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### Amor mundi: Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology of world

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## Chapter 8

### **The pathologies of in/visibility II: social in/visibility. The social question, the race question, the Jewish question and the woman question**

In the previous chapter, I discussed the pathology of public invisibility and natural visibility; in this chapter I will add another pathology of in/visibility: social in/visibility in public space. The concept of social in/visibility corresponds to notions of in/visibility familiar from theories of extra-parliamentary new social movements and critical theories of ethnicity ('race'), class and gender. In these theories, the problem of exclusion, domination or exploitation of groups is diagnosed in terms of social invisibility; the remedy for this problem is formulated in terms of social visibility. The feminist political philosopher Iris Marion Young, for example, distinguishes between five 'faces of oppression', the experience of one of which, 'cultural imperialism', she describes as 'to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other'.<sup>1</sup> Metaphors of in/visibility are also pervasive in black American prose: '[Invisibility] evokes much that has been of crucial import in the black man's American experience: [it] suggests the situation of a group stripped of its native culture and forced to adhere to alien standards and values while its own cultural qualities were ignored; socially it reflects the condition of a group whose basic plight was long overlooked or pushed into obscure shadows; perhaps most significantly it embodies the complex psychological dilemmas of men without a sense of vital group identity, whose sense of individual human identity is often denied by the dominant society.'<sup>2</sup> In the aforementioned discourses, social invisibility refers to social injustice and inequality, along two axes, one a socio-economic, the other a socio-cultural axis. At least ever since Marx, the classical politico-philosophical concept of justice has encompassed redistribution, the just, i.e. fair, reasonable or legitimate, distribution of welfare, material resources and social power. Take, for example, Rawls'

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<sup>1</sup> Young, 1990, 58-59.

<sup>2</sup> Lieber, 1972, 86. Cf. Weate, 2003, 5.

famous ‘difference principle’, which asserts that social and economic inequalities, that is, inequalities in the distribution of primary social goods, such as wealth, authority and/or status, are justified only to the extent that they benefit the least-advantaged members of society.<sup>3</sup> Institutionally, the principle of redistributive justice has been given shape in the welfare state. In this chapter, I will discuss the ‘social question’, i.e. poverty and the labour movement, as the major example of redistributive injustice and the fight against it.

A second, more recent, concept of justice concerns the recognition of collective identities and the group membership of minorities or groups who are otherwise excluded, oppressed, discriminated against, marginalized, stereotyped, abjected, etc., such as women, migrants, Muslims, homosexuals, etc. Concrete examples of the struggle for recognition include multiculturalism, emancipation policies, extra-parliamentary activities of new social movements, etc. Examples of socio-cultural injustice I discuss in this chapter are the ‘race question’, i.e. racism and the black civil rights movement; the ‘Jewish question’, i.e. anti-Semitism and pariah politics, including the Zionist movement; and the ‘woman question’, i.e. patriarchy or phallocentrism and the feminist movement. Philosophers such as Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth and Iris Marion Young, among others, each played a major role in expanding the older concept of socio-economic justice in social and political theory and philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

The best-known form of the struggle for recognition is identity politics, that is, the demand of disadvantaged groups for recognition of their particular group identity, i.e. of the very ground on which recognition had been withheld before, instead of their inclusion in some allegedly universal common humanity. This implies, for example, the struggle of Afro-American to be recognized as Afro-Americans, or of women as women, rather than as human beings *simpliciter* or in spite of their difference, and instead of, or at least in addition to, the demand for enfranchisement.<sup>5</sup> Identity politics is to be opposed to, for example, the first-wave feminist call for the acknowledgement of women as human beings just like men, worthy of the same universal rights, in particular suffrage, that men already possessed; or to the strategy of Booker T. Washington (1856-1915), the most influential spokesman for the Afro-American community right after the abolition of slavery. Washington, a former slave himself, was the first black dean of the all-black college Tuskegee. He thought that by providing education, Afro-Americans would contribute to society as responsible citizens. This, he hoped, would lead white American to accept them in spite of their difference.

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<sup>3</sup> Rawls, 1971, §13.

<sup>4</sup> Markell, 2008; Honneth, 1992, 2001, 2003; Fraser, 2003; Taylor, 1992; Young, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Kruks, 2001, 85. Cf. Heyes, 2007.

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Arendt's problem with social justice, and by extension with the struggle for social visibility, concerns not the principle of social justice in itself, but instead the politicization of what she saw as a social principle and the usurpation of the political by this principle.<sup>6</sup> She presents an alternative paradigm, another perspective on political action, which centres on freedom rather than justice. Many, if not most, political philosophers and theorists object to Arendt's rejection of a social approach, that is, any approach focussing on socio-economic and socio-cultural justice, of the political sphere. More particularly, many feminists disapprove of Arendt's exclusion of identity issues from the political sphere and as a consequence either reject her work altogether or set about heavy revisions. Arendt's critics object that her approach would render the content of the political unintelligible or vacuous, since in our world the political is primarily concerned with socio-economic and socio-cultural issues. That which we usually understand by 'politics' roughly coincides with Arendt's notion of the social, and consequentially is non- or even anti-political in Arendt's vocabulary. Most famous is Hannah Pitkin's rhetorical question 'What is it that they talked about together in that endless palaver in the agora? What does [Arendt] imagine was the *content* of political speech and action and why is this question so difficult to answer from her text?'<sup>7</sup> And Benhabib reproaches Arendt for anti-modernism because of her supposed exclusion of the social: 'Arendt's agonistic model is at odds with the sociological reality of modernity, as well as with modern political struggles for justice.'<sup>8</sup> Benhabib maintains that the distinction between the social and the political has become porous and meaningless, 'because the struggle to make something public is a struggle for justice. (...) When freedom emerges from action in concert, there can be no agenda to predefine the topic of public conversation. The very definition of this agenda entails a struggle for justice and freedom.' Benhabib calls this lacking insight Arendt's 'blind spot'.<sup>9</sup>

Challenges of Arendt's distinction between the social and the political like these and others usually take issue with those writings in which Arendt indeed applies this distinction in a methodologically quite essentialist way, by reifying both spheres, such as her notorious essays 'Reflections on Little Rock', 'The social question' and, in some instances, *The human condition*. In these texts, Arendt condemns the struggle against, respectively, racial segregation in the educational system, and poverty, as social issues to be prevented entrance to the political sphere. While the distinction between the social and the political is based on a phenomenological analysis of the implications of lived experiences of in/visibility, in these essays she instead imposes the social-political distinction as a pre-

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<sup>6</sup> For the social-political distinction in Arendt's work, see Introduction to Part III.

<sup>7</sup> Pitkin, 1981, 336.

<sup>8</sup> Benhabib, 1992, 95.

<sup>9</sup> Benhabib, 1990, conclusion; Cf. Bernasconi, 1996.

conceived substantial framework onto events. This is a very anti-phenomenological move, and therefore on the whole uncharacteristic of Arendt's work. These texts are hence exceptions in a body of work in which Arendt argues that both issues, racism and poverty, do have political aspects. For good reasons, Arendt never renounced the distinction between the social and the political, but she often took this distinction in a non-essentialist sense.

The objective of this chapter is to defend an alternative Arendtian political perspective on those issues and conflicts, as well as the extra-parliamentary social movements to which they gave rise, which are usually defined in social terms, such as exclusion, oppression, marginalization and exploitation. For this alternative option, I draw inspiration from Arendt's council-model of political action (§1). It diagnoses exclusion not, at least not exclusively, in terms of *social* invisibility, i.e. as a lack of socio-economic redistribution or socio-cultural recognition, but in terms of *political* invisibility, i.e. as a lack of participation and public freedom. Subsequently, as a strategy for emancipation or empowerment, it advocates a struggle for political, rather than social visibility, i.e. for participation, political equality, empowerment and freedom. In sections 2 through 5, I will exemplify the issue of social and political in/visibility respectively, by means of four cases of social movements and the social conflicts and struggles against social invisibility that they are concerned with. I will discuss socio-economic justice and the politics of redistribution in §2 on the social question. Subsequent sections will deal with three cases of socio-cultural justice and the politics of recognition or identity politics, namely the Jewish question (§3); the race question (§4); and the woman question (§5). In each case, I will show what a social, i.e. socio-economic or socio-cultural, and subsequently a political, Arendtian outlook on groups' in/visibility could mean.

## **1. Councils**

For Arendt, the key to taking a freedom perspective on issues, which are conventionally defined in terms of socio-economic or socio-cultural justice, is the participatory or republican model of the civic organization or the horizontal social contract.<sup>10</sup> Voluntary associations of citizens, sometimes federally connected into council republics, Arendt observes, resurface spontaneously and vanish every now and then throughout modern history, for instance in the French revolution's revolutionary councils, the Parisian

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. chapter 3. On Arendt's model of the council, see Schindler, 2000; Kateb, 1983, 1984 (chapter 4); Wolin, 1983; Hoheneder, 2004; Sitton, 1987; de Vries, 2004; de Haan, 2004; Isaac, 1994; Wellmer, 2000.

