

Hannah Arendt's radical politics: beyond actually existing democracies¹

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*Hannah Arendt has given us
the clearest image of the
constituent principle in all its
radicalism and potency*

(Antonio Negri)

*The work of a group is a
work of liberation. A working
group is an alliance between
friends*

(Espai en blanc)

In Brazil as in many other parts of the world, Hannah Arendt's thought has been frequently mentioned and assessed in juridical discussions (Lafer 1988; 1993). In fact, her work contains many passages in which she discusses juridical matters, often in close connection with questioning the perplexities engendered by totalitarianism. We may for example, take her discussions concerning the crisis of the Rights of Man in the context of the twentieth century's growing legion of refugees and displaced persons, or her reflections on Adolf Eichmann's trial, which raise the issue of crimes committed against humanity within the death factories of the concentration camps (Arendt 1965). In spite of Arendt's unquestionable contributions to these juridical-political debates, we should stress that her reflections on those matters are pervaded by her criticism concerning the *limitations* of the positive juridical order and of representative democracy as powerful and adequate antidotes

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to the political crisis of our time. Nothing could be further from Arendt's political thinking than to conceive of liberal democracy – that is, our actually existing democracies of mass manipulation and market oriented values – and the juridical field of Law as exclusive grounding instances for the active exercise of political citizenship. In other words, Arendt never substituted the juridical for the political, nor did she understand the rights of man as a positive ground for actively exercising citizenship. Much to the contrary, she always stressed that human rights were to be conceived of in terms of the negative conditions that would free human beings from oppression, thus liberating them for the exercise of politics. Nonetheless, we are frequently surprised by interpretations of Arendt's thought as advocating juridical normativity and democracy without further qualification. In my view, these are the signs of a depoliticized era in which, under the auspices of seminal political thinkers such as Habermas and Rawls (Sauhi, 2002; Habermas 1996; Rawls, 2005) – to name just two of the most important – the political has been overdetermined by the juridical.

In the following considerations, I would like to argue that Arendt's political thought is situated at the *margins* of the subordination of politics to the field of positive Law as well as at the *margins* of traditional liberal understandings of democracy. Thinking against the tide, Arendt has offered us a different conception of the law, of political action and of democracy, one that I would like to synthetically qualify as 'radical democracy', a concept well fitted to understanding marginal political phenomena of our time, at the margins of actually existing democracies. We should not forget Arendt's warning in the preface to the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, that after the totalitarian rupture one cannot indulge in escaping the horror of political reality as we experience it in our present. This warning means that one should refuse as untenable theoretical alternatives that either recommend a nostalgic return to the past or put the totalitarian catastrophe behind us through the anticipation of a better future, one to be found in the liberal democracies of the post-totalitarian world. From the Arendtian perspective, since the consummation of the totalitarian rupture it is the very structure of traditional morality, as well as the ideas of justice and liberty related to it, that must be radically reshaped and reconsidered, instead of simply reestablished. It is essential to acknowledge the reality of this rupture between past and present and to avoid the reassuring tendency of thinking that "some accident has happened after which one's duty is

to restore the old order, appeal to the old knowledge of right and wrong, and mobilize the old instincts for order and safety” (Arendt 1994, p. 329).

According to Arendt, the twentieth century witnessed the eclipse of the possibilities for experiencing radical democracy, due to the increase of the State’s employment of violent means to deal with political questions - as paroxistically exemplified in totalitarianism - and the historical and structural transformation of the public sphere into a social market-place devoted to the administration and the improvement of the *animal laborans*’ vital interests, that is, the interests of man as a laboring and consuming being. This historical transformation affected the autonomy of the political and rendered it increasingly overdetermined by the economic interests of the *animal laborans*, which shaped the contemporary political domain under biopolitical determinations (Duarte 2006). Under such a critical diagnosis, one should not be surprised that Arendt, after sharply criticizing totalitarianism, did not fully embrace liberal democracy and the American way of life as paradigmatic for post-totalitarian political thought. As is well known, in *The Human Condition* Arendt presented a vigorous criticism of Modern political conditions under mass society and mass desolation, stressing the (im)possibilities of fully experiencing radical democracy in the actually existing democracies of our time.

