

Hannah Arendt and the Philosophical Repression of Politics

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Jacques Rancière and Hannah Arendt both disavow political philosophy even as they place the conflict between philosophy and politics at the centre of their philosophical analyses. In response to a roundtable on his ‘Ten Theses on Politics’ in 2001, Rancière declared:

I am not a political philosopher. My interest in political philosophy is not an interest in questions of [the] foundation of politics. Investigating political philosophy for me, was investigating precisely...what political philosophy looked at and pointed at as the problem or obstacle...for a political philosophy, because I got the idea that what [it] found in [the] way of foundation might well be politics itself... (Rancière 2003b, para 10).

These remarks echo a similar declaration made by Hannah Arendt in an interview with Günter Gaus for German television in 1964. Following Gaus’s introduction of her as a philosopher, Arendt protested that she does not belong to the circle of philosophers. If she has a profession at all it is political theory:

The expression ‘political philosophy’, which I avoid, is extremely burdened by tradition. When I talk about these things...I always mention that there is a vital tension between philosophy and politics...There is a kind of enmity against all politics in most philosophers...I want to look at politics...with eyes unclouded by philosophy.
(Arendt 1994, 2)

Arendt and Rancière followed parallel intellectual trajectories, ‘turning away’ from philosophy in response to the shock of an historical event and the disillusionment with a former teacher.

Hannah Arendt attended Martin Heidegger’s lectures at the University of Marburg in the 1920s, which formed the basis of *Being and Time*. Arendt, a German-Jew who had a brief affair with Heidegger while studying at Marburg, was appalled by his support for the Nazi regime as Rector of Freiburg University in the early 1930s. In 1946, she wrote bitterly that Heidegger’s ‘enthusiasm for the Third Reich was matched only by his glaring ignorance of what he was talking about’ (Arendt 1994, 202). She recognized in Heidegger’s characterization of ‘das Man’ the philosopher’s characteristic disdain for public life and, in his support for the Nazis, the philosopher’s tendency to prefer the order of tyranny over the contingency of politics (Arendt 1994, 432-433). Subsequently, she was preoccupied by the problem of how ‘such profundity in philosophy could coexist with such stupidity or perversity in politics’ (Canovan 1992, 255). In exile from Germany, Arendt undertook the extensive historical research that resulted in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Only once she had settled in America did she turn her attention directly to political philosophy in *The Human Condition* (1958).

Rancière contributed to Louis Althusser's reading group on Marx's *Capital* at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris in the 1960s. Rancière became disillusioned with Althusser due to his opposition to the student protests of May 1968 and his insistence on the privileged role of the Party intellectual. In 1972 Rancière wrote: 'Althusser needs the opposition between the 'simplicity' of nature and the 'complexity' of history: if production is the affair of the workers, history is too complex for them and must be left to the specialists: the Party and Theory' (cited in May 2008, 78). In Rancière's view, Althusser reproduces a symbolic hierarchy that empties the words and actions of political agents (such as the 'working class') of any intrinsic worth due to the division he insists on between manual and intellectual labour (see Deranty 2010, 4). Henceforth, Rancière became preoccupied with the problem of the transmission of emancipatory experience, seeking to avoid philosophy's impulse to either fetishize *concepts*, on the one hand, or to fetishize *praxis*, on the other (Badiou 2009). Turning away from philosophy, Rancière engaged in archival research that resulted in the publication of two anthologies and *The Nights of Labour* (1981). Only later in his career did he begin to write about political philosophy, leading to the publication of *Disagreement* (1995).

Rancière and Arendt are both praxis theorists who want to escape political philosophy's reduction of political issues to questions of government. For each of them, Plato seems to stand in for their former teacher, exemplifying the philosopher's antipathy toward politics. Both look beyond the canon of political philosophy to find a more authentic mode of political thought, sometimes highlighting apparently marginal figures as exemplary political actors. For instance, while Arendt valorises Gotthold Lessing for his passionate openness to the world and love of it, Rancière celebrates Joseph Jacotot as the ignorant schoolmaster who presupposes an equality of intelligence between teacher and student. Arendt and Rancière both understand politics as aesthetic in nature, concerning the sensible world of appearances. They are both preoccupied with 'events' or exceptional moments of political action through which social worlds are disclosed to the senses. Given these affinities, sympathetic readers of Arendt might be surprised by Rancière's claim that Arendt's political thought, in fact, *represses* politics in a way paradigmatic of the tradition she sought to escape from. On the contrary, it might appear that rather than offering a rival view of politics, Rancière actually amends and extends an Arendtian conception of politics (e.g. Ingram 2006; 2008).

I want to caution against such an interpretation. It is true that Arendt is an important influence on Rancière, despite his polemic against her. Yet, as Rancière (2003a, xxviii) observes in a different context, 'the power of a mode of thinking has to do above all with its capacity to be displaced.' Arendt's understanding of praxis seems to resonate within Rancière's work. However, those apparently Arendtian notions that Rancière make use of are fundamentally transformed when transposed within his broader thematization of dissensus. To develop this argument I first examine Arendt's own account of the tension between philosophy and politics in order to understand the phenomenological basis of the political theory that she sought to develop. I then consider how persuasive Rancière's characterization of Arendt as an 'archipolitical' thinker is. In the final section, I discuss some key passages in *Disagreement* in which Rancière alludes to Arendt. These passages highlight how those Arendtian concepts that do seem to find their way into Rancière's thought are transformed when displaced from her ontology.