Commune, the early Russian soviets, the München *Räterepublik*, the Hungarian revolution, the *kibbutzim* in Israel, the civil rights movement starting in the mid-1950s, the student protest movement and the antiwar movements of the 1960's and 1970's, the eastern European dissident movements, up to present-day American city councils and jury system, etc. In an interview conducted in 1970, Arendt summarized her thoughts about this system or model with great clarity:

Since the revolutions of the eighteenth century, every large upheaval has actually developed the rudiments of an entirely new form of government, which emerged independent of all preceding revolutionary theories, directly out of the course of the revolution itself, that is, out of the experiences of action and out of the resulting will of the actors to participate in the further development of public affairs. This new form of government is the council system, which, as we know, has perished everytime and everywhere, destroyed either directly by the bureaucracy of the nation-states or by the party machines. (...) It seems to me (...) the single alternative that has ever appeared in history, and has reappeared time and again. (...) [Council systems] never came into being as a result of a conscious revolutionary tradition or theory, but entirely spontaneously, each time as though there had never been anything of the sort before. Hence the council system seems to correspond to and spring from the very experience of political action.<sup>11</sup>

What turns councils into movements struggling for political rather than social visibility?<sup>12</sup>

There is a triple relation of councils to action. First, councils spontaneously and unpredictably spring out of action. Second, they constitute the framework within which a plurality of citizens acts and speaks and thus realizes public freedom. Simultaneously, third, councils safeguard action against its excesses, through the principle of mutual promises that is internal to action and which Arendt describes as the 'remedy for the failure of institutions, the unreliability of men, and the uncertain nature of the future'<sup>13</sup>.

Unlike individual acts of resistance, rebellion or conscientious objection, councils entail associative practices of citizens, or what Alexis de Tocqueville dubbed the 'art of associating together'<sup>14</sup> and John Stuart Mill 'the capacity of cooperation for a common

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<sup>11</sup> 'Thoughts on politics and revolution', CR, 231-32.

<sup>12</sup> Especially in 'Civil disobedience' and 'On violence', CR.

<sup>13</sup> 'Civil disobedience', CR, 102.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Arendt, 'Civil disobedience', CR, 94. See *Democracy in America* (2000 [1835, 1840]), 219 (last sentence of book II, chapter 5): 'Among the laws that rule human societies there is one which seems to be more precise and clear than all others. If men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased.'

purpose'<sup>15</sup>. This presupposes what Arendt usually calls 'action in concert', which is grounded on mutual promises and results in power.<sup>16</sup> The Arendtian notion of power is a positive one and very similar to the more recent concept of empowerment. It implies the non-violent concerted action of organized groups of citizens. Civil disobedience is an example of such action.<sup>17</sup> Second, unlike identity politics, council politics is not based on substantive collective identities or ideological commitments, but concerns the practical, ad-hoc organization of citizens pursuing 'actual' and 'short-term' goals and disappears as soon as these goals have been achieved.<sup>18</sup> The council system is also opposed to the democratic party system and is in fact even often destroyed by parliamentarism<sup>19</sup>, for a number of reasons. Voluntary associations are non- or extra-parliamentary and non-representative, for being direct and based on the participation instead of the representation of citizens; they are non-ideological, for being plural and horizontal alliances or contracts that avail themselves of opinion and persuasion<sup>20</sup>; they are small-scale as opposed to the mass scale of bureaucracy, which by itself precludes action in concert *à la* Arendt; and, finally, they are opposed to the very idea of government in the sense of rule.

The booth in which we deposit our ballots is unquestionably too small, for this booth has only room for one. The parties are completely unsuitable; there we are, most of us, nothing but the manipulated electorate. But if only ten of us are sitting around a table, each expressing his opinion, each hearing the opinion of others, then a rational formation of opinion can take place through the exchange of opinions.<sup>21</sup>

In short, councils are based on the power of groups who mobilize and organize around a common problem, issue or purpose, instead of being based on a common identity or aiming at consensus. The former make action an associative, the latter an agonistic-pluralistic affair.

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Arendt, 'Civil disobedience', CR, 97. In his review of volume I of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Mill maintains that 'The many, for the first time, have now learned the lesson, which, once learned, is never forgotten—that their strength, when they choose to exert it, is invincible. And, for the first time, they have learned to unite for their own objects, without waiting for any section of the aristocracy to place itself at their head. The capacity of cooperation for a common purpose, heretofore a monopolized instrument of power in the hands of the higher classes, is now a most formidable one in those of the lowest.' Mill, 1972, 51.

<sup>16</sup> 'Civil disobedience', CR, 95, 98. Arendt borrows the phrase 'action in concert' from Edmund Burke.

<sup>17</sup> See 'Civil disobedience', CR.

<sup>18</sup> 'Civil disobedience', CR, 95, 98.

<sup>19</sup> 'Civil disobedience', CR, 95.

<sup>20</sup> 'Civil disobedience', CR, 101.

<sup>21</sup> 'Thoughts on politics and revolution', CR, 233.

## 2. The social question

As is well-known, Arendt challenges the belief implied not only in Marxism, but also in the French Revolution, the welfare state, and contemporary consumer society, that the alleviation of poverty and the advancement of welfare or redistribution should be the aim of politics. For Marx, according to Arendt, the true political scandal consisted in poverty and scarcity. He would have defined the end of politics as welfare or abundance and its means as the proletarian revolution.<sup>22</sup> As such, he turned the social question rather than tyranny and oppression into a political force, Arendt argues. She criticizes Marx for sacrificing freedom, and hence politics, to necessity, i.e. economy, by reducing human beings to specimens of *animal laborans*, and all human activities, including political action, to labour.<sup>23</sup>

However, throughout her work, Arendt points to a number of socialist and communist theorists who have reflected, at least occasionally, on the political dimensions of the predicament of poverty. She lists a number of examples of political struggles within the labour movement. The early Marx, that is, prior to his conversion to what is in Arendt's view an ideology, historical materialism, is the most notable communist theorist to have analysed the problem of poverty in political rather than economic terms.<sup>24</sup> Though later in life, Marx would analyse poverty and scarcity, respectively welfare or abundance, as natural or historical necessities, in the beginning of his career as a social theorist he still saw poverty as the consequence of 'man-made violence and oppression of man by man'<sup>25</sup>. Hence, as a starting philosopher, he would have formulated the aim of the revolution as liberation from oppression, instead of poverty, and as the foundation of freedom, instead of welfare, as he later in his philosophical career would do.

Bertolt Brecht receives the same ambivalent appreciation.<sup>26</sup> Arendt's criticism of his commitment to the communist cause and of his active involvement in the communist party later in life, even after he had learned about Stalin's crimes - Brecht's 'sin'<sup>27</sup> in her view - has been notoriously merciless.<sup>28</sup> However, she used to admire and praise him as a younger poet and playwright for his genuine, impartial though passionate, care for the world and the

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<sup>22</sup> In the social-democratic version of Marxism, the means to achieve welfare are redefined as redistribution through the welfare state.

<sup>23</sup> HC and 'The social question', OR.

<sup>24</sup> 'The social question', OR, 62-65.

<sup>25</sup> 'The social question', OR, 63.

<sup>26</sup> 'Bertolt Brecht', MDT.

<sup>27</sup> MDT, 243.

<sup>28</sup> Arendt's harsh criticism of Brecht's communist commitment caused a controversy (1968-1971), raging in *Times Literary Supplement*, *Merkur* and *New York Times*.

miseries of its inhabitants, 'over and above his own'.<sup>29</sup> '[Brecht] understood and was outraged by not only the sufferings of the poor but their obscurity (...) [H]e thought of the poor man as the invisible man. And it was out of this outrage, perhaps even more than out of pity and shame, that he began to hope for the day when the tables would be turned.'<sup>30</sup> In a portrait of Brecht, she observes that to her, he used to be a 'voice (...) of the world and everything that was real', before he 'became *engagé*'.<sup>31</sup>

Rosa Luxemburg, too, offered a positive example of world-orientation in Arendt's view.<sup>32</sup> Arendt praises the direction of Luxemburg's moral commitment, namely towards the world: 'Rosa Luxemburg was very much concerned with the world and not at all concerned with herself. (...) [S]he couldn't stand injustice within the world.'<sup>33</sup> Additionally, Arendt celebrates Luxemburg as a non-ideological, non-orthodox, Marxist socialist who emphasized the spontaneous, unplanned character of the revolution, which emerges 'from below', as self-organisation of labourers: 'this sudden uprising of an oppressed people for the sake of freedom and hardly anything else, without the demoralizing chaos of military defeat preceding it, without *coup d'état* techniques, without a closely knit apparatus of organizers and conspirators, without the undermining propaganda of a revolutionary party'.<sup>34</sup> As Luxemburg herself put it:

Die moderne proletarische Klasse führt ihren Kampf nicht nach irgendeinem fertigen, in einem Buch, in einer Theorie niedergelegten Schema; der moderne Arbeiterkampf ist ein Stück in der Geschichte, ein Stück der Sozialentwicklung, und mitten in der Geschichte, mitten in der Entwicklung, mitten im Kampf lernen wir, wie wir kämpfen müssen.<sup>35</sup>

This conception of revolution is juxtaposed to the Marxist deterministic ideology of revolutions as dictated by historical materialism.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> MDT, 224.

<sup>30</sup> MDT, 238.

