

# Citizen Action and Radical Democracy: Towards an Arendtian Transformation of Politics

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## Abstract

This paper attempts not only to interpret the political theory of Hannah Arendt but also to develop it from the author's viewpoint. According to the author, Hannah Arendt's concept of action and the active participation of ordinary people in politics can provide a theoretical basis for a theory of humane politics that focuses on influencing the macro-level of politics through voluntary, nonviolent action at the micro-level, that is, from the grass-roots level of actively engaged citizens. The paper clarifies that the purpose of Arendt's political theory was to restore the perspective of ordinary citizens and the meaning of politics as the participation of ordinary citizens in public affairs. Furthermore, the paper shows how citizen participation in politics encourages individual initiative, open-mindedness, creative problem-solving, and a sharing of ideas that can benefit all concerned.

## 1. Introduction

Hannah Arendt was one of the 20th century's greatest political thinkers. She was, by her own account, a professional political theorist<sup>1)</sup> whose theorizing about politics was a continual dialogue with the great political thinkers of the Western tradition. But her reflections on politics were more than just a reflection on a "great man" tradition of the past — Arendt always believed that political theory had to encompass an appreciation for the experiences of ordinary people and ordinary political actors, and the universal experiences of mankind. No elitist, Arendt held that ordinary people's perspectives on the political world were of crucial importance for understanding the true nature of political action.

Politics was for Arendt above all a human activity that must be understood from the standpoint of the human beings who are part of politics. Her understanding of politics differs from most modern views insofar as she believed that politics at bottom had to be

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1) On October 28, 1964, in the conversation with Günter Gaus, a well-known journalist at the time, Hannah Arendt said, "My profession, if one can even speak of it at all, is political theory." (Hannah Arendt, "What remains? The Language Remains": A Conversation with Günter Gaus," in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, edited by Jerome Kohn, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994, p. 1.)

understood as the micro-level of the participating citizenry rather than from the macro-level perspective of nation-states and the elites who govern them. Much of modern political theorizing is state-centered. In the great political thinkers of the modern era including Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, the focus is on the need for a powerful authority to preserve the peace, and this authority is concentrated at the state level to insure the safety and security of the people. Politics in this view is all about nations, states and the decisions that are made at the national level and on the international stage of power politics.

But this kind of perspective misses the crucially important dimension of the everyday "life-world" — in German *Lebenswelt* — of ordinary people and citizens. Making the situation even worse is the fact that liberalism had become the dominant ideology in the Western world and according to its tenets the entire economic arena was to be relegated to a private realm excluded from the purview of politics. Politics thus became even more detached from the actual life-world of ordinary people and citizens, for whom the economic arena of labor and production is so important.

The purpose of Arendt's political theory was to restore the perspective of ordinary citizens and the meaning of politics as the participation of ordinary citizens in public affairs. The macro-level of state action, she believed, always needed to be viewed from the micro-level of citizen action. But Arendt could view her work, which in many ways appeared quite radical, as a restoration rather than a new innovation because the perspective on politics that she sought to reestablish was one highly developed by the ancient Greeks for whom political life was the chief aspect of life. She could also draw upon a few modern thinkers like Tocqueville, who saw politics as a process created by self-governing citizens. In most of modern politics, Arendt believed, something had been lost, and this could be restored, she held, by a focus on people's actual lived experiences and by an ongoing dialogue with thinkers of the past who had not lost an understanding for the crucial dimension of citizen participation and citizen action. As Margaret Canovan has pointed out, it is the characteristic of Arendt's political theory "to articulate experience in this way, to enable people to think consciously what they have been only half aware of, to give them names by which to remember experiences that would otherwise vanish without trace."<sup>2)</sup>

From the popular nonviolent uprisings in Eastern Europe to the calls for more participatory democracy and a rebirth of civil society that are echoed in so many areas around the globe, we can see how Arendt's theory of the public sphere finds contemporary resonance. It will be shown in the rest of this article how Arendt's concept of citizen action and the active participation of ordinary people in politics can provide a theoretical basis for a theory of humane politics that focuses on influencing the macro-level of politics through voluntary, nonviolent action at the micro-level, that is, from the grass-roots level of acting citizens.

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2) Margaret Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, London: J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd., 1974, p. 7.

## 2. Plurality and Action

### The meaning of plurality

A central feature of the human condition for Arendt is human plurality. By this she means simply that not one person but always two or more people live on this earth. The “human condition of plurality,” she writes, refers “to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”<sup>3)</sup> Plurality also means that humans, in their great diversity, are each unique and non-reproducible. Humans cannot be understood merely as instances of some more general law of behavior without doing violence to the true being of each person as distinct and unique. We are all in some sense a one-of-a-kind, non-replicable individual irreducible to anything else. “Plurality is the condition of human action,” Arendt writes, “because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”<sup>4)</sup> In part because we are each unique, Arendt didn’t believe it possible to define human nature. Our individual uniqueness she once said takes on the quality of a non-natural idea that only a god could adequately define. Our uniqueness is such that it is not fully comprehended even by ourselves.

