

HANNAH ARENDT'S ARGUMENT FOR COUNCIL DEMOCRACY

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One of the most puzzling aspects of the political thought of Hannah Arendt is her support for some kind of council democracy. It is one of the few topics in her work that is not taken seriously by critics. Evaluations of her specific proposals in this regard invariably contain the word utopian: "utopian populist", [Benjamin I. Schwartz, 'The Religion of Politics' in: *Dissent* VII, 1970, p. 147] "utopian in the pejorative sense", [...] ... These critics can immediately point out that Arendt herself referred to her proposals, with qualifications, as a "people's utopia", [Arendt, 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' (interview) in: *Crises of the Republic*, 1972, p. 231] Especially because of the latter, some critics have accused Arendt of acting in bad faith in arguing for council democracy, or suggested that this was an example of Arendt's unfortunate predilection for "historical rarities". [Sternberger, 'The Sunken City', p. 143] They have therefore usually confined themselves to puncturing a few easy holes in Arendt's proposed structure for council democracy, leaving the puzzle of why such a keen and original thinker would consistently support such an obviously impractical alternative. Consequently Arendt's discussion of council democracy has remained in an ill-deserved obscurity.

Arendt actually answers in advance the charge that she did not sufficiently specify the structures of council democracy: "But we can't talk about that now. And it is not necessary, since important studies on this subject have been published in recent years and anyone seriously interested can inform himself." [Arendt, 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution', p.232] Arendt refrains from creating a detailed blueprint of council democracy for good reasons: others were doing so. Her purpose instead is simply to sketch a political structure to illustrate the possibility of realizing alternative political principles: direct democracy, the experience of public freedom and public happiness in the modern world, an arena for proper opinion formation, and a polity not based on the notion of sovereignty. It is necessary to re-examine Arendt's argument for council democracy in order to dispel some of the ambiguity surrounding an issue that was clearly very important to her. ...

Problems of Representative Democracy

In what has become a commonplace of partisans of political participation, Arendt, like others, argues that "no one could be called either happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power". [Arendt, *On Revolution*, 1988, p. 255] In her opinion, the American Constitution impoverished the political experience of the American people. In the representative democracy established by the Constitution, only political representatives experience politics properly so called: "those activities of 'expressing, discussing, and deciding' which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom", [On Revolution, p. 235] Representative politics restricts the broad mass of the citizenry to private concerns; consequently, the "pursuit of happiness" lost the public dimension that that phrase had for Jefferson and became defined as the pursuit of a purely private happiness.

In a like manner, Arendt argues that the meaning of freedom was reduced to the essentially private and non-political concern with civil liberties, Arendt does not deny that civil liberties are important but believes that they have less to do with political participation than with the idea of limited government, however constituted, These private liberties must not cause us to

"mistake civil rights for political freedom, or to equate these preliminaries

of civilized government with the very substance of a free republic, For political freedom, generally speaking, means the right *to be a participator in government' or it means nothing"*. [On Revolution, p. 218]

The American Constitution destroyed this positive sense of freedom, at least for the mass of the citizenry, In the place of public freedom, public happiness, and public spirit were civil liberties, the happiness of the greatest number (an aggregate of private happinesses), and the rule of a privatistic, uneducated public opinion. [On Revolution, p. 221] The American system can be called democratic insofar as the popular welfare and private happiness of the citizens are secured, but must be called oligarchic in that "public happiness and public freedom have again become the privilege of a few". [On Revolution, p. 269]

Besides this normative criticism of representative democracy, Arendt also has certain practical concerns, the primary one of which has to do with Arendt's conception of what constitutes a properly political topic, According to Arendt, political life cannot be concerned with matters about which there can be truth, whether rational truth or factual truth, Political life is concerned solely with matters that have no right answer [In the phrase of George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, 1984, p. 121], with topics that not only allow discussion and various opinions but demand them for proper judgment: "debate constitutes the very essence of political life". [Arendt, 'Truth and Politics' in: *Between Past and Future*, 1983, p. 241] Topics which allow certainty are the province of specialists, not the public at large. [Arendt, 'On Hannah Arendt' (roundtable discussion with H. Arendt) in: Melvyn A. Hill (red.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 1979 p. 317]

Arendt circumscribes political topics in this manner in order to protect the unique political experience from those "who would reduce politics to the realization of absolute truths, whether religious or secular. In so doing she expresses fears similar to those of Isaiah and J. L. Talmon, to whom I will return below, that truth is in many ways at war with freedom. From her perspective, truth does not allow discussion, only recognition and obedience.

In contrast, a truly political question is one in which one's preference cannot be determined by objective criteria which would compel all. "Their validity depends on free agreement and consent; they are arrived at by discursive, representative thinking; and they are communicated by means of persuasion and dissuasion". [Arendt, 'Truth and Politics' in: *Between Past and Future*, 1983, p. 241] Political matters are matters of opinion; their only validation is based on discussion and consent. Truly political topics always allow the possibility of this agreement among rational actors and always allow choice.

