

IS POLIS THE ANSWER? HANNAH ARENDT ON DEMOCRACY

Monika Bokinić

Institute of Philosophy, Sociology and Journalism,
University of Gdańsk, ul. Bielańska 5, 80-851 Gdańsk, Poland
E-mail: m_bokinić@o2.pl

The aim of this paper is to reconsider Hannah Arendt's most influential works from the point of view of her attitude towards democracy and analysis of the way it may contribute to the contemporary understanding and redefinition of the very notion of what democracy is.

The paper begins with the reconstruction of Arendt's anthropology in order to ground her political reflections. The next part discusses the basic characteristics of council democracy in forms of spontaneous, local organizations and associations in which every citizen could freely and equally participate, as they show through her analysis of revolutions. The last part deals with different and contradictory interpretations of Arendt's attitude towards democracy and the question whether her proposition is a practical, revolutionary proposition or an idealist utopia. The interpretation of Arendt's project emphasizing her democratic and reformative approach is defended. The conclusion states Hannah Arendt's important contribution to the contemporary reflection on democracy in view of her recognition of the power of grassroots collective actions and their role in contemporary political sphere and the necessity of such formed at grass-roots and spontaneous level actions and associations as a unique safety valve for the society, as well as a counterbalance for mass society.

Keywords: grass-roots democracy, council democracy, revolution.

DOI: 10.3846/1822-430X.2009.17.1.76-82

Introduction

Democracy is one of empty words that inhabit the language of modern humanities and public discourse. By describing it as empty I mean that it can be filled with almost any content in virtually any context. There is no single acceptable definition of what democracy is, as it has been constructed, reconstructed and deconstructed many times in history of ideas and political practice. Even if for the sake of discussion we settle for one of the most famous formulas for democracy expressed by Abraham Lincoln in his *Gettysburg Address*: "government of the people, by the people, for the people" (Lincoln 1863), it is still too vague. The matter is getting complicated further when we take into

account different shapes of democracy: forms of representative and direct democracy fit into Lincoln's formula, but as we move towards authoritarian democracy (if we consider it a legitimate form of democracy at all), it is not clear any more. The discussion has by no means ended and I believe that Hannah Arendt's political and philosophical contribution to this debate may prove to be useful precisely because of its controversial shape¹. Hannah Arendt's political philosophy is an interesting

¹ As Etienne Balibar put it: "Arendt is one who never wrote twice the same book, and more than that, never wrote two successive books from the same point of view" (Balibar 2007: 727).

phenomenon, as it has been a subject of numerous and contradictory interpretations. It is at once praised and rejected both by democrats and antidemocrats; some recognize her philosophy as stable and coherent, others – as contradictory and baffling. Therefore, her political thought is not easy to classify as pro or contra democracy. It rather transgresses those classifications, which makes it even more inspirational and influential.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is twofold: firstly, I would like to refer to Hannah Arendt's most influential ideas from the point of view of her attitude towards democracy and secondly, I shall consider the way it may possibly contribute to contemporary understanding and redefinition of the very notion of what democracy is and what it should be. The core of the paper is organized around the question whether Arendt's attitude was democratic or anti-democratic.

Arendt's anthropology, or what does it mean to be human?

I shall first briefly outline Arendt's philosophical anthropology, as it constitutes the framework for her political propositions, and as such, the conditions of possibility for political experience. She isolates the sphere of human existence which she calls *vita activa* as opposed to *vita contemplativa*. In this sphere of active life she further distinguishes three stages of activity and corresponding levels of humanity: labor, work, action, and respectively: *animal laborans*, *homo faber*, *zoon politikon*. In her analysis labor seems to be almost pre-human activity and humanity in this mode of existence is called *animal laborans*, it consists of perpetual practices which are never-ending and fruitless but necessary for the maintenance of biological survival. It is a sphere of necessity and a state of slavery. The higher mode of *vita activa* is work, which exceeds nature, necessity, biology and results in relatively stable and independent human realm of common things, institutions, laws, structures

etc. This realm, created by *homo faber*, is a necessary condition for the third stage of *vita activa* – political life – but is not political yet.