<sup>31</sup> MDT, 246.

<sup>32</sup> For Arendt's views on Rosa Luxemburg, see 'Rosa Luxemburg', MDT; 'Thoughts on politics and revolution', CR, 203; Arendt, 1979, 'On Hannah Arendt', 311; OT, 1958, 'Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian revolution', 480-510. Scholarship on the affinity between Arendt and Luxemburg includes Blättler and Marti, 2005; Cocks, 1995; Deppe, 2007; Auernheimer, 2007; Heller, 1985; Storlokken, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Arendt, 1979, 'On Hannah Arendt', 311.

<sup>34</sup> OT, 1958, 482.

<sup>35</sup> Luxemburg, 1990, 465. Apart from Luxemburg's thoughts on councils, Arendt is also inspired by her theory on imperialism. See OT, Part II.

<sup>36</sup> Luxemburg indeed has been decried within the SED for her *Spontaneismus*, spontaneism, the very quality for which Arendt praised her (Deppe, 2007).

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Apart from theorists, Arendt also discusses a number of examples of politically significant organisations within the labour movement. In a little commented upon passage in *The human condition*, Arendt herself already complicated the assumption that the labour movement is necessarily a strictly social affair.<sup>37</sup> After first establishing the most extremely unworldly nature of labour - indeed the most unworldly of all human activities for her - and hence the anti-political approach of the labour movement, which is reflected in its appeal to the 'unitedness of many into one'<sup>38</sup> and the necessary loss of 'all awareness of individuality and identity' within the 'labor gang'<sup>39</sup>, she is struck by the observation of the 'sudden and frequently extraordinarily productive role which the labour movements have played in modern politics'.<sup>40</sup> 'From the revolutions of 1848 to the Hungarian revolution of 1956, the European working class, by virtue of being the only organized and hence the leading section of the people, has written one of the most glorious and probably the most promising chapter of recent history.'<sup>41</sup> This, however, she concludes, is exceptional. It cannot be ascribed to the trade union movement, which in her view has never been revolutionary at all, since it has never been the objective of the unions to transform society fundamentally, but merely to serve the interest of labourers. On the contrary, it should be understood as emerging from 'the people's political aspirations': sudden spontaneous uprisings of labourers, entirely independent from official party doctrines, programs and ideologies, who established their own 'new form of government'.<sup>42</sup> Previously, in her columns in Jewish periodicals in the 1940s, she had already noted that socialism in the beginning, before turning ideological, that is, historical-materialist, featured an authentic political impulse in the shape of the labour movement.<sup>43</sup> The kibbutz movement, established by socialist Zionists, did not conduct a social identity politics, nor was it nationalistic like the dominant Zionist school of Herzl, but it was a form of government 'by', 'of' and 'for' the people.<sup>44</sup> Other examples of politicized socialist organisations include the Paris Communes I and II and the soviets in the very first years of the soviet system.<sup>45</sup>

The alter-globalisation movement, in particular the so-called social forums, is, I think, the most adequate contemporary example of an activist movement organizing itself

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<sup>37</sup> HC, §30, 'The labour movement'.

<sup>38</sup> HC, 214.

<sup>39</sup> HC, 213.

<sup>40</sup> HC, 215.

<sup>41</sup> HC, 215.

<sup>42</sup> HC, 215-16.

<sup>43</sup> Arendt, 'Zionism reconsidered', JW, 351-53.

<sup>44</sup> 'Peace or armistice?', JW, 442-43.

<sup>45</sup> The Paris Commune I existed during the French revolution; Paris Commune II in 1871. On the political nature of both movements, see OR, 64, 239-48, 256-57, 266.

around socio-economic issues, now called ‘global justice’, but in a manner which is political through and through in the Arendtian sense.<sup>46</sup> Oliver Marchart argues that alter-globalization activism is best considered as a struggle against the *Alternativlosigkeit*, the lack of alternatives, i.e. the economic and normative determinism, of the neo-liberal discourse of globalisation. This determinism expresses itself in the consensus on the ‘impossibility, even the impossibility of thinking (*Denkunmöglichkeit*)’ a ‘new beginning’ and in complete economization, as is summarized in the slogan ‘There Is No Alternative’ (TINA).<sup>47</sup> With Arendt, Marchart understands this ‘oblivion of beginning’ (*Anfangsvergessenheit*) as a form of world alienation (*Weltvergessenheit*) and hence as a loss of the political (*Politikvergessenheit*). This is already clear in the ‘fatal’ neo-liberal conception of world as *globus*, or earth, that is, a neutral and all-encompassing totality in which economic and political processes necessarily and mechanically unfold according to their inherent functionalist logic.<sup>48</sup> Marchart opposes this concept of world as *globus* to an Arendtian concept of world as *mundus* which defies determination by any functionalist logic whatsoever because of the contingency of the status quo.<sup>49</sup> Marchart insists on the importance of shifting our understanding of world from *globus* to *mundus*, that is, from necessity to freedom, and sets his hopes on the alter-globalists.<sup>50</sup> By replacing TINA with the slogan ‘Another World is Possible’, this movement executes such a ‘change of point of reference’<sup>51</sup>. Marchart argues that the alter-globalists are motivated by the same ‘revolutionary pathos’ as the councils in Arendt’s work, namely the belief in the possibility of beginning.<sup>52</sup> Marchart points to a number of features the movement has in common with Arendt’s council model: its heterogeneity and plurality; commonality and associative as well as agonistic practices; the element of public happiness, which Marchart calls ‘fun’ and the movements organization as public space.<sup>53</sup> In this context, Marchart speaks of re-politicization or ‘the return of the political’ because it entails a turning away towards freedom from any determinism.<sup>54</sup> Any discourse that suggests that there may be alternatives, and that new beginnings are possible, is already political in itself,

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<sup>46</sup> I do not want to suggest that all theorists of global justice are adherents to the alter-globalisation movement.

<sup>47</sup> Marchart, 2005, 25, 94-95.

<sup>48</sup> Marchart, 2005, 89-95.

<sup>49</sup> Marchart, 2005, 169.

<sup>50</sup> Marchart, 2005, 92-95.

<sup>51</sup> Marchart, 2005, 69, 167.

<sup>52</sup> Marchart, 2005, 69.

<sup>53</sup> Marchart, 2005, 26, 70-72, 121, 124, 169-70.

<sup>54</sup> Marchart, 2005, 168.

even if it also poses social-economic questions, he argues.<sup>55</sup> The alter-globalists, therefore, constitute a politicisation movement in Marchart's view.

### 3. The Jewish question

Arendt occasionally acknowledges that the struggle for the socio-cultural recognition of collective identities may be politically relevant. This is especially the case in limit situations whenever a group's identity is 'under attack', due to persecution, sometimes up to the point of its physical extermination.<sup>56</sup> The experiential background of this acknowledgment consists in her own personal, but also shared Jewish-German experience, with anti-Semitism, Jewish assimilationism, the Holocaust and Zionism, the *Judenfrage* for short. The distinction between pariah and parvenu that she borrowed from Bernard Lazare has been pivotal for Arendt's analysis of collective (Jewish) identity.<sup>57</sup> Pariah existence, i.e. being a social, political and/or legal outcast, has been typical of Jewish life in Europe - Arendt focuses on Germany - since the Enlightenment. Pariahs 'have no place in the political and social world'.<sup>58</sup> In *The origins of totalitarianism*, Arendt reminds us that German Jews were deprived of 'legal or civil status' between 1812 and 1869 and after that 'socially ostracized' from society.<sup>59</sup> Though they were economically fully integrated in German society, they lived 'outside the law'<sup>60</sup>, a condition that would repeat itself on an even larger scale in twentieth century Europe in-between the two world wars, in the predicament of the stateless<sup>61</sup>. The pariah can neither appear as a Jew, nor as a citizen. She is both socially and politically invisible, i.e. invisible both as a Jew and as a citizen. This starting point leaves him or her with a number of options. She can become a 'separatist', i.e. choose life in isolation from wider society in a brotherhood; become an assimilated parvenu; a Zionist; or appropriate her pariah existence in a politically conscious way.<sup>62</sup> In 'dark times', Arendt

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<sup>55</sup> Marchart, 2005, 92-94.

<sup>56</sup> 'On humanity in dark times', MDT, 18.

<sup>57</sup> Arendt on the figure of the pariah: JW ('We refugees'; 'The Jew as pariah: A hidden tradition'; 'Zionism reconsidered'), Ch 3 OT ('The Jews and society') and *Rabel Varnbagen*, 1997. Secondary scholarship includes Barnouw, 1990; Bernstein, 1996; Feldman, 1978; van der Hoek, 2000; Herzog, 2001; Young-Bruehl, 1982, 121-22.

<sup>58</sup> JW, 279.

<sup>59</sup> OT, Part I (Anti-Semitism).

<sup>60</sup> JW, 74.

<sup>61</sup> See chapter 7.