Arendt therefore argues that political life, if it is to maintain its experiential integrity, must be concerned exclusively with subjects about which opinions can be formed. She not only accepts Plato's judgment of the political as the realm of *doxa*, she insists that this is the very soul of political experience. The absolute truths of philosophers and the absolute goodness of saints cannot be allowed entrance to this sphere without destroying it. They have their places in other realms of human experience.

That truth has no place in political activity does not mean, however, that all opinions are equally valid, any more than is the case in matters of aesthetic judgment. Opinions allow of better or worse depending on how many different perspectives have been integrated into the formation of a judgment.

"The more people's stand points I have present in my mind while I am pondering a given issue, and the better I can imagine how I would feel and think if I were in their place, the stronger will be my capacity for representative thinking and the more valid my final conclusions, my opinion". [Arendt, 'Truth and Politics' in: *Between Past and Future*, 1983, p. 247]

For Arendt, given that politics only concerns topics which are not subject to truth, the

validity of political opinions rests on consideration of a variety of perspectives.

“Herein lies one of Arendt's practical criticisms of representative democracy: representative democracy cannot provide the experience of a plurality of perspectives for the majority of its citizens. Therefore representative democracy disrupts proper opinion formation on political topics. In fact, according to Arendt, in the specific sense of the term, “opinions” simply do not exist in representative democracy.

“In this system the opinions of the people are indeed unascertainable for the simple reason that they are non-existent. Opinions are formed in a process of open discussion and public debate, and where no opportunity for the forming of opinion exists, there may be moods-moods of the masses and moods of individuals, the latter no less fickle and unreliable than the farmer-but no opinion”. [*On Revolution*, p. 268/69]

To put it another way, there may be “public opinion,” uneducated moods, but no public “opinions”. Arendt's argument is that citizens must have personal experience in public debate for proper opinion formation to take place on political topics. For this, council democracy, a number of public spaces or “elementary republics” around the country, is necessary. [*s phrase, cited by Arendt in On Revolution*, p. 254.] In a clever answer to the usual argument for representative democracy, that “the room will not hold all”, Arendt argues: “the booth in which we deposit our ballots is unquestionably too small, for this booth has room for only one”. Under this circumstance, a “rational formation of opinion” cannot take place. [Arendt, ‘Thoughts on Politics and Revolution’ in: *Crises of the Republic*, 1972, p. 232/33] In sum, Arendt's position is essentially the opposite of Rousseau's insistence that “each citizen should think only his own thoughts”.

In contrast to council democracy, representative democracy depends on the registering of public opinion through the vote. According to Arendt, this is unsatisfactory for two related reasons. First, the vote is the citizenry acting in its private capacity, without political experience or well-formed opinions. This means the encroachment of private concerns on the public world, which cannot be allowed if the public world is to maintain its integrity as a public world. Arendt argues that had a foreboding of the danger of giving power to the citizens “without giving them the opportunity of being republicans and of acting as citizens”. [*On Revolution*, p. 253]

Following from this, a second limitation on voting is that it does not create a meaningful relation between the individual and issues of the whole. Such a relation can only occur if a space for political experience is established in which people can participate outside of their personal network of concerns, beyond instrumental considerations, i.e. if a space of equality is established. Such a political organization would allow a direct, undiluted confrontation with issues that concern the whole. One's political participation would then be meaningful, not in the sense of being given a goal, a direction, or a function, but in having a place in a collectivity of multiple perspectives and having that place acknowledged by others. At best representative democracy can only provide a “certain control of rulers by those who are ruled”, and even this resembles blackmail and force more than it does “the power that arises out of joint action and deliberation”. [*On Revolution*, p. 269]

Arendt's Council Democracy

The basis of all of Arendt's criticisms of representative democracy is her insistence that politics is an irreplaceable kind of human experience, one that can only unfold within a participatory structure of equality and multiple perspectives. It is only in this place that individuals can experience public happiness, freedom in a positive sense, and a plurality of perspectives on which proper opinions on political topics can be formed.

As an experience, politics cannot be reduced to goals of political action, although the latter are not excluded from politics, as Arendt's critics frequently charge. [See, for example, Martin Jay, “Hannah Arendt: Opposing Views,” *Partisan Review XLV*, No. 3, 1978. The “pro” Arendt view is given in the same article by Leon Botstein.] James

Knauer and Hannah Pitkin have demonstrated that an interpretation of Arendt as excluding all instrumental concerns from politics simply cannot be supported textually. [1] Arendt repeatedly allows for an instrumental dimension of political action, as shown above in the phrases "joint action and deliberation" and politics as activities of "expressing, discussing, deciding".