The highest, the most valuable, the most human mode of life is action. Only this mode is characterized by freedom, emancipated from necessity: freedom is action and action is freedom. How, then, is action to be understood? To act is to begin something, to initiate, to set in motion. In the existential plane of Arendt's philosophy every human being is the beginning enabling innovation, a pioneer that constantly initiates, establishes something. As such, the sphere of action is free from necessity and it is the only sphere in which humans are fully humans. In *Human Condition* Arendt claims: "Men are free [...] as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same" (Arendt 1968a: 153). It is important from the point of view of our main issue here – which is democracy – that action is never isolated; it realizes itself in the common, public sphere, just as freedom is not something inner, private or personal, because we only realize it in the company of other people. As Arendt puts it: "Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men [...] corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition - not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* - of all political life" (Arendt 1958: 7). Public sphere is the only sphere of freedom, the only sphere emancipated from necessity, because it is constituted directly between people in a common area through revealing ourselves in communicative speech acts.

"The lost treasure of revolution" or the value of council democracy

Hannah Arendt rarely expressed her views on democracy as a political system explicitly, but it can be argued that her positive idea of

the political can be interpreted as a synonym for democracy in the very basic, etymological sense of the word. The anthropological basis for her understanding of the political action as fulfillment of the human are constituted in *The Human Condition*, but it is most profoundly visible in *On Revolution*, which only on the surface is a politico-historical analysis of American, French and Soviet revolution. In fact there is an intense project built in those analyses – the project of practical use. Arendt observes that in pre-revolutionary political thought democracy “was abhorred because public opinion was held to rule where the public spirit ought to prevail, and the sign of this perversion was the unanimity of citizenry” (Arendt 1968b: 227). But, she argues, it is a confusion of the Enlightenment idea of public spirit (that she attributes e.g. to Montesquieu) with the possibility of unanimity of opinion, whereas in fact unanimity of opinion is not possible. Opinions, she claims, can only be held by individuals, and no such thing as an opinion of society can be reached, because opinions are formed in free interactions and will always differ among individuals.

Revolutions failed to provide long-lasting institutions exercising and maintaining their achievements and had to turn to either terror or some form of politicized republic, and therefore the “treasure of revolution” became in post-revolutionary thought a “lost treasure”. What, then, is this “treasure of revolution”? Arendt emphasizes in each of revolutions the moment in which their potential was at its best – the tendency to organize spontaneously and at grass-roots level popular societies, councils, elementary republics etc. not associated to any political party. In case of French revolution these societies “regarded it as their main, if not their sole task to discuss all matters pertaining to public affairs, to talk about them and to exchange opinions without necessarily arriving at propositions, petitions, addresses, and the like” (Arendt 1968b: 246). These societies were the expression or embodiment of a truly public spirit². All those forms of spontaneous,

local organizations and associations in which every citizen could freely and equally participate became, in the history of revolutions, a target of centralized state power and “political experts” and the object of “power struggle of a party and party interest against *la chose publique*, the common weal” (Arendt 1968b: 248). But as long as they existed, they provided “spaces of freedom” (Arendt 1968b: 268), a new *agora* for participation in public sphere. The lost treasure would therefore be “this hope for a transformation of the state, for a new form of government that would permit every member of the modern egalitarian society to become a ‘participant’ in public affairs” (Arendt 1968b: 268).

