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For Love of the World. Hannah Arendt's political Legacy in an Age of Populism

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Abstract

What can we still learn from Hannah Arendt's political categories and reflections on the public realm in an era that sees the growing spread of populisms? The large critical literature on Arendt's work has been spreading over the years a sort of standardized vision, according to which Arendt was a nostalgic and anti-modern thinker, whose aim was to rehabilitate the greek polis model against the modern decline of the public sphere, so that very few of her conceptual categories are still useful to understand contemporary phenomena. The purpose of these notes is to offer a different reading of the complex relationship between Arendt and the modern age. With the help of most recent literature – characterised by a more critic approach to her work – it seems possible, quite to the contrary, to draw from Arendt's thought a deep “modernist” attitude, not just regarding her judgement on modernity, but above all in terms of up-to-dateness of some of her suggestions.

Keywords: Arendt, politics, action, public space, power, populism, fake news.

1. Introduction. Between Past and Future

What can we still learn from Hannah Arendt's political categories and reflections on the public realm in an era that sees the growing spread of populisms?

The large critical literature on Hannah Arendt's work has been spreading over the years a sort of standardized vision, according to which Arendt was a nostalgic and anti-modern thinker, whose aim was to rehabilitate the greek polis model against the modern decline of the public sphere, so that very few of her conceptual categories are still useful to understand contemporary phenomena. The purpose of these notes is to offer a different reading of the complex relationship between Arendt and the modern age. With the help of most recent literature – characterised by a more critic approach to her work – it seems possible, quite to the contrary, to draw from Arendt's thought a deep “modernist” attitude, not just regarding her judgement on modernity, but above all in terms of up-to-dateness of some of her suggestions.

2. Politics and the Modern Age

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*¹ Hannah Arendt does not merely observe, with desolate passivity, the nature of the new evils introduced by totalitarianism, that is the “burden of our time”, but is concerned with a work of understanding – though not “absolving” – the totalitarian phenomenon and its terrible outcomes in order to avoid to repeat it,² thus manifesting an attitude of deep openness to the future. In line with the idea of totalitarianism as a manifestation of the disappearance of the most authentic meaning of politics, the deconstruction and revision of the traditional conceptual heritage conducted by Arendt carries out the fundamental task of preparing the ground for the reconsideration of the

1. See Arendt 1951.

2. Arendt 1953a: 377-392.

most important philosophical-political categories, which are conceived in a specularly opposite manner to the notions that the author considers essential to the comprehension of the totalitarian phenomenon.

Action

To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, “to begin”, “to lead”, and eventually “to rule” indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*).³

With these words in *The Human Condition* Arendt presents the most significant features of the action, that is the activity that holds the highest rank in the hierarchy of active life, distinguishing itself by its constitutive freedom, by its ability to “give life to the new”, to be unpredictable and irreversible and to be structurally linked to plurality. Recapturing the original etymology of the word “act”, the author intends to show the close connection, whose meaning has been lost through our tradition of political and philosophical thinking, between action and beginning, and therefore between action and novelty.⁴ Only the innovative force of action can make a turning point in history and counteract the apparent lack of meaning of human life.⁵ In this way the author intends to outline a criterion that redeems man from his “being natural”. As a matter of fact, for Arendt “nature” is synonymous with an uninterrupted passage that leaves no permanent existence to which it can give meaning. There-

3. Arendt 1958: 177.

4. Forti 1994: 273-274.

5. Ivi: 274.

fore, the ability to “start something new”, first of all, is the “existential possibility” of being free.⁶

The philosophical-political tradition, especially in modern times, has betrayed the original and exclusive characters of the action to think it essentially according to the model of fabrication, using the means-ends logic, which compromises the freedom and autonomy of action itself. So, by bringing this assumption to its extreme consequences, Arendt concludes that action, as a free initiative, can be understood as the product of the will or, more generally, as the outcome of the moral conscience that decides the course to follow. In both cases, the action would be reduced to an *instrument* to achieve a certain end.⁷