There are two problems with this discussion, however, that must be pointed out here, although they can only be addressed after we consider her proposed structure of councils. The first is her argument that "no one could be called either happy or free without participating" and its connection with her notion of positive freedom. This statement raises the spectre of "self-realization" conceptions of politics, examined by , that lead so easily to a "despotism of liberty", i.e. that people must be forced to act in a certain way in order to achieve their higher natures.

The second is that it is not obviously clear why council democracy would necessarily encourage the multiplicity of opinions. The common experience of small groups seems to indicate the opposite, that small groups are as likely to be narrow-minded on political issues as are the isolated citizens of representative democracy. That is, even if we accept Arendt's argument that proper opinion formation cannot take place under representative democracy, that is no argument for how council democracy can avoid this difficulty.

Some of the objections to Arendt's criticisms of representative democracy can be dissolved by examining her proposed structure for council democracy. This will allow us to see the alternative principles she espouses. At the outset, a very important distinction must be made. Many of the examples Arendt cites as instances of council democracy were actually complex political configurations of workers' councils, neighborhood councils, direct democratic organs of the military, councils of cultural groups, etc., e.g. Russia 1917, Germany 1917-18, and Hungary 1956. The form she specifically wants to praise is that of "neighborhood councils", i.e. to use her distinction, the Revolutionary Councils rather than Workers' Councils. [Arendt, 'Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution' in: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1958, p. 498] The former is territorially based rather than functionally-based, although historically they have overlapped. It is because she has in mind primarily territorially-based councils that she could use 's plan for "ward-republics" to exemplify the council tradition. I will argue in my criticism that this concentration on territorially-based councils is the primary cause of her misinterpretation of the council tradition.

The primary problem for Arendt is how to reconcile the tension between authority and equality among federated councils. [On *Revolution*, p. 278] That is, how can the federation be organized such that the integrity of each local council as an arena of free action is maintained while also articulating the local councils into a national federation which can act for the whole. This is always the primary problem for theories of council democracy.

In Arendt's proposal, the local councils would be open to all who wished to participate and higher councils would be constituted of representatives of the lower. It is important to Arendt's conception that the representatives to the higher councils are not bound in any way to those who selected them on the lower level. The relationship is one of trust, not an imperative mandate of any sort. [On *Revolution*, p. 278; *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 499] Neither are those who participate on the lower level bound to those who do not participate. The participants are self-chosen, as Arendt said, and do not owe their political position to anyone else. [On *Revolution*, p. 280] Although the federated councils would take pyramidal shape, authority would be derived neither from the top down nor from the bottom up. Deputies would not be subject "to any pressure either from above or from below". [On *Revolution*, p. 278; *Crises of the Republic*, p. 230] In some manner, authority would be generated, "on each of the pyramid's layers".

Through this arrangement, Arendt hopes to escape any assertions of sovereignty which,

in her conception, reduces politics to ruling instead of participation among one's peers. Most radical democrats employ such a notion of sovereignty, e.g. "sovereignty of the people", and attempt to realize it by binding delegates, not representatives, to the lower councils through a mandate. In contrast, Arendt's model is one of discussion and decision on each level, unconstrained by a mandate from above or below.

The problem remains, however, of coordinating decision-making by the lower and higher councils. Any argument as to Arendt's solution to this problem is conjectural, but it appears to proceed from her understanding of the principles of the American republic, especially the separation of powers: "that only 'power arrests power,' that is, we must add, without destroying it, without putting impotence in the place of power". [*On Revolution*, p. 151] Each of the councils would be autonomous; each would possess its own power and authority. But if the power and authority of each is to be maintained, then the relations between the different levels of councils must also be based on authority in the sense of the Roman Senate, which Arendt, quoting Mommsen, characterized in this manner; "more than advice and less than command, an advice which one cannot safely ignore". [Arendt, 'What Is Authority?' in *Between Past and Future*, p. 123]

According to Arendt, authority is neither coercion nor persuasion. [Arendt, 'What Is Authority?' in *Between Past and Future*, p. 93] In fact, she argued that one of the most important characteristics of those with authority is that they do not have power to compel obedience. [Arendt, 'What Is Authority?' in *Between Past and Future*, p. 93] In our context of the relations of councils, it would appear that the councils would be related through mutual respect, coupled with the practical recognition that coordinated action is necessary. No single council would have to be persuaded that the course of action upon which the others had decided was the correct one. Rather, each council would have respect for the opinions of the others and realize that certain things must be done, whether that particular council agreed or not. To the extent that this relation to authority is realized, Arendt believes the tension between authority and equality would be alleviated among the federated councils. The very phrase "higher council" would therefore not refer to any coercive power but to the fact of including a larger territorial area as the primary, but not exclusive, focus of deliberations.