Arendt on democracy – contradictory interpretations

Let us start with the antidemocratic interpretation. Some theorist reconstruct Arendt’s position concerning democracy as not so much antidemocratic, but rather inconsistent in that respect. They observe a deep tension between the elitist and the egalitarian fragments of her most important and influential books: *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*, as well as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. This tension is sometimes seen as resulting from two sources of Arendt’s political ideas: the ideal of the Greek *polis* on the one hand, and her mass society theory – on the other. The first source – the Greek *polis* – is largely idealized and functions more like an archetype than a historical representative example (I will come back to this later), and the second one – the mass society theory – is exaggerated and overrated by the experience of totalitarianism. The critics who consider Arendt to be antidemocratic usually

² Actually only the system councils spontaneously formed in Soviet Union at the very beginning of October Revolution produced “the only new form of government born out of revolution” (Arendt 1968b: 262), but it was equally promptly corrupted by “professional politics”, as other forms.

refer to her critique of modernity and capitalism, the critique targeted against the domination of labor as its principal mode and the equation of human life with labor, resulting in the decline of public life. Arendt identified the beginning of this process with two revolutions: the French and the American. The whole intellectual activity of the 19th century can thus be interpreted as continuous and diverse attempts to substitute for the lost tradition. The world that people inhabit is devoid of any organizing principle and the human is reducible to *animal laborans*. In such a situation, there is a great potential for violence and politics, once realizing itself in communication, speech, persuasion, rhetoric, becomes a domain of violence. A mass of people, eradicated, disoriented and lost in an endless consumption, is left at the mercy of propaganda and totalitarian regimes.

This contemptuous description of laborers together with her praise for elites, whose members can freely engage in public sphere, seems to confirm Arendt's position as antidemocratic elitist³. As Margaret Canovan remarked: "A great deal of *On Revolution* [...], like a great deal of Hannah Arendt's previous books, seems to be concerned with arguing that political freedom, which is the all-important glory of human existence, is possible only among aristocratic leisure class undisturbed by the compassion for their serfs, and that it has been lost in the modern age, because increasing equality of condition has given politics into the hands of the poor and lowly" (Canovan 1978: 15). Canovan claims, that Arendt's position is self-contradictory, because having established the elites as the only worthy of political freedom she

suddenly advocates participatory democracy in the form of councils, accepting at the same time that this net of councils will produce its own elite. Nevertheless, Canovan recognizes that in principle Arendt's councils are open to anyone, who is willing to participate in political life. Arendt herself explicitly states that counsels can serve as "best instruments, for example, for breaking up the modern mass society, with its dangerous formation of pseudo-political mass movements, or rather, the best, the most natural way for interspersing it at the grass roots with an 'élite' that is chosen by no one, but constitutes itself" (Arendt 1968b: 283).

Taking all the above into account I believe that those interpretations that classify her as – at best – inconsistent, or – at worst – as anti-democratic elitist, are unkind, if not mistaken. Close reading of Arendt's writings supports Jeffrey Isaac's claim, that "while Arendt was quite clearly against mass democracy, she was not against democracy per se" (Isaac 1994: 156). And her distrust towards mass society of anonymous people, who are an easy target for totalitarian ideologies, is understandable. Arendt's elites are not from aristocratic leisure class, it is aristocracy of human spirit, of engagement, of action, elite that can be joined by anyone, who is willing to participate in the public sphere. Even if she is an elitist in that respect, she is definitely not anti-democratic: the difference between elites and masses is "not between two classes of people so much as between two competing attitudes" (Isaac 1994: 159).

There is a debate among Arendt's critics, whether the political organization she advocated for, namely council democracy, should be treated as a practical, revolutionary proposition designed to substitute the existing system, idealist utopia or something in-between. Council democracy is not a practical project to reject and substitute representative democracy with the net of councils. Otherwise it might seem inconsistent, as Canovan noticed. She formulated a set of questions to be answered, if Arendt's ideal is to be reinforced as a replacement of

³ For the elaborate criticism of Canovan's interpretation of Arendt's description of *animal laborans* see: Martin Levin, *On Animal Laborans and Homo Politicus in Hannah Arendt*. He believes that those, who notice elitist tendencies in Arendt's writings, wrongly attribute her contemptuous attitude towards labor and *animal laborans* as referring to "social category of humanity that was formerly described as the lower orders and today is called the working class" (Levin 1979: 521–522).

existing political system, such as: "What her councils would actually *do*? [...] Where is the line between politics and administration to be drawn? [...] What is to become of the interests and welfare of those, who do not choose to enter the public arena, perhaps because they are too old, too ill, overburdened with work, or too inarticulate?" (Canovan 1978: 19). It is true, that Arendt does not answer any of these questions, but this is because her ideal is not to be treated either as utopia, or as a concrete political project. For Arendt's writing is also not utopian, it is not a detached theory, it is an engaged, though empirically and historically grounded writing from the point of view of an insider, not an expert from the outside.