In the following pages I intend to extract the fragile signs of ‘another’ politics from Arendt’s political work - a radically democratic politics, in stark contrast to the depoliticized and technocratic administration of the *animal laborans* vital interests, which is nowadays taken as contemporary politics. In face of the Arendtian diagnosis of the political crisis of our time, we must ask what kind of politics can be derived from her phenomenological reconstitution of action and the public space. For Arendt, radically-democratic political action is non-teleological, which means it is an end in itself; therefore, this non-teleological political praxis refuses the traditional normative need for rational and moral grounding just as it equally refuses to be fully submitted to the positive domain of Law. In other words, Arendt’s political thinking is not dedicated to defending and supporting *actually existing democracies*, but is concerned with opening new political spaces for the active exercise of citizenship. Let us not forget Arendt’s praise of those modern and contemporary radical political instances, such as the French *Résistance*, in which citizens were “sucked into politics as though with the force of a vacuum. Thus,

without premonition and probably against their conscious inclinations, they had come to constitute willi-nilly a public realm where – without the paraphernalia of officialdom and hidden from the eyes of friend and foe – all relevant business in the affairs of the country was transacted in deed and word” (Arendt 1993, p. 3). At first sight, it is true that this radical-democratic politics seems to be a bit awkward or eccentric, but this is so only to the extent that we are not used to looking towards the margins of what we commonly acknowledge as politics today. At the end of the text, I shall briefly point to some examples of radically democratic political forms of self-organization which, although rather incipient and fragile, are already noticeable in their strong subversive challenge to our contemporary democracies. The rather new political collectives that have been spreading around Europe for some years now seem to be a particularly interesting form of radical politics, committed to multiplying the “small hidden islands of freedom” that surround the growing desertification of daily politics. As we shall see, Arendt’s categories help us to understand that their political relevance flows from their defiance of well known anxieties regarding political effectiveness and predictable results. The outcome of this refusal is the radical experience of political action as self-enclosed performance, “beyond victory and defeat” (Arendt 1993a, p. 6). In following such a line of argumentation I am in agreement with Bonnie Honig’s interpretation of Arendt’s political thought, according to which Arendt intended to “retrieve the possibility of an authentic political action capable of resisting the rise of the social and the administration of the late modern state by establishing new communities of meaning and new sites of resistance” (Honig 1993, p. 531).

To qualify Arendt’s conception of political action as radically democratic does not imply that we see her political thought as unwilling to acknowledge the importance of the juridical domain and of representative democracy as such. What it does imply is that Arendt intends to radically redefine the relation between politics and the law, as well as the relation between participatory and representative democracy. With regard to the relationship between politics and the juridical domain, for instance, Arendt’s thinking does not fit the parameters of an absolute refusal of the law as a formal instance for covering up and legitimizing social inequalities, as in older and orthodox versions of Marxism; nor does it fit within the parameters of pure decisionism, which reduces the force of the law to the originary violence that gives birth to the sovereign power. Neither does it fit into the

traditional liberal understanding of the law as a means to normatively tame the plural agonism of collective actors in order to protect the isolated individual from the coercion of power, a conception that implies a negative understanding of both politics and power. With regard to my qualification of Arendt's political thinking as radical-democratic, the gist of the argument is to emphasize her recognition of the tension between constituent power and constituted power. In other words, the question is how to articulate the problem of the stabilization of the political domain with that of leaving free space for creating new political relationships. According to Arendt, genuine political action always bring novelty to the realm of political appearances and, due to its unpredictability, it will always transcend and challenge the juridical order: "The limitations of the law are never entirely reliable safeguards against action from within the body politic, just as the boundaries of the territory are never entirely reliable safeguards against action from without. The boundlessness of action is only the other side of its tremendous capacity for establishing relationships, that is, its specific productivity" (Arendt 1989, p. 191). The Arendtian recognition of the tension between the boundlessness of political action and the necessary limitations of the law is manifest in her view that the law's limiting and stabilizing qualities should not hinder and render impossible the potential creativity of collective action, i.e., the constitution of new spaces of freedom. Therefore, I would disagree with Negri's argument that Arendt discovered the expansive and creative potentialities of constituent power only to further suppress them through the juridical trappings of a liberal understanding of constituted power, as manifested in her praise of the American Constitution (Negri 1999). Contrary to Negri's criticism, I think that no one has better understood the critical problems surrounding all genuine political manifestations in Modernity, which so far have never been more than brief shining moments, whether because they were suffocated by terror and the State's violence, that is, by constituted power; because the revolution soon became too institutionalized and bureaucratized, thus blowing out the flame and passion of political engagement; or because collective and public interest were soon overshadowed by private and economic interests. If it is correct that Arendt is seeking to strategically articulate constituent power and constituted power, politics and the law, participatory and representative democracy, this should be seen as anything but an intention to undermine political creativity. In fact, this is precisely why Arendt tries to rethink the political