<sup>62</sup> I borrow the term 'separatist' from Disch, 1994.

writes, pariahs tend to stick together and withdraw into warm brotherhood.<sup>63</sup> Though she is not without understanding altogether, Arendt objects to this type of organization because it neglects the world, i.e. is a-political, since those withdrawing do not speak up politically, as Jews, against their persecution.<sup>64</sup> This group of pariahs condemns itself to an existence of social and political invisibility. Throughout her work, she demonstrates the political unfruitfulness and disastrous consequences of the politics of brotherhood in relation to the social question<sup>65</sup>, the race question<sup>66</sup> and the Jewish question<sup>67</sup>. Starting with the Jacobin Terror, she argues that ‘strong fraternal sentiments’ inevitably lead to violence.<sup>68</sup> ‘Brothers’ and, *mutatis mutandis*, ‘sisters’, constitute warm communities, grounded in the natural solidarity of belonging to the same ethnic group. Arendt’s powerful example of this type of community draws on her own experiences as a persecuted German Jew. She observes that many of her fellow Jews tended towards a ‘brotherly attachment’ to each other ‘which springs from hatred of the world in which men are treated inhumanly’.<sup>69</sup> The ‘powerful need (...) to move closer to one another, to seek (...) the warmth of intimacy’, a home or haven in an unsafe and *unheimliche* world, is a ‘well-known characteristic’ of all pariahs, persecuted or oppressed groups. The ‘emotional closeness and consolation, a specific kind of humanity’ between brothers, ‘their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity’ that ‘grow out of suffering’ are ‘the proudest possession of all pariahs’, she writes more than once.<sup>70</sup> ‘[I]t is the advantage that the pariahs of this world can always and in all circumstances have over others’.<sup>71</sup> However, in fraternity, plurality is denied. The ‘excessive closeness of (...) brotherliness (...) obliterates all distinctions’ since brothers and sisters ‘avoid disputes and try as far as possible to deal only with people with whom they cannot come into conflict.’<sup>72</sup> A crucial quality of brotherhood is that it collapses the political phenomenon of equality into the natural and social phenomenon of sameness. Brotherhood is laden with a fatal confusion of equality, on the one hand, and sameness, identity or unity, on the other. Discussing the book that is somewhat like a bible to the black power movement, third-world liberation movements and anti-colonial movements of

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<sup>63</sup> For Arendt’s account of the politics of brotherhood, see chapter 3, 5 and the present chapter, §1.

<sup>64</sup> ‘On humanity in dark times’, MDT.

<sup>65</sup> ‘The social question’, OR.

<sup>66</sup> ‘On violence’, CR.

<sup>67</sup> ‘On humanity in dark times’, MDT.

<sup>68</sup> See chapter 3 on the politics of compassion and chapter 5 on the politics of brotherhood.

<sup>69</sup> ‘On humanity in dark times’, MDT, 12-13.

<sup>70</sup> MDT, 13, 30; Arendt, 1962, Letter to Baldwin.

<sup>71</sup> MDT, 13.

<sup>72</sup> MDT, 30.

the 1960s, Frantz Fanon's *The wretched of the earth*<sup>73</sup>, Arendt writes: '[I]n military as well as in revolutionary action 'individualism is the first [value] to disappear'; in its stead we find a kind of group coherence which is more intensely felt and proves to be a much stronger though less lasting, bond than all the varieties of friendship, civil or private.'<sup>74</sup> Therefore, the relationship between brotherhood, on the one hand, and coercion or outright violence, on the other hand, is more than a mere historical coincidence. The logic of brotherhood requires 'us' to be a homogeneous unity. Disagreements within the brotherhood are neutralized, as they threaten its unity. The logic of the politics of brotherhood dictates that difference and conflict can only exist and be tolerated in-between communities. Still discussing Fanon's work, Arendt writes: '[O]nce a man is admitted [to an illegal enterprise], he will fall 'under the intoxicating spell of the practice of violence [which] binds man together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain, a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upward'.<sup>75</sup> Second, the type of solidarity that is based upon brotherhood, is usually short-lived, Arendt warns: '[T]he strong fraternal sentiments collective violence engenders have misled many good people into the hope that a new community together with a 'new man' will arise out of it. The hope is an illusion for the simple reason that no human relationship is more transitory than this kind of brotherhood, which can be actualized only under conditions of immediate danger to life and limb.'<sup>76</sup> 'Unfortunately, [brotherhoods] have never survived the hour of liberation by even five minutes.'<sup>77</sup>

The strategy of the parvenu, however, is no less a-political. Like the separatist, she is invisible, both socially and politically. As social climbers or *nouveaux riches*, seeking what Arendt calls 'the idols of social privilege'<sup>78</sup> and 'using [their] elbows'<sup>79</sup>, parvenus are ready to assimilate to the norms of any society they happen to live in. In earlier centuries, this group comprised the figures of the exception Jew and the court Jew, in the twentieth century for example wealthy Jewish philanthropists such as the Rothschilds. Essentially anti-political beings, parvenus pursue social opportunity, while disregarding their given, natural, in this case Jewish, identity.<sup>80</sup> Arendt cites Lazare's condemnation of 'the spurious doctrine' of assimilation which would have the Jews 'abandon all their characteristics, individual and

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<sup>73</sup> Fanon, 1963 [1961].

<sup>74</sup> 'On violence', CR, 164. Arendt cites Fanon, 1963 [1961], 47. On Arendt and Fanon, see Cocks, 1995; King, 1992, chapter 7; Kruks, 1996.

<sup>75</sup> 'On violence', CR, 164. Arendt cites Fanon, 1963 [1961], 93.

<sup>76</sup> 'On violence', CR, 166.

<sup>77</sup> Arendt, 1962, Letter to Baldwin.

<sup>78</sup> JW, 279.

<sup>79</sup> JW, 296.

<sup>80</sup> 'We refugees', JW.

moral alike, and give up distinguishing themselves only by an outward mark of the flesh which served but to expose them to the hatred of other faiths.<sup>81</sup> Arendt makes no secret of her aversion against parvenus, who were more than willing to deny any Jewish trait in order to be accepted by gentile society. Her personal experience may throw light on this aversion. As a child initially unaware of being Jewish and, as a consequence, in the increasingly anti-Semitic atmosphere in Germany during her youth, 'being unwanted', Arendt's mother taught her a basic pride over and against anti-Semitic remarks: 'Man darf sich nicht ducken! Man muß sich wehren!'<sup>82</sup> Arendt's rejection of the figure of the parvenu refers to the denial of his natural Jewishness, which is doomed to fail anyhow, because of its visibly conspicuous signs, but also due to its highly individualistic strategy: '[I]nsofar as the Jew seeks to become 'indistinguishable' from his gentile neighbours he has to behave as if he were (...) utterly alone; he has to part company, once and for all, with all who are like him.'<sup>83</sup>

Zionism is a third strategy open to the pariah. During and after the war, Arendt became engaged with the Zionist movement, although she never wholeheartedly embraced it. She applauded the wish to fight anti-Semitism and to assert Jewishness, but dismissed the non-political and nationalist form it took in the first part of the twentieth century in the predominant Zionism of Theodor Herzl *cum suis*. In her view, this strand within the Zionist movement engaged predominantly in the social struggle to assert Jewish identity, without an accompanying political struggle.

The fourth and final strategy Jews, and *mutatis mutandis* other pariahs, may choose and which Arendt obviously favored, is related to a political, finally unsuccessful, undercurrent within Zionism, associated with Lazare. Lazare called Jews to become so-called 'conscious pariahs'. The conscious pariah 'enters the arena of politics and translates his status into political terms'.<sup>84</sup> Refusing to accept his pariah status, 'the emancipated Jew must awake to an awareness of his position and conscious of it, become a rebel against it - the champion of an oppressed people'.<sup>85</sup> Arendt's ideal of the emancipation of Jews is 'an admission of Jews as Jews to the ranks of humanity, rather than a permit to ape the gentiles or an opportunity to play the parvenu'.<sup>86</sup> Persecuted Jews who refuse to deny their Jewishness make themselves unpopular, that is, 'unwanted', but, according to Arendt, receive the

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<sup>81</sup> JW, 283-84.

<sup>82</sup> ZP, 52; cf. Young-Bruehl, 1982, 11-12. Young-Bruehl interestingly suggests that Arendt in her controversial 'Reflections on Little Rock', in which she opposed state intervention in the racially segregated educational system, may have confused the situation of the Little Rock Nine with the predicament of German Jews in the Third Reich (308-18).

<sup>83</sup> JW, 291.

<sup>84</sup> JW, 284.

<sup>85</sup> JW, 283.

<sup>86</sup> JW, 275.