The meaning of appearances

'Every political philosophy', Arendt (2005, 27) tells us, 'faces the alternative of interpreting political experience with categories which owe their origin to the realm of human affairs, or, on the contrary, of claiming priority for philosophic experience and judging all politics in its light'. Arendt believed traditional philosophy failed to recognize the specificity of politics because it followed the second path, privileging the life of contemplation over that of action. Bikhu Parekh (1981, ch.1) highlights four aspects of Arendt's critique of traditional political philosophy. First, philosophy fails to appreciate the *dignity* of politics. Rather than recognizing action and appearances as intrinsically meaningful, it construes politics as a means to a higher end. Second, philosophy fails to appreciate the *autonomy* of politics. Rather than recognize that political life raises distinct ontological and epistemological issues, it treats political problems as matters of morality or law. Third, traditional philosophy neglects the fundamental character and structure of political *experience* due to its preoccupation with formal features of political life. Formal analysis of concepts makes philosophy inarticulate about political phenomena since it becomes self-contained and divorced from experience. Fourth, traditional philosophy fails to appreciate *action* as the proper object of political philosophy because it treats politics as a matter of ruling. Philosophy's preoccupation with questions concerning the legitimacy of government means that it fails to appreciate how human beings actualize their freedom by participating in public life. Overall, then, traditional philosophy tends to 'derive the political side of life from the necessity which compels the human animal to live together with others...and it tends to conclude with a theory about the conditions that would best suit the needs of the unfortunate human condition of plurality and best enable the philosopher, at least, to live undisturbed by it' (Arendt 1994, 429).

Against this tradition Arendt sought to understand politics on its own terms. In her view, philosophy is properly concerned with hermeneutic questions, which originate from existential perplexity, the human need to make sense of experience. Such questions cannot be answered on the basis of knowledge about facts since they entail judgments of worth. Moreover, answers to interpretive questions cannot be judged true or false but only more or less plausible according to the insightfulness of the interpretation they offer (Parekh 1981, 61-62). Thus, rather than explain political appearances in terms of a deeper truth that they reveal, she sought to understand the meaning inherent within appearances themselves. Despite her disillusionment with Heidegger's own political errors, Arendt appropriates Heidegger's concept of world in order to understand plurality as the fundamental ontological condition that structures all political experience (Arendt 1994, 443).

Arendt's insistence on the autonomy of the political as a domain of human experience, distinct from the economic, is crucial to her attempt to develop an authentic mode of political thought. In order to develop a phenomenology of politics, she must assume that those distinctions we make between different kinds of experience (aesthetic, moral, political, economic, etc.) are not simply a matter of convention but reflect objective structures that are part of a universal human condition (Parekh 1981, 69). To this end, Arendt accords a certain privilege to the political thought of the Greeks who, she claims, were more articulate about political experience than the moderns (Arendt 1994, 430). For her, concepts should be understood ontologically as distillations of experience, a way of assigning meaning and significance to human affairs. Since

the political concepts we have inherited originate in the Greek polis, where they were first articulated without the burden of tradition, returning to the Greeks allows for the recuperation of the fundamental structure of political experience (see Parekh 1981, 72-75). She derives from Greek political thought an image of the polity as a space of appearance (Hinchmann & Hinchmann 1984, 196f.). She contrasts this image of an authentic politics, oriented to being-in-common, to the nihilistic, isolating and, indeed, anti-political politics of modernity that made possible the Nazi death camps (see Dietz 2000).

But although the language of the Greeks offers an unparalleled insight into political experience, she blames the political philosophies they developed for the displacement and misunderstanding of what she takes to be the proper object of political thought: *action*. In Arendt's view, the fundamental tension between politics and philosophy arises due to the different nature of the experiences of the *vita activa* (active life) and the *vita contemplativa* (life of the mind). Since action is only possible in the company of others, politics is concerned with 'men' in their plurality as *zoon politikon*. It is concerned with winning immortality by appearing before others within the polity and it entails *doxadzein*, forming an opinion about how the world appears from one's particular perspective within it. In contrast, since thinking always takes place in solitude, traditional philosophy is concerned with 'Man' in his singularity as *animale rationale*. It seeks to discover universal truths and it begins from the experience of *thaumadzein*, speechless wonder at what is from the perspective of transcendent reason. According to Arendt, the philosopher is an 'expert in wondering' and 'in speechless wonder he puts himself outside the political realm where it is precisely speech that makes man a political being' (Arendt 2005, 35).

In describing the emergence of this tension between philosophy and politics, Arendt presents a 'kind of myth of a philosophical Fall', as Margaret Canovan (1992 258) puts it. In the early Greek polis, action and thought were united in logos. Arendt describes approvingly how Socrates thought that the philosopher's role was to help citizens reveal the truthfulness in their own opinions (*doxa*) rather than to educate them with those truths philosophy had already discovered. For Socrates, *doxa* was 'neither subjective illusion nor arbitrary distortion, but...that to which truth...adhered' (Arendt 2005, 19). *Doxa* was the formulation of *dokai moi*, 'of what appears to me' (Arendt 2005, 14). Socrates assumed that the world opens up differently to each citizen and that the commonness (*koinon*) of the world resides in the fact that 'the same world opens up to everyone' (Arendt 2005, 14). The achievement of philosophical dialogue was the constitution of a common world. In talking about the world that lay between them, the world would become more common to those engaged in philosophical dialogue. In this context, to assert ones opinion also meant to show oneself, to appear within the world, 'to be seen and heard by others' and hence it was a condition of being recognized by others as 'fully human' (Arendt 2005, 14).

Following the trial and death of Socrates, Arendt argues, an 'abyss opened up between thought and action' (Arendt 2005, 6). This event 'made Plato despair of polis life' and led him to reject rhetoric, the political art of persuasion, in favour of the 'tyranny of truth' (Arendt 2005, 11-12). Consequently, Plato elevated the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*. In contrast to the eternal truths that philosophy sought to discover through reason, the world of politics appeared as contingent, arbitrary, meaningless and potentially dangerous to those who sought the truth. Against the irresponsible opinions of the Athenians, Plato opposed the Ideas. According to Arendt, Plato was the first philosopher to 'use the ideas for political purposes, that is, to

introduce absolute standards into the realm of human affairs, where, without such transcending standards everything remains relative' (Arendt 2005, 11).