Arendt saw how the moral dimension of the human person could be destroyed in the 20th century by the physical and ideological terror of totalitarian regimes, and she was skeptical of much modern political theory, even theorists such as Locke and Rousseau, whose teachings about ideal states of human beings, lacked, in her judgment, grounding in actual political experience. In search of authentic politics, Arendt was drawn back to the classical political theory of Greece and (republican) Rome rather than to modern political theory, because it was in ancient times, she believed, that the vocabulary of truly authentic politics was first developed out of the rich everyday experience of ancient citizens. In her major theoretical work, *The Human Condition*, she makes it plain that she is concerned with theorizing about a politics of acting and doing that must be distinguished from a more ethereal enterprise like contemplation or reflection on the nature of thought itself. Arendt focuses on the *vita activa* — i.e. the active life of labor, work, and action — not the *vita contemplativa*, which “has no correspondence with and cannot be transformed into any activity whatsoever.”<sup>5)</sup>

### Humaneness as the attitude formed in talk and debate

We become human — and humane — according to Arendt by participating in the common enterprises and common concerns of other people. Crucial to this enterprise is ongoing conversation and debate. Through talk and debate “we humanize what is going on

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3) Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, p. 7.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 8.

5) *Ibid.*, p. 20.

in the world and in ourselves,” and it is in this manner that “we learn to be human.”<sup>6)</sup> We develop our humanity and humaneness in ongoing talk and debate with our fellow human beings. The attitude we develop by this process, however, must be “sober and cool rather than sentimental,”<sup>7)</sup> if its true effect is to be realized.

Arendt sometimes speaks of the common concerns and common enterprise of people that gets expressed through ongoing conversation and debate simply as “the world” (in contrast to a private, contemplative realm), and it is this world — the world of speech and human conversation — that continues to be subject to controversy and upheaval. “The world lies between people,” she writes, “and this in-between — much more than (as is often thought) men or even man — is today the object of the greatest concern and the most obvious upheaval in almost all the countries of the globe.”<sup>8)</sup> She also uses the word “world” in a slightly different sense as a relationship “between [an] individual and his fellow men.”<sup>9)</sup> These two concepts of “world” are closely connected with the central idea that the human world is formed out of common concern among people who have gathered together to participate in the ongoing conversation and debate. According to Arendt, life in modern societies is really without a world — without this in-between realm of discussion, deliberation, and debate — because of the disintegrating and alienating features of modern mass society. Modern society lacks the arena for citizens to come together to talk, deliberate, and act in concert, and this loss has been, in her view, inestimable in terms of the harms done to the health of modern political life. A more creative kind of political conversation, Arendt believes, was once developed in the Greek polis.

### **Taking initiative as a beginner**

In Arendt’s political thought political participation, as an ongoing activity, is more important than the attainment of any concrete goal of political life. It is important, she believed, to maintain citizen action through political participation beyond the achievement of any concrete end. A citizen movement that was too narrowly focused on a single end is to be dissolved once that end is achieved. This problem is avoided if a more universal and open-ended goal is chosen — like environmental protection, world peace, or the protection of human rights — but with such a goal the movement must be pursued beyond each generation. The problem then arises of intergenerational continuity and the need for renewed initiative.

The key to the problem of intergenerational continuity and renewed initiative is solved for Arendt by the simple fact of new human beings coming into the world each with their unique individuality, creativity, and capacity for deliberative action that is theirs by birthright. “Each man is unique,” she writes, “so that with each birth something uniquely

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6) Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Jovanovich, 1968, p. 25.

7) *Ibid.*, p. 25.

8) *Ibid.*, p. 4.

9) *Ibid.*, p. 5.

new comes into the world.”<sup>10)</sup> Human action she goes on to explain, “has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.”<sup>11)</sup>

This “capacity of beginning something anew” is the power of taking initiative. It exists in all human beings potentially, and, as a result, all human beings have the power of achieving something unpredictable. It is possible for all human beings to begin something new, though special courage is often called for in the case of political action — such activity often requires that people care for the state of the world and the welfare of mankind more than for their own life and their personal security. But all human beings are capable of beginning something that is new by the fact of their natality, and on a non-political level, everyone can become a hero or a heroine in their own personal life.

Participating in citizenship activity is a form of “second birth”<sup>12)</sup>, according to Arendt. Everyone joins fellow citizens as a newcomer in the beginning. “With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world,” Arendt writes, “and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance.” “This insertion,” she goes on, “is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, it is not promoted by utility, like work. [But] it may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join.”<sup>13)</sup> To act in this sense means “to take an initiative,” “to begin,” “to achieve” (in Greek, *archein, prattin*) — that is, to begin an enterprise and to achieve it. To achieve this purpose, according to Arendt, we must have a sense of personal responsibility, a sense of obligation to our fellow citizens and to the world to achieve a noble purpose and to finish what we have begun.

The collective action and activities of citizens in Arendt’s view constitute an “in-between” or mediated world that is a crucial web of human relationships. “The realm of human affairs,” she writes, “consists of the web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together.”<sup>14)</sup> This mediated web of human relationships is the world of common purpose and common activity, and paradoxical as it may seem, it is the world in which each individual experiences his own uniqueness and individuality. The peer group constituted by the ongoing actions of engaged citizens, according to Arendt, constitutes the “the space of appearance” by which she means the space where everybody can be recognized and admired for their own deeds and speeches in their own individuality. This is the space where one confirms who one is, as an individual and unique being.