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inestimable advantage that 'for him history is no longer a closed book, and politics ceases to be the privilege of the Gentiles.'<sup>87</sup> The figure of the conscious pariah throws into doubt any essentialist and substantial distinction between the social and the political. His strategy is, and cannot be but, ambiguous.<sup>88</sup> For the conscious pariah does not strive for social but for political visibility and in order to become so is compelled to sacrifice her social invisibility to some extent. 'Wenn man als Jude angegriffen ist, muß man sich als Jude verteidigen. Nicht als Deutscher oder als Bürger der Welt oder der Menschenrechte', Arendt said in an interview.<sup>89</sup>

The key to the strategy of the conscious pariah is, first, that he takes responsibility, that is, refuses the position of a victim, and 'fe[els] himself responsible for what society had done to him (...). For insofar as a man is more than a mere creature of nature, more than a mere product of divine creativity, insofar will he be called to account for the things that men do to men in the world which they themselves condition'<sup>90</sup>. Second, it is essentially a non-individualistic, associationistic strategy: 'For only within the framework of a people can a man live as a man among men, without exhausting himself. And only when a people lives and functions in concert with other peoples can it contribute to the establishment upon earth of a commonly conditioned and commonly controlled humanity.'<sup>91</sup>

So Arendt implicitly acknowledges that making visible collective identity sometimes plays a preparatory role with respect to action and participatory visibility, since, generally speaking, what we are is relevant to who we are<sup>92</sup>, in particular when this what, i.e. one's social identity or membership in a social group, is 'under attack'.<sup>93</sup> The pariah is both socially and politically invisible, i.e. invisible as a Jew and as a citizen. The strategy of the separatist only serves to confirm this social and political invisibility. The parvenu's social invisibility is equally a-political by definition, but such is the mainstream Zionist's social visibility, as long as it is not accompanied by a political struggle. As a consequence, both social visibility and invisibility can lead to political invisibility. Only the conscious pariah

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<sup>87</sup> 'We refugees', JW, 274.

<sup>88</sup> Young-Bruehl, 1982, 89. Arendt demonstrates this ambiguity in a narrative fashion in her biography of Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833), a German-Jewish salonnière in Berlin, who struggled severely with her Jewishness. Arendt demonstrates that Varnhagen moved from pariah to parvenu, by converting to Catholicism and marrying a gentile husband, and back again. Towards the end of her life, Arendt writes, Varnhagen eventually came to accept her Jewish identity in the ambiguous way of a conscious pariah. Arendt, 1997 [1957], *Rahel Varnhagen. The life of a Jewess*.

<sup>89</sup> ZP, 57. Cf. 'On humanity in dark times', MDT, 17-23.

<sup>90</sup> JW, 284-85. Parvikko (1998) indeed stresses the aspect of responsibility.

<sup>91</sup> JW, 297.

<sup>92</sup> See chapter 2.

<sup>93</sup> Arendt, 'On humanity in dark times', MDT, 18.

succeeds in turning social visibility into a political condition. She pursues political visibility and in order to become so has to renounce her social invisibility to some extent, for she refuses to compromise her Jewish identity.

#### **4. The race question**

The Afro-American activism of the civil rights movement starting in the early 1960's offers another interesting case which features the struggle for both social and political visibility. Arendt's focus on the political and political visibility and disinterest in what presents itself as a social struggle, initially blinded her for the political dimension and relevance of the race question and the black civil rights movement. In her notorious 'Reflections on Little Rock', Arendt indeed argued that the events in Little Rock during the entire month of September 1957 constituted a social rather than political struggle, namely the parvenu struggle for social recognition, endangering political equality and freedom.<sup>94</sup>

In the summer of 1957, the board of the formerly racially segregated, all-white Central High School in Little Rock decided upon desegregation of the school, to be implemented in the school year 1957-1958. Nine black students, who later became collectively known as the Little Rock Nine, were to attend from September 1957. In this decision, the board followed the US Supreme Court's ruling. On May 17, 1954, the Warren Court<sup>95</sup> had issued *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled that racial segregation of public schools, a practice which was particularly alive in the South, is inherently unequal and hence a violation of the Equal Protection Clause of section 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution. This clause provides that 'no state shall (...) deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws'.<sup>96</sup> As a consequence, the Court called for desegregation in order to achieve equal educational opportunities for black and white students. Also, it abolished *de jure* the Jim Crow 'separate but equal' doctrine which amounted to legally enforced racism, most clearly through racial segregation and

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<sup>94</sup> See Bohman, 1997.

<sup>95</sup> The Warren Court was the US Supreme Court between 1953 and 1969.

<sup>96</sup> The entire section 1, which defines citizenship and protects people's civil rights from infringement by any State, reads: 'All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.' This section lists respectively the Citizenship Clause, Privileges or Immunities Clause, Due Process Clause and finally the Equal Protection Clause (Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, 1868).

racial discrimination in elections.<sup>97</sup> On September 4, 1957, however, things went different than planned. On their first school day, the black students were prevented from entering the school by an angry mob of white citizens, supported by governor Orval Faubus, who deployed the Arkansas National Guard to block the school's entrance. Subsequently, President Eisenhower decided to intervene and sent federal troops, the 101st Airborne Division, to enforce integration and protect the nine students on September 24.<sup>98</sup>

Arendt's objection against federally ordered desegregation, familiar enough in its notoriety, is that it confused the social and the political spheres. In her 1970 piece 'Civil disobedience' she, however, implicitly revises her judgement on black agitation in her Little Rock essay, although this has never been noticed, as far as I know, in the Arendt scholarship<sup>99</sup>. She now takes a quite different perspective on the civil rights movement, including the key role of the Fourteenth Amendment. What she previously saw as a struggle for social visibility and social equality, she now turns out to regard as a struggle for political visibility and equality; the first comprising Afro-Americans' struggle for recognition of social identity claims, that is, of their visibility as Afro-Americans; the latter their struggle for recognition as citizens, that is, for access to the public sphere. In the latter essay, a different perspective on the same issue, i.e. black activism, emerges with different consequences. Arendt demonstrates that the civil rights movement constitutes a form of civil disobedience which fits into the council tradition. Arendt describes civil disobedience, as opposed to conscientious objection<sup>100</sup>, as a form of organized, associative dissent. Only the right to dissent lends credibility to the polity's social contract that presupposes, most of the time tacit consent.<sup>101</sup> Agreement with the foundation and the constitution of the polity one belongs to is necessary, but inevitably also fictitious. For with the exception of the first generation, none of the citizens has been physically present at the moment of foundation. In the first instance, the citizen is to agree with the rules of a game she did not choose herself. Since a truly free consent to the rules of the game is impossible - the individual

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<sup>97</sup> Not before 1964 / 1965 did racial segregation in public buildings, including schools, and racial discrimination in elections cease *de facto* through respectively the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965). The so-called Jim Crow era in the Southern states of the US is formally dated between 1876 and 1965.

<sup>98</sup> Escorted by soldiers, the nine students were finally admitted to Central High on September 25.

<sup>99</sup> See for example Bernasconi (1996), who simply takes it for granted that Arendt never changed her mind and therefore reads 'Civil disobedience' as being in line with 'Reflections on Little Rock'.

<sup>100</sup> On conscientious objection, see §1. For clarifying remarks on this point, see Marchart, 2005, 117-18, 123-24.

<sup>101</sup> CR, 87. Note the difference between respectively Arendt's and Habermas' notion of consensus or consent. Unlike Habermas, for whom consensus basically means agreement and harmony of opinions, for Arendt consent means 'the active support and continuing participation in all matters of public interest' (CR, 85).

citizen is always confronted with given rules that were established before she was even born - every citizen should at least have the possibility and right to disagree with these rules and to mobilize for joint resistance or the amendment of these rules. Since the world is dynamic and contingent, rules should be equally dynamic.<sup>102</sup> In other words, consent, the *consensus universalis*, is conditional upon the possibility of dissent, provided that the latter entails concerted, associative and non-violent action. Moreover, Arendt even suggests that civil disobedience contributes to the strength of the *consensus universalis*, and therefore to the polity.

While thus defending the civil right to organized and civil disobedience as organized, non-violent dissent, and as being in line with ‘the spirit of American Law’<sup>103</sup>, Arendt at the same time explicitly acknowledges the ‘original crime’ of the Declaration of Independence against citizens of Afro-American and Indian descent.<sup>104</sup> They were excluded from the ‘tacit consent’, the *consensus universalis* of the American republic<sup>105</sup>: ‘There was nothing in the Constitution or in the intent of the framers that could be so construed as to include the slave people in the original compact.’<sup>106</sup> The ‘inability or unwillingness of the federal government to enforce its own laws’, *in casu* the Fourteenth Amendment which the Southern states did not accept ‘for roughly a hundred years’<sup>107</sup> after its ratification on July 9, 1868, made the ‘tacit exclusion from the tacit consensus’ even more ‘conspicuous’.<sup>108</sup> It is not the law itself, i.e. the constitution including the Fourteenth Amendment, which brought about change and ‘remedied’ the ‘original crime’, but civil disobedience, the mobilization of people who organized and mutually acted in concert through dissenting with the supposedly universal consent and in doing so concretely shaping the principle expressed in the law, that is, equal protection or ‘racial equality’, as Arendt calls it.<sup>109</sup>

In his historiography of the black civil rights movement, Richard King underwrites Arendt’s account. He makes a strong and convincing case for considering the civil rights movement as a political enterprise, transcending merely social, i.e. socio-cultural aims, at least during its initial phase roughly up to the mid 1960’s.<sup>110</sup> Making use of both existing

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<sup>102</sup> See Marchart, 2005, 125.

<sup>103</sup> CR, 88.

<sup>104</sup> CR, 90.

<sup>105</sup> CR, 88.

<sup>106</sup> CR, 90.

<sup>107</sup> CR, 80, 81. I suppose Arendt refers here to *Brown vs. the Board of Education* of which the Fourteenth Amendment constituted the background and hence of the ensuing federally enforced de-segregation of public life in the South, starting with ‘Little Rock’.

