's social contract theory, the will of Hobbes' absolute monarch is transferred to the will of the people, this transfer does not affect nor challenge the principle of sovereignty.⁴⁵ Sovereignty is an anti-political principle in Arendt's view. Due to the condition of plurality, we are never the masters of our actions. Sovereignty is not only an 'illusion'⁴⁶, but even completely alien to political action which is always contingent, according to Arendt. '[T]he faculty of the will and will-power in and by itself, unconnected with any other faculties, is an essentially nonpolitical and even anti-political capacity'⁴⁷, she argues, because it runs counter to the condition of plurality.⁴⁸ As a

⁴⁰ That is, in human beings considered sane. The fact many people find the behaviour of autistic people, who lack empathy, so disturbing, is I think, a quite adequate illustration of the supposed naturalness of compassion and of common-sense definitions of humanity. There is much neurological evidence about the natural dimension of compassion today.

⁴¹ OR, 94.

⁴² 'The social question', OR, 77, 94.

⁴³ OR, 94; cf. 76, 77.

⁴⁴ OT, 465-66. See chapter 2.

⁴⁵ On the place of sovereignty and the will in the political sphere, and in particular the different roles they played in the political thought of respectively the American and the French revolutions, see OR, 30; 150-56; 183-85, 163, 225.

⁴⁶ 'What is freedom', BPF, 164.

⁴⁷ 'What is freedom', BPF, 164.

⁴⁸ 'What is freedom', BPF, 164; cf. OR, 225.

consequence, sovereignty is also alien to and destructive of political freedom, which is predicated on this very contingency, as expressed in the condition of natality. 'If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce' because 'in the realm of human affairs sovereignty and tyranny are the same'.⁴⁹ Sovereignty also invites violence. The sovereignty of political bodies 'can be maintained only by the instruments of violence, that is, with essentially non-political means' because it runs counter to the condition of plurality.⁵⁰ Next, sovereignty is also at odds with power in Arendt's sense, i.e. the power of individuals acting in concert.⁵¹ Whereas Rousseau opposes a separation of powers, arguing that divided power implies less power, Arendt asserts that the more centres or foci of power there are, the stronger the political community as a whole will be. Centralized power, Arendt thinks, can only mean stagnation and a loss of power. 'Power can be divided without decreasing it, and the interplay of powers with their checks and balances is even liable to generate more power, so long, at least, as the interplay is alive and has not resulted in a stalemate.'⁵²

Instability and violence

Arendt points out two consequences of the homogenous, organic models of political community I discussed above: both are inherently unstable and invite violence. In her view, Hobbes' community is 'built on sand'; Rousseau's one even on 'quicksand'⁵³. Arendt argues that Hobbes' thought on the relationship between individual and community is inconsistent, that is, self-defeating. While his main purpose is to provide the Commonwealth with a solid foundation, his account of the human nature prevents a stable community from coming about.⁵⁴ The pursuit of stability is grounded upon instability, just like the protection of safety is based upon fear. Hobbes' community is an unstable and fragile construct, and therefore permanently at risk of disintegration. Community is therefore at most a 'temporary and limited affair', which 'essentially does not change the solitary and private character of the individual (...) or create permanent bonds between him and his fellow-men.'⁵⁵ Arendt also argues that the general will, like any will, is

⁴⁹ 'What is freedom', BPF, 165; OR, 153.

⁵⁰ BPF, 164; cf. OR, 225.

⁵¹ For Arendt's critique of sovereignty, see MDT, 149; 'Civil disobedience', CR, §III. For secondary literature on this issue, see Beiner, 2000, 60; Canovan, 1992, 32, n.70; idem, 1993; Honig, 2003; Villa, 1998, 152-56. For Arendt's arguments on isonomy and no-rule, see OR, 30 (plus n.285); HC, 222; 'Civil disobedience', CR, 86; OR, 171.

⁵² HC, 201.

⁵³ BPF, 163-64.

⁵⁴ OT, 140, 142.