Moreover, and following from this, Plato transformed the concept of *arkhē* into the principle of ruling. Arendt points out the Greeks distinguished between two inter-related modes of action with the words *archein* and *prattein*, which she translates as 'beginning' and 'achieving'. Together these modes of action indicate the contingent and unpredictable quality of a plurality of human beings acting in concert. While action requires an agent to seize the initiative, it is dependent on others joining this enterprise of their own accord in order to see it through (see Markell 2007). Plato, however, sought to master action from beginning to end according to the model of fabrication. He did so by dividing the polity between those who *know* and command and those who *do* and follow orders (Arendt 2005, 52, 91):

To begin (*archein*) and to act (*prattein*) thus [became] two altogether different activities [since] the beginner has become a ruler...who 'does not have to act at all (*prattein*), but rules (*archein*) over those who are capable of execution.' (Arendt 1958 223, citing *The Statesman*)

Politics was thereby identified with the issue of how to rule effectively while action was reduced to the execution of orders. Since, for Arendt, action is distinguished above all by its initiatory quality (or 'natality'), this amounts to the 'elimination' of action by political philosophy. Plato treated politics as a means to establish social order, to protect the philosopher from the whims of the demos. In treating politics as a means to secure the private freedom necessary to pursue the good life of contemplation, philosophy 'deprived political affairs...of all dignity of their own' (Arendt 2005, 83). The consequence of Plato's identification of politics with ruling meant that questions of government, legitimacy and authority came to predominate in political philosophy in place of understanding and interpreting 'action itself' (Arendt 1958, 228).

The edge of politics

Given Arendt's anti-Platonism, her disavowal of political philosophy and her desire to understand politics in its own terms, what are we to make of Rancière's claim that Arendt in fact adopts an 'archi-political position', which represses politics by subordinating it to the logic of police (Rancière 2010, 66)? In his essay 'Who is the subject of the rights of man?', Rancière points out that Arendt is able to equate the subject of human rights with a deprived form of life because she characterises the political sphere as a realm distinct from that of necessity. Stateless people, on Arendt's account, are deprived of the possibility of distinguishing themselves as human within a public realm (see Schaap 2011; Gündogdu forthcoming). As such they are reduced to their mere biological life within a state of nature, an abject condition beyond oppression. According to Rancière, Agamben radicalizes Arendt's *archi-politics* into a stance of de-politicization (Rancière 2010, 64; see Whyte 2009). Indeed, he claims, Agamben's view of the camp as the nomos of modernity is:

..the ultimate consequence of Arendt's *archi-political position*, that is, of the attempt to preserve the political from contamination by the private, the social or a-political life.

This attempt de-populates the political stage by sweeping aside its always ambiguous actors... (Rancière 2010, 66-67 – my emphasis)

In *Disagreement*, Rancière explains that archi-politics is one of three paradigms through which political philosophy seeks to eliminate politics. According to Rancière, philosophy's hostility towards politics arises not due to its resentment of the plurality and contingency of opinion but its hatred of democracy. Philosophy is scandalized by the lack of any proper foundation for political community: the fact that every social order and, hence, every principle of legitimate government, ultimately presupposes a radical equality of anyone with everyone. This anarchical foundation of politics is viewed by philosophy as a source of disorder and excess to which 'political philosophy' is a response. Consequently, political philosophy attempts to develop 'an alternative to the unfounded state of politics' by achieving the 'true essence of politics' (Rancière 1999, 63).

If Rancière accords any special privilege to the Ancient Greek philosophers it is not because they are more articulate than the moderns with regard to the good life of the *bios politicos*, as Arendt (1994, 430) thinks. Rather it is because they were the first to encounter the 'secret' of politics that the political community is 'essentially a litigious community' (Rancière 2010, 40; Rancière 1999, 6). Classical political theory encounters the 'edge' of politics precisely because it does not seek to avoid questions of the good life but looks for a good on which the political community should be constituted and, in doing so, 'bumps into' an obstacle: the anarchy of politics, i.e. the 'absence of any *arché* meaning any principle leading from the essence of the common to the forms of the community' (Rancière 2003b, 10, 11). This is expressed in terms of the principle of democracy: the qualification according to which the people rule is their 'freedom' but this is really an absence of any specific qualification, which they share with every other citizen. As such, philosophy 'came upon politics as this oddity that disrupts its logic in advance, meaning, properly, a disruption of legitimacy' (Rancière 2003b, 12).

Against the anarchy of politics, political philosophy is founded on the attempt to establish the principles according to which the political community is properly organized. The 'inaugural conceptual act' that philosophy makes is the distinction between the good polity (or Republic) and the various forms of corrupt government (Rancière 1999, 63). Philosophy suppresses politics in seeking to overcome the various bad forms of government (*politeiai*) that institutionalize the domination of one class over another by replacing them with the good polity (the *politeia*) in which the true purpose of political community is realized. However, the 'essence' of politics that political philosophy proposes to realize is in fact the opposite of political rationality: it is the logic of police, which is concerned with establishing a distribution of the sensible in which individuals and groups are identified with their position in a social order (Rancière 1999, 63). Rancière writes:

The *politeia*, as Plato conceives it, is a community achieving its own principle of interiority in all manifestations of its life. To put it simply, the *politeia* of the philosophers is the exact identity of politics and the police. (Rancière 1999, 64)

In identifying politics with the police, political philosophy disciplines conflict, subordinating agents to their place within a social order. In identifying police with politics, political philosophy

imitates politics, opposing an account of the proper origin and end of political community to the anarchic foundation of politics that philosophy first encounters (Rancière 1999, 64-65).

Archipolitics, which Rancière associates with Plato, is the project of fully realizing political community according to the fundamental principle for which it exists. It is a form of communitarian rule that subordinates politics by assigning agents to their proper part within the whole. As Luka Arsenjuk (2007) puts it, archipolitics is the attempt to ‘subsume politics under the logic of a strict and closed distribution of parts, a social space which is homogenously structured and thus leaves no space for politics to emerge’. It effectively assimilates the ‘part that has no part’ by turning it into a sociological category of people: the artisans or labourers who contribute to the community through their economic function and, consequently, cannot participate in politics simply because they lack the leisure time necessary for politics. Their virtue is temperance or moderation, which amounts to ‘nothing more than their submission to the order according to which they are merely what they are and do merely what they do’ (Rancière 1999, 67).