This attempt to exclude any notion of sovereignty from her council system led Arendt to a very striking proposal: "the end of general suffrage as we understand it today". [*On Revolution*, p. 279] Bhikhu Parekh, for one, insists that Arendt obviously did not intend the abolition of general suffrage, but he neither supports his interpretation nor is he correct. [Bhikhu Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy*, 1981, p. 171] Arendt argues forcefully that those who would choose to participate demonstrate by that very fact that they care more for public affairs than for their purely personal concerns. They have *amor mundi*: they are "self-chosen." Those who will not participate are self-excluded and will have no voice; they will simply enjoy their negative liberty of freedom from politics. [*On Revolution*, p. 280] "Anyone who is not interested in public affairs will simply have to be satisfied with their being decided without him. But each person must be given the opportunity". [Arendt, 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' in: *Crises of the Republic*, p. 233] Abolition of suffrage is precisely in accord with Arendt's notion of a political elite, self-selected by its intense concern with public affairs at the expense of its members' private worlds. This is why she can describe her federated council system as an "aristocratic form of government".

The last major structural feature of Arendt's council democracy is her insistence that the personal qualities necessary for leadership in the councils are not necessarily the qualities of a good administrator. [*On Revolution*, p. 274] Arendt believes that one of the historical problems of councils is their repeated attempts to administer the economy directly in the public interest. Arendt has workers' control of factories specifically in mind which she asserts have always "ended in dismal failure" and "earned the council system its bad name". [*On Revolution*, p. 274] To avoid repetition of this mistake, Arendt insists on a strict separation of participation, whose principle is

freedom, from management or administration, whose principle is necessity. [*On Revolution*, p. 274]

This separation clearly follows her general argument in *On Revolution* that concern with the “social question” destroyed the ability of the French revolutionaries to establish freedom. It is also closely related to Arendt's argument in *The Human Condition* that non-political concerns have invaded the political realm, threatening the possibility of truly political experience. The occasion for this threat has been the emergence of a modern category, the social. This is a hybrid realm (from the standpoint of the ancients) because it is public but is concerned with the realm of necessity, i.e. production to satisfy immediate need and concentration on making (*animal laborans* and *homo faber*, respectively). [*Arendt's distinction in The Human Condition, 1958*] Attempts to subject the social to the political bring questions of necessity into the realm of free action. This violates the principle, outlined above, of a properly political question and corrupts the political. Thus Arendt maintains a strict division between politics and administration..

This feature of councils will be criticized below. Suffice it to mention that there is no indication by Arendt of how administrators are to be chosen, what they will administer, or what their relationship to the councils will be. The line between political affairs and administration is extremely ambiguous and, I will argue, untenable. Arendt is convinced that such a system of councils at least holds the promise of durability. She agrees with that where everyone “feels that he is a participator in the government of affairs, not merely at election one day of the year, but everyday he will let the heart be torn out of his body sooner than his power be wrested from him by a Caesar or a Bonaparte”. [*Arendt is quoting from 's letter to Joseph C. Cabell v. 02.02.1816 in On Revolution, p.254*] However, at first glance councils appear to be the most fragile of political institutions, regardless of repeated attempts to found them. Arendt attributes the demise of various instances of council democracy primarily to partisan battles. She argues, for example, that the dissolution of the councils in 1917 was the consequence of the Bolshevik Party achieving exclusive political domination. [*On Revolution, p. 257/58*] In a similar manner she believes that the political assemblies of the French Revolution were simply suppressed by their erstwhile supporters, Robespierre and Saint-Just. [*On Revolution, p. 240/41*] Arendt also suggests that Marx repudiated the Paris Commune of 1871 when it was clear that its political program contradicted the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. [*On Revolution, p. 257*] Finally, Arendt asserts that the councils weakened themselves by attempting the work of administration and managing the economy, rather than restricting themselves to purely political matters. [*On Revolution, p. 274*] This is the only hint Arendt gives of any internal weakness in the council system as it has developed historically. Arendt implies that all of these things are avoidable, and as evidence she points to the apparent lack of partisan activity in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. [*Arendt, 'Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution' in: The Origins of Totalitarianism, p. 499*]

Arendt believes that such a system of federated councils-founded on principle! of non-sovereignty, participation of those who would place public affairs before their personal interests, and authority relations in the true sense of authority-could protect the autonomy of the political sphere. It would secure for the mass of the citizenry the possibility of true political experience, the experience of a plurality of perspectives on issues concerning the whole. In this manner, this “new concept of the state” [*Arendt, 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' in: Crises of the Republic, p. 231*] presents the possibility of breaking up the modern mass society. [*On Revolution, p. 279*]

Because Arendt conceived of politics as primarily the securing of a place for a certain kind of experience, she could avoid the difficulties usually found in conceptions of positive freedom. Negative freedom was anathema to her because it did not allow the linkage between freedom and politics: freedom is conceived as something that takes place outside of the political sphere. By outlining what constitutes true political questions and by excluding the issues arising from the realm of necessity, Arendt could formulate the political sphere as a realm of free activity.

She could escape the problem of forcing people to be free by recognizing, even against some of her own statements, that there are a multiplicity of freedoms. Freedom from politics is just as real a freedom as political freedom. For this reason, no one is compelled to pursue freedom above another. There is a place for Plato in her country, if not in her polis.