⁵⁵ OT, 140.

shortsighted. The will is inherently bound to present and to short-term interest only. Rousseau even argues that ‘it is absurd for the will to bind itself for the future.’⁵⁶ A community, however, needs a longer-term perspective, which only political institutions, in Arendt’s view ultimately referring to the promise, can provide. Unlike the will and compassion, political institutions constitute ‘elaborate framework with bonds and ties for the future’, without, however, destroying the fundamental contingency of action.⁵⁷ Both concepts of community are permanently threatened from the inside by either dissenting particular wills or by self-interest. For this reason, both conceptions demand an instance outside the web of citizens in order to, in Rousseau’s case, secure or, in Hobbes’ case, violently impose this unity. In Hobbes, community cannot come about nor subsist without the Leviathan’s permanent threat of awful punishment, for ‘Covenants without the sword are but words’⁵⁸. Less explicitly violent and repressive, even in Rousseau, the reconciliation between particular wills eventually depends on the somewhat mysterious Lawgiver, who knows better than the people themselves what the general will consists of and hence which laws are best for them. Compromising the horizontality of the social contract, the Lawgiver is introduced through the backdoor, like a *deus ex machina*, in order to guarantee that individual citizens’ wills are indeed in accordance with the general will.⁵⁹

Arendt stresses that Hobbes obviously justifies tyranny openly⁶⁰, but that the effect of Rousseau’s model is no less tyrannical, because both try to solve what is in their view the problem of plurality, through abolishing it altogether.⁶¹ Peter Wagner distinguishes between two modes of proto-totalitarian thinking, as two ways of solving the conflict or contradiction between individual interests and the public, general or collective interest. Rousseau’s way is to subordinate individual interest to the collective. Hobbes’ way, reversely, is to subordinate public interest to the individual, by rendering the public good no more than the sum of individual interests. Both ways lead to the erosion of public space and the loss of the interest in the common. And hence both, Arendt claims, destroy public freedom.⁶² Rousseau’s theoretical introduction of compassion as a political principle is the key to the violent course the French Revolution as well as its children, subsequent revolutions focusing on the ‘social question’, took. Whereas Rousseau is the representative of the political theory of compassion, Robespierre represents its political praxis, the Reign

⁵⁶ Rousseau, 2003 [1762], book II, chapter I, 15.

⁵⁷ BPF, 164-65; cf. HC on the promise, §34.

⁵⁸ Hobbes, 1985 [1651], part II, chapter 17, 223.

⁵⁹ Cf. Markell, 1997, 380.

⁶⁰ OT, 144.

⁶¹ HC, 197-98.

⁶² Wagner, 2003.

of Terror.⁶³ Since Robespierre, Arendt suggests, pushed the logic of the general will and compassion as a political principle to its extreme, he brought to light the implications of Rousseau's theory, namely its inherent violence. Through unleashing the 'terror of virtue'⁶⁴ and the 'war on hypocrisy'⁶⁵, as he himself called it, Robespierre did no more than make manifest what was already implied in Rousseau's theory of the general will, the people and compassion. Violence, i.e. the Terror, is not an accidental circumstance, i.e. an unfortunate though unintended effect of compassion, but it is its necessary consequence. Feelings and passions are by nature inarticulate or speechless, because they are felt immediately, preceding arguments.



Figure: colored print by Paul André Basset, 1796

The immediacy and monological nature of compassion encourage the use of political violence, rather than speech, i.e. the lengthy, tedious process of negotiation and persuasion through mediating political institutions. 'A state in which there is no communication between the citizens and where each man thinks only his own thoughts is by definition a tyranny.'⁶⁶ That the unification based on compassion may easily lead to violence, is exemplified in a picture by Paul André Basset (see figure). On the Jacobin flags, to the originally inclusive and universalistic ideal of *fraternité*, the ominous catchphrase *ou la mort* is added. This addition addressed not only the Jacobins' external enemies, that is, those opposed to the revolution, but also its own members. Among the brothers, no dissenting opinions were allowed.

⁶³ OR, 81. Similarly, for that matter, does Stalin relate to Marx, OR, 79.

⁶⁴ Robespierre, 2009 [1794], 47; 'The social question', OR, 79.

⁶⁵ 'The social question', OR, 99, 105.

⁶⁶ BPF, 164.

Hostility to plurality and worldlessness

To conclude, Arendt's key objections to both Hobbes' and Rousseau's political thought, concern the hostility to plurality and the blindness with respect to the phenomenon of world and worldliness to which their theories testify. Their shared hostility to plurality is related to their ignorance concerning the paradoxes of plurality.⁶⁷ For both Hobbes and Rousseau, equality in fact refers to social or natural sameness, that is, to our shared physical ability to kill and vulnerability to be killed, respectively our physical needs. Hence they disregard the paradox of difference and equality. For both, commonality refers to human nature and unity, rather than to the world we share. Also, both think that the existence of different individual perspectives threatens community, whereas Arendt thinks that difference and commonality paradoxically presuppose each other. Finally, both regard disagreement, dissensus and conflict as a problem. Installing community through the social contract therefore means terminating conflict, and as a consequence communication, for if everyone thinks and feels the same, we indeed would not need communication. Arendt, therefore, sees individuality and intersubjectivity as mutually conditional.