10) *The Human Condition*, p. 178.

11) *Ibid.*, p. 9.

12) *Ibid.*, p. 176.

13) *Ibid.*, pp. 176–177.

14) *Ibid.*, pp. 183–184.

### **Action and citizen activity**

For Arendt it is a fundamental condition of human existence to appear before others in order to establish one's own identity and at the same time confirm the reality of the surrounding world. It is indispensable, she believes, to live in a world of other people to achieve one's humanness in full. As she writes, "without a space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as a mode of being together, neither the reality of one's self, of one's own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt."<sup>15)</sup> For Arendt, as for the ancient Greeks — or more specifically the Periclean Athenians — this kind of self-realization in the company of others was most importantly carried forth in the practice of citizen action and participatory democratic politics.

The model of the Greek polis, however, would obviously be problematic today in the wake of the much larger scale of governments and polities that exist on the nation-state level. We do not live today in such a small political community as the ancient Greek polis. As the size of a political community becomes ever larger it becomes more difficult for ordinary citizens to daily and directly participate in politics. The question that arises here is whether it is possible under modern circumstances to have what might be called a genuine civic life. A grass-roots type of citizen action, however, is still possible in the modern world, and can be seen in many of the reform-oriented movements of the contemporary world, such as the environmental and peace movements.

People who participate in citizen action are usually concerned with some kind of public matter, and such action can change the world. The possibilities of citizenship activity in the modern world are much greater than many people realize, and the effect of such activity can be truly transformative. Citizens acting in public at their free will have an enormous capacity to work and cooperate with others, to build open network-type organizations that include many individuals otherwise unknown. By working together with other citizens previously unknown to us, we are able to creatively solve various problems in the contemporary society that can elude solution by the top-down bureaucratic structures of the modern nation-state.

According to Arendt's theory of political action, in order to realize our true humanity and humaneness it is necessary for us to be concerned with public matters not construed from any self-interest but from the interest of a larger world of cooperating human beings. "In the center of politics," she writes, "is always the care for the world."<sup>16)</sup> The radicalism of Arendt's thought is thus seen in its focus on cooperation-directed citizen action that is humanistic and humane. Unlike Kant's humanism, however, Arendt is less concerned about the motive of one's action, since the motive may be mixed. What counts in her eyes is the willingness of people to bear responsibility for the world.

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15) *Ibid.*, p. 208.

16) Hannah Arendt, *Was ist Politik? : Fragmente aus dem Nachlass*, herausgegeben von Ursula Ludz; Vorwort von Kurt Sontheimer, München: Piper, 1993, p. 24.

In Arendt's view, the ends pursued by citizen action, while important, are still not as important as the process of public deliberation and action. Arendt specifically rejects an instrumental or teleological view of politics in which only the ends or goals matter. Such a view, she believes, can all too easily lead to the justification of terror and violence to realize one's political ends, as has sadly been the case throughout much of modern politics. Deliberating, debating, and acting in concert with others are all centrally important to the political process according to Arendt. Process is more important than the ends agreed upon. But it would be a mistake to conclude that Arendt's view is that of a "*politique pour la politique*," as Martin Jay has suggested.<sup>17)</sup> Ends count for a whole lot for Arendt, but the means of achieving ends and the process of deliberation whereby ends are decided upon are also important — indeed, more important. Citizens should engage in politics, she believed, not simply as a means for affirming a specific purpose, but to affirm life itself, and to carry out our individual responsibility and obligation for the world.

### 3. The Citizen as an Equal

#### Equality as an artificial attribute

Arendt's political theory is rightfully seen as having opened up a new dimension in our understanding of freedom.<sup>18)</sup> Her idea of freedom draws heavily upon the experience of the free citizens of the democratic polis of ancient Athens, and as such, is far distanced from the idea of freedom found in modern liberalism as exemplified, for instance, by thinkers like John Stuart Mill. As Margaret Canovan explains, "against this almost universally accepted [modern] view that freedom is a feature of private life, Hannah Arendt sets the totally opposed notion that it is located in public life and is a feature of action carried on in the company of one's fellows."<sup>19)</sup> Her view of freedom is in many ways anti-modernist and not only conflicts with Mill's understanding of freedom as a private-realm concept, but is equally incompatible with the emphasis of Kant and others on freedom as a problem of the inner world of an individual. For Arendt, freedom is exercised in the political realm by free citizens deliberating and debating over common projects that are seen to further the interest of the world.

Closely tied to her concept of political freedom — a freedom which entails the notion of acting in concert with others — is her idea of political equality. Arendt's concept of equality is also derived largely from the Greek polis experience, which she believes has a kind of universal validity for different cultures and times. Unlike Tocqueville, who thought equality was a danger to freedom, Arendt points out that political equality was "originally

17) Martin Jay, "Opposing Views," *Partisan Review*, vol. 65, no.3 (1978), p. 367.

18) For example, Margaret Canovan considers Hannah Arendt's understanding of freedom as her most important contribution to political theory (See *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, p. 72).