Canovan suggests, that if Hannah Arendt's concept of politics would be complemented with the distinction between *normal* politics and *extraordinary* politics, than "her theory of politics as the unexpected, unpredictable actions of a few free man is an excellent account of what happens in extraordinary political situations" (Canovan 1978: 21). But by no means can it be considered as an alternative political scenario for normal and mundane times or a permanent replacement for representative system. On the other hand we do not need extraordinary political situations to fulfill our need to participate in public life. The questions on freedom, equality, justice, are constantly posed anew, and always from the level of life and action, not some abstract system. As I tried to emphasize above, Arendt recognizes the impossibility of a system of councils as a system of administration for larger groups or states. Indeed, the very fact that councils did not differentiate "participation in public affairs and administration or management of things in public interest" (Arendt 1968b: 278) was one of principle reasons for their failure in the historical context. But she still postulates the necessity of such formed at grass-roots and spontaneous level actions and associations as a unique safety valve for the society, as well as a counterbalance for mass society. Jeffrey Issac

enumerates and discusses specific cases, that are complementary to mass democratic citizenship, such as green movements, feminist organizations on the larger scale, but local initiatives, community councils, social action committees etc. as well.

Arendt's proposition is rather an idea to direct us towards reformation or complementation of a system which failed to be democracy: system, in which most citizens are not interested in participating in politics, and professional politicians are not interested in them participating, because politics is business, not life. Arendt encourages us to recognize the value and loss of something we took for granted, some part of our humanity which is a condition for the potential to create a common public space within which we can communicate and discuss issues and opinions that are vital for our everyday life, and therefore, initiate changes. The ideal is a permanent revolution, resistance, contestation, but without violence and hegemony. It is not possible to go back to *polis*, once the thread of tradition is broken, but, as I suggested above, *polis* operates as an *archetypal* center in her philosophy. The popular interpretation of Arendt's approach to *polis* has thus been reconsidered. An interesting example is Roy Tsao's article *Arendt against Athens*, in which he challenges the popular interpretation of *The Human Condition* of those, who "treated the book as [...] a regrettable lapse into an unrealistic and irresponsible nostalgia for the days of Pericles' Athens" (Tsao 2002: 98). He argues that "throughout *The Human Condition* Arendt deliberately – and systematically – attributes to the ancient Greeks a set of beliefs about the nature of politics that are at odds with her own theoretical claims in this same book" (Tsao 2002: 98). Hence not only there is no going back to *polis*, but there should not be such way. The way is not backward, but forward: towards the possibility to establish *novus ordo saeculorum* – a possibility of immediate and common participation, to restore and regenerate democracy, grassroots community of peers, revealing themselves in

communicative and persuasive speech acts. Her attitude evokes Jürgen Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy and communicative action. Habermas himself recognizes his intellectual debt to Hannah Arendt⁴. There are also many detailed as well as general differences between their conceptions⁵, but they both see the essence of humanity in engaged political action of which free communication in public sphere is among the most valuable kinds and they both notice the power of grassroots collective actions and their role in contemporary political sphere.