Objections to Council Democracy

Many criticisms of Arendt's discussion of council democracy revolve around this proposed structure of council democracy. Especially of concern is Arendt's intention to "end suffrage as we understand it today". Even Parekh, who does not interpret this to mean the outright abolition of suffrage, calls this statement "ominous". [Bhikhu Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy*, 1981, p. 171] The chief problem is that many will not be able to participate whether they desire to or not. As Margaret Canovan says, the sick, the elderly, the working, and the inarticulate will be excluded from all political life. [Canovan, 'The Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought' in *Political Theory* 6, nr. 1, 1978, p. 19] Others have suggested that the councils will come to be dominated by those who have the time, especially the wealthy, and by professional politicians and other "manipulators". [Sternberger, 'The Sunken City: Hannah Arendt's Idea of Politics in: *Social Research*, autumn 1977, p. 144] If suffrage is ended, this leisured elite cannot be checked by those who do not participate. Others have asserted that, had they endured, councils would likely have been subject to the same partisan pressures and fissures that occurred in 1917. Finally, Dolf Sternberger says that the only reason councils do stimulate mass participation is that in revolutionary times people stop working and have time that would otherwise be unavailable. [Sternberger, 'The Sunken City:', p. 144/45] Parekh concludes that Arendt had a "romantic and rather naive view of the political elite". [Parekh, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 171]

Some of these criticisms of the structure of Arendt's council system are well taken, and even as Canovan says, exasperatingly obvious. [Canovan, 'The Contradictions', p. 19] However, most of them assume the limitations that Arendt placed on political action, specifically that it would leave the social structure and present distribution of resources untouched. For this reason, the arguments of Arendt's critics do not advance the discussion of what would be necessary to realize such a structure; The solution to these problems is indeed very difficult given Arendt's assumption that politics must be "walled off" from social questions. However, if we reject that assumption, and if the social structure is altered such that especially leisure time is extended in a fruitful direction, these criticisms lose much of their force. Structural problems of council democracy would no doubt remain, but they are not obviously insurmountable.

A second kind of criticism of Arendt's conception of council democracy is that she failed to recognize the real accomplishments of representative democracy. She is accused of misinterpreting key concepts of representative theory in order to portray the citizenry of such democracies as passive sufferers of government. George Kateb, for example argued that Arendt gave a misleading interpretation of the phrase "government by the consent of the governed" such that consent appears as passive acquiescence in being governed. Kateb argues instead that this principle encourages resistance to government policy in that it places the legitimacy of government (i.e. whether it can truly claim consent of the governed) in constant doubt. [Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, 1984, p. 126-31] Kateb contends that this doubt as to the legitimacy of government keeps alive the possibility of civil disobedience: "civil disobedience is unthinkable without the institutions of representative democracy". [Kateb, 'Arendt and Representative Democracy' in: Robert Boyers (red.), *Proceedings of "History, Ethics, Politics: A Conference Based on the Work of Hannah Arendt"*, 1982, p. 123] For example, the anti-war movement, a mass participatory political phenomenon that Arendt supported and compared to "the best in the revolutionary tradition-the council system", [2] is a case of representative democracy keeping alive an oppositional spirit.

It is argued further that Arendt fundamentally misrepresents civil liberties by grouping them all together as negative liberties. Kateb and Canovan both insist that it is through their defense of negative liberties that representative democracies entourage political participation. [Canovan, 'The Contradictions', p. 22] Representative democracy presents more possibilities for political participation than Arendt acknowledged. It even creates a space for political action in the "agonal" sense. In reviewing these accomplishments, Kateb simply asks: "How can we associate passivity with representative democracy?" [Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, p. 132] He suggests that we should at least seriously consider representative democracy as a legitimate political system, even if only "second best". [Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil*, p. 116]

Kateb's criticism of Arendt has much to commend it. Arendt did fail to recognize distinctions among the negative liberties and accordingly underestimated the importance of certain civil liberties for maintaining the possibility of participation. No doubt she also gave, in most instances, an excessively passive interpretation to the phrase "consent of the governed". Kateb's critique, however, leaves the thrust of Arendt's criticism of representative democracy relatively untouched. The key political relation of representative democracy is the vote. The vote does not create a space for direct experience of politics nor for the creation of proper opinion formation which depends on such participation. Certain civil liberties establish the possibility of such participation without giving this possibility an enduring, institutional embodiment. The oppositional mood engendered by the requirement of "consent of the governed" remains simply that: a mood, not an arena for education and analysis.

Kateb also seems to overlook an obvious point: the civil disobedients of the anti-war period seized their participatory space in the face of considerable institutional repression. Further, the political participation of the sixties in this country and others was, although certainly not unique, an unusual period in the history of representative democracies. The doubts as to the legitimacy of government policy which are supposedly inspired by a belief in "consent of the governed" apparently do not realize themselves often enough in order to maintain widespread participation. In their attempts to provide a defence of representative democracy, Kateb and Canovan open themselves to the same charge they make against Arendt: they are building their critique on extraordinary politics. Representative democracy may well be the second best form of government but it is not good enough and, in Arendt's opinion, the best form has been explored inadequately.