Both in *The Human Condition* and in the essays collected in *Between Past and Future*, action is always approaching speech and often overlaps with it. Language politically characterizes the action, by separating it from the scope of violence, within which the *poiesis*, the activity of fabrication, moves. In other words, whenever language is at stake, the situation becomes political by definition, because it is the language that makes man a political being.⁸

Based on these considerations on the close connection between action and speech, and the separation of action and violence, several authors have identified in the Arendtian reproduction of *praxis* the historical antecedent of the theory of communicative action, and in particular that of Habermas.⁹ According to Arendt, some statements, some linguistic

6. See Arendt 1960b, Beiner 1984: 354-357 and Flores d’Arcais 1985.

7. Forti 1994: 279.

8. See Arendt 1958: 175-181.

9. See Hanssen 1999: 67-69.

acts are, in fact, political acts in themselves. In the beautiful pages of *The Human Condition* on the “revealing power of the word”, one can read:

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of voice. This disclosure of “who” in contradistinction to “what” somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does.¹⁰

Through discursive action it is therefore possible for the actor to enter the world and reveal his identity.

Public Space

For Arendt free, innovative, discursive and competitive action is structurally linked to plurality. This last point allows us to introduce another key concept of Arendt’s political theory, that of “public space” or “space of appearance”.

As far as the author is concerned, especially in a purely political concept, it is important to dwell on the “ontological” meaning of the term.¹¹ In this sense, the word “space” does not necessarily refer to a physical placement or to a principle of territoriality; on the contrary, in Arendt’s words,

the space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized.¹²

10. Arendt 1958: 179. See also Arendt 1962 and Collin 1992.

11. Forti 1994: 285.

12. Arendt 1958: 199.

As Forti effectively comments, rather than identifying itself with concrete domains, public space is the condition of being-together; rather than a determined political form, it is “the transcendental of politics”.¹³

Since it does not identify with a given spatial delimitation, such a public space presupposes the notion of “world”. In *The Human Condition* it is read that, in one of its meanings, “the term ‘public’ signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it”. It is

related to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.¹⁴

By this enlightening metaphor, Arendt means that living together in the world, being together in a public space, everyone can see and listen to others without canceling the distance that separates them. As it has been noted,

the peculiar feature of this space is therefore to unite and separate at the same time, to articulate plurality through relationships that are neither vertical nor hierarchical nor tending to create a fusion.¹⁵

For Arendt, man is a political being to the extent that he wants to manifest himself in the “space of appearance”. Then politics is first of all the mutual play of seeing and being seen, of manifesting and being recognized as one exposes itself to

13. Forti 1994: 286.

14. Arendt 1958: 52.

15. Forti 1994: 288.

others. So, without a space of appearance, individual identity can not be preserved by doubt.¹⁶ It follows that there does not seem to exist for Arendt an “original subject”, already fully structured, before this “subject” licks the scene of the world, before the subject comes to confirm his reality and his individuality from the others.

According to Arendt, therefore, identity, as well as freedom, is not something which is “given” but it must be conquered through action. As long as we do not act, we are only aware of “what” we are. What we are is determined by the roles we play in private life, by our qualities and abilities, talents and defects. So the identity of the agent stems from his action and the action itself is privileged with respect to the agent. As noted by Dal Lago,

the idea of identity in Hannah Arendt is always a conquest, never a *datum* or a *sub-jectum*. By always keeping his *self* secret (that is private, original, creative), the human being becomes an “who” only by the plural exercise of his faculties and in comparison with the plurality that surrounds him. He lies between himself and others; his condition is relational.¹⁷

These hints remind us of Erving Goffman’s perspective about the situational genesis of self. According to Goffman, the self is not something organic that has his own specific location, whose main destiny is to be born, mature and die. The self is rather a dramatic effect that emerges from a scene that is represented. Or, even in more dramatic terms, the self is the *product* of a scene that is represented and not its *cause*.¹⁸

16. Arendt 1978: 100.

17. Dal Lago 1978: 45.

18. Goffman 1959: 289.

The peculiar Arendtian theory of the self is also based on the redefinition made by the author of the concept of “equality”. As Forti explains,

the meaning attributed by Arendt to the term *equality* has nothing to do with a *natural* or *economic* equality. It rather indicates the same chance for everyone to take part in the game that is played in the common public space.