dimension of the law in such a way that its stabilizing and limiting function would not contradict the creation of new spaces for the exercise of freedom, as we shall soon see.

Arendt developed a phenomenology of political action and of public space in order to uncover and shed light on their essential democratic determinations, resorting for that purpose to a fragmentary analytic reconstruction of the originary democratic and republican experiences among the Greeks and the Romans. For Arendt, the return to this particular core of political experiences was not a nostalgic attempt to reproduce them, in the present, as they had been in the past. Her aim was to discover in the past, the seeds of political possibilities which were new rather than bygone, since they had not been fully experienced, developed and adequately transmitted or conceptualized by traditional political thought. In other words, the political past to which Arendt returns is plainly ‘new’ and ready to re-new itself in present political experiences. Arendt is not a nostalgic thinker, devoted to mourning what has been definitively lost; neither is she a political philosopher interested in theoretically determining what the extra-political normative conditions are that will grant the exercise of a ‘good’ politics. What really mattered to her was to understand what politics ‘is’ about, and if she turned her eyes to the past it was only insofar as this return to the origin of democratic and republican political experiences could be of interest for understanding both the present political crisis as well as the possibilities for renewing our exercise of politics today.

In Arendt’s reconstruction, freedom as a genuine political experience sprang from the Greek democratic *polis* whose public space was characterized by the fact that it was not made up of the governing and the governed. This means that Greek democratic public space did not recognize human relationships grounded on the inequality that prevails in a situation in which some command and others obey, since all citizens enjoyed the condition of political equality. *Isonomy* did not mean abstract and universal equality before the law, but rather implied that all citizens had the same right to political activity. This meant that all were free to converse and have the certainty that their speech would be considered of interest; command, and blind obedience, were excluded from this scenario (Arendt 1993b, p. 40). Freedom and equality coincided in the Greek *polis* to the extent that *isonomy*, by means of its *nómos*, created an artificial equality amongst men unequal by nature (*physis*). Equality was, in this sense, a political achievement, an attribute of the democratic and

isonomic *polis*, and not a natural and universal property of man as such. Freedom and equality also coincided in the public space since the Greeks believed that freedom depended on a plurality of agents committed to acting and speaking in concert with their peers, excluding all forms of coercion as well as forms of government defined in terms of domination or violence toward citizens. The Greek *polis* as well as the Roman *res publica* were spaces in which freedom and equality could be collectively experienced and exercised through action and discourse. This presupposed the need to guarantee the existence of a stable arena - capable of outlasting the fleeting nature of human deeds and words - which must be preserved and transmitted rather than vanishing into the past. The *polis* was created to provide a common space where men could permanently establish relationships among themselves through interaction and speaking, so that the revelation of the actors' singularities would permit their acquisition of immortal fame, thus escaping the danger of oblivion. Antiquity's experience of both freedom and equality was essentially spatial and relational, that is, it was essentially tied up with the space of appearances that springs up whenever a plurality of acting and speaking beings assemble, disappearing whenever the individual is alone.

By emphasizing that the *polis* refused the distinction between the governing and the governed, Arendt pointed out that governmental power is "only one of power's special cases", although it "must be admitted that it is particularly tempting to think of power in terms of command and obedience, and hence to equate power and violence" (Arendt 1972, p. 146). In other words, in order to deconstruct the traditional equation between power, violence and government, Arendt tried to rescue a more positive, originary and emphatic experience of power. For that matter, she returned *beneath* the already constituted forms of government and thus found the original space and mode of being from where the political domain springs. Politics and power originally spring from "the space of appearances [which] 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" (Arendt 1989, p. 199). This is a space that exists only potentially, that is, under the condition that men gather together in speech and action, vanishing when they become separated. This potentiality is what is implied in the Greek and Latin words for power,

dynamis and *potentia*, which also imply that power is not a good that someone may preserve and accumulate regardless of conditions – in isolation, for instance – since power depends on its realization in the words and deeds of a plurality of agents:

Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is ‘in power’ we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with (*potestas in populo*, without a people or group there is no power) disappears, ‘his power’ also vanishes (Arendt 1972, p. 143).