At first blush, this characterization of archi-politics does not sound at all like Arendt. Indeed, we can easily imagine several Arendtian objections. Firstly, doesn’t Arendt precisely aim to understand how individuals transcend their social identity (or ‘what-ness’) through a struggle for recognition in which the actor is distinguished in her singularity (or ‘who-ness’) (Arendt 1958, 211; see Villa 1996, 89f.)? As such, her account of action does not seem at all tied to the social order and the assignation of agents to their proper part within it. Secondly, as we have seen, Arendt explicitly criticises Plato for identifying *arkhē* with rule and government, forgetting the extent to which *arkhē* entails beginning (*archein*) and is dependent on seeing through an enterprise with others (*prattein*). Since Arendt construes *arkhē* in terms of initiatory action, she takes it to be an uncertain, unpredictable and contingent ‘foundation’ for politics. Moreover, for Arendt, the animating principle of this kind of action is ‘isonomy’, which she construes in terms of an equality based on a shared freedom from rule. Is it not the case, then, that she valorises precisely the kind of politics that an archipolitical perspective is supposed to suppress? (Arendt 1958, 189, 222; Markell 2006; Balibar 2007). Thirdly, can her account of the polity as a space of appearances that emerges from the public interaction of a plurality of agents really be reduced to a communitarian image of a homogenous society (Arendt 1958, 198-199; Janover 2011)? For Arendt, polity is a fragile and contingent achievement of praxis and its unity is not that of sameness (the logic of the social) but rather a manifold expression of the multiple perspectives that constitute a public sphere. This image hardly seems to fit Rancière’s (1999, 65) characterization of archipolitics as a project of the complete realization of the community with nothing left over, that is, no excess of representation.

I will return to consider each of these points in the final section of this chapter. Having noted them here, however, and given Arendt’s critique of Plato and her sympathetic appropriation of Aristotle, it might seem more plausible to suggest that if Arendt is complicit in the philosophical repression of politics this is because she adopts a ‘parapolitical’ position, one which domesticates politics by re-casting conflict as always in the service of the unity of the polity. Indeed, James Ingram (2007, 236) seems to want to correct Rancière when he observes that this is precisely how Rancière characterizes Arendt. Whereas archipolitics results in the ‘total elimination of politics’, Rancière (1999, 70) tells us, parapolitics ‘refuses to pay this price’. While Aristotle

follows Plato in identifying political action with the police order, he ‘does so from the point of view of the specificity of politics’ (Rancière 1999, 70). While it would be better to have a city in which the virtuous ruled, such a city would not be political for Aristotle since in the polis all citizens partake equally in ruling and being ruled. Aristotle takes this political equality as a given so that the problem for parapolitics is how to reconcile virtuous government with the equality of citizenship. The solution he proposes follows from the recognition that, in order to sustain itself in government, a class must seek to rule on behalf of the common good of the whole. In doing so, ‘the party of the rich and the party of the poor will be brought to engage in the same politics’ (Rancière 1999, 74). As Arsenjuk (2007) describes it, parapolitics is ‘the attempt to reduce political antagonism to mere competition, negotiation, exercise of an agonistic procedure’. The ‘part that has no part’ is incorporated within this order as those whose interests the best must claim to serve at all times in order to legitimate their rule. In this way, the community ‘contains the demos without suffering from its conflict’ (Rancière 1999, 75).

There are certainly elements of this parapolitical perspective in Arendt’s work, which Rancière also draws our attention to. Indeed, at times Arendt seems to address the parapolitical problem of how to combine government by the best with the equality of citizenship. She follows Aristotle in recognizing that the artificial equality of the polity distinguishes it from pre-political forms of association such as the family or tribe based on natural principles of hierarchy. However, she observes, ‘the political way of life has never been and never will never be the way of life of the many’ even though politics, by definition, always concerns the common good of all citizens (Arendt 1990, 275). Her solution to the parapolitical problem is for the public sphere to be both open and exclusive (see Villa 1996, ch.1). While in principle the public realm is open to all, in practice the *bios politicos* is the preserve of a self-selected elite who are drawn to politics by a love of the world (*amor mundi*) and ‘taste for public freedom’, while those who do not care for politics exclude themselves, exercising their right not to participate in government (Arendt 1990, 279; see also Arendt 1958, 27-28). Against Arendt, Rancière (2006, 52-53) observes approvingly that democratic elections in Ancient Athens were based on the drawing of lots. The role of chance in determining who was to rule was seen to be compatible with the principle that ‘good government is the government by those who do not desire to govern’ (Rancière 2006, 43). Moreover, it was a fundamentally political principle because it eroded the ‘natural’ entitlement to rule based on kinship or wealth: the ‘title specific to those who have no more title for governing than they have for being governed’ (Rancière 2006, 46).

Perhaps more significantly, Arendt follows Aristotle in understanding politics in terms of its specificity as a way of life (*bios politicos*) that redeems human existence from the futility of mere biological life (*zoe*). By participating in politics human beings actualize their freedom and invest the world with meaning. On this basis she differentiates political action as *praxis* (involving public speech and action that is as an end in itself) from the instrumentality of work as *poiesis* (involving fabrication or production that is a means to a higher end) and the cyclical nature of labour (concerned with sustaining life through toil, reproduction and consumption). However, she departs from Aristotle in understanding political equality not in terms of partaking in ruling and being ruled but the principle of *isonomy*, which meant both to be free from necessity and ‘neither to rule nor to be ruled’ (Arendt 1958, 32; Arendt 1990, 30f.; see Balibar 2007). In contrast, Rancière insists that the ‘participation in contraries’ is the defining feature of a political subject.