This has obviously nothing to do with the modern and liberal idea according to which all men were born equal. The Greek ideal, as well as the Republican one to which Arendtian proposal can be retrieved, aimed at redeeming those who, unequal by nature, want to be *made equal* by laws and institutions, and thus enter into the artificial world of *polis* or *res publica*. Equality among men is therefore not a *datum*, but a *project* inherent in the construction of political space.¹⁹ Anyway, in Hannah Arendt the awareness of social oppression is equal, if not superior, to any political thinker of our time. It should be remembered the essay on Rosa Luxemburg²⁰ to get rid of the accusation of neo-conservatism that has often been raised against the author. The central aspect of her political theory is not the exclusion or denial of the social sphere, which would have no sense in a modern conception of action, but its necessary subordination to the sphere of *politeia*. In other words, in order to be able to act in public, with others, a human being must necessarily be rooted in the private, and from such loneliness and privacy he can establish with others a common space in which the original differences no longer matter.

19. Forti 1994: 290-291. See also Arendt 1963.

20. See Arendt 1966.

But Arendtian public space assumes a non-exclusively subjectivist interpretation. The public realm is also the area where the existence of “the world” is revealed. The things of the world can be said to be real thanks to the simultaneous presence of innumerable prospects and aspects in which the common world is offered:

Only when things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.²¹

In this perspective, having an opinion is nothing but the ability to grasp reality by moving between the different perspectives from which the plurality of men sees the world. It is then apparent how far Arendt’s political philosophy is from proposing a Rousseauian theory of direct democracy.²²

In this sense, for Arendt the public-political sphere

is the sphere of being-in-common not because those who stay there have a unique and *common* goal, but because everyone has something *in common*; and this something is the world,²³

which, moreover, we share not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were before and with those who will come after us. So Arendt thinks of an “inactive community”,²⁴ which does not pursue any other purpose than the “being-in-common” thanks to the world and “for the love of the world”.

21. Arendt 1958: 57.

22. See O’Sullivan 1973: 183-198.

23. Forti 1994: 294.

24. See Nancy 1986.

As a consequence of all this, a number of interpreters agree about the presence, in Arendt's work, of two meanings of public space, which corresponds to the presence of two patterns of action. The first meaning of public space refers to a kind of *space of appearance*, whereby actors enjoy the visibility needed to share experiences, evaluate their actions and, above all, build their own identities. It is a potentially fragile space that needs to be constantly recreated and kept alive by the actions and speeches of a plurality of individuals. Public space as a sphere of appearance corresponds to an *expressive model* of action, which is present above all in *The Human Condition*, in which the emphasis is placed on the aspiration of the actors to unveil their own unique identity and to express their excellence, by distinguishing themselves by noble and courageous action and speech, and thereby pursuing glory and immortality in history. With this conception of the public sphere as a dramatic arena, which makes actors performances possible, Arendt seems to refer here to the model of Pericles' Athens and to a, so to speak, *competitive* or *heroic* conception of citizenship.

On the contrary, in a second meaning, present in the works written after *The Human Condition*, especially in *On Revolution*, public space is the same as the *common world* which, as we have noted, unites and at the same time separates men and, by virtue of its permanent character, provides the temporal context in which individual existences acquire the role of narratives, conquering a sort of immortality. In this sense, the public sphere appears as a *discursive space* made possible by a communicative action model, from which one can evince a much more *participatory* conception of citizenship.

Here the emphasis is on a mode of human coexistence based on the capacity of actors to establish relationships inspired by solidarity, reciprocity, symmetry, in order to generate and evaluate, by common accord, persuasion and accommodation, the rules of social interaction, and in order to share the joys of freedom and public happiness. The historical reference model seems to be in this case the American Revolution. Taking into account the second meaning of action and public sphere in Arendt, in a well-known essay Passerin d'Entrèves significantly finds in her thought a deeply "active" idea of citizenship.²⁵ Although the name of Arendt has often been invoked by the communist critics of liberalism – because of her criticism to representative democracy, her constant reference to civic engagement, political deliberation and revolutionary tradition and her emphasis on the necessity of separating politics from morality – at the same time her views contain a strenuous defense of constitutionalism, of the role of law and of fundamental human rights (among which she also includes right to action and right to opinion) and a strong criticism against any form of political community based on traditional ties and customs, or on a presumed religious, ethnic or racial identity.