19) *Ibid.*, p. 73.

almost identical with [freedom]<sup>20)</sup> — and, in her view, it still remains so even today. Equality for Arendt means the equal rights and obligations of equal citizens in an ongoing deliberative process such as that which existed in the ancient Athenian polis. But equality in this sense, Arendt is quick to emphasize, is not something natural; human beings are not equal by nature. Some are bigger, some smaller; some very intelligent, others not so intelligent; some are born to riches, others are poor; some have strong leadership qualities, others could simply listen and follow.

Not by nature, but by artificial convention was equality achieved in the Greek polis, Arendt explains. Human beings, she writes, “received their equality by virtue of citizenship, not by virtue of birth.”<sup>21)</sup> Humans, in other words, become equal through the laws. Freedom and equality are thus “conventional and artificial, the products of human effort and qualities of the man-made world.”<sup>22)</sup> “The equality attending the public realm,” Arendt writes, “is necessarily an equality of unequals who stand in need of being ‘equalized’ in certain respects and for specific purposes.”<sup>23)</sup> Equality is thus not an attribute of nature but an attribute of the in-between world of social interaction and political deliberation. But according to Arendt, equality is the precondition of real freedom, for if one is not equal in the political realm one cannot be free.

### **Equality in the public realm**

The idea that equality is a feature of the public realm is exemplified in Arendt’s view by the contrast between the Greek household and the Greek polis. In the Greek household — the private realm — inequality prevailed with the male head of household ruling over his wife, children, and slaves as a dictator or even tyrant. The private household realm was governed by a principle of command and obedience. But in the public realm Greek male citizens engaged with others as equals seeking neither command nor obedience. Regardless of their social position, family background, age, or other personal features, citizens were all equal. The Athenian citizen was neither king nor subject. As Arendt explains, “To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to command *and* not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled.”<sup>24)</sup>

Today, of course, we cannot make the same distinctions that were made in ancient times. There was a double standard in the ancient world that we cannot accept in regard to men and women, free and slave. The concept of political equality that Arendt sees exemplified in the public realm of Greek male citizens is still of value today and merely needs to be expanded so as to include the formerly excluded — the women, the non-citizens, the slaves, etc. Besides the idea of equality itself, what is more valuable in the

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20) Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York: The Viking Press, 1963, p. 23.

21) *Ibid.*, p. 23

22) *Ibid.*, p. 23.

23) *The Human Condition*, p. 215.

24) *Ibid.*, p. 32(emphasis in original).



ancient Athenian understanding of politics as Arendt interprets it is the cardinal importance placed on citizen action, deliberation and debate, and the substitution of persuasion for coercion and violence. What moderns can learn from the ancient Greeks is the importance of deliberative political action, taken by free and equal citizens, who could speak freely and in their own unique voice and seek to persuade rather than command. Freedom, equality, and nonviolent persuasion are features of Athenian citizenship that have enduring relevance for us today.

### **Five tenets of citizenship and citizen action**

The political theory of Hannah Arendt continues to inspire us to address the need to establish norms of citizen action in the modern world. The idea of citizen action and “citizenship education” has attracted the attention of many people in countries like Britain and the United States in recent years where some school curricula have been newly introduced dealing with these subjects. Citizenship, it is sometimes said, has four main attributes: rights, responsibilities, participation, and identity.<sup>25)</sup> Arendt was particularly concerned with the third attribute of citizenship listed here — participation — and her political theory stresses the need for citizen participation and citizen associations as prerequisites for any kind of authentic public policy making. If we define a citizen as “an individual open to others and society,”<sup>26)</sup> we can say that citizen participation and citizenship action are necessary to the health of any decent polity. Even beyond the Greek polis, citizen associations, it will be contended here, are needed just as much in the modern world as they were in the time of the ancients. Continuing in this Arendtian mold, I would like to suggest five key attributes of citizen participation and citizen action, each of which is crucial to the formation of vibrant participatory governance.

[1] Spontaneity and creativity are crucial. When citizens are all free and equal and willing to engage in discussion and debate with others, creative and spontaneous responses can emerge from the process of political deliberation. While some participants in the deliberative process will assume a leadership role and take the initiative in proposing new ideas, and to this extent there is an element of inequality in such deliberations, all have the right and the capacity to participate in the decision-making process. And those who take the initiative on one occasion may not be the same as those who assume the initiative on another day when dealing with another topic. Citizen participation fosters creative and spontaneous responses to ongoing political problems.

[2] To take initiative in political deliberation is closely related to the concept of citizen responsibility. Responsibility is closely tied to the belief that one’s words and actions are important, and that one has an obligation to carry through and finish what one has begun.

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25) See Gerard Delanty, *Citizenship in a Global Age*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000, pp. 126–132.

26) SANO Shoji, *Vorantia wo Hajimeru Maeni: Shiminkoekikatsudo (Before Beginning Volunteer Activity: Citizen Public-interest Activity)*, Tokyo: Kojinnotomo-sha, 1994, p. 37.

Citizenship responsibility in Arendt's view also requires that citizens care for the well-being of others and the world and make this care the focus of their citizen activity.