Indeed, Aristotle's understanding of the citizen as one who partakes in ruling and being ruled 'speaks to us of a being who is at once the agent of an action and the matter upon which that action is exercised' (Rancière 2010, 29).

For Arendt, as Rancière (2010, 29) puts it, 'the order of *praxis* is an order of equals who are in possession of the power of the *archéin*, that is the power to begin anew'. Yet, he insists, Aristotle's paradoxical formulation cannot be resolved by the classical opposition between *poiesis* and *praxis* that Arendt revives. As we have seen, Arendt 'restores' the conceptual link between *arkhēin* and freedom in the principle of natality. Equality is realised through participation in the power of *arkhē*. Rancière argues against this conceptual retrieval, insisting that the logic of *arkhē* is inherently linked to the principle of rule: the meaning of *arkhēin* was to 'walk at the head' so that others must 'necessarily walk behind'. Hence, the 'line between the power of *arkhēin* (i.e. the power to rule), freedom and the *polis*, is not straight but broken' (Rancière 2010, 30). Political subjectification, he insists, requires a break with the logic of *arkhē* (see Rancière 2006, 38-39). Arendt can be understood as a parapolitical thinker, then, to the extent that she elides the antagonistic moment of politics, which Rancière thematizes as the way police *wrongs* equality (Rancière 2006, 48). Consequently, she 'seeks to limit politics, admitting it only in homeopathic doses, containing its spontaneity, uncertainty, and contingency by limiting it to certain actors at certain times and places' (Ingram 2006, 236).

Yet, since Rancière is a careful reader of Arendt, we should assume that his identification of her *with* Plato, as an archi-political philosopher is to the point and consistent with his broader critique. As we have seen, he characterizes Arendt in this way because she wants to preserve the political from contamination by the private. The 'opposition between the political and the social', he argues, 'is defined entirely within the frame of political philosophy' and, hence, 'lies at the heart of the philosophical repression of politics' (Rancière 2010, 42). Rancière's critique of Arendt was no doubt part of a strategic intervention aimed not only at Arendt herself but the uses made of her thought within the particular intellectual milieu in which he was writing. Rancière took issue with the notion of a 'return of the political' and political philosophy in France in the 1980s (Rancière 2010, 28, 58; see also Rancière 2006, 23). Invoking the distinction between the good life (*eu zen*) and mere life (*zen*), some philosophers advocated a recuperation of an authentic politics against the encroachments of the social. This gave rise to a wide debate within philosophy, sociology, economics and political science over whether historical developments had led to a post-political era or had given rise to the possibility of recuperating a more authentic politics. As Rancière comments in an interview with Davide Panagia, 'the return to 'political philosophy' in the prose of Ferry, Renaut, and other proponents of what is referred to, on your side of the Atlantic, as 'New French Thought' simply identified the political with the state, thereby placing the tradition of political philosophy in the service of the platitudes of a politics of consensus; this occurring all the while under the rubric of wanting to restore and protect the political against the encroachments of the social' (Rancière & Panagia 2000, 119).

In returning to Plato, Rancière (2010, 42) wants to show how the sociological claim about the end of politics and the philosophical claim about the return of the political 'combine to bring about the same forgetting of politics'. The flipside of Plato's archi-political Republic, he argues is the invention of a sociological account of democracy against which this ideal community is set. Rather than recognizing democracy as one form of government among others, democracy is re-

described as a ‘social phenomena or as the collective effectuation of the properties of a type of man’ (Rancière 2010, 42). According to Rancière (1999, 64), contemporary critics who ‘contrast the good republic with a dubious democracy’ are heirs to the Platonic opposition between the philosophical articulation of the ideal polity and unflattering sociological description of the demos (Rancière 2010, 41). This finds its expression in philosophy’s characteristic ‘hatred of democracy’, according to which democratic man is represented as unruly and driven by his immediate desires (Rancière 2006, 35; Rancière 1999, 22). Indeed, Rancière (2010, 63) insists, Arendt’s ‘critique of ‘abstract’ rights is really a critique of democracy’.

This observation is certainly supported by several passages in *On Revolution* in which Arendt disparagingly equates democracy with the rule of majority opinion and representative cliques. But while Arendt only makes scattered and passing references to democracy in her work, the critique of the social is a consistent theme throughout her work. Arendt deplores what she calls the rise of the social in modernity through which the state becomes concerned with the regulation of economic life. The cost of elevating life as the ultimate end of political organization is that human affairs are deprived of the reality and significance that comes from the world-disclosing activity of praxis. ‘Society is the ‘public organization of the life process itself...the form [of living together] in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance’ (Arendt 1958, 46). Consequently, she says, the public realm has become dominated by the concern of ‘animal laborans’ to make life easier and longer (Arendt 1958, 208). Indeed, Arendt attributes the failure of the French revolution to the fact that it was overwhelmed by the insatiable needs of the poor so that aim of the revolution became ‘abundance’ rather than ‘freedom’ (Arendt 1990, 64).

If Arendt has something in common with Plato, then, it is that her philosophical account of the political/republic (as an autonomous mode of being in common through which human beings actualize their freedom) necessarily presupposes a sociology of the social/democracy (as a way of life that is improper because it makes public what ought to remain private, elevating heteronomous needs and interests above the *inter-esse* of the community). Throughout her work, she contrasts her image of polity as a space of appearance to the sociological reality of modern democracies in which politics is reduced to collective housekeeping, dominated by the concerns of ‘animal laborans’ who is driven by his immediate needs and desires. In other words, like Plato, Arendt thematizes ‘the social’ in sociological terms as a realm of natural determination rather than recognizing it as ‘a disputed object of politics’, a particular distribution of the sensible that is the potential object of politicization (Rancière 2010, 43; Rancière 1999, 91).