Power is defined by Arendt as an “end in itself”, so that politics is also understood as an unending task. With regard to power, understood as the opposite of the instrumental character of violence, a means to achieve an end, the important question has to do with the conditions under which it is legitimately generated and exercised. Power’s legitimacy depends on a discursive togetherness “where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities” (Arendt 1989, p. 200). Power’s legitimacy depends on conditions that favor the exchange of divergent opinions and the exercise of consensual collective action in the public space. In the same vein, power is the element that grants permanency to the public space, insofar as it is constantly reenacted in non-violent words and deeds. If power comes into being by means of its actualization in collective words and deeds, it can only remain and acquire its constancy by means of men’s capacity to formulate promises and pacts. This is a fundamental political condition under which future citizens will be able to gather together in the pursuit of public happiness, continually generating and sustaining power through the “temporary agreement of many wills and intentions” (Arendt 1989, p. 201).

It is this radical-democratic understanding of the potentialities of political action that determines Arendt's understanding of the law in its political character. Like the Greeks, but not in plain conformity with them and only them, she views the juridical order of a body politic as the stabilizing factor which pervades the intrinsic fragility of men's pacts and promises as well as the irreducible unpredictability of the common web of plural political relationships. However, this stabilizing factor will never be able to fully dominate politics' unpredictability and fragility. Thus, according to Arendt,

Positive laws in constitutional government are designed to erect boundaries and establish channels of communication between men whose community is continually endangered by the new men born into it (...). The stability of the laws corresponds to the constant motion of all human affairs, a motion which can never end as long as men are born and die. The laws hedge in each new beginning and at the same time assure its freedom of movement, the potentiality of something entirely new and unpredictable; the boundaries of positive laws are for the political existence of men what memory is for his historical existence: they guarantee the pre-existence of a common world, the reality of some continuity which transcends the individual life span of each generation, absorbs all new origins and is nourished by them (Arendt 1968, p. 163).

The law circumscribes each new beginning brought to the world by political action, assuring a space of freedom at the same time that it imposes certain limits on human creativity, in order to guarantee the stability and durability of the common institutional world of human affairs that extends far beyond the moment to which political words and deeds pertain. Arendt also brings the Roman conception of the law into discussion in order to stress that positive laws are both an instance of limitation and a stimulus for political creativity. This understanding springs from the Republican lineage which moves from the Romans through Maquiavel and to Montesquieu, a political thinker for whom "The spirit of laws' (...) is the principle by which people living under a particular legal system act and

are inspired to act” (Arendt 1972, p. 94). In other words, Arendt conceives the juridical order, and above all the Constitution, not only as a set of legal regulations destined to limiting human creativity, but also and mainly as the fixation of *political principles* which ought to inspire human collective actions and thus allow the continuous establishment of new webs of political relationships. Political laws are neither eternal nor absolute; they are not divine commandments and have no essential or unquestionable groundings that would enable them to finally square the contingencies of a political game played by mortal men. According to Arendt, the phenomenon of obedience to the laws has to be understood in terms of power’s legitimacy, that is, in terms of the non-violent quality of political words and deeds. This is what marks the difference between legitimate obedience and obedience which is obtained through coercion and the threat of violence. While violence is always unquestionable, political obedience is always mediated by the acknowledgment of the legal order and by popular consent, which provides the basis for its legitimacy. However, it is essential to stress that there can be no proper consent where dissent is not possible. As a matter of fact, there can be no politics open to the novelty that originates from the interchange of words and acts where there is no possibility of dissent, of saying no, of resisting and trying to interrupt a certain state of affairs. By considering the limiting and the creative aspects of the law, Arendt arrives at an understanding of the laws in which they are conceived not so much as coercive legal instruments, but in a more positive and directive way, as the “rules of the game”: “The sanctions of the laws, which, however, are not their essence, are directed against those citizens who – without withholding their support – wish to make an exception for themselves” (Arendt 1972, p. 193).