A final common criticism of Arendt's proposal for council democracy is that she was ambiguous as to exactly what constitutes a properly political topic. The problem this poses is that if one rules out administration of the public good or any social questions, then it is unclear what the participants in the councils will actually do and discuss. Mary McCarthy asked Arendt this question bluntly at a conference in 1972 and Arendt's response was exceedingly vague. [Arendt, 'On Hannah Arendt' in: Melvyn A. Hill (red.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 1979 p. 315] Arendt's failure to answer this question satisfactorily has led many critics to argue that her conception of properly political activity is so narrowly drawn as to empty politics of all content: *politique pour la politique*. [Martin Jay, 'Hannah Arendt: Opposing Views' in: *Partisan Review* XLV, nr. 3, 1978, p. 353] Political activity becomes a performance for its own sake, simple display.

We need not accept this criticism in its extreme form to see that Arendt's refusal to admit social questions or administration into the political realm does indeed reduce significantly the possible subjects of political discourse and action. The rigid separation of politics and economics in her conception has been ably disputed before and we need not rehearse it in detail here. [See, e.g., Sheldon Wolin, 'Hannah Arendt: Democracy and the Political' in *The Proceedings of History, Ethics, Politics*, pp. 79-94; or Richard J. Bernstein, 'Hannah Arendt: The Ambiguities of Theory and Practice' in T. Bali (ed.) *Political Theory and Praxis: New Perspectives*, 1977, pp. 141-158] However it is

important to show how this separation caused Arendt to fundamentally misinterpret the council tradition and to fail to appreciate exactly what is at stake. This is the key weakness of Arendt's theory of council democracy and forms my criticism.

Assumptions and Limitations of Arendt's Argument

For Arendt, the principle of revolution is the establishment of freedom. However, she argues that when the demands of the poor, the social question, are allowed into the revolutionary process, revolution cannot achieve its goal. Her premier example is that of the French Revolution.

According to Arendt, it was as impossible to ignore "the misery and unhappiness of the mass of mankind" in eighteenth century as it is in much of the world today. [On Revolution, p. 73] The "passion of compassion" inspired the revolutionary leaders and, as a result, the goal of revolution shifted from freedom to the satisfaction of needs issuing from the realm of necessity. Instead of the constitution of freedom, revolution became identified with abundance and the happiness of the people. [On Revolution, p. 61] In the face of the overwhelming urgency of the poor, there is a general denigration of constitutions or any limits whatsoever. As Rousseau noted, the will of the people cannot be bound.

Arendt's objection to this is not only that it leads a revolution away from its original goal, freedom, but that revolutions are incapable of accomplishing their new goal, to abolish poverty, i.e. to solve the social question. [On Revolution, p. 112] The reason is, simply, that poverty cannot be solved by political means:

"the whole record of revolutions - if we only knew how to read it - demonstrates beyond doubt that every attempt to abolish poverty, i.e. to abolish the so-called social question, with political means is doomed to failure and for this reason leads to terror; terror, on the other hand, sends revolutions to their doom". [Arendt, 'The Cold War and the West' (symposium) in: *Partisan Review* XXIX, nr. 1, winter 1963, p. 17]

If scarcity is the human condition, the establishment of freedom through revolutions will be a failure.

However, Arendt argued that scarcity is no longer intractable. Technology has made it possible to produce abundance and will even "force us to fight superabundance". [Arendt, 'The Cold War and the West' in: *Partisan Review* XXIX, nr. 1, winter 1963, p. 17] Modern technology will soon make it possible to handle "all economic matters on technical and scientific grounds, outside all political considerations". This is what Arendt clearly meant when, in a famous passage from *On Revolution*, she said that attempts to liberate mankind from mass poverty by political means are obsolete. [On Revolution, p. 114] This means that economic factors need no longer affect political development and that "the wreckage of freedom on the rock of necessity is no longer unavoidable". [Arendt, 'The Cold War and the West', p. 18]

One of Arendt's basic assumptions is that technology is politically neutral, and it is upon this assumption that her strict separation of politics and administration in modern society is based. Administration is part of the cares of the household and, even when such cares are allowed to enter the public realm (a modern phenomenon to which Arendt sometimes appears to be reconciled), she insists these matters must be "put into the hands of experts, rather than be considered issues which could be settled by the twofold process of decision and persuasion". [On Revolution, p. 91] These are, in Arendt's opinion, questions that allow of only one right answer, that can be determined with certainty, and are therefore not political questions. Arendt simply did not recognize any constraints of social structure on technological development.

