

Thinking about the problems of democracy from Hannah Arendt

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1. Introduction

In recent decades we have witnessed the emptying of the ideal of participatory democracy. If, on the one hand, we go back to the original formulations of the 1960s and 1970s, we see that these indicated the need to expand the spaces of collective democratic management in daily life, particularly in the workplace. But, on the other hand, the models of the following decades accepted the circumscription of democratic practices to the state. In a parallel movement, the critique of representative institutions and the political passivity they promote was set aside in favour of a perception in which the difference between participation and representation is practically annulled. With this, the radicality of the critique of the participation deficit in liberal democracies is lost.

In the context of post-modernity, in which the ailments of modernity have not been healed, together with the generalised lack of interest in public affairs, especially among the younger generations, there is an urgent need to revitalise sleeping democracies, mostly in the Western world. Our work is built on Hannah Arendt's thought, committed to rehabilitating the space of politics, and on the dialogue with other authors, but also on the investigation of psychoanalytic contributions, following the tradition of German critical theory, in the search for antidotes to the dangers that Western democracies face, more specifically the right-wing populist escalation and the disintegrating threat of an instrumental rationality that is colonising all domains of our existence.

It becomes pertinent, as an objective for our work, to revisit Arendt's great questions and, based on existing scientific knowledge, to imagine and conceptualise new forms of inclusion and social and political participation that may renew the democratic system. Here, we can only enunciate this project, which will be developed in a broader research context.

2. Totalitarianism and populism

The study of totalitarianism, even after the profound studies by Carl J. Friedrich and Hannah Arendt after World War II on Italian fascism, German national socialism and

Stalinism and their different replicas, continues to reveal its complexity and to summon our critical capacities. We are inspired by Marilena Chauí's understanding when she applies it to the global reality of the neoliberal system, for the identification of a homogeneous society which, despite its formally democratic and uncensored regimes, tends to refuse social heterogeneity, the plurality of ways of life, the diversity of behaviours, beliefs, opinions and choices.

Despite the polysemic meanings of the concept of totalitarianism, it remains useful to characterise a time that is appearing on our horizon in the context of the catastrophe we are living through, like a sudden end or a time of turning point and abrupt change that is capable of deeply affecting humanity.

In times of dystopias determined by mechanisms of control and standardisation that the pandemic context has been able to install as the foundations of a new and oppressive "normality", it is important to study the phenomenon and the concept of totalitarianism and its correlations with the growing right-wing populism seen in European democratic societies.

In this sense, some unavoidable questions that Hannah Arendt¹ confronted, both on a practical and on a theoretical level, remain unanswered, such as totalitarian ideologies, persecutions against Jews and other minorities, the question of statelessness and the lack of the '*right to have rights*'.

One of the first conclusions she reached was that such phenomena were possible because of a profound crisis of the modern era, the root of which was essentially political. It was due to the progressive disappearance of a common space, the space of politics, where human beings can break out of existential solitude and achieve what Arendt² called the "*redemptive grace of a companionship that saves them from duality, equivocation and doubt*". Modern individuals are, for her, individuals alienated from the world because they are unable to interact with others in an authentic way that goes beyond social automatisms.

For Arendt, the great success of totalitarianism was due to its ability to fill the void existing in this context of alienation and absence of space for true political participation. It was the power of totalitarian ideologies in giving a sense of inevitability to the phenomena of history that attracted millions of individuals, as undifferentiated and disoriented masses³.

¹ Among others, check Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1982 and Giuseppe Ballacci, "Hannah Arendt", in Rosas, João (coord.), *História da Filosofia Política*, Lisbon, Editorial Presença, 2020.

² Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, translated by Roberto Raposo, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1973, p. 529.

³ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 525-531.

3. Inclusion and political participation

Faced with the contradictions of our times, it will be important to refocus politics in our lives, in Arendt's sense of the participation of each person in the community and in the destiny of that community, experiencing their contribution in the public sphere.