At first sight, this Arendtian argument concerning mutual pacts and consent could lead one to think that she fully embraces some kind of traditional contract theory grounded in natural right. According to Habermas, for instance, Arendt finds the fundamental basis of legitimately constituted power in the force of authority and tradition, thus refusing to ground it in the citizen’s communicative praxis, which, through processes of argumentation, eventually arrives at a rationally grounded consensus (Habermas 1977, pp. 23-24). In fact, Arendt stresses the human capacity to make pacts and promises, yet this does not make her political thought a mere variation of some contemporary or modern contract theories. What is significant in her appropriation of the idea of a political contract

is the reality of sheer reciprocity binding citizens together and thus preserving their power and plurality. According to the Arendtian conception of the contract, the originary consent that legitimizes constituted power does not imply the traditional abdication of power on the part those who have made a pact and thus enabled constituted power. Much to the contrary, those who make a pact and therefore give rise to constituted power retain their own power, since shared power is what lies at the roots of constituent power. For Arendt, “power needs no justification, being inherent in the very existence of political communities”, since it “springs up whenever people get together and act in concert (Arendt 1972, p. 151). Being an end in itself, all forms of its justification are either “question-begging – to enable men to live together – or dangerously utopian – to promote happiness or to realize a classless society or some other nonpolitical ideal, which if tried out in earnest cannot but end in some kind of tyranny” (Arendt 1972, pp. 150-151). For Arendt, the relevant political matter is not that of rationally justifying the genesis of power by resorting to the fiction of an ideal past contract; by resorting to a rational reconstruction of the shared principles of “justice as fairness”, arrived at under the protection of the “veil of ignorance” (Rawls); or by resorting to a theory of communicative action in which rational consensus is the result of a process of argumentation led by the force of the better argument under ideal conditions of speech (Habermas). For Arendt, the important issue is to concentrate on the question of power’s legitimacy, which springs out of the nature or quality of the *political principle* that presided the origin of the body politic and thus remains at its very core. Accordingly, for Arendt the contract is not a hypothetical fiction to which men should give their actual consent, but a rather real event of the political world, the event of the founding of a body politic. In order for constituted power’s legitimacy not to become degraded, it is necessary that the political principle which inspired the foundation of the body politic be able to continue inspiring new words and deeds in consonance with it. Everything depends on the real and current human disposition to continue supporting constituted power, its laws and its institutions. Political consent to laws does not depend on blind or involuntary submission to the past or to tradition, nor does it depend on theoretically recognizing its rational and moral foundations, but mostly on the “desire to play”, that is, to actively participate in shaping the destinies of the political community. For Arendt, consent is not considered “in the very old sense of mere acquiescence, with its distinction between rule over willing subjects and rule

over unwilling ones, but in the sense of active support and continuing participation in all matters of public interest” (Arendt 1972, p. 85). In other words, in order to participate in the political game of the world it is necessary either to obey to the agreed-upon rules and laws or to try changing them through collective action.

It follows from these considerations that, for Arendt, political life is potentially conflictive, competitive, agonistic and even antagonistic. Under a democratic and republican political universe, however, antagonism is reduced to the agonistic confrontation of plural interests and points of view which occasionally are able to reach a transitory consensus, as theorized by Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe 2001). Such an agonistic conception of politics is fully compatible with Arendt’s understanding of freedom as a collective performative exercise, assumed as an end in itself. In a rather enigmatic formula, Arendt affirms that “Action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other” (Arendt 1993a, p. 151). Evidently, Arendt does not think that authentic political action lacks previous motives and goals, which would be an absurd contention. The main point to be stressed is that genuine political action, as a pure manifestation of political freedom, has *meaning* only in so far as it transcends its own motives and goals. In other words, free political action goes beyond the consideration of the fulfillment of its previous motives and goals, which it always surpasses. There is no sense in denying that any action has motives and goals of its own; the question is that free action is free only in so far as it is not contingent upon their fulfillment; it must be more creative and productive than it could be if it remained tied to its initial objectives. In short, free acts establish new sets of human relationships in the public realm. Transcending the traditional consideration of action’s particular motives and objectives, Arendt opens up the space for theoretically considering free action derived from the collective adhesion of a plurality of agents to general political principles. These political principles do not pertain to the inner dimension of subjectivity, but rather to the public sphere in which certain acts and deeds are possible or impossible. Such political principles are not a rational, abstract and ideal creation, but are rooted in the tradition of Western political thought as well as in its genuine political practices. We can take, for example, from within the democratic and republican field of thought and experience, the principles of solidarity, of love of equal rights and justice, as well as the interest in public happiness, that is, in actively participating in the