Arendt tried further to separate politics from economics with regard to council democracy by insisting that workers' control was unimportant. She claimed that the Soviet Union waited until the last to suppress the specifically Hungarian workers' councils because "nothing more was at stake than the organization of labor and the

mode of consumption and appropriation of consumer goods". [Arendt, 'Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution' in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1958, p. 502] Arendt returned to the topic of worker control in an interview in 1970 to insist that the notion of collective ownership itself was a contradiction in terms: "Property is what belongs to me; ownership relates to what is my own by definition". [Arendt, 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' in *Crises of the Republic*, 1972, p. 214] This, however, failed to grasp the issue, and Arendt almost immediately backed away from the position. She next mentioned the self-management units of and as steps in the direction of redefining property in a more satisfactory way, as the legally enforceable right of an individual to a job and job security.

This latter theory of property has been argued by C. B. MacPherson as the right of an individual to be included in the use of a thing, i.e. as a right of access, rather than of exclusive disposal. Contrary to Arendt, it is not "new," an experiment, but rather is contained in precapitalist notions of property, such as that of the common as common property. [See MacPherson, 'A Political Theory of Property' in *Democratic Theory; Essays in Retrieval*, 1973, pp. 120-40] The point here is not to defend this conception but simply to show that Arendt's attempts to distinguish economic systems from pure political reforms meet great difficulties. [As is demonstrated in the discussion by Arendt in 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' in *Crises of the Republic*, 1972, p. 217/18]

Arendt's attempt to separate politics and administration, to refuse to see the political dimension of economic and technological problems, and to insist that workers' control is either dangerous or absurd, all seriously weakened her understanding of council democracy. Furthermore they caused her to distort the historical record of the Paris Commune of 1871 to give the impression that the Communards did not desire socialism but "the true Republic". [On *Revolution*, p. 264] However, Jellinek himself argues throughout the latter part of his book, which Arendt calls an "excellent study," that the Commune was not only, in its tendency, objectively socialist, but was also in large measure intentionally socialist: "Even when the question arose from immediate necessity, and even when little was done in actual solution, the discussions do bring out the Commune's socialist intentions". [Frank Jellinek, *The Commune of 1871*, 1937, p. 395] Arendt simply distorts Jellinek's complex analysis in order to support her contention.

Analyzing the Hungarian revolution in terms of her framework presented Arendt with even more difficulties. She had continually to acknowledge the express intention of the participants to "reorganize the Hungarian economy on a socialist basis," the evaluation of the U.N. report which she called "truly admirable", [Arendt, 'Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution' in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 498] and simultaneously to insist that this was not important to the participants, that the primary issue was "Freedom and Truth", and that workers' councils were essentially a reaction against the communist trade unions. [Arendt, 'Epilogue: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution', p. 494 and 498] She repeated these contradictions in *On Revolution* by saying, first, that the revolution intended "the reorganization of the political and economic life of the country and the establishment of a new order" and, three pages later, that "social and economic claims played a very minor role". [On *Revolution*, p. 271 and 274]

In contrast to Arendt's confusion over , this is the assessment of a more recent historian of the Hungarian revolution, Bill Lomax:

It was a social revolution aimed not at restoring a previous regime but at creating a radically new social order, One which would be both more democratic than the capitalist West and more socialist than the communist East.[3]

The point here is not that Arendt fails to weigh political and economic demands properly in the Hungarian revolution or the Paris Commune of 1871. The problem is her very attempt to distinguish these two aspects in modern revolutions. It is this distinction that goes to the heart of Arendt's misconception of council democracy.

Hannah Arendt does not understand the significance of the fact that most of the examples of council democracy she utilized were attempts at socialist revolutions. Socialism is the destruction of the exclusive categories economic and political by the recognition that the economy is a political system. The key insight of Karl Marx is that economic relations are *social* relations, relations of domination and decisions that must be subject to political judgment. For this reason, Marx describes the capitalist economy in terms of wage-slavery to indicate its political dimension and sees communism as the "emancipation of the working class." These terms were formulated as an identification of the struggle for socialism with the emancipation of slaves in the United States. From this perspective, to refer to the position of workers in the workplace as merely an economic question is as absurd as to call the abolition of black slavery an economic question. Marx argues these points particularly strenuously in his discussions of the Paris Commune of 1871.

It is easy to establish from the historical record that major forces operating in the historic uprisings of council democracy, at least from the Paris Commune on, were guided by the notion that economic relations are political relations. The recent Solidarity movement is a case in point, with its central demand for worker self-management. In fact Arendt would be hard pressed to point to one example in the council democracy tradition since 1871 where many of the participants believed that nothing much was at stake in the organization of the workplace. Quite the contrary, most of these struggles indicate the belief that economic questions are not questions with one right answer, but rather that the economic sphere here is an arena of political issues in the Arendtian sense.