Rancière takes issue with Arendt for presuming that there is a ‘form of life’ that is specific to politics since this comes to play a normative function within her work. According to Rancière (2010, 39), the ‘notion that politics can be deduced from a specific world of equals of free people, as opposed to a world of lived necessity, takes as its ground precisely the object of its litigation’. In other words, the presupposition of the autonomy of the political, which is necessary to sustain a phenomenological ontology, is question-begging. For it takes as an ontological given what is, in fact, politically contestable. Arendt makes the mistake of trying to derive an account of politics from an understanding of the subject of politics. But this leads to a ‘vicious circle’ since politics ‘comes to be seen as a way of life proper to those who are already destined for it’ (Rancière 2010, 28). Indeed, he writes:

The canonical distinction between the social and the political is in fact a distinction between those who are regarded as capable of taking care of common problems and the future, and those who are regarded as being unable to think beyond private and immediate concerns. (Rancière 2010, 58).

Arendtian political thought, on this account, represses politics or becomes a form of ‘archi-police’ in seeking to distinguish in advance what counts as properly political action and what amounts to an ‘anti-political’ politics, namely the pursuit of particular interests or the satisfaction of needs in the public domain. What it seeks to evacuate from the public domain is precisely what Rancière takes to be politics itself: a struggle over the distribution of public and private, of what is political and what is not, ‘displacing the limits of the political by re-enacting the equality of each and all *qua* the vanishing condition of the political’ (Rancière 2010, 54).

Strikingly, Rancière (2010, 40) does not consider this to be an idiosyncratic feature of Arendt’s work but the vicious circle of political philosophy itself (see also McClure 2003; Rancière 2003b). Moreover, the philosophical repression of politics it leads to has real political effects insofar as it becomes complicit with a police order. With reference to the French polity, Rancière identifies at least three rhetorical effects of Arendtian archi-politics. First, in practice the Arendtian purification of the public sphere becomes ideological since it surrenders political issues to administration by the state, handing over politics to ‘governmental oligarchies enlightened by their experts’ (Rancière 2010, 28). Second, it discounts the universalizability of political claims about working conditions or the satisfaction of needs. Workers on strike, for instance, can be characterized as acting according to their own particular interests rather than considering the public good. As such it elides the extent to which their actions in fact invoke a *rival* conception of the common in which their claims could be heard as a properly political (Rancière 2006, 23 and in this volume). Third, it deprives the subjects of human rights of political agency. The subject of human rights becomes a ‘worldless victim, the ultimate figure of the one excluded from the logos, armed only with a voice expressing a monotonous moan, the moan of naked suffering, which saturation has made inaudible’ (Rancière 1999, 126). Consequently, it legitimizes humanitarian forms of policing. The rights of the rightless are defended by others: they become the right of military intervention (Rancière 2010, 72-75). To be sure, Arendt (1967, 289) is well aware of the limits of humanitarian rhetoric, noting that the declarations of an emergent human rights movement showed an ‘uncanny similarity in language and composition to that of societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals’. Rancière’s claim is not, however, that Arendt herself endorses such a form of human rights paternalism but rather that the rhetorical effect of Arendtian archi-political discourse is to naturalise the capture of human rights within this kind of police logic (see Schaap 2011).

The Displacement of Arendtian political thought

While couched in distinctive terms, Rancière’s critique of Arendt is in many respects a familiar one. Critics of Arendt have long pointed out that she does not allow for any mediation of the antinomy between necessity and freedom that her political ontology presupposes (Parekh 1979; Pitkin 1981; Bernstein 1986). The opposition between the illumination of the public realm and

the obscurity of the private realm does not provide any basis for understanding the dynamic by which the public sphere is enlarged through democratic struggles or privatized by social power. If we accept that politics is fundamentally about politicization, a process of ‘denaturalizing’ oppressive social relations to reveal them as the contingent effect of social organization, then we are likely to agree with Rancière that Arendt is complicit in the philosophical repression of politics.

While acknowledging this to be a problematic aspect of her thought, however, many sympathetic readers of Arendt nonetheless see important conceptual resources in her work for thematizing an agonistic politics that would be quite close to that advocated by Rancière. In her book, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, for instance, Bonnie Honig recognizes that Arendt can be interpreted either as a ‘virtue’ theorist (who displaces politics) or as a ‘virtù theorist’ (who valorises agonistic politics). It is therefore possible to recuperate Arendt for a radically democratic politics because her ‘politics beckons beyond itself to practices of disruption, augmentation and re-founding that surpass the ones she theorizes and circumscribes’ (Honig 2003, 204). In terms of Honig’s distinction, one might say that Rancière’s critical reading of Arendt as a virtue theorist, is part of an interpretive strategy intended to develop his own thematization of politics from a virtù perspective. But in doing so, he neglects the virtù aspects of Arendt’s thought, which we might instead choose to emphasize.

Consequently, sympathetic readers of Arendt (myself included) have been tempted to see in Rancière a way beyond some of the impasses that afflict an Arendtian account of politics (Schaap 2010). James Ingram (2006, 236), for instance, suggests that Rancière does not arrive at a *radically opposed* account of politics to Arendt, but *radicalizes* Arendt, amending rather than rejecting her account of politics. While Rancière agrees with Arendt that politics is participation as an equal in public affairs, he takes a step back from Arendt’s starting point to view politics as the ‘struggle to achieve that status’. While Ingram does not seek a synthesis between the two accounts of politics, he suggests they are complimentary: by understanding politics as a ‘struggle to participate in public in public life’ Rancière ‘gives Arendtian politics a point and at the same time universalizes it: the point of political action is inclusion and equality’ (Ingram 2007, 239). If the main difference between them is that Arendt conceives politics as a sphere while Rancière views politics as a process, Ingram explains, this difference arises due to their different philosophical backgrounds in phenomenology and Marxism.