[3] Citizenship participation requires participation as equals. Citizens do not place each other under command-obedience type of relationships. Although everyone is not equal in physical strength or intellectual capacity, everyone is unique in their own way and all must respect the value and uniqueness of others. Everyone must have a say in the deliberative process, and in order to act cooperatively, it is necessary to have equal relationships among them. For citizenship deliberation to be carried out effectively, it is necessary for it to be anchored in the consciousness of political equality. Everyone must be allowed to participate in the discussion and debate. No one's voice may be privileged over any one else's.

[4] Individuals who participate in politics of deliberation or of discourse must foster a spirit of open-mindedness. Open-mindedness fundamentally means to be open to the criticism of others. Only by being open to such criticism can we hope to eliminate the narrowness and prejudice that is inherent in the human being. Through ongoing deliberation and debate, and through consideration of the critical viewpoints of others, we can help liberate ourselves from the self-interest and one-sidedness that is usually reflected in our own views or in the views embodied in our inherited customs and folkways. None of us is entitled to have a monopoly on truth. No one culture or tradition embodies all there is to know or all that is of value. In the present age of globalization, it is particularly important to foster the ability to understand one another beyond the borders of our own nation and culture.

[5] A sense of justice is also a key component of good citizenship. Here, "sense of justice" simply means the capacity to distinguish right from wrong. We develop our ability to distinguish right from wrong — to determine, that is, what is just and what is unjust — not merely through deliberation with others, but even more importantly, by cultivating our inner capacity of moral discernment and just dealings. To do this it is important to cultivate an independent thinking space in ourselves specifically for this purpose. Cultivating a sense of justice thus requires some degree of reflective or contemplative thinking activity, though it is directed toward the outer world of action and deeds rather than the inner world of the religious contemplative self-seeking.

These five tenets of citizen participation and citizen action can be realized even in the modern world in various civic associations dedicated to solving some of the key problems confronted by modern societies. These include such issues as the environment, human rights, the problems of political refugees, homelessness, and poverty. The spontaneity and creativity of voluntary citizens' organizations can provide solutions to such problems that have proven so intractable to the efforts of large, bureaucratic state institutions usually devoid of citizen participation and citizen control. We need to think over what kind of democracy we want to live in, and whether our current form of governance really lives up to the ideal of self-government that most of free and cooperative human beings deserve.

## 4. The Road to Radical Democracy

### Arendt's criticism of modern democracy

Since Arendt's model of citizen action and deliberative governance was the Greek polis, it is not surprising that she is critical of modern representative democracy. Having witnessed the transition from the Weimar form of representative democracy to the totalitarian regime of Hitler, she knew first-hand that representative democracy could not insure freedom, equality, or the triumph of political wisdom.

Arendt was also critical of the two-party system in Britain and the United States largely because such a system denied direct participation by acting citizens and represented only political interests rather than freely voiced political opinions. At the present time it would be necessary to support calls for greater use of referenda and NPO activity as means of furthering citizen empowerment. The idea of a large-scale representative democracy detached from the participatory presence of thinking, acting, and deliberating citizens was alien to Arendt's political theory, the touchstone of which was discussion and debate among free and equal citizens rather than among political elites.

The word "democracy," Arendt points out, was originally a pejorative term for isonomy (no-rule in Arendt's translation). "The word 'democracy,'" Arendt writes, "was originally coined by those who were opposed to isonomy and who meant to say: What you say is 'no-rule' is in fact only another kind of rulership; it is the worst form of government, rule by the *demos*."<sup>27)</sup> Arendt was very aware, that the *demos* could become an impassioned mob and be swayed by powerful orators and demagogues — Hitler being a prime example — or otherwise manipulated into conformity by the power of the dominant public opinion. Democracy, she says, can become unstable, because of "the fickleness of its citizens, their lack of public spirit, their inclination to be swayed by public opinion and mass sentiments."<sup>28)</sup>

What Arendt really supported was what M. Canovan calls "new republicanism" or "radical republicanism," which she understood as a political system in which a citizen becomes "a participator in the *res publica*, sharing in common responsibility for public affairs."<sup>29)</sup> This type of republicanism would have some features in common with the republicanism of Rousseau and Machiavelli, but it was distinguished from these by Arendt's belief that participation in public affairs must be voluntary. Arendt was also critical of Machiavelli's resort to violence to found new republics and was skeptical of certain types of patriotic appeals, as one might expect from someone who had seen the great crimes committed in the name of patriotism in both the First and Second World Wars.

27) *On Revolution*, p. 23.

28) *Ibid.*, p. 227.

29) Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, Cambridge ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 224.

The kind of republicanism Arendt advocated was a far cry from modern mass democracy where citizens lose their capacity to think freely in the face of mass conformity to the dominant public opinion. Her criticism of democracy in this regard was similar to that of Tocqueville. She agrees also with the following text in *The Federalist*: “When men exert their reason coolly and freely on a variety of distinct questions, they inevitably fall into different opinions on some of them.”<sup>30)</sup> This is not a bad thing for Arendt, but a sign of republican vigor and independence of spirit by unique individuals. The mass conformity engendered by modern mass democracy is incompatible with any genuine concern for the welfare of the society, or any genuine citizen initiative, she believed. Mass democracy stifles reason, initiative, and public spiritedness, according to Arendt, which is why she stressed the need for republican rather than democratic government. The two have been confused, however, since the nineteenth century.