About the latter point, Canovan notes that Arendtian public space is characterized by "artificiality", that is to say that it is built by men and constitutes, therefore, one of their cultural acquisitions. In this way, the author would hardly be placed in the neo-aristotelian tradition, beyond the emphasis on the importance of revitalizing active life, and would be closer to the tradition of typically modern thinking that sees

25. See Passerin d'Entrèves 1989 and 1993.

politics based on *Will* and *Artifice*, rather than, as in the ancient times, on *Reason* and *Nature*.²⁶ With an emphasis on the artificial nature of political life, Arendt also demonstrates a drastic opposition to any neo-romantic appeal to *Volk*, and to ethnic identity as the foundations of the political community. In many writings, especially in those dedicated to the Jewish question, it is evident her intention of considering irrelevant any attribute of ethnic, religious or racial nature in defining the identity of the citizen and, therefore, his belonging to the political community. In that she is clearly inspired by the example of the spirit of the American Constitution.

Violence, Power, Authority

Arendtian thesis of the sunset of politics implies a basic assumption: that politics, or rather *le politique*, has its own autonomy, only in virtue of which it is possible to denounce its disappearance.

As it has been noted, “Arendt lacks any lexical distinction between *la politique* and *le politique*”.²⁷ Moreover, according to her, discussing about the state is never talking about *la politique* or *le politique*. In fact, nothing is so far from Arendt as longing for the state-*le politique* equation or the idea that politics is the activity of those who decide on the state of exception,²⁸ bringing plurality to unity. Nor it is too much of a problem of order and form. In her view,

everything that has to do with the state is, and has always been, anti-political, and politics has never been identifiable with the state. Because for Hannah Arendt *la politique* and *le politique* are subtracted from the

26. See Canovan 1985.

27. Forti 1994: 306.

28. Schmitt 1972.

universe of domination, even when it is exercised in the form of a legitimate monopoly of force. Where you are together without resorting to any strategic logic, mode of action, and speech, in a public space that allows plurality and distinction, identity and difference, there is politics.²⁹

In the light of these considerations, many interpreters have presented Arendt as the philosopher who reasserts the political experience of the polis, particularly the way in which that experience was articulated by Aristotle, to outline her political criterion. Of course, as Forti's note,

if public space coincides with a determined historical space, that of *polis* or *res publica*, there is no doubt that politics can no longer find any place in our world for her. The more modernity proceeds, the more it departs from authentic politics, and the lesser become the possibilities of free and plural political action.³⁰

But, as the same interpreter well argues, things are not all that way. Beside this interpretation it is possible to identify another one, which integrates and complicates the first, and which refers to Arendt's very singular conception of the public space. This does not seem to possess the solid features usually associated with political forms and institutions, such as Athenian democracy or Roman republic; on the contrary, it is characterized by an extreme fragility, which refers to the character of potentiality of the public sphere itself. As a matter of fact, Arendt writes that public space appears "wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, not necessarily and not forever"; [...] it "is due to this peculiarity of the public realm, which, because it ultimately resides on action and speech, never altogether loses its potential character".³¹

29. Forti 1994: 307.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Arendt 1958: 199-200.

In this sense, public space seems to be incompatible with duration, rather constituting a “possibility”, not limited to a given time and place, but a potentiality that has become current in some occasions. Public space is therefore not an exclusive property of the past, because it is *potentially everywhere*. It concretizes in those moments in which the relations of domination and those spaces on the edge of modern statehood are interrupted: *Räte*, Soviet, Budapest insurrection, Prague Spring, student rebellions, episodes of civil disobedience. If, therefore, it is undeniable that Arendt expresses that melancholy resignation of those who know that, in the world where the social has colonized every area, the potential of *le politique* can become less and less true, it is true as well that if *le politique* itself is a *possibility* and not a determined reality, it can never completely disappear, until there is “a world”.³² The potential character of Arendtian public space is also reflected in the notion of “power”. It is written in *The Human Condition*:

Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence. The word itself, its Greek equivalent *dynamis*, like the Latin *potentia* with its various modern derivatives or the German *Macht* (which derives from *mögen and möglich*, not from *machen*), indicates its “potential” character.³³

Arendt proceeds from this concept to deconstruct the stratifications of sense of the traditional political concepts, and above all to deny the conviction, traced by Plato onwards, according to which politics deals with an asymmetrical relationship between who commands and who obeys.