Rancière’s contemporary relevance is no doubt due, in part, to his contribution to a vein of political theory that Jean-Philippe Deranty (2003) characterizes as ‘ontology of the political’. This includes Arendt, but also other Heideggerian thinkers such as Nancy, Agamben and Lefort. Rancière’s engagement with this phenomenological tradition is always polemical and, as Deranty points out, produces a radical and original position. In this final section, however, I want to suggest that the difference of perspective between Arendt and Rancière that Ingram brilliantly analyses may be more of an obstacle to an accommodation of their respective accounts of politics than he acknowledges. If Rancière does end up using some Arendtian concepts, these are fundamentally transformed when unmoored from Arendt’s ontology, which Rancière consistently rejects.

To show this I want to return to the three Arendtian objections that I have already briefly outlined. First, her conception of human agency in terms of the disclosure of the ‘who’ through a struggle for distinction provides a basis for understanding how actors are able to enact a subject position that is not socially determined. Second, her thematization of *arkhé* in terms of beginning places politics on precisely the kind of an-archic foundation that Rancière thematizes as the equality of anyone with everyone. Third, her understanding of the political in terms of the disclosure of a common world from a plurality of perspectives is only another way of understanding that excess of representation that separates the ‘we’ invoked in political discourse from a sociologically determined entity. In each case, an Arendtian might suspect, Rancière has actually (albeit, perhaps unintentionally) taken a concept from Arendt and twisted it to suit his purpose.

Let’s start with the third objection and work backward. In *Disagreement*, Rancière mentions Arendt only once (and then in a half-approving reference to her thesis of the ‘banality of evil’, which does not concern us here). However, throughout the text there are numerous allusions to Arendtian concepts. For instance, Rancière’s thematization of dissensus as ‘putting two worlds into one’ seems to borrow the idea of ‘world’ so central to Arendt’s phenomenology (see Rancière 1999, 55-56). Moreover the term ‘dissensus’ itself alludes to the notion of the ‘sensus communis’, which Arendt associates with the notion of world disclosure (see Dikeç forthcoming). In both cases, what is important is the aesthetic aspect of politics in the disclosure of the common.

However, in his thematization of dissensus, Rancière resolutely breaks with the idea of the autonomy of the political, which we have seen is fundamental to Arendt’s ontology and, indeed, to phenomenological approaches more generally. He insists that there is no such thing as an essence of the political and he rejects Arendt’s understanding of the political in terms of a shared life world (Rancière 1999, 61). In a key passage in which he refers to Nancy but might as well be talking about Arendt, he writes:

Political impropriety is not not belonging: it is belonging twice over: belonging to the world of properties and parts and belonging to the improper community...Politics...is not the community of some kind of being-between, of an *interesse* that would impose its originarity on it, the originarity of being-in-common based on the *esse* (being) of the inter (between) or the inter proper to the *esse*...The inter of the inter *esse* is that of an interruption or an interval. The political community is a community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local, through which egalitarian logic comes and divides the police community from itself...Political being together is a being-between: between identities, between worlds...A political community is not the realization of a common essence or the essence of the common. It is the sharing of what is not given as being in-common... (Rancière 1999, 137-138)

As we have seen, Arendt turns to Heidegger’s concept of world to develop her mode of political thinking, which takes plurality as the ontological condition for action. As Deranty (2003) discusses, Rancière twists this notion of world into an ontology that is also an anti-ontology. The putting of two worlds into one means bringing together community and non-community, being and not-being, equality and its absence (Rancière 1999, 55-56). Or, in another formulation, it is

‘the community based on the conflict over the very existence of something in common between those who have a part and those who have none’ (Rancière 1999, 35).

Following Heidegger, it has now become commonplace to associate politics with the ‘ontic’ while ‘the political’ refers to the ‘ontological’ (Marchart 2007, 11f). If politics refers to struggle over the distribution of the benefits and burdens of political association, the political refers to the background horizon in relation to which politics appears. In Arendt’s terms, the political is the disclosure of a common world from the agonistic inter-play of plural perspectives brought to bear upon it. In contrast to this twofold distinction, Rancière (2010, 53) refers to a ‘disjunctive relation between *three* terms’ (my emphasis), according to which *the political* is the meeting point of the two heterogenous processes of *politics* and *police*. Politics refers to the process of emancipation based on the verification of an equality of anyone with anyone. Police, in contrast, is a process of government and the parcelling out of roles and identities within a social order. The political is the field for the encounter of these two process (or ‘two modes of human being together’) in which a wrong is staged or demonstrated: it is the putting of two worlds into one, the community invoked by the part that has no part into the community that is defined by the distribution of the sensible in which politics intervenes (Rancière 1999, 27; Rancière 1992, 58).

As such, the political, as Rancière (1999, 139) conceives it, has the same quality of an event of disclosure as Arendt accords it. In fact, one might hazard that he provides a way to overcome the impasse between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom that afflicts Arendtian accounts of politics. Indeed, one might read the police here as just another word for what Arendt conceives as ‘the social’. However, it is important to recognize that for Rancière, police and politics are not different in kind. They are not separate spheres, as the social and the political are for Arendt (Rancière 2010, 70). For Rancière police is not ‘real’ as in the sociology of Arendt’s archipolitics but, rather, a symbolic order, a partition of the perceptible. What politics does is insert a rival image of the common within the existing social order, another partition of the perceptible, to produce a ‘contentious commonality’ (Rancière 1999, 9). So the concept of world, as Rancière describes it here, loses the quasi-normative status that it acquires in Arendt’s account, which allows her to describe some people as being deprived of world and others to be more ‘worldly’ (see Janover forthcoming).