Since they do not take into account the paradoxes of plurality, Hobbes and Rousseau also represent two influential ways of doing away with plurality, either through one-man rule, in Hobbes' case, or through the fiction of the people as many-in-one, in Rousseau's case. Both ways foster the paradox of fusion and isolation.⁶⁸ Both Rousseau and Hobbes regard plurality as a problem, a regrettable condition to be solved in order for the polity to subsist. For Rousseau, plurality is associated with selfish particular wills, for Hobbes with unrestrained aggressive self-interests in the civil war-like state of nature. Plurality therefore for Hobbes can have no other meaning than a mere conflictual multitude of isolated individuals. Similarly, Rousseau and Hobbes represent two ways to bypass and hence undermine the world. Rousseau's reduction of unique individuals' plural perspectives to a general will and his introduction of compassion as a principle of public affairs, ignore political institutions which lie outside of, that is, between, people and that serve as media in their relationships.⁶⁹ Compassion 'abolishes the distance between people'⁷⁰, i.e. the common world. Hobbes' enlightened self-interest means that the individual applies instrumental reason to her discovery of this commonality. Through 'reckoning with consequences', she concludes that her interest is served best when all people transfer their autonomy to the sovereign.

⁶⁷ I introduced these paradoxes in chapter 2.

⁶⁸ 'One of the crucial elements in Rousseau's political thought is an attempt to overcome human plurality by converting a multitude into one being willing one will.' Canovan, 1983, 297-98.

⁶⁹ Most scholars emphasise the first objection; Canovan in particular has noted the second objection.

⁷⁰ OR, 86; cf. Markell, 1997.

2. Arendt's alternative: the promise, opinion, action-in-concert

Arendt rejects any foundation of community in interest or will, be it enlightened or general or not.⁷¹ This is not only dangerous, but in fact we do not even need to share a common will, nature or even interests in order to be able to live together politically, Arendt suggests. It is sufficient to share a common world, that is, to relate to and be loyal to worldly institutions. In this way, citizens are left room in which they are allowed to differ and in which their plurality may even flourish. Arendt's 'point is that instead of being reduced to a single will, diverse individuals can be united by sharing a common world; a common set of external institutions.'⁷² Arendt accepts that 'plurality is inescapable, but that worldly institutions can nevertheless provide a way of holding people together while leaving them space in which to differ.'⁷³ If there should exist such a thing as a public interest, or *inter-est*, in her words, it could never be derived from private interests in her view. The world has interests of its own⁷⁴, she writes and she praises the attitude of 'vigilant partisanship for the world'⁷⁵. In the words of Canovan: 'Our public interests as citizens are quite distinct from our private interests as individuals. Public interest (...) has nothing to do with private interests at all. Public interests, according to Arendt, are the interests of the *public realm*. As citizens, we share that public realm and participate in its interests; but the interests belong to the public realm itself rather than to people.'⁷⁶ Disch argues that the Arendtian *inter-esse* mediates between the extremes of liberalism and communitarianism. 'In contrast to the interests of interest group pluralism, Arendt's interests are not private bargaining chips, defined with reference to individual goals and traded competitively on the political 'market'. In contrast to the communitarian ideal, the 'inter-est' is not a common cause that in some way expresses the authentic beings of its disparate participants and harmonizes their wills.'⁷⁷ However, it is important to see that Arendt does not take a moderate middle ground, as if she seeks a compromise. On the contrary, her view on the common is informed by her reflections on the totalitarian experience and presupposes a phenomenological understanding of the paradoxical nature of plurality; more particular, of the paradoxes of difference and commonality, solitude and being-together, and

⁷¹ Cf. 'The revolutionary tradition and its lost treasure', OR; and 'Civil disobedience', CR. Secondary literature on common interest, see Disch, 1997, 142; Bickford, 1996, 14-15, 86.

⁷² Canovan, 1983, 294. Cf. 297.