<sup>108</sup> CR, 90-91.

<sup>109</sup> CR, 81.

<sup>110</sup> King, 1992.

historiography of the civil rights movement as well as oral history interviews, King provides 'a political-theoretical analysis of [the civil rights movement's] rhetoric and thinking', in particular of its 'freedom talk'.<sup>111</sup> King's account of the rise and fall of one of the principal organizations within the black civil rights movement, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), nicely illustrates the difference between a political and a social take on civil rights.

The SNCC was founded in 1960 within the context of non-violent student protests. From an initially political organisation, it turned into a socio-cultural one and subsequently forfeited its political, participatory notion of freedom. Eventually it perished due to the social ideal of brotherhood which is similar to the separatist strategy of pariahs I discussed in the previous section and which gradually took hold of it, as King argues.<sup>112</sup> The SNCC's initial commitment to participatory politics is exemplified by the organization of non-violent protests, voter registration actions and sit-ins. Famous examples include the Freedom Rides (1961), the March on Washington (August 28, 1963)<sup>113</sup>, the Mississippi Freedom Summer (1964) and the establishment of the so-called Freedom Schools. Due to a number of disappointing experiences, part of the SNCC activists gradually lost faith in the effectiveness of non-violent action by the end of 1964. The group split into a moderate and a more militant faction; the first continuing the politics of non-violence, the other faction under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael turning its focus towards Black Power and advocating violence in order to end oppression. This change of focus is reflected in the aims of the movement, shifting from freedom to interest and brotherhood; its methods, shifting from essentially non-violent to violent means; and its structure, shifting from an open, inclusive structure which welcomed both blacks and whites, to a separatist structure admitting blacks only. 'Freedom-talk' was increasingly replaced by 'Black Power!', in which power should be understood in the usual, narrow, non-Arendtian, sense of control, domination and rule.<sup>114</sup>

Apart from the wealth of historical details about the tumultuous decades of mid-twentieth century black activism in the US, King's book is especially valuable for its assertion of the centrality of freedom in this movement and its elaboration of the particular republican or participatory nature of the concept of freedom which abounded in it. This concept will prove to be of great significance for the other movements described in this

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<sup>111</sup> King, 1992, 10.

<sup>112</sup> King, 1992, 150-71. On Martin Luther King's ideal of *ἀγάπη*, love, on the other hand, see 136. Another example of the politics of brotherhood that King discusses critically is Frantz Fanon's black radicalism.

<sup>113</sup> A largely though not exclusively Afro-American political rally that took place in Washington, D.C. During this political rally, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his historic 'I Have a Dream' speech.

<sup>114</sup> King, 1992, chapter 6.

chapter too. This understanding of freedom, King argues, differs from the liberal, negative definition of civil rights as freedom from racial discrimination or other arbitrary restrictions. It points beyond freedom from Jim Crow, as well as beyond a restrictive meaning of political participation as voting, to a notion of freedom, resembling Arendt's, as empowerment and participatory democracy that engenders self-respect and self-determination in the black community. Freedom thus understood embraces the idea of individuals and communities taking responsibility for their own lives and shaping their own futures. Having emerged spontaneously and unexpectedly, King describes the civil rights movement as in itself a 'new beginning'<sup>115</sup> which embodied a 'new notion of politics'<sup>116</sup> and a 'new political culture' which fell outside the liberal conception of politics 'with its emphasis upon the pursuit of interests and defence of political and legal rights as the *raison d'être* of politics'<sup>117</sup> and outside of a conception of power as control and domination.<sup>118</sup> That is, apart from 'the attainment of individual liberty through the dismantling of the Jim Crow system', it forged 'a new sense of individual and collective identity through political mobilization.'<sup>119</sup>

In conclusion, Richard King and Arendt in 'Civil disobedience' entertain the idea that the civil rights movement fought not just for social, but also and more importantly, for political, participatory visibility. Initially, the Afro-Americans not only suffered from social invisibility, namely from the oppression or exclusion of Afro-Americans as a group, but as a consequence also, and more importantly, from political invisibility, because of their exclusion from participation by mainstream society. The members of these groups mobilized around a shared issue or purpose, namely participatory freedom, rather than around a collective racial identity. Their purpose was first and foremost the attainment of political visibility.

## 5. The woman question

The third and last example of the struggle against group invisibility that I will discuss is the feminist movement. Feminist identity politics, i.e. the struggle for social-cultural justice, that is, for the recognition of female gender identity and against the social invisibility of women, is often expressed in the ideal of universal sisterhood. The rhetoric of sisterhood is

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<sup>115</sup> King, 1992, 3-4.

<sup>116</sup> King, 1992, 5.

<sup>117</sup> King, 1992, 6.

<sup>118</sup> King, 1992, 6.

<sup>119</sup> King, 1992, 4.

about a century younger than the French Revolution's ideal of brotherhood. As far as I know, it at least dates back to the late 19th century American and European women's movement. Since the 1980's, it has been criticized for its lack of sensitivity to in-group differences and for its essentialism or naturalism, that is, the assumption of 'woman' as a predetermined category of identity or object of analysis.

What is at stake in critical debates in feminist theory in general about the perplexities of identity and identity-politics? These debates have at least a practical and a conceptual motive, though alliances between these perspectives have been created frequently. Starting at the beginning of the 1980's, postcolonial theorists<sup>120</sup>, black or Afro-American<sup>121</sup>, Chicana or Latina<sup>122</sup> and Indian feminists have argued that Western, white women colonised the feminist movement. Concealed under the guise of the rhetoric of global sisterhood, ethnocentrism or even racism went unchecked. This objection could be summarized as the charge of false universalism.<sup>123</sup> These feminists rejected identity politics in favour of a politics of diversity or intersectionality, which is sensitive to in-group differences. Postcolonial challenges of identity politics roughly coincided with the emergence of postmodernism in academia, which employed a somewhat different, more theoretical, critique of identity-politics, which fitted well in their broader agenda of deconstructing the very humanist or modernist notions of identity, subjectivity and experience. Under the influence of this critique of humanism, some feminist philosophers started to challenge the legitimacy of 'woman' as a predetermined, essentialist category of identity or object of analysis, to which they felt feminism as a modern emancipatory movement so far had appealed unreflectively. The slogan of the second feminist wave, 'the personal is political', and the rhetoric of sisterhood, for example, tacitly presuppose a universally shared female experience and the allegedly self-evident collective identity of 'we women'.

The diverse attacks on the very assumptions of subjectivity, in particular of a unified and predetermined gender identity, provoked much feminist debate, since many felt it undermined the very possibility of feminist solidarity and a feminist movement altogether. How to mobilize women and to engage in joint resistance when female gender identity is indeterminable? Or, in the words of Diana Meyers who quite aptly summarized the perplexity as it was felt: 'If there is no such thing as a self with persistent attributes, it seems that gender cannot be a feature of every woman's identity. But if there is nothing that all women have in common, it seems that there are no interests that all women share, and

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<sup>120</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, for example.

<sup>121</sup> Audre Lorde and bell hooks, for example.

<sup>122</sup> Linda Alcoff, Maria Lugones and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others.

<sup>123</sup> For example see Mohanty, 1984; hooks, 1986; Amos and Parmar, 1984; Simons, 1979; Lugones and Spellman, 1983; Dhruvarajan and Vickers, 2002.

there is nothing for feminism to be about.<sup>124</sup> As a consequence, alternative perspectives were formulated which attempted to refute postmodernist undermining of identity and subjectivity and to restore the belief in a universal female gender identity, and hence in the possibility and significance of feminist identity politics.

This general intellectual background is reflected in the feminist Arendt scholarship of the last two decades of the twentieth century. Though Arendt was anything but a feminist, since the 1980s feminist thinkers have raised the question how her thinking on identity is to be made to bear on the task of rethinking or deconstructing identity politics. Various dimensions of Arendt's work have proven to be quite attractive to feminist scholars who reflect on the perplexities of non/identity, not the least because of her own biographical situation - woman, Jew, German-citizen-later-turned-stateless-later-turned-American - and because of her personal struggles in interpreting her social, i.e. primarily Jewish, identity.<sup>125</sup> Two opposed feminist interpretations of Arendt's work have been defended. On the one hand, political thinkers such as Bonnie Honig regard Arendt as a postmodernist *avant la lettre*, because of her deconstruction of metaphysical notions of the subject, of human nature and of social identity politics, that is, of what I have previously called the separatist and Zionist forms of pariah politics. These postmodernists praise Arendt for challenging the demands of any predetermined group membership and of other models of solidarity predicated upon naturalism, i.e. upon allegedly non-discursive, quasi-immediate bonds. On the other hand, however, other feminist thinkers such as Benhabib, Cavarero, Kristeva, Collin and Moruzzi consider Arendt a sophisticated humanist, even a post-post-humanist.<sup>126</sup> They praise her for her thematization of natality, which they often interpret as a celebration of birth, motherhood and embodiment; for her narrative and intersubjective notion of embodied identity, i.e. the who; for her notion of plurality which some of them interpret as sexual 'difference'<sup>127</sup>; and for her attention to representative thinking, or *erweiterte Denkungsart* in her own words, which, according to these modernist feminists, admonitions taking into account the perspectives of differently situated groups and persons. Finally, they are fascinated by Arendt's defence of some sophisticated form of identity politics, notably the position of the conscious pariah.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Meyers, 2004, §3.2.