Arendt⁴ intended to recover the value of politics as a non-instrumental human activity and, therefore, with an end in itself, enabling human beings to exercise freedom. Here it is a freedom that characterises action, does not correspond so much to the freedom of free will or liberal individual autonomy, but a public and collective freedom: something that is only realised when we act with others. The development of this potential only occurs in a context of plurality. Plurality is the essential condition that determines action, in interaction with other individuals who possess the same capacity to act⁵.

The great existential value of politics lies in the fact that it allows individuals to reveal in the public space their own identity through action and discourse. Hence, for Arendt, the impossibility of acting politically is equivalent to being dead to the world, since we live a life that is not shared with other human beings⁶.

Here arises that great theme that occupied much of Arendt's research, the centrality and fragility of politics in our lives, that the world increasingly dominated by instrumental reason leaves little space to exercise freedom, participation and authentic interaction with others, which would be the true value of politics for Arendt.

Starting from Arendt, it is important to dialogue with other authors, but also to investigate in the ways of psychoanalysis, in the tradition of German critical theory, that great dilemma to which Arendt gave great emphasis, from her study of the Eichmann trial: the inability to think about one's own actions, that is, to judge, which for her constituted the banal root of evil. On the other hand, if we think with Arendt that thought is, by its very nature, a threatening activity for politics, insofar as it can alienate us from our commitment to the common world⁷, then a duality appears that has the potential to explain this disconnection of the world of survival and labour from the world of politics and possibility. Judgement is situated in the middle of this contradiction, which for Arendt characterises politics as such. In other words, judgement is the faculty

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Rio de Janeiro, Forense Universitária, 2007.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Between past and future. Six Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, The Viking Press, 1961, ch. 4.

⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 189-193.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, pp. 69 ff.

that unites thought, which deals with abstractions, with the realm of practice, of the concrete world, allowing the realisation of thought.

Now, political judgements, like aesthetic judgements, are not motivated by specific interests about a given object and go beyond personal conditioning. They go beyond subjective points of view, aiming at a more general validity, about which it is possible to debate and reach a consensus. But for there to be the possibility of understanding between diverse political opinions, common sense and imagination are fundamental. Common sense, as a general sense, allows, through dialogue, to ensure the existence of a reality common to all⁸, while imagination allows us to broaden our mentality through the adoption of an impartial position, away from our own interests and convictions, thus creating the space for the reproduction within ourselves of the points of view of others⁹.

However, both common sense and the exercise of imagination depend on the existence of a public space that enables a dialogue between different points of view. From this confrontation and dialectic with others it is possible to know their positions and form our own, in a precarious balance, which always depends on our ability to judge and debate with others.

In this sense, it will be important to recover, on the one hand, and imagine, on the other, forms of political participation. A political participation that depends on the measure of social inclusion of a society, threatened by the growing fragility and right-wing populist escalations in the States of the Western world. Why do people adhere to resentment and the destruction of the space of politics, as the capacity to think and to influence the real world? Why does the human being close himself up in the impossibility of his solitary existence and fill this void with totalitarian ideology? To give a capable answer, it does not seem sufficient to consider only the level of social inclusion and recognition that each individual manages to achieve, without taking into account the different capacities of resilience correlated with different degrees of emancipation experienced at each stage of life.

The constitution of personality and the recognition that each individual manages to achieve thus assume a fundamental character in the explanation of these aporias. If we assume the hypothesis that intersubjective relations of recognition profoundly influence the formation of personality, the contribution of Axel Honneth¹⁰ is important in conceptualizing the three spheres of recognition: Love, Law, and Social Esteem, initially identified by Hegel. These spheres of interaction, through the cumulative acquisition of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem, create not only the social conditions for

⁸ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 50.

⁹ Arendt, *Between past and future*, pp. 221-222. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant Political Philosophy*, Chicago University Press, 1982, pp. 42-44, 63-68.

¹⁰ Axel Honneth, *Struggle for recognition: towards a moral grammar of social conflicts*, Translation by Jorge Telles de Menezes, Lisbon, Edições 70 (1992) 2011.

individuals to achieve a positive attitude towards themselves, but also give rise to the autonomous individual.