32. Forti 1994: 308-309.

33. Arendt 1958: 200.

If in the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt still refers to the conventional notion of political power, associating this term with the use of force and violence, from the immediate later years her political reflection is animated by the constant effort to distinguish the peculiarities of political power by the conceptual confusion that has identified it with dominion, constraint or authority.

In the paper *Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought*,³⁴ written in 1953, Arendt argues that almost all political philosophers have either identified in the law the expression of power or conceived the former as a boundary to stem the second. But conceiving power as a tool that gives force to law means, ultimately, that power coincides with violence, which is always a means of serving a certain end. This conveys an instrumental conception of power.³⁵

In Arendt's view, more interesting is the other perspective which conceives the law as a boundary, because in this sense it echoes the ancient significance of *nomos*, that is something man-made, which protects and preserves a more fragile and precious reality. The author writes:

Power, pouvoir, posse or dynamis mean potentiality and therefore stand out from *strength*, something that is at my disposal. That really is my possession. In this sense, power becomes possible, it arises only because and only when the individual begins to act. And "acting", as distinct from "making", always involves a relationship with others.³⁶

This non-instrumental and non-objectivistic conception of power has lived on the margins of the dominant philosophical and political tradition, which has always conceived power

34. Arendt 1953b.

35. Ivi: 41, 44. See also Forti 1994: 311-312.

36. Arendt 1953b: 44.

as associated with violence. Only Montesquieu, Arendt concludes, has succeeded in somehow to relive, in the discovery of the divisibility of power, the original meaning conveyed by the term *dynamis*.³⁷

These ideas are reproduced, in essentially identical terms, in the pages of *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution*, and then systematized, in an almost didactic manner, in *On Violence*. In order to assert her concept of power, in this work Arendt must first fight “certain political science” which is unable to distinguish between keywords such as *Power*, *Strength*, *Force*, *Authority*, and ultimately *Violence*, each of which refers to different and distinct phenomena. Among the main representatives of this thread of political science, the author cites Charles Wright Mills and Bertrand de Jouvenel, also underlining that the various definitions of political power by these and other authors concur in identifying politics with the field of the struggle for power itself and the essence of power with command, whose effectiveness is measured by its level of use of violence.³⁸

But the real target that Arendt’s distinctions want to strike is probably Max Weber, so that, as Forti writes, *On violence* could also be read as a response to weberian sociology of power expressed in *Politik als Beruf*.³⁹ Although the same interpreter underlines a formal analogy between the two authors – since Arendt in her own way distinguishes between *Macht*, *Gewalt* and *Herrschaft* in highlighting the differences between *Strength*, *Violence* and *Power* –, the content of Ar-

37. Ivi: 55.

38. Ivi: 134-155. Arendt quotes from Wright Mills (1956) and de Jouvenel (1952).

39. See Weber 1920.

endian power seems to qualify itself in opposition to Weberian *Herrschaft*.⁴⁰

Weberian definition according to which “power” means “the possibility for specific commands to find obedience by a certain group of men and not any chance of exerting strength or influence on other men” and the statement that “Every true relationship of power entails a minimum of will to obey, that is, an interest in obedience”⁴¹ deeply alert Arendt. If the essence of power is the effectiveness of the command, for Weber and many other scholars violence remains the most flagrant manifestation of power itself.⁴²

The concept of *Herrschaft* crystallizes in itself the elements of a long tradition that connects political power to the state through the notion of sovereignty and constitutes a line of thought that was born with Bodin, affirmed itself with Hobbes, crossed Rousseau’s thinking and was kept alive until Carl Schmitt. Wondering if it is possible to think in terms other than those that inevitably seem to come back to the idea of domination, then Arendt recalls the legacy of another tradition:

When the Athenian city-state called its constitution an isonomy, or the Romans spoke of the *civitas* as their form of government, they had in mind a concept of power and law whose essence did not rely on the command-obedience relationship and which did not identify power and rule or law and command.⁴³

In these ancient experiences, as well as in modern revolutions, we can find traces that lead to a “pure” concept of

40. Forti 1994: 310.

41. See Weber 1922: 207.

42. Arendt 1970: 134-155.

43. Ivi: 139.

power,⁴⁴ which should not be confused with strength, force or violence.

Strength designates

something in the singular, an individual entity; it is the property inherent in an object or person and belongs to its character, which may prove itself in relation to other things or persons, but is essentially independent of them.

While the term *Force*, which we often use in daily speech as a synonym for violence, especially if violence serves as a means of coercion,

should be reserved, in terminological language, for the “forces of nature” or the “force of circumstances” (*la force des choses*), that is, to indicate the energy released by physical or social phenomena.

As for *Violence*, as it was already said, it is mainly distinguished

by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute for it.⁴⁵

Unlike violence, which is for Arendt a means to an end, power is an end in itself. It is never owned by an individual, but belongs to a group and continues to exist only as long as the group remains united. Not only power is not equivalent to violence, nor is it based on it, but power and violence are mutually exclusive. And although seldom in the social reality the two phenomena can be completely separated, it remains indisputable that the more widespread the violence is, the more suffocated is the power.⁴⁶

44. Ricoeur 1989: 141-159.

45. Arendt 1970: 143-145.

46. Ivi: 202.

Perfectly aware of the fact that “pure power” is difficult to withstand over time, Arendt’s concern is about thinking of a way to combine power and stability, without falling into the exaltation of a chaotic and evanescent disorder that can threaten the existence of public space but, at the same time, without denying, as the main categories of modern politics did, finitude and temporality.⁴⁷ The author attempts to answer this dilemma by using the notion of “authority”, which in her opinion refers to the “most elusive” of political phenomena:

Authority can reside in people – there is something like personal authority such as, for example, the relationship between parent and child, or between teacher and pupil – or it may reside in public office, such as in the Roman Senate (*auctoritas in senatu*), or in the hierarchical functions of the Church.

Wherever it resides – Arendt writes in *On Violence* –

its hallmark is unquestioning recognition by those who are asked to obey; neither coercion nor persuasion is needed [...] To remain in authority requires respect for the person or the office. The greatest enemy of authority, therefore, is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter.

Authority therefore implies a type of obedience in which men retain their freedom.⁴⁸

Authority for the author is not equivalent to an experience or a universal concept, but it has existed and has been conceived in a particular time and in a particular space, that of Rome from the primordial of the Republic to the last years of the imperial age. Authority came from the *pietas* with which the Romans looked at the sacred foundation of their city:

47. Ivi: 321-322.

48. Arendt 1970: 144, 1959: 116.

The word *auctoritas* comes from *augere*, “raise”, “elevate”; now the authority, or those who invest it, constantly “raise the foundations”. Members of the Senate – the elders, the *patres* – were invested in authority as they rejoined, thanks to tradition, the original foundation of Rome and to those who had laid the foundations, the *maiores*.

Their duty to “increase” and transmit their legacy derives of the eminently political content of Roman religiosity. In fact, in the context of the “spirit” of Rome,

religion meant literally *re-ligare*, being linked to the past, obliged to the grandiose, almost superhuman and therefore always legendary task of laying the foundations, implanting the cornerstone, for eternity.⁴⁹

As Forti explains,

Being religious, therefore, meant being related to the past, being grateful to it, constantly remembering the act of birth of the city. [...] [The authority] increased the power, legitimized it by binding the citizens, engaging them with the city, without resorting to either the imperative of the law or any form of external coercion [...] or to anything transcendent.⁵⁰

In this sense, the author finds in political history of ideas at least two experiences in which the notion of authority and the related foundation play a decisive role: the theoretical experience of Machiavelli – “the forerunner of modern revolutions”⁵¹ – and the political experience of American revolution.