### **The idea of republican democracy**

Although she does not use the term, we can derive from Arendt’s thought a theory of what might be called “republican democracy.”<sup>31)</sup> In the republican tradition from which Arendt draws, the people are empowered, so it is legitimate to speak of democracy (“government by the people”), but the democracy she has in mind is always republican in the sense that citizens always talk, debate, and deliberate among each other with the public good (*res publica*) in mind. It is no accident that Arendt’s *On Revolution* was popular with many Eastern Europeans who participated in the revolutions of 1989, and it became a source of inspiration to many seeking to move beyond totalitarian governments.

At the heart of Arendt’s “republican democracy” is the emphasis on public spiritedness and universal (as opposed to selfish or self-seeking) ideals such as human rights and world peace. Public spiritedness, in her view, leads neither to patriotism nor state-worship but to concern for what is best in the *res publica*. Political participation in the public sphere by civic-minded citizens is at the heart of Arendt’s idea of politics with the citizens acting not only to further their collective well-being, but for the sheer “pleasure to be able to speak, to act, to breathe”(Tocqueville).<sup>32)</sup> Political activity itself has value for Arendt when engaged in by free and equal citizens and is seen as a vital part of a meaningful and fulfilling human life.

While it is of great value for citizens to engage in politics, at the same time such

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30) *On Revolution*, p. 227 (cited from *The Federalist*, no. 50).

31) See Antonia Grunenberg, “Einleitung,” in *Totalitäre Herrschaft und republikanische Demokratie : fünfzig Jahre The Origins of Totalitarianism von Hannah Arendt*, hrsg. von Antonia Grunenberg unter Mitarbeit von Stefan Ahrens und Bettina Koch, Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 2003, p. 9. As Iseult Honohan suggests, “the failure of liberal democracy to prevent the rise of totalitarian governments gave a new impetus [to republicanism] in the aftermath of the Second World War.” (Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism*, London: Routledge, 2002, p. 119).

32) *On Revolution*, p. 121.

participation, Arendt believes, must be voluntary. There must be no obligation to participate in politics; its participants must be “self-chosen.” She sees the freedom not to participate in politics as one of the valuable contributions of our Christian heritage. The “freedom from politics,” she writes, “was unknown to Rome and Athens,” and was “politically perhaps the most relevant part of our Christian heritage.”<sup>33)</sup> This kind of aristocratic voluntarism characterizes Arendt’s republicanism, and is seen as necessary to preserve the spontaneity and freedom necessary for genuine deliberation and debate. No one should be coerced into becoming a participating citizen.

In “The Revolutionary Tradition and Its Lost Treasure,” the last chapter of *On Revolution*, Arendt extols the council system as “a new form of government that would permit every member of the modern egalitarian society to become a ‘participator’ in public affairs.”<sup>34)</sup> While those who joined the council might be spoken of as elites, they were “the only political élite [that was] of the people and sprang from the people [that] the modern world has ever seen.”<sup>35)</sup> Those who did not participate were self-excluded, so there could not arise the feeling of alienation and powerlessness that pervades non-republican forms of government. In the council system the people selected were chosen “for their trustworthiness, their personal integrity, their capacity of judgment, [and] often for their physical courage.”<sup>36)</sup> In this way the council system reconciled equality and authority.

Arendt goes well beyond the ancient Greek ideal of equality in that her theory does not countenance discrimination on the basis of race, sex, social status, or class. The category of who may be a citizen must be expanded to include effectively all adults under the jurisdictions of the laws. In the public political realm — the “space of appearance” — all people confront each other as equals. While people may be very unequal outside the public space of the republican order, within this space all enjoy equal rights for “freedom in a positive sense is possible only among equals.”<sup>37)</sup>

A final aspect of Arendt’s “republican democracy” is the emphasis on cooperation and acting in concert. Liberal democracy can be criticized because of its competitive and adversarial nature where each side seeks to achieve victory and avoid defeat. Republican democracy, on the other hand, emphasizes the element of cooperation. Such cooperation is necessary to achieve genuine social harmony and public virtue. Today, such cooperation is particularly urgent in the face of the troubling inroads of competitive market values into the civic and political realm, and the need for transnational cooperation in an age of globalization and increasingly porous borders. In the modern world, it is necessary to cooperate across borders, and such cooperation carries the possibility of a greater recognition of our universal humanity and the opportunity to develop creative solutions to problems

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33) *Ibid.*, p. 284.

34) *Ibid.*, p. 268.

35) *Ibid.*, p. 282.

36) *Ibid.*, p. 278.

37) *Ibid.*, p. 279.

such as environmental degradation which afflict all of us around the world.

### **Towards nonviolent democracy**

For Arendt the political realm was identified as the realm in which persuasion and other nonviolent activities gain currency in contrast to the many non-political realms where force and violence reign supreme. Both the household, in which slaves and women were ordered about, and the sphere of international relations, where bloody conflicts took place, were seen by Arendt as arenas in the lives of the ancient Greeks that were *not* political. "To be political," she writes, "to live in a *polis*, meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force and violence. In Greek self-understanding, to force people by violence, to command rather than persuade, were pre-political ways to deal with people, characteristic of life outside the *polis*, of home and family life, where the household head ruled with uncontested, despotic powers."<sup>38)</sup> Today we would wish to expand this Greek concept of the political to include much of both the private realm and the realm of foreign relations insofar at least as the principle of nonviolent persuasion can be made to operate in each. Nonviolent discourse and non-coercive persuasion must be made to substitute for brute force.