⁷³ Canovan, 1983, 300.

⁷⁴ 'On violence', OR, 175.

⁷⁵ 'On humanity in dark times', MDT, 5-8.

⁷⁶ Canovan, 1985, 636-37.

⁷⁷ Disch, 1994, 36.

communication and conflict.

The opposition of private and public interest refers, first of all, to different dimensions of human existence to which we belong, which are both valuable in their own right. Individual interest concerns one's 'relationship to life' and belongs to the private sphere; common interest concerns one's 'relationship to the world' and belongs to the public sphere.⁷⁸ When private interest becomes the measure for public life and politics, the concerns of life displace the concerns of the world, which would imply the end of politics. Second, private and public interests are opposed because of the different temporal logics to which these dimensions of life obey: the short-term, immediate and urgent, versus the long-term, permanent and solid. 'The main characteristic of the common with respect to the individuals who share it is that it is much more permanent than the life of any one individual.'⁷⁹ Due to the human condition of mortality, 'the self qua self cannot reckon in terms of long range interest, i.e. the interest of a world that survives its inhabitants.'⁸⁰

I hope I have made it clear by now, what 'common' does not mean in Arendt's work. It does not mean unified, the result of some operation of fusion, through either compassion or instrumental reason. Neither is it an aggregate or sum of individual interests. Nor is it a lowest common denominator, something which 'happen[s] to be same in everybody', which is not brought about in human action, for example 'the structure of [our] minds'⁸¹. Finally, the common world is not grounded in an innate human nature, reason as little as passion, that would be shared preceding the exchange of opinions.

What, then, do people as citizens have in the common, positively defined? What is the foundation of community, if it is not grounded in human nature, organically grows out of a common interest, or is not the union of all particular interests? The simplest answer would be: there is no such thing as a foundation; community is groundless.⁸² Still, despite the anti-foundationalist agreement between contemporary postmodernist Arendt-scholars, Arendt's phenomenological anthropology suggests that human existence is intersubjective through and through. This intersubjectivity points to the human condition of plurality that refers to the interaction between people and the common world, rather than to a common human nature. This sharing-a-world-with-others, instead of a solipsist individualism, is the basis of political community. Citizens are 'united by the objective bonds in a common cause'⁸³, aiming at the *res publica*. What we share as citizens in the public realm, is an interest

⁷⁸ 'The crisis in education', BPF, 185.

⁷⁹ Arendt, 1977, 'Public rights and private interests', 105.

⁸⁰ 'On violence', CR, 175.

⁸¹ HC, 283.

⁸² As, for example Villa (1996), Honig (1992, 1993), Herzog (2004) argue.

⁸³ 'The social question', OR, 74.

in something, a case or issue, outside ourselves. ‘What makes [the citizens] common is something that is not subjective.’⁸⁴ Now, the most general name of this public or common cause or common good is the world. ‘The ‘public good’, the concerns of the citizen, is indeed the common good because it is localized in the *world* which we have in common *without owning it*.’⁸⁵ This is a radical reversal of the Cartesian relation between self or *res cogitans* and world or *res extensa*. Rather, this conception of the world disrupts the situation of the mind as Archimedian point. What people have in common is not ‘the structure of their minds’ or a ‘common outlook inside all their minds’, but the world that lies outside and between them and that consists in institutions, buildings, stories, opinions, etc.⁸⁶

How do people build such a common world if there is no foundation? In the last part of this chapter, I will argue that it is by means of opinionating and making contracts based on promises.

Opinion

Instead of a shared will, a self-subsisting common good, or the pursuit of private interests, Arendt’s model of the political community is predicated upon opinions. Opinions require the presence of others, i.e. they are typically generated and subsequently tested between people, in the course of their exchange in discussion, rather than inside their minds. The common good is ‘the shifting product of dialogue.’⁸⁷ ‘Where an appropriate public space exists, these opinions can be filtered into a sophisticated political discourse, instead of being either left as a chaos of innumerable opinions on the one hand, or molded into an unanimous ‘public opinion’ on the other.’⁸⁸

Although they are typically formed in public contexts, opinions, unlike personality traits, motives, interests and qualities, belong exclusively to individuals.⁸⁹ My opinions, that is, ‘how things seem to me’ (δοκεῖ μοι⁹⁰), qualify who I am, whereas my interests and will rather express what I am, i.e. to which group I belong.⁹¹

⁸⁴ Arendt, 1977, ‘Public rights and private interests’, 105.