body politic. These political principles are not to be confused with psychological or subjective motivations the agent might possess, but are to be thought of in terms of general political ideals that are able to inspire such and such actions and words in the public sphere, since they are “the very criteria according to which all public life is led and judged” (Arendt 1994, p. 332). By centering her attention on political principles that only reveal what they are once they are manifested in the performance of words and deeds in the world, Arendt was able to investigate the *meaning* of political actions without resorting to non-political or anti-political grounds, whether reason, goodness or instrumental demands of any sort. Action is not to be judged by its efficacy or by the correctness of its moral or rational intentions and motivations, but in terms of its intrinsic grandeur, that is, in terms of its capacity to engender new political relationships without recourse to coercion or brutal violence: “Motives and aims, no matter how pure and grandiose, are never unique; like psychological qualities, they are typical, characteristic of different types of persons. Greatness, therefore, or the specific meaning of each deed, can lie only in the performance itself and neither in its motivation nor its achievement” (Arendt 1995, p. 206).

The Arendtian political phenomenology dislocates political theory’s key concerns from the subjectivity to the exteriority of the public realm of appearances in which agents perform their deeds and words, as noticed by Lisa Disch: “Disclosure publicizes knowledge by decentering and pluralizing the meaning of an act, taking meaning out of the mind of the actor and leaving it open to interpretation by various participants in the public space” (Disch 1994, p. 80). Furthermore, for Arendt the undeniable communicative and deliberative dimensions of political action *do not* conflict with its agonistic and individualizing character, since they are not intrinsically contradictory. For a clearer understanding in this regard we should consider two interrelated political notions. First of all, it is necessary that political consensus is not conceived of as rationally grounded, but only as a transitory result of agreements and negotiations, as is the case in Arendt’s political thought; second, it is necessary to understand that political leadership and excellence do not separate the leader from their peers. If those conditions are provided, then one can understand that communicative deliberation and agonistic striving for excellence are not contradictory but rather two sides of the same event. Under a radical-democratic conception of politics, there can be no sharp and essential distinction between the one who initiates a

course of action in words and deeds, and the others who follow the leader and take this course of action to its fruition in their own words and deeds. According to Disch's interpretation, "An heroic performance can initiate action only when it mobilizes a network of actors" (Disch 1994, p. 81).

Certainly, Arendt did not intend to bluntly refuse representative democracy and its juridical order, but neither was she satisfied with their mere reform. What she aimed at was radically reshaping democracy and the law in consonance with its originary roots, in order to preserve and promote new spaces for the active experience of freedom. To rethink politics beyond the representative model implies favoring new forms of political association and engagement, less centralized, bureaucratized and disciplined, forms of political organization that are more creative, spontaneous and daring. Arendt's concern was double: it was necessary to demythologize the already known representative system as being the sole and exclusive possibility for exercising democratic citizenship in our time, an option that tends to restrict political action to the solitary voter. But she was also worried about naming and calling attention to the already existent new forms of political experience, evidenced under the subtle and recurring desire for full and active participation in the destinies of the political community. For Arendt, if there is still an instance for attenuating contemporary society's growing privatization of the public sphere under the context of a transnationalized and accelerated cycle of laboring and consuming, a cycle that reduces humanity to the bare life of the *animal laborans*, it is the very experience of political action exercised by a plurality of de-centered political agents.