Arendt recognized that violence is often inevitable when a new state or new regime is formed. This process is perhaps most justified in the case of a revolution whose purpose is the liberation of a people from oppression by a tyrannical power. In such a revolution, she says, violence is often used to bring about "a new beginning, ... to constitute an altogether different form of government, to bring about the new body politic."<sup>39)</sup> But Arendt was hesitant to affirm the use of violence in politics even in a revolutionary setting lest it lead, as it all too easily can and does lead, to the idea that good ends can justify the use of violent means. She believed in fact that the whole concept of politics as a means-end kind of craftsmanship or fabrication, as an arena, that is, in which rational plans or utopias are carried out in the manner in which a craftsman crafts an artifact, is one fraught with danger and confusion. Such thinking, she believed, easily leads to the pragmatic kind of argument that "you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs,"<sup>40)</sup> and this type of thinking, she believed, has led in the modern world to the justification of murder on a grand scale. "We are perhaps the first generation," she writes, "which has become fully aware of the murderous consequences inherent in a line of thought that forces one to admit that all means, provided that they are efficient, are permissible and justified to pursue something defined as an end."<sup>41)</sup>

Arendt sees Plato's utopian vision of the model city in *The Republic* as a model for all political theory which seeks to eliminate political action and replace it with instrumental

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38) *The Human Condition*, pp. 26-27.

39) *On Revolution*, p. 28.

40) *The Human Condition*, p. 229.

41) *Ibid.*, p. 229.

rationality. The philosopher-king in *The Republic* makes his polis in the way a sculpture makes his statue. Such a process, however, eliminates citizen action, and as the modern age has shown, Arendt argues, this kind of instrumental rationality easily leads to the justification of mass violence and murder. Her criticism of utopian blueprints and instrumental rationality in politics is summed up in the following statement: “Only the modern age’s conviction that man can know only what he makes ... brought forth the much older implications of violence inherent in all interpretations of the realm of human affairs as a sphere of making.”<sup>42)</sup> This has been particularly striking in the series of revolutions, characteristic of the modern age, all of which — with the exception of the American Revolution — show the same combination of the old Roman enthusiasm for the foundation of a new body politic with the glorification of violence as the only means for ‘making’ it. Marx’s dictum that ‘violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one,’ that is, of all change in history and politics, only sums up the conviction of the whole modern age and draws the consequences of its innermost belief that history is ‘made’ by men as nature is ‘made’ by God.”<sup>43)</sup>

Thus Arendt believed that the substitution of making for acting, of instrumental rationality for genuine citizen action, made politics degenerate into a means to obtain a supposedly “higher” end.<sup>44)</sup> As a thinker who survived the era of totalitarianism, Arendt here was sensitive to the problem of justifying immoral means in politics — she knew that such thinking can all too easily lead to slave labor camps or Auschwitz. When “making” — that is, instrumental rationality — is substituted for genuine political action (citizen action), these kinds of horrors are the typical result.

### **The separation of power from violence**

An important distinction that Arendt makes in her writing is that between violence and power. This distinction is made most sharply in her essay “On Violence.” Arendt is particularly critical of the maxim of Mao Tse-Tung whereby it is said that “power grows out of the barrel of a gun.”<sup>45)</sup> What can grow out of the barrel of a gun, Arendt contends, is not power but violence, coercion, and force. A man with a gun can indeed force others to comply with his wishes, she argues, but this is not power by definition. Power in her use of the term refers to the potential effects produced by people “acting in concert” to persuade and convince others.<sup>46)</sup> Power thus depends upon the number of people who support a policy or a government and their level of conviction and persuasion, not on instruments of violence and coercion like firearms or weapons of war. Violence can be exercised by a

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42) *Ibid.*, p. 228.

43) See *ibid.*, p. 228.

44) See *ibid.*, p. 229.

45) See Hannah Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, p. 113.

46) See *ibid.*, p. 143.

single person — in the extreme by a megalomaniacal dictator commanding vast armies of destruction — but power according to Arendt only comes through numbers and conviction — in the extreme case by a whole people all united against a single tyrant. She writes on this: “Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together.”<sup>47)</sup> “The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All.”<sup>48)</sup>

Free citizens working together, according to this view, produce power — people power or citizen power — and this power can transform the world, according to Arendt. This kind of people power grows from people connecting themselves “horizontally” in a network of communication rather than “vertically” in a hierarchy of subordination and command. This view has had a great influence in more recent times on theorists of nonviolent citizen action such as Gene Sharp or Michael Randle. Sharp regards power as “the power of a united people,”<sup>49)</sup> and asserts that this kind of power has the ability to overthrow even dictators. Randle, whose views have been heavily influenced by Arendt’s ideas, stresses the importance of voluntary cooperation as the key to effective collective action.<sup>50)</sup> Power, in the Arendtian sense, was clearly on display as a “people power” in the Philippine Revolution of 1986, and the East European Revolutions in 1989, and these events have proven that nonviolent revolution, far from being an impractical project envisioned only by dreamers unfamiliar with the real world of power politics, can be both real and effective.