⁸⁵ Arendt, 1977, ‘Public rights and private interests’, 104. In this context, Arendt maps her well-known distinction between the private and the public on the one between respectively ‘own’ (ἴδιος) en ‘common’ (κοῖνος); quasi-epistemologically deriving the concept ‘own’ from ‘owning’, i.e. possessing.

⁸⁶ HC, 283; Canovan 1988, 183.

⁸⁷ Hinchman, S., 1984, 326-27.

⁸⁸ Canovan, 1985, 634-35.

⁸⁹ OR, 227; cf. Canovan, 1985, 634.

⁹⁰ LOM I, 94; ‘Philosophy and politics’, 1990 [1954], 80; LKPP, 56.

⁹¹ Bickford, 1996, 60, 81, 85-86.

Chapter 3

Opinions cannot be reduced to interests. Particular interests do not dictate or automatically give rise to particular opinions.⁹² Opinions differ from the will, in so far as the latter is given and ‘one and indivisible’⁹³, while the condition of plurality implies that opinions are multiple and alterable. ‘Plurality implies that it is ‘natural’ for people to form different opinions about their common affairs.’⁹⁴ ‘Differing opinions are always characteristic of ‘men in the plural’, as unanimity of opinion is characteristic of mass society and tyranny.’⁹⁵ The Rousseauan politics of compassion demands identification of wills, rather than exchange of opinions.⁹⁶

To be sure, Arendt’s turn to opinions, or rather, to the activity of opinionating, does not imply an entry into mere subjectivism or relativism. In Arendt’s view, opinions, though contingent, are not arbitrary, nor formed in solitude, but require exchange. Hence, they are neither objective, nor subjective, but intersubjective and have a common point of reference, namely the world that provides a situated objectivity.

Promises

Arendt situates her thinking about the common in a different tradition within social contract theory, loosely associated with Locke.⁹⁷ Let me briefly return to Hobbes and Rousseau, and focus on their ideas of the social contract. Theirs, Arendt argues, is a vertical version of the social contract⁹⁸, which she describes as ‘an agreement in which an individual person resigns his power to some higher authority and consents to be ruled in exchange for a reasonable protection of his life and property’.⁹⁹ This contract between a people and a sovereign ruler, results in legitimate government, i.e. in a division between the ruled and legitimate rulers, be it the sovereign will of the absolute Leviathan or Rousseau’s ‘theoretical substitute’, the general will.¹⁰⁰ Both shapes of the social contract depend upon consent which in Arendt’s view comes down to ‘mere acquiescence’¹⁰¹ and is ‘accomplished by each person in his isolation’.¹⁰² Arendt, on the contrary, favors the horizontal contract

⁹² Bickford, 1996, 86; Canovan, 1988, 185.

⁹³ OR, 76.

⁹⁴ Canovan, 1988, 185.

⁹⁵ Bickford, 1996, 81.

⁹⁶ OR, 74-75.

⁹⁷ ‘Foundation I’, OR, esp. §3 (165-78); ‘Civil disobedience’, CR, §III, esp. 85-87; Canovan, 1992, 151, 208, 211, 216.

⁹⁸ See n.3.

⁹⁹ OR, 169.

¹⁰⁰ OR, 156.

¹⁰¹ ‘Civil disobedience’, CR, 85.

¹⁰² OR, 171.

between independent individuals, associated with Locke and the American Revolution, or rather with the pre-revolutionary ‘American experience’ in the colonies.¹⁰³ The result of such an ‘alliance’ is a political community in which citizens mutually bind themselves, instead of a government in the sense of rulership.¹⁰⁴ The horizontal contract presupposes the equality of its constituting members, as opposed to the vertical relationship between the people or ruled, and the government or ruler. It is based upon a promise, that is, ‘by definition enacted ‘in the presence of one another’¹⁰⁵, unlike consent. This model of the social contract presupposes that the contract among citizens themselves precedes the one between citizens and the government:

All contracts, covenants, and agreements rest on mutuality, and the great advantage of the horizontal version of the social contract is that this mutuality binds each member to his fellow citizens. This is the only form of government in which people are bound together not through historical memories or ethnic homogeneity, as in the nation-state, and not through Hobbes’s Leviathan, which ‘overawes them all’ and thus unites them, but through the strength of mutual promises.¹⁰⁶