I believe that Arendt's political thought helps us to envisage new instances in which politics is re-appropriated by political agents in shared deeds and words. These events do not restrict themselves to modern and contemporary revolutions nor to more punctual events of resistance against oppression, such as civil disobedience and social movements concerned with the recognition of a plurality of rights, as embraced by gays, women, blacks, ecologists and other minorities. Beyond these already classic instances of political reassessment, Arendt's reflection also illuminates more discrete political happenings such as those promoted by the contemporary marginal political collectives which act at the margins of the representative system. Such political collectives act by establishing a network of virtual and real relationships with other collectives around the world,

constituting themselves as mobile and flexible quasi-places which are always able to move on and to disperse geographically when needed. In political collectives such as the Barcelonan *Espai en blanc* – in Catalan, open space, meaning un-occupied space, open to occupation – the task of critically and hyper-critically thinking the fate of the political under representative democracy and its ever renewed economic and warlike pressures and demands, does not depart from the exigency of finding a way for acting politically, for denouncing and trying to disrupt the hegemonic consensus of mass and market democracies². In other words, *Espai en blanc* is a “program of subversion” by means of the conjugation of critical collective political reflection with critical collective political action, thus confronting both the figure of the disengaged intellectual as well as that of the blind activist, unconscious to the task of discerning the possibilities and the impossibilities of political action today.

Espai en blanc, much as many other Spanish political collectives, is tied up with the illegal practice of *Okupaciones*, of occupying abandoned public and private spaces, which are then transformed into new free spaces for critical thinking, for intellectual discussions, for the organization of subversive political actions; briefly, new spaces open to experimentation and to the development of new forms of life among equals. This collective is not only interested in questioning and denouncing capitalistic real-state speculation, an undeniable problem affecting those who cannot afford to rent a place to live. Even more important is their commitment to implanting new islands of freedom amidst the desert of daily life, in which men and women can experience new forms of solidarity, friendship and new forms of living together, developing the political creativity that arises spontaneously whenever a plural group of people assemble. For these reasons, the open space alluded in their name is not to be understood as the possibility or the “promise of a better future”, but as the “passion for conquering places in which it is possible to live in another way”. This ‘open space’ is left intentionally un-occupied, since the participants are aware that their reflections and forms of acting are not anchored in “pre-established references”. They are conscious that political experience is not something that can be accumulated, since “the past does not work today as a force of transmission and transformation”. All previous revolutionary and enlightened dreams of emancipation have vanished, and this is the

² See the web-page <http://www.espaienblanc.net> from where all following quotations are extracted.

paradigm under which they are committed to liberating and subverting life wherever it finds itself most imprisoned. In so doing, they are also aware that they have to overcome the isolation and the desolation of mass and spectacularized society, since there is no possible way for subverting the present in the absence of a group, of cooperation, of solidarity and collective creativity. The collective is also not interested in reassessing old forms of hierarchical paternalism which sees the intellectual as the legitimate voice of the suffering. Most surprisingly, this collective addresses the State as the political instance to which social and political demands are directed, but they do not do so in the expectation that these demands will be heard and satisfied. In short, they are not especially interested in formulating social demands, but primarily in acting politically and thus manifesting what they want and need. In this sense, they do not even insist in using the old vocabulary of participation and belonging. They do not want to partake in the old distinction between those who pertain to the inner circle of the movement and those who stay outside it. Those who are interested in participating already exist in the world and the collective's task is to provide conditions for their gathering together, breaking down the ghettos in order to shatter the desolation that render all of us impotent. In other words, in their own words, *Espai en blanc* is a "catalyst of experiences: a network of complicities, a device at the disposal for those interested on it". Furthermore, they do not want to stimulate 'participation' in a traditional sense, since the appeal for participation is almost always haunted by the specter of absenteeism or by the calculated representation of exits or defeats, of victory or doom, and for the most part, all radical-democratic political action is previously destined to fail. This does not mean that they are committed to failure, much to the contrary; what they are really committed to is to acting and discussing, that is, to experiencing, provoking and denouncing. In short, they seem to assume politics as an end in itself, beyond the consideration of victory or defeat, in such a way that each defeat can also be considered a victory: at least they do not compromise with the absurdities and the reactionary abuses of constituted power.

In the concluding remarks of this essay, I would like to emphasize that Arendt's conception of radical-democratic political action, understood as an end in itself, inspired by an agonistic and pluralistic model of the public space and lacking any sort of rational or moral groundings, is perfectly fit to promote non-conformism and the search for excellence

amidst the monotonous passivity of the ever-recurring sameness that overshadows our actually existing democracies. A radical-democratic politics of resistance, unsure of its own effectiveness, is at least able to multiply and renovate the spaces of freedom against the constituted power's intent for domesticating the creativity of constituent power, of constituent democracy.

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