<sup>125</sup> She never writes about women as a marginalized group, as has often been noted.

<sup>126</sup> Kristeva, 2001; Cavarero, 2000; Moruzzi, 2000; Verhoeven, 2003; Cornell, 1993; Birmingham, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2007; Collin, 1999; Hahn, 2004, 2005, 2007; Weissberg, 1997; Bowen Moore, 1987; Hermsen, 2002; Cutting-Gray, 1991; 2002; Vacchiarelli Scott, 2002; Schües, 1999; and others.

<sup>127</sup> See chapter 5 on Derrida's notion of *différance*, difference.

<sup>128</sup> Cf. in particular in the feminist reception of Arendt's biography of Rahel Varnhagen.

## *Chapter 8*

Although it might be argued that Arendt indeed shares particular motives with both positions, as I said in the Introduction, I take issue with the adoption of Arendt's thought, either in an affirmative or deconstructive sense, as a participant in debates between those defending feminist identity-politics, anti-identity politics or anti-anti-identity politics. Arendt nowhere engages in a discussion of identity in the way feminist critics of identity do; their stakes, purposes and reasons differ widely from hers. Except for limit situations, when a particular group's identity is under attack, Arendt is not really interested in social difference and identities or what-ness, in her own terms, i.e. differences between people construed along a finite number of sociological categories such as man-woman; poor-rich; black-white, Jew-Gentile, etc., but rather in individual differences and unique identities, or what she calls who-ness. From Arendt's perspective, the world is primarily populated neither by Man, nor by groups, though in limit situations the latter may become politically relevant, but first of all by individual citizens. Moreover, identity, i.e. who one is, is something that emerges from political action, and cannot be separated from it. One's identity is an epiphenomenon of political action. Additionally, the selection of the issue of identity from Arendt's work, even if it would be correctly represented, prevents feminists from looking for other inspiring thoughts and concepts in her work. A more fruitful employment of Arendt's categories is possible, which is neither on a pro-female-identity, nor on its opposite side, nor somewhere in the middle, but cuts across the very logic of identity and non-identity. The debate between proponents of identity-politics, anti-identity politics and anti-anti-identity-politics is currently becoming highly academic and politically unfruitful. As long as the very terms of the debate are left intact, every critique has a nasty habit of remaining tied to what it strives to fight, as a kind of unbreakable tragic embrace. Critiques of identity and identity politics, as well as critiques of critiques of identity politics, ultimately remain tied to the conceptual framework of political identities, subjectivities or selves, including the concept of gender, albeit this time conceived as non-essential and multiple. The deconstruction of identity does not mean that the politics of difference yields collective identity-related claims. On the contrary, it aims at the recognition of ever more dispersed and fragmented collective identities. The succession of identity and identity-politics, critiques of identity-politics, and critiques of critiques of identity-politics, demonstrates that the focus on issues of identity has turned feminist theory into a dead-end that threatens to turn it into a sterile and merely self-referential and navel-gazing intellectual game, which has lost touch with the very political experiences which used to, and still do, inspire and fuel feminism in the first place. Feminist politics and political practices are not exhausted by the framework of non/identity. Other practices and concepts of feminist struggles beyond the framework of non/identity do exist, which are less inwardly turned, to

the 'subject' of feminism, and more outwardly turned, towards the worldly issues at stake in feminist struggles.

My thesis, now, is that a hermeneutic phenomenological reading of Arendt's approach of collective action and the political may be the source of a fruitful intervention in this debate. This intervention challenges identity politics more radically than anyone has done so far by shifting attention from social identity, or the lack or failure thereof, in debates and collective struggles, to the world, to which we relate from plural perspectives. In other words, my suggestion is to take serious the distinction between the social and the political and focus on women's aspiration to political rather than social visibility. Arendt could help feminist see that common empowerment is made possible not by a shared identity, which is the target of postmodernist critics, but by associative and agonistic action in the service of a particular worldly issue or common end.<sup>129</sup> Indeed, a minority of feminist Arendt scholars has already defended such an approach to feminist practices, consisting, for instance, in practices of freedom<sup>130</sup>, female empowerment as action-in-concert<sup>131</sup>, and in 'feminism as a politics committed to the spontaneity and unpredictability of persons acting together in concert as speakers of words and doers of deeds'<sup>132</sup>. Amy Allen suggests that Arendt's positive conception of power, entailing both the capacity to act in concert and empowerment, rather than the conventional concept of power as rule, control or oppression, offers a good starting point for a non-identity-based feminist movement and for practices of group solidarity as expressions or modalities of this power: '[W]hen individuals bind themselves together by means of promises and engage in concerted action, they become powerful.'<sup>133</sup> Solidarity, among, for example, women, is something to be achieved on the basis of concerted action, rather than to be assumed in advance or given, as based on a shared identity for example.<sup>134</sup> Women have been invisible from the perspective of the common public world for ages, and still are, to a greater or lesser extent, dependent upon one's geopolitical location. And because of this exclusion from the public sphere, they have enjoyed the public freedom which comes from it less than men or even not at all. Following Arendt, Sidonia Blättler argues that feminist should realize that issues

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<sup>129</sup> On the ambivalent relationship between feminism and republicanism, see Phillips, 2000. Both share an unease with liberalism. Further research to Arendt's position within republican thought is needed to see if all possible feminist appreciations as well as objections to republicanism apply to Arendt's thought as well.

<sup>130</sup> Zerrilli, 2005a.

<sup>131</sup> Allen, 1999a and 1999b.

<sup>132</sup> Dietz, 2002, 132.

<sup>133</sup> Allen, 1999b, 113.

<sup>134</sup> Allen, 1999b, 112-13.

become a political reality only in public articulation.<sup>135</sup> ‘Anders als ein bloßes Faktum, das den betroffenen diffus und schicksalhaft widerfährt und dem sie aufgrund seiner Unfaßbarkeit ohnmächtig ausgeliefert sind, zeichnet sich eine politische Realität dadurch aus, daß sie beschrieben, kritisiert, zurückgewiesen und bekämpft werden kann.’<sup>136</sup> Instead of a shared identity, the public presence of women and female-specific issues should provide the ground for feminist mobilization. Finally, drawing from Arendt’s work and in particular her concept of freedom, Linda Zerrilli suggests that we think about feminism as a practice of freedom, that is, a new beginning in itself.<sup>137</sup>

The early days of each of the various waves of the feminist movement offer nice examples of such feminist practices of freedom: its revolutionary pathos and its urgent sense that something new is happening; its lack of ideological dogmatism; and its abundance of taking pleasure in a public, here feminist, cause. The first feminist wave, for example, saw the rise of the unorthodox, militant but humorous activism of the suffragettes, in the UK organized in, among others, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), led by Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. The second feminist wave saw the equally playful-though-serious activism of the Dutch feminist movement *Dolle Mina*, established in December 1969, that was open to both female and male members.<sup>138</sup> *Riot Grrrl*, a feminist underground subculture, at its height in the US in the early 1990s, is sometimes seen as the starting point of third wave feminism.<sup>139</sup> Though centred on music, that is, punk rock or hardcore punk, it is a feminist movement as well, including political activism, magazines, so-called zines, and consciousness raising groups. All the elements of the council system are there: spontaneous emergence; associative action; its revolutionary pathos - ‘Revolution girl style now!’ - ; the very urgent sense that something new and empowering is happening; and, sadly, also its short-lived existence.

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<sup>135</sup> Blättler, 2001, 127.

<sup>136</sup> Blättler, 2001, 125.

<sup>137</sup> Zerrilli, 2005a and 2005b.

<sup>138</sup> Linda Zerrilli elaborates the Milan women’s bookstore collective as an example of a feminist practice of freedom. 2005a, chapter 3.

<sup>139</sup> In 1991, in the US the Christian Coalition’s Right to Life attack on legal abortion and the Anita Hill case (in which Anita Hill accused Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment and was mocked by the media) aroused a spontaneous, joint protests and actions by young women (mostly students). In August 1991, an independent record label, K Records, organized an underground music festival with an all-female bill on the first night, called ‘Revolution Girl Style Now’. At the end of 1991 the girls participating in the political protests and / or festival had loosely organized in the movement which became known as *Riot Grrrl*.

## 6. *Gestaltswitch* from justice to freedom

Arendt acknowledges the political dimension inherent in the predicaments of poverty, oppression and discrimination. Exclusion, oppression and discrimination do not necessarily, or at least not exclusively, refer to social invisibility or injustice, i.e. misrecognition or maldistribution, per se, but to a lack of political freedom due to the inaccessibility of the public sphere which allows people to be seen and heard by their fellow citizens and to exercise their common freedom. In particular circumstances, poverty, oppression and discrimination do constitute politically relevant issues, because they cause public invisibility too. Arendt argues that human dignity is not brought about through attaining social visibility or justice, i.e. economic redistribution and/or recognition of identity groups alone, but requires the freedom to participate as well. For Arendt, the meaning of political freedom entails the right to be seen and heard in the world, that is, to have access to the space of appearances.