Making and keeping promises is a world-building human capacity, since it ‘provide[s] stability in the ocean of future uncertainty where the unpredictable may break in from all sides’.¹⁰⁷ The social contract based upon the promise is institutionally embodied in covenants, treaties, constitutions, the law, etc. These institutions propose standards which ‘lie outside of men’ and constitute ‘something men have in common in a worldly reality perceived by the senses or by the mind.’¹⁰⁸ It is exactly these intermediary institutions that are conspicuously absent in the Rousseauan and Hobbesian vertical social contract. Unlike the essentially short-sighted self-interest and general will, these institutions constitute ‘elaborate framework with bonds and ties for the future’ without, however, destroying the fundamental contingency of action.¹⁰⁹ Next to its long-term orientation, the law, unlike compassion and the sum of self-interests, is impartial, that is, ‘without regard to persons’.¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ OR, 172. Arendt suggests that Locke’s social contract theory should be seen as providing the *ex post facto* theoretical articulation of this experience, rather than of inventing the corresponding version of the social contract.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Civil disobedience’, CR, 86.

¹⁰⁵ OR, 171.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Civil disobedience’, CR, 86-87.

¹⁰⁷ OR, 175.

¹⁰⁸ HC, 299.

¹⁰⁹ BPF, 164-65.

¹¹⁰ OR, 90. This lack of regard for persons does not refer to unique individuals, but to persons as representatives of a particular collective identity, in this case especially class.

Power as action-in-concert

The promise and the horizontal contract are the basis for Arendt's very different model of power. She conceives of power not as sovereignty, neither in the shape of an absolute sovereign monarch, nor of the sovereign people, but as action-in-concert. Promising establishes the power of plural people. Consenting, on the contrary, brings about sovereign power. Sovereignty is conceived as a property of an entity which rules over isolated individuals who have resigned their individual power. Of course, Rousseau's conception of sovereign power, i.e. popular sovereignty, is more complicated, but essentially follows the same logic. Although popular sovereignty implies that 'each, while uniting himself with all, (...) obey[s] himself alone, and remain[s] as free as before', each citizen resigns its individual power and will to the 'supreme direction' of the general will.¹¹¹ Hence it is static and absolute. Power, in the Arendtian sense of action-in-concert, on the other hand, is seen as essentially consisting in a relation; hence it is dynamic, plural and relative. The Arendtian horizontal contract lifts the isolation of each individual member and limits its individual power, however in favor of an enhanced 'new power structure', that is, the power of the citizens constituting the common world by participating.¹¹²

Conclusion

In Arendt's view, the common, the civic bond, is not about common interests, or a substantial conception of the common good. Though we may have very different, even conflicting interests, and have very different conceptions of the good life, we share a common world. The point of the matter is that the world allows for disagreement and dissensus, that is, for debate about what the *inter-esse* actually is.¹¹³ The common does not consist in the common denominator of different interests, but in the discussion between these interests. Or as Bickford argues:

[P]olitics is not simply about shared interests or shared conceptions of the good; it is how we decide what to do in the face of conflict about all these things. Politics in this sense is constituted neither by consensus nor community, but by the practices through which citizens argue about interests and ends - in other words, by communication. It is through such communicative practices that we come to

¹¹¹ Rousseau, 2003 [1762], book I, chapter VI, 9.

¹¹² 'Civil disobedience', CR, 86-87; OR, 170-71, 175.

¹¹³ Cf. Canovan, 1985, 639.

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understand our interests and our identities in ways that inform our decisions about what to do.¹¹⁴

Arendt's account of the problem of community is neither radically individualistic, i.e. solipsistic, nor communitarian, due to the second paradox of plurality I identified, which comes down to the fact that commonality is not opposed to, but crucially dependent upon, differences. Individual and community, in the sense of the common world, are not antithetical. Truly political community, that is, non-given, artificial and heterogeneous community, emerges when citizens publicly display their plurality of views and opinions. Its purpose is not to achieve agreement, consensus or harmony by homogenizing or equalizing differences, but to do justice to the multiplicity and divergence of individual views, so that a common world emerges. Community is never a given, that is, it lacks an ultimate foundation, but it is a construct which citizens should actively design and maintain, through opinionating, contracts and promises.

¹¹⁴ Bickford, 1996, 11. The interdependency of world and plurality will be further elaborated in the next chapter on common sense in Arendt's work.