So throughout her life, the writer has expressed a constant commitment in the defense of man against the reification of a power that belittle man himself. Undoubtedly the notion

49. Arendt 1959: 133-134.

50. Forti 1994: 323-324.

51. Arendt 1959: 152-153.

of authority to which Arendt refers is somewhat enigmatic and elusive, emerging from the memory of an initial choral gesture whose origin is therefore perhaps more evocative than concretely identifiable. To support, as Arendt does, that a “tradition of authority”, formed by all those foundations and revolutions that turn to one another in a long chain of legitimizations, is now irretrievably lost,⁵² means

then being delivered to a fragile but always potentially present power, who has no other authority than the one it receives by the actors who participate to its game from time to time. This means to recognize once and for all that “pure power” can hardly be preserved over time.⁵³

But it is equally unquestionable that even if the decisive impulse of her reflection is the phenomenon of totalitarianism, her acute vision is based not just on a broad knowledge of political thought from the Greek world to today, but above all on the will to think again of political categories with specific reference to human experience.⁵⁴

3. Truth, Lying and Politics. Reflections for an Age of Populism

In line with the author’s attitude to engage in “exercises of thought” based on suggestions coming from concrete experience, one can highlight some of Arendt’s most interesting intuitions in contemporary socio-political discussion. Among the large number of current debates, in the age of populist simplification and of the so-called “post-truth”, the relationship between truth, lying and politics seems to assume particular relevance.

52. Arendt 1978: 545-546.

53. Forti 1994: 330.

54. Serra 1997.

In 1951 Hannah Arendt wrote that the project conveyed by the totalitarian ideology claimed to constantly refer to another reality, which was located in the future, in that “getting rid of experience” (even by adapting facts to ideas, and not the other way round) and to draw the interpretation of reality in a unilateral and logical-deductive way from a premise given for axiomatics, thus proceeding “with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality”.⁵⁵ As a matter of fact, in describing totalitarianism Arendt underlines that one of the features of this new form of government is “its strange disregard for factuality”⁵⁶ and its inclination to fabricate the truth by replacing, through systematic lying, a dummy world to the real one.

According to the author, the need for security expressed by modern masses was fully satisfied by the scientifically prophetic language of totalitarian propaganda, which played both on the feeling of isolation and non-belonging typical of atomized individuals in mass society, and on the contempt manifested by the same individuals for contradictions in reality. Instead of the uncomfortable complexity of reality itself, those individuals seemed to prefer the sharpness of a one-sided interpretation of events, according to the logic of explaining facts as examples of universal laws.

A particular attention was also given by Arendt to the constitutive fragility of “factual truths” in the face of the power of lies, especially in the case of “organized lies”. These reflections were well pointed out in a 1972 essay, *Lying in Politics*, in which she significantly referred not to totalitarian contexts

55. Arendt 1951: 471.

56. Arendt 1968a: 126.

but to the controversial revelations drawn by the “Pentagon Papers” about the management of the war in Vietnam by the USA, that is the nation which particularly symbolized the idea of “consolidated democracy”. Arendt wrote in that essay:

Secrecy – what diplomatically is called “discretion”, as well as the *arcana imperii*, the mysteries of government – and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history. Truthfulness has never been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealing. Whoever reflects on these matters can only be surprised by how little attention has been paid, in our tradition of philosophical and political thought, to their significance, on the one hand for the nature of action and, on the other, for the nature of our ability to deny in thought and word whatever happens to be the case.⁵⁷

Moreover, she noted that

The historian knows how vulnerable is the whole texture of facts in which we spend our daily life; it is always in danger of being perforated by single lies or torn to shreds by the organized lying of groups, nations, or classes, or denied and distorted, often carefully covered up by reams of falsehoods or simply allowed to fall into oblivion. Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs. From this, it follows that no factual statement can ever be beyond doubt – as secure and shielded against attack [...].⁵⁸

This is due to the greater plausibility of the lie, if compared to reality itself:

Lies are often much more plausible, more appealing to reason, than reality, since the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand

57. Arendt 1972: 4-5.

58. Ivi: 6.

what the audience wishes or expects to hear. He has prepared his story for public consumption with a careful eye to making it credible, whereas reality has the disconcerting habit of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we were not prepared.⁵⁹

But the most important consequence for the purpose of the reflections we are proposing here can be probably found in the impact that the strategies of simplification and polarization of the public – political and mediatic – discourse adopted by contemporary populisms can exert upon the publics who are less “equipped” for contextualizing those distorted or simplifying messages which are better known at nowadays as “fake news”. What is particular significant is that, as Arendt notes,

the result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth be defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world – and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end – is being destroyed.⁶⁰

And the weakening of the critical sense seems to find broad consonance not only with the foreseeable reduction of political and social pluralism, but also with such phenomena as the growth of perceived insecurity and individualism, stigmatization of “the different”, erosion of social capital and political participation.⁶¹

Anyway, Arendt concluded on this topic with an optimistic view, stating that

In their stubbornness, facts are superior to power; they are less transitory than power formations, which arise when men get together

59. Ivi: 6-7.

60. Arendt 1967: 68-70.

61. See Sennett 1982.

for a purpose but disappear as soon as the purpose is either achieved or lost. This transitory character makes power a highly unreliable instrument for achieving permanence of any kind, and, therefore, not only truth and facts are insecure in its hands but untruth and non-facts as well. [...] Truth, though powerless and always defeated in a head-on clash with the powers that be, possesses a strenght of its own: whatever those in power may contrive, they are unable to discover or invent a viable substitute for it.⁶²

4. Concluding Remarks. Why Hannah Arendt now?

During a lesson at the University of Pisa, Agnes Heller argued:

It is possible to read the main work of political philosophy written by Arendt, *The Human Condition*, as a story of uninterrupted descent from light into darkness. [...] Although this is a possible reading of Arendt's text, it is not therefore an illuminating reading, and it is certainly partial. [...] When Arendt describes our times as dark,⁶³ our world as prosaic, in very similar terms to Hegelian ones, she can not think of the "end" of something, since the last events, which are dark or splendid, are not necessarily the last, or at least you can not know. Not only because we do not know the future (we do not have privileged access to history), but also because there is no entity already ready as the future; the future is pluralistic, there are many possible future and all reserve surprises.⁶⁴

As for the legacy of Arendt's reflections for our times, one of her most precious suggestions can be identified in the importance of rediscovering fundamental theoretical distinctions that much of modern political thinking seems to have lost. This can help to keep an eye on the quality of the so-called "consolidated democracies", in which power and

62. Arendt 1967: 70-71.

63. See Arendt 1968b.

64. Heller 1999: 151-156.

violence often appear so deeply interconnected that they become almost indistinguishable. Suffice to think of the increasingly widespread use of verbal violence in populist breathing languages and styles.⁶⁵ While it is true that Arendt's concept of power, in its purest formulation, seems difficult to work in highly complex political contexts such as contemporary ones, the above considerations remain indisputable in terms of indicators useful for monitoring the quality of our democracies.⁶⁶

As for the up-to-dateness of Arendt's work, although they are often not applicable, as they are originally proposed, to contemporary highly complex political phenomena, many Arendt's suggestions undoubtedly retain a great value as warnings, as inspiring principles, as regulating criteria of reforming processes. If many of her conceptualizations can provoke perplexity, it is also true that they exert a driving force on the reader who, after a first reaction of uncertainty, comes back to them with interest, being induced to reflect on many incoherences of the contemporary world.⁶⁷

One can then conclude with Agnes Heller's question: "Why Hannah Arendt – now? Because she thought in terms of caducity and finitude" [...] and

for all things that bind her thought to the spirit of our time right now: fragmentation, sense of discrepancy and change, activism, openness to political freedom and democratic situations.⁶⁸

65. Among the most recent contributions to populism, that seek to clarify a highly controversial notion, see Müller 2016, Revelli 2017 and Anselmi 2017.

66. See, among others, Bobbio 1984.

67. Serra 1997: 165.

68. Heller 1999: 160-161. See also Antonini 2002.

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