In a roundtable discussion of her thought in 1972, Arendt's distinction between political and economic (or administrative) topics was openly attacked in this manner by Albrecht Wellmer:

I would ask you to give one example in our time of a social problem which is not at the same time a political problem. Take anything: like education, or health, or urban problems, even the simple problem of living standards. [Arendt, 'On Hannah Arendt' in: Melvyn A. Hill (red.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, 1979 p. 318]

Arendt's response was that each of these problems has a "double face" and "one of these faces should not be subject to debate". However, her example of a non-debatable question, "how many square feet every human being needs in order to be able to breathe and to live a decent life" is obviously political because of the insertion of the word *decent*. Without the word *decent* the question is simply unimportant.

Arendt misunderstands the nature of the decisions in the realm of necessity. No economic administrators or committee of experts will ever be able to find an answer to questions of safety versus more production, leisure time or higher wages, environmental protection versus more production, or present consumption versus investment for consumption in the future. These are issues of opinion, not truth. These are value decisions that can only be solved by consensus of the participants: they are issues of discussion and persuasion if ever there were any. There is simply more at stake in the economic realm than "the citizens' right to choose their profession and their place of work". [Arendt, 'The Cold War and the West' in *Partisan Review* XXIX, nr. 1, winter 1963, p. 16]

In an age of an interdependent economy, rather than individual subsistence households, Arendt's conception of the economy as a realm of necessity is an anachronism. It is ironic that her limitation of truly political questions, which excludes all economic questions, moved her closer to Engels' position, taken from Saint-Simon, that much of public life can be reduced to the mere administration of things, a position she often criticized. Finally, even in ancient times, participation applied as much to administration as to discussion and decisions on political affairs. [As argued at length by M. I. Finley, *Democracy Ancient and Modern*, 1985/73]

This is not to deny that the collapse of the economic and the political as it has developed in existing socialist societies is without problems. Much recent work has begun exploring the theoretical implications of the disappearance of civil society in through its absorption by the state. [See, for example Jean Cohen, *Class and Civil Society: The Limits of Marxian Critical Theory*, 1982] It is to be hoped that this work will provide answers to the political conditions and structures necessary for the formation of a valid consensus on political issues. It will not do so, however, by refusing to apply the criteria of discussion, persuasion, and freedom to *economic* issues.

Conclusion

These criticisms aside, Arendt's discussion of council democracy is important for at least two reasons. First, she argues a separate political structural cause for the meaninglessness of contemporary politics. As Arendt suggests in several places, our politics is truly idiotic in the original Greek sense of "one's own", of isolation, the same sense in which Marx spoke of the "rural idiocy" of the French peasantry. This is not to deny that some form of political representation may be necessary. However, those who refuse to consider seriously the possible relationship between representation and meaninglessness or those who believe that our political problems can be resolved by purely social structural changes, as Arendt says, simply "don't hear the ticking". In this light, Arendt accomplishes what she set out to do: she defends the autonomy of the political.

Secondly, even in the details of her argument Arendt is illuminating. Her discussion of the political principles of non-sovereignty and authority in the ancient sense, and the relation between these structures and the dynamic of political questions, indicates a political structure capable of realizing the principles of political judgment outlined by Ronald Beiner [Beiner, *Political Judgment*, 1983] Her argument is also closely related to the desire for public spaces for normative criticism that guides the work of Andre Gorz, Jean Cohen, and, to a lesser extent, Jürgen Habermas. In fact, the closer one looks, the more one sees that Arendt's reflections are at the very center of recent post-Marxian theory. Arendt may have intended her account of council democracy as merely a people's utopia, a theoretical construction to reveal how much we have lost. But she also clearly believed that council democracy is the only possible modern embodiment of her political principles. Far from merely revealing a perverse delight in historical rarities, Arendt's argument for council democracy is the concentrated expression of her political philosophy. For this reason, however, her argument for council democracy pointedly reveals the assumptions and limitations of her political philosophy.

Notes

[1] James T. Knauer, 'Motive and Goal in Hannah Arendt's Concept of Political Action', *The American Political Science Review* 74, No. 3, September 1980: 721-733; Hannah Pitkin, 'Justice: On Relating Private and Public', *Political Theory* 9, No. 3, August 1981: 327-352. This position is also supported by Arendt's unpublished statement: "This is not to deny that interest and power and rule are very important and even central political concepts The question is: Are they the fundamental concepts, or are they derived from the living-together that itself springs from a different source? (Company/ Action)" Quoted in Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment*, 1983, p. 15. (Ellipses in Beiner.)

[2] Arendt, 'On Violence' in *Crises of the Republic*, p. essay 'Civil Disobedience' in the same collection, Arendt suggests that John Calhoun's concept of "concurrent majorities" may be utilized to regularize dissenting group activities; however, it remains a suggestion. See pp.75-76.

[3] Bill, *Hungary 1956*, 1976, p. 17. For many other examples of Hannah Arendt's misrepresentation of historical facts, see E. M. Hobsbawm's extremely critical review of *On Revolution* in his collection of essays, *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays*, 1973, pp. 201-208.