The sphere of love constitutes the primary affective relations of mutual recognition that structure the individual from birth, and which are dependent on a fragile balance between autonomy and attachment. According to Honneth¹¹, the symbiotically nurtured bond, which is formed by a reciprocally desired delimitation initially between mother and child, creates the dimension of individual self-confidence, which will be the fundamental basis for autonomous participation in public life.

From the normative perspective of the generalised other, which teaches us to recognise others as holders of rights, we are allowed to understand ourselves as legal persons. The sphere of law develops in a historical process, its development potential is verified in the generalisation and materialisation of relations of legal recognition.¹²

In order to achieve an uninterrupted self-relationship, human subjects also always need, in addition to the experience of affective dedication and juridical recognition, a social esteem that allows them to relate positively to their concrete properties and capacities. We are in the sphere of social esteem, of a third relation of reciprocal recognition, on the assumption of symmetrical valuation, individuals consider each other in the light of values that make manifest the capacities and properties of themselves and the other as important for the common experience. The symmetrical relationship does not mean reciprocal valuing in equal measure, but rather the challenge that any subject has the opportunity to experience himself as valuable to society through his capacities and properties. Only then, following Honneth¹³'s reasoning, under the notion of solidarity can social relations access a horizon in which individual competition for social valuation can be free from experiences of disrespect.

In the succession of the three forms of recognition, to which parallel experiences of social disrespect can be attributed, the degree of the person's positive relationship with himself increases progressively. With each level of mutual regard, the subjective autonomy of the individual also grows.

Honneth's contribution makes it possible to materialize the political demand of the "right to have rights" that Arendt¹⁴ previously invoked as the first fundamental right. Starting from an analysis of Honneth's bibliographical path that ¹⁵begins with the concept of recognition, seen as a fundamental need of the human being, a theory of

¹¹ Honneth, Struggle for recognition, pp. 131-146.

¹² Honneth, Struggle for recognition, pp. 147-164.

¹³ Honneth, Struggle for recognition, pp. 165-176.

¹⁴ Arendt, Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 330.

¹⁵ Paulo Fontes, The politics of recognition and Axel Honneth's theory of justice. *OXÍMORA Revista Internacional de Ética y Política*, 2021, 0(18), pp. 56-67. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1344/oxi.2021.i0.31707>

justice is developed that seeks to specify the intersubjective conditions of individual self-realization. Honneth's conception of justice¹⁶ is based, in the first place, on replacing the distributive schema with the conception of an inclusion of all subjects in the relations of recognition developed in each situation; secondly, in place of the construction of a fictitious procedure, a normative reconstruction should be placed that historically and genetically reveals the fundamental moral norms of those relations of recognition; and, finally, the exclusive look at the regulatory activity of the rule of law should be complemented by a decentralized consideration of non-state agencies and organizations. A reconstructively proceeding theory of justice is today faced with the challenge of defending in the name of individual autonomy not just one normative principle, but three such principles: depending on the respective social sphere, it must highlight and strengthen the moral standpoints of deliberative equality, the justice of needs, and the justice of performance. A pluralism of these, however difficult it may seem to manage, meets the differentiations that the subjects themselves operate topically in questions of justice; as a series of empirical researches reveal today, they too usually distinguish in cooperation-related problems in their everyday life precisely the three areas mentioned, in order to apply to each of them the corresponding principle of justice.¹⁷

4. Concluding remarks

We can affirm that Honneth's thought represents a decisive contribution to the contemporary debate on theories of justice and political philosophy by questioning positions already taken as presupposed in much of this debate, seeking to offer a response of its own within the framework of a renewed political philosophy. The challenges pursued by Arendt are increasingly current, and lack answers. It remains, therefore, promising to develop our research in the steps of a critical analysis of society, even if historically dependent on our own context.

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¹⁶ Axel Honneth, The texture of justice. On the limits of contemporary proceduralism, *Civitas*, 2009, vol. 9, no. 3, Sept-Dec, p. 360.

¹⁷ Axel Honneth, The texture of justice, p. 365.

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