Conclusions

Politics is a promise, as the title of one of Arendt's essays implies. It is a promise that we have not reached the end of history. Even if we totally reject her perspective in practice, it would still be valuable as an impulse to imagine things otherwise, impulse to imagine, to initiate, to change, i.e. to be a human being. As Julia Kristeva remarked in her biographical essay on Hannah Arendt: "Her intellectual experience reveals itself simply as a life rethought – it means, life torn out of biology through labor, work and – above all – action, but the culminating point of which is the highest form of human existence: the pluralist and unfinished thinking, if and only if it is practiced in a diverse and contradictory world" (Kristeva 1999: 46). Arendt's ideas were widely criticized for many reasons, some of them more or less legitimate, others – not. But despite all the criticism towards Hannah Arendt's alleged elitism and typically Enlightenment-type optimism concerning the possibilities of human nature, there are

some motives and traits of her thought that are especially valid for the contemporary reflection on modern democratic societies.

Among those characteristics is her insistence on the duty or the obligation of every citizen to participate in public sphere, as well as emphasis on personal responsibility, plurality⁶, the vision of humanity as realizing itself only in free, voluntary and creative public speech acts and human being as a political actor. The important point that she makes is her idea of freedom as human condition, but this freedom is understood always as positive freedom – negative freedom, or so called "freedom from" is not freedom at all, as the result of its creation of institutional barriers on the one hand, and axiological void – on the other. The very thing that she was mostly criticized for – her optimistic belief in the potential of each and every human being to act, initiate, create, resist and project – is in fact a condition for democracy.

As I mentioned in the introduction, Arendt's work is open to many interpretations. What we inscribe in her writings depends on the questions we ask while reading them. If we start reading with a question What shall I do to fulfill my citizenship and lead a good life in a community?, the answer showing through her writings would be: whoever you are, first of all engage in thinking; and by thinking she meant "the disposition to live together explicitly with oneself, that is, to be engaged in that silent dialogue between me and myself" (Arendt 2003: 44–45), and then express yourself freely in the public sphere, discuss public affairs, resist, create, act. If this is not the heart of democracy understood not so much as a political system (in the narrow sense of the political), but as a framework for a fulfilled life realizing the human in its utmost form, than I do not know what the heart of democracy is.

⁴ For the summary of interconnections between Arendt and Habermas see Canovan 1983 and Habermas 1977.

⁵ One of such differences is pointed out by Kenneth Baynes, who noticed that Arendt's theory stresses spontaneity in expression of collective will, whereas Habermas's concept appeals more to institutionalized discourses (Baynes 1999: 213).

⁶ As Dagmar Barnouw observed: „Arendt's construct of the political, with its characteristic mixture of shrewdness and utopianism, is shaped by her understanding of the political-philosophical tradition as the historically concrete, articulate experience of others" (Barnouw 1990: 39).

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AR POLIS YRA ATSAKAS? HANNAH ARENDT APIE DEMOKRATIJĄ

Monika Bokinić

Siekiama panagrinėti įtakingiausius Hannahos Arendt kūrinis, išeities tašku laikant jos požiūrį į demokratiją, ir pasvarstyti, kaip tai gali praturtinti dabartinę demokratijos sampratą, pakoreguoti jos apibrėžimą. Straipsnio pradžioje atliekama H. Arendt antropologijos rekonstrukcija, kuri padeda pagrįsti jos politinę refleksiją. Antrojoje dalyje nagrinėjama demokratijos samprata. Paskutinėje dalyje apžvelgiamos skirtingos ir prieštaringos Arendt požiūrio į demokratiją interpretacijos, kuriose jos pozicija traktuojama, kaip praktiška, revoliucinė ar idealistinė, utopiška. Ginama pozicija, kurioje išryškinamos demokratinės ir reformatyvios Hannahos Arendt projekto prieigos. Daroma išvada, kad Hannahos Arendt esmingai prisidėjo prie šiuolaikinių demokratijos apmąstymų, nes suvokė, kad eiliniai nariai yra labai reikšminga kolektyvinės veiksenos dalis, turinti daug reikšmės politikoje. Spontaniški veiksmai, kylantys iš asociacijų, yra unikalus visuomenės saugumo veiksnys, o sykiu ir vartotojų visuomenės atsvara.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: demokratija, revoliucija, polis.

Įteikta 2008-09-17; priimta 2008-11-17