Consider next Rancière’s understanding of the an-archic foundation of the political community. Arendt seeks to reclaim the concept of *arkhē* from the tradition of political philosophy. She re-thematizes *arkhē* as beginning (rather than ruling) and restores its relation to *prattein*, as following through. Moreover, she understands equality as a pre-condition for action and she characterizes this equality as isonomy, which she takes to mean precisely the *absence* of rule. According to Balibar (2007) this principle of isonomy is fundamentally an-archic. As such, the origin of community is to be found in the freedom of a plurality of agents acting in concert. It is the dramatic enactment of this freedom that is the ultimate ground of political institutions, which is re-enacted in moments of civil disobedience. Indeed, certain descriptions she offers of the public sphere seem to indicate its subaltern or insurgent quality: constituent moments in which the people appear on the political scene (e.g. Arendt 1958, 198-199). On this account, as Ingram (2006) puts it, the common is not homogenous or unified but defined by difference and conflict while promising moments of commonality.

If Rancière seems to follow Arendt in recognizing the anarchical foundation of the polity in a radical equality, he departs from her in thematizing equality in abolitionist terms. In other words, in his view, the meaning of equality can only be determined through the negation of inequality (Deranty & Renault 2009). Equality is a presupposition of an entitlement to participate in politics, which is always enacted in a situation of inequality:

Nothing is political in itself for the political only happens by means of a principle that does not belong to it: equality. The “status” of this principle needs to be specified. Equality is not a given that politics presses into service...it is a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices implementing it.

(Rancière 1999, 33)

This explains why Rancière (2010, 30) takes issue with Arendt's identification of equality with a shared participation in the power of *arkhē*, insisting, against her, that *arkhē* always also entails commanding. For, in thematizing the anarchic foundation of the polity in terms of the ‘wrong’ of the social order, Rancière insists on recognizing the antagonistic dimension of constituent moments that Arendtian agonism elides (Deranty & Renault 2009; Frank 2010, ch. 2; Christodoulidis & Schaap forthcoming). Contrary to Arendt's (1958, 180) claim that politics is only possible where people are neither simply for nor against but only ‘with’ each other, for Rancière the world-disclosing quality of action is revealed precisely in moments of antagonism (cf. Badiou 2005, 21f.). On this account, class struggle is not the ‘hidden truth behind appearances’ but ‘politics itself’, i.e. ‘politics such as it is always encountered, always in place already, by whoever tires to found the community on its *arkhē*’ (Rancière 1999, 18).

Finally, what about Arendt's understanding of the way in which the agent distinguishes herself through action? For Arendt, it is through the struggle for recognition, the striving for distinction in a public sphere, that individual actors reveal who they uniquely and unexchangably are. Arendt's thematization of this process of singularization is attractive to theorists of agonistic politics since it suggests a way to understand how agents are able to transcend oppressive social identities, how action brings about a ‘re-opening of the terms of our social inter-action’ (Ingram 2007, 244). For Arendt the ‘what’ of human existence is part of what we share with nature, those properties of identity and otherness. The ‘who’ corresponds to natality: it is that ineffable quality of selfhood that transcends the natural world (Arendt 1958, 179). The disclosure of the singularity of the agent is the existential achievement of action. ‘This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human’ (Arendt 1958, 176). In relation to the natural world of causal determination, the disclosure of the singularity of the agent has a miraculous quality.

Rancière's notion of subjectification might thus seem to build upon Arendt's account of singularization. Indeed, he alludes to Arendt as he develops the concept in *Disagreement*. As in Arendt, the subject of politics does not precede politics but is constituted through action. This disclosure of the agent in the act is the creative aspect of politics. But, Rancière writes:

A mode of subjectification does not create subjects *ex nihilo*; it creates them by transforming identities defined in the natural order of the allocation of functions and places into instances of experience of a dispute. ‘Workers’ or ‘women’ are identities

that apparently hold no mystery. But political subjectification forces them out of such obviousness by questioning the relationship between a *who* and a *what* in the apparent redundancy of the positing of an existence. (Rancière 1999, 36)

The above passage suggests that, Rancière differentiates his notion of subjectification directly in contrast to Arendt's account of singularization. Subjectification begins through an act of negation or dis-identification and the claiming of an impossible identity within a given context. Rather than understanding agency only in terms of the disclosure of a radically indeterminate subjectivity that is irreducible to the identity ascribed to her, the underlying social conditions that determine the embodied experience or 'what' of an agent are taken to be a condition of possibility for her effective agency (see McNay 2010). As such, subjectivization does not simply entail the transcendence of oppressive social identities or 'mere bodily existence' but their transformation. If Rancière shares Arendt's concern with appearances, what he attends to are the ways in which these are regulated, the processes of representation that thwart or co-opt the appearance of subjects in the public realm. As such subjectivization is always tied up with the struggle to make visible the wrong of the social order (Rancière 1999, 39).

Arendt and Rancière both want to avoid philosophy's characteristic repression of politics, which arises because philosophy treats politics as a problem of government. Rather than a philosophy of right, therefore, they each turn to aesthetics to understand the conditions of possibility for action and appearance. Working within the tradition of phenomenology, Arendt relies on an ontology that differentiates action into separate domains of experience, each associated with a fundamental aspect of the human condition: life, worldliness and action. The phenomenology of politics she develops on the basis of this founding presupposition of her theory is evocative and her concern with political appearances resonates within Rancière's own thematization of politics. Despite Rancière's anti-phenomenological stance, it can be seen that through his critical engagement with this Arendt, Nancy and others, he has inherited some phenomenological concepts.

If Rancière does end up using some Arendtian concepts, however, he unmoores them from her ontology, which he resolutely rejects. Politics for him is not a way of life that we are in danger of forgetting. There is nothing essential about politics that philosophy has repressed. And the political is not an autonomous domain of experience that philosophy has misinterpreted in terms of categories derived from other experiences. Rather, for Rancière, politics is a certain rationality based on the assumption of equality that every social order depends on but seeks to conceal. Philosophy is overtly scandalized by that fact that the legitimacy of every social order ultimately depends on this anarchical foundation. And the political is the name given to the appearance of class struggle, which reveals the possibility of social transformation. Consequently, for Rancière (1999, xii) a mode of thinking that would capture the specificity of politics would not start from speechless wonder at human plurality, as Arendt suggests, but rather would take the aporia of dissensus as the starting point of its analyses.

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