Arendt is not insensitive to the sufferings of marginalized social identities, but she tends to think of discriminated groups in terms of a lack of freedom, rather than of injustice, i.e. misrecognition. Their suffering refers to worldlessness, that is, to political rather than social invisibility, because marginalization impairs political agency and participation. She understands the wrongs inherent in the situation of the extremely poor, slaves and discriminated groups in political rather than in socio-economic or socio-cultural terms. Worse than social and material deprivation, which may be very real, even up to the point of being unbearable, is their political deprivation, i.e. their invisibility as regards the world. This political invisibility is not to be remedied through social visibility. Poverty, on the one hand, and the exclusion of ethnic minorities, Jews and women, on the other, have usually been considered social issues, namely socio-economic and cultural or identity issues, but Arendt argues that the struggles against poverty or exclusion should not only be viewed through social glasses, but could very well, and to surprising and valuable effect, be seen through political glasses. This takes something like *Gestaltswitch*. A particular problem may have both a dimension of freedom and of justice. Arendt herself uses the metaphor of a 'double face'<sup>140</sup>. The social and the political are best seen as two, only analytically distinct, dimensions that are inextricably linked up in reality. The social and the political are two possible faces of single events or phenomena that touch each other, rather than two separate processes or domains.<sup>141</sup> Some, especially feminist, Arendt-scholars have indeed

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<sup>140</sup> Arendt uses the double face metaphor in Arendt, 1979, 'On Hannah Arendt', 318.

<sup>141</sup> Although, as we have seen before, particular texts could be singled out in which Arendt reifies and essentializes this distinction and imposes it onto reality.

adopted an attitudinal and dynamical (as opposed to an essentialist and static) view on the social-political distinction.<sup>142</sup>

The preceding analyses of the questions of race, poverty and gender have demonstrated the phenomenal pertinence of Arendt's controversial distinction between the social and the political, namely that these questions have both social and political dimensions that are actually experienced and partly articulated, but have got snowed under because of the dominant socio-economic conception of the political.<sup>143</sup> The distinction between the social and the political is a phenomenological clarification which allows us to distinguish between social and political dimensions of one and the same problem, conflict or event. Problems are not in themselves social or political, but depending upon the perspective one takes upon them, appear as either social or political. Schnell formulates this as a hermeneutic commonplace: 'Das Politische an sozialen, gesellschaftlichen, ökonomischen, ökologischen und verwaltungstechnischen Angelegenheiten ist ihre Deutung, durch die sie erst zu dem werden, was sie sind.'<sup>144</sup> The nature of the claims of marginalized groups turns poverty, racism and patriarchy or misogyny into social or political problems respectively. For example, the struggle for visibility of women as women makes feminism a struggle for recognition, that is, a social struggle; the struggle for women as citizens, that is, for access to the public sphere, makes it a struggle for freedom and participation and hence a political issue. It is not the what of its substance, but the how of our interpretations and practical dealings and solutions which determine what is a social and what a political question.

The image of the *Gestaltswitch* is also helpful in demonstrating that in the case of poverty and discrimination, social and material deprivation, i.e. socio-cultural injustice or social invisibility, go hand in hand with political deprivation, i.e. invisibility in the world and lack of freedom. Discrimination and exclusion impair or even disable participation. Restoring or installing human dignity and freedom demands that both be raised. It is impossible to participate in political action on an empty stomach or if one belongs to a group which is excluded categorically from the public realm. But although lifting absolute material and physical wants and group-specific discrimination is a necessary condition for political action, it is far from sufficient, nor is it in itself a political pursuit, Arendt held. The proliferation of passive victimhood is the price to be paid for the exclusive struggle for

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<sup>142</sup> Allen, 1999a, 1999b; Honig, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Bickford, 1995, 1996; among others.

<sup>143</sup> In the Conclusion, I will demonstrate the contemporary political relevance of this distinction and present some topical examples of this distinction between the social and the political, the perversions of the public sphere that occur as soon as the political is usurped by the social.

<sup>144</sup> Schnell, 1995, 274; cf. chapter 1.

social visibility. The struggle for public visibility, on the contrary, is characterized by participation and active appearance.<sup>145</sup>

What is the significance of the preservation of the distinction between the social and the political and, subsequently, of the struggle for political rather than social visibility? According to Arendt, the political itself and consequentially political freedom are at stake.<sup>146</sup> She calls for saving the common world or for the re-politicization of the public world, against the socialization and moralization of the political. In contemporary words, this means a 'return of the political'<sup>147</sup>. This shift from an orientation on social to one on political in/visibility, implies a turn from a focus on the self and nature, as it is expressed, for example, in identity politics and political economy, to the world. What is eventually at stake in saving the political, Arendt argues, is the redemption of freedom. The phenomenon of freedom that Arendt celebrates also plays an important role in the social movements I have discussed in this chapter: the labour movement and, more recently, alter-globalisation; the civil rights movement and the feminist movement.

Arendt's is a republican and phenomenological, rather than a liberal concept of freedom.<sup>148</sup> According to Philip Pettit, liberalism emphasizes freedom from interference, including the law, while republicanism emphasizes freedom from coercion, domination or what Arendt calls rule. In the republican conception, freedom is to be guaranteed by the rule of law.<sup>149</sup> In both cases, especially in the case of liberalism, emphasis is on negative freedom. I would, however, add that both traditions also entertain a positive conception of freedom. The liberal philosopher John Stuart Mill, for example, embraces a concept of freedom as autonomy or sovereignty over self, as he calls it. Think of the famous line in *On liberty*: 'Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.'<sup>150</sup> Generally speaking though, the negative dimension of freedom is liberalism's 'conceptual core'.<sup>151</sup> The positive dimension of Arendt's concept of freedom is much more extended. Above all it refers to civic participation, participatory citizenship and to the freedom to be 'participators in government'<sup>152</sup>. This notion of participatory freedom is closely related to her positive concept of power as empowerment. An important difference between the liberal and Arendt's republican concept of freedom, is that liberals posit the value of safeguarding the

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<sup>145</sup> See chapter 6.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Marchart, 2005, 92-94 and Villa, 2008. On Arendt's conception of freedom in relation to both the liberal and the republican tradition, see Wellmer, 2000, 223-32.

<sup>147</sup> This is the title of a book by Chantal Mouffe, 2005.

<sup>148</sup> Classical liberal accounts of freedom include Berlin, 1969 and Mill, 1985 [1859].

<sup>149</sup> Pettit, 1997, 2001.

<sup>150</sup> Mill, 1985 [1859], 69.

<sup>151</sup> King, 1992, 26-27.

<sup>152</sup> OR, 244.

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private sphere against state interference. Liberals also pursue eventual liberation from politics as a source of bondage. Arendt's freedom, on the contrary, is public; it concerns the ability to shape the common world in associative, public action. She also embraces politics as a source of freedom, not as a limitation of it.

For Arendt as a phenomenologist, freedom also refers to the human condition of natality and to plurality, because freedom can only come about amidst and together with other citizens in public space. Because of its uncontrollability, irreversibility and unpredictability, action is contingent. The outcome of action completely lacks any necessity; it is never compelling. Because of the condition of plurality, each deed and word has the same unpredictable quality of making something unexpected happen. Indeed, the plurality of the common world implies that as soon as an action is initiated, it is inserted in an intersubjective network. Contingency is the condition of newness, of action as beginning and initiative. As such, contingency is the necessary condition of freedom.<sup>153</sup> Due to the condition of natality, human existence and action are fundamentally open, spontaneous and creative. Human action, unlike behavior, is not causally determined, neither by our past, nor by our genes, etc. Arendt identifies this capacity to begin, to initiate something that did not exist before and cannot be deduced from precedents, as the principle of freedom. Arendt calls this ability to start something new natality. The principle of natality is the key to human freedom. Thus, freedom in the Arendtian sense does not refer to freedom of choice or freedom of will, but to contingency, to the inherent spontaneity and unpredictability of action and speech and to newness, the human capacity of making new beginnings.<sup>154</sup>

Thus, freedom in Arendt's sense is dependent upon plurality, for it can only come about amidst and together with other citizens in public space. Therefore, freedom is always public or political freedom for Arendt. It can only emerge and exist whenever and as long as citizens act in concert. Someone like Robinson Crusoe cannot be free in the Arendtian sense, since his island lacked plurality. Participatory freedom is Arendt's alternative to justice as the political value *par excellence*. It is, as she said, the *Sinn*, meaning of politics.<sup>155</sup> Participation is the alternative she proposes to redistribution of goods and to recognition of social identities as the key to the political. In Arendt's view, civic action or participation is not a means to an end, such as a just society, not even to freedom, as if that would be

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<sup>153</sup> The contingency of action is not the sufficient condition for freedom, for human action always has unpredictable, but not always new outcomes. Action always brings about change, but change does not always imply a new beginning.

<sup>154</sup> See chapter 2 for the Arendtian notion of natality and its relation to contingency, spontaneity, newness and freedom.

<sup>155</sup> WP, 12.

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something static one could possess. Action carries its goal, namely freedom, in itself. Freedom is not something external to political action, but emerges in political participation and action itself. In this sense, politics is not the way to reach freedom, to make it real.