One of the examples that Arendt gives of successful nonviolent citizen action is the Gandhian independence movement in India in the 1930s and 1940s. She admits, however, that nonviolent citizen action is not always effective against the brutal violence of repressive regimes. The nonviolent protest of the Czechoslovak people against Russian tanks, she says, was “a textbook case of a confrontation between violence and power in their pure states”<sup>51)</sup> — and it was a case where initially, at least, the tanks won. There is some truth to the claim, Arendt says, that “out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience,”<sup>52)</sup> as organized violence can sometimes defeat nonviolent citizen action and citizen power. The Gandhian movement, she says, would probably not have been effective if the nonviolent resistance had been against Hitler’s Germany rather than the more receptive British parliamentary regime. But the substitution of violence for citizen power achieves victory for a regime at a very high moral, spiritual, and existential cost, Arendt says, and her ideal of republican democracy looks forward to the creation of a political situation where violence is minimized and people power gains maximum strength. Arendt, however, did not believe that armies and police forces could be

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47) *Ibid.*, p. 143.

48) *Ibid.*, p. 141.

49) Gene Sharp, *Exploring Nonviolent Alternatives*, Boston: Porter Sargent Publisher, 1970, p. 21.

50) See Michael Randle, *Civil Resistance*, London: Fontana Press, 1994, p. 2.

51) “On Violence,” pp. 152.

52) *Ibid.*, p. 152.



made to go away any time soon, and while it is possible to create a situation where violence becomes less likely to occur, violence, she believed, would always lurk at the extreme of politics.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has tried to recapture Arendt's ideal of republican democracy in order to cherish and develop it. Her ideas concerning republicanism and citizen power are rich in insight and practical implications which are of enormous value to the modern, post-totalitarian world of globalized economies and liberal democracies. While no one would dispute the superiority of the kind of representative democracies that have become dominant in the more economically developed parts of the globe since the collapse of fascism and communism, at the same time, the increasing concentration of power in the hands of professional politicians, the manipulation of mass opinion by powerful news media, the increasing influence of money and self-serving interest groups in modern politics, the growth of mammoth, unresponsive government bureaucracies, and the decline in civic spiritedness among the general population are developments that tear the heart and soul out of democracy and rob it of much of its creative potential. Arendt's focus on citizen action and people power, and her appreciation for the greatness of the participatory republicanism of ancient Athens, is a much needed corrective to the tendency of modern liberal democrats to celebrate uncritically the superiority of their regimes over totalitarianism. The kind of republican democracy that Arendt envisioned can serve as a powerful corrective to the many ills beset by modern liberal democracies.

In her understanding of politics, not in terms of violence or force but in terms of the public power of citizens who come together on a daily basis to deliberate and exchange ideas, Arendt has found a key antidote to the malaise that afflicts much of modern democracy. The kind of citizen-oriented republicanism that she envisioned is able to spur to the creative potential of many individuals who spontaneously deliberate and work together to focus on the needs of the day. In the republicanism of Periclean Athens, the republican system envisioned by Thomas Jefferson, and the council system Arendt finds models for a radical kind of participatory politics that has continuing relevance for the modern age.

Above all, Arendt's ideas provide the basis for a renewed sense of citizen empowerment and the reconstitution of modern politics from the bottom up. It is only when citizens and citizen action take the initiative and become the driving force in politics that the ideal of authentic democracy — in the sense of "power to the people" — can be effectively realized. The realization of such a politics, where the center of gravity lies in citizen-initiative rather than the power and manipulation of elites, has important advantages. It provides not only greater creativity and humaneness in the formulation of public policy, but also enables ordinary citizens to reap the fruit of political participation, which are not available in the

private sphere. Citizen participation in politics encourages individual initiative, open-mindedness, creative problem-solving, and a sharing of ideas that can be of benefit to all concerned.

Although citizen action in Arendt's own thought was limited to territorially-restricted sovereignties — the idea of a sovereign world-state, she once said, "would be the end of all citizenship. It would not be the climax of world politics, but quite literally its end"<sup>53)</sup> — we can easily expand upon her idea of citizen participation in the contemporary world to include citizen initiatives beyond nation-state borders. Many of our problems today are transnational in scope — including environmental degradation and climate change, international war, poverty, AIDS, etc. — and they may be most effectively addressed by the cooperative relationships of citizens working both within and between nations. The development of modern transportation and communication provides possibilities for such intra- and transnational citizen initiatives that were certainly not available to Greek citizens in classical times or to the yeoman farmers in Thomas Jefferson's day. Arendt's ideas are rich in implications and possibilities for development, and rather than confronting international politics and the global arena as mere spectators or observers, engaged citizens must take the initiative in addressing problems that cannot be left only to commercial interests, bureaucrats, and professional politicians. We have a responsibility to the world, to speak in Arendtian terms, and this responsibility today must be global in scope.

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53) *Men in Dark Times*, p. 82.