

HANNAH ARENDT ON FREEDOM AND POLITICAL

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Abstrak

Hannah Arrendt adalah salah seorang pemikir politik yang menempatkan ruang publik sebagai basis pemikirannya. Politik baginya merupakan ruang di mana segala macam gagasan politis dari masing-masing manusia maupun kelompoknya bertemu. Dalam pengamatan Hannah Arendt, ruang publik politik saat ini tidak ramah terhadap perbedaan pendapat ataupun keberagaman. Manusia modern kesulitan untuk membedakan antara ruang publik dan ruang pribadi (*private*) dalam berpolitik. Akibatnya, manusia modern tidak menemukan kebebasannya dalam berpolitik. Tulisan ini akan mengupas persoalan kebebasan manusia dalam ruang publik politik berdasarkan konsep *Vita Activita* yang digagas oleh Hannah Arrendt.

Kata-kata Kunci: Kebebasan, Politik, Vita Activita, Ruang Publik.

Abstract

Hannah Arendt is well known as a political thinker who explicates a profound meaning of political action as a public space. Politic is a space where every political concepts meet each other. For Arendt, in the modern age, people lost appreciation of political praxis and of the plurality of human affairs and the breakdown distinction between public and private. As a result, modern man does not find his freedom in politics. This paper will explore the issue of human freedom in the political public space based on the concept of Vita Activita initiated by Hannah Arrendt.

Keywords: *freedom, politic, Vita Activita, Public Sphere.*

1. Introduction

Hannah Arendt is well known as a political thinker who explicates a profound meaning of political action as a public space, where people meet together; take an initiative to exercise their power. Arendt's thought is concerned with political action in the modern age by reference to the

beginning of our political tradition in the Greece and civilization. For Arendt, in the modern age, people lost appreciation of political praxis and of the plurality of human affairs and the breakdown distinction between public and private. The question of public realm as a locus of freedom lies at the heart of her reflection. Arendt states that freedom as a human condition in the political action has declined in its understanding. She argues that there is a distortion in understanding the original meaning of freedom in ancient Greece which is a turn away from understanding freedom as located in a public space. Moreover, for Arendt, freedom becomes a philosophical issue in the work of St. Augustine as a part of the effort to be divorced from politics. Arendt states the idea of freedom exists in the power of the will to realize its aims have characterized most modern thinking about freedom. This paper, however, will explain the notion of freedom held a distinctive significance for human life, when man takes part in public life and demonstrate public realm as a locus of freedom, where action as excellence can illuminate the world. Arendt in *The Promise of Politics*² states that the meaning of politics is freedom and its field of experience is action. In the action, men are free as long as they act together and it requires the public appearances.

Arendt, states that the public realm, or *polis* is a common ground for political action. In her book *The Human Condition* (1958,) she compares the political arena to a “table” where we gather around. This “table” is an analogy for that space, our shared political world; a table that relates people together with a common cause, but simultaneously separates them by sitting in their own chairs and having their own stances. This space of appearance allows the people to practice politics, where they encounter each other and experience the existence of others. In the other words, they experience other people in the plurality, which significant aspect in the political action. Plurality is the condition of human condition. Plurality means that no two human beings as are alike, so people have to relate to one another, must come together, find ways to live together, negotiate their differences, exchanges opinions, established relational political institution.

According to Arendt being human is being political, and we have to go out in public, take place at that table, take initiative to meet others and speak out. She argues that in totalitarian rule, there are no rooms, much less table for people to act and speak, because totalitarianisms is the complete opposite of genuine politics.² Arendt explains and defines totalitarianisms as an unprecedented event. Under totalitarianisms people

1 Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 2005, 108.

2 Hannah Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, The United State of America: A Harvest Book, 1976, 460.

are brought together as a single whole rather than having a distinct identity. For Arendt, the most characteristic of totalitarianism's rule is the way that abolishes the space between people. In other words, there is no space for freedom.

Departing from totalitarianism as a unique phenomenon, where aspects of human life are controlled by the totalitarian. Arendt formulates an alternative concept of the necessity of space in political life in order to protect it against totalitarianism. She introduces *Vita Activa*, which she claims that this comprehensive concept will bring back the genuine politics.

2. In the light of Vita Activa

Arendt observes that there is a decline of understanding of the meaning of political activity, since the traditions of Western Philosophy do not pay much attention on the *vita activa*. She suggests that there are three different modes for human activities, namely labor, work, and action. Each of them relates to universal and basic conditions, "under which life on earth has been given to a man and by "man-made or "self-made conditions.³ The argument for this is that, "whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence". According to Arendt, three human conditions; labor, work and action still relate to the three fundamental human activities, namely; life itself, worldliness and human plurality.

The first mode of human activities is labor. Labor is the activity of human needs in order to sustain and reproduce themselves. It relates to the life itself. Arendt observes that the word labor is also used in many languages to mean the process of giving birth. (Arendt, HC: 115) Labor is the activity that relates to the condition of life itself. Labor manifests of the basic behavior imposed on humans, namely, the necessity to survive. Human beings want to satisfy their needs for survival by laboring in order to sustain their life.⁴

Arendt writes:

"...all human activities which arise out of the necessity to cope with them are bound to the recurring cycles of nature and have in themselves no beginning and no end, properly speaking; unlike *working*, whose end has come when the object is finished, ready to be added to the common world of things, *laboring* always moves in the same circle, which is prescribed by the biological process

3 Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 6.

4 Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 9.

of the living organism and the end of its "toil and trouble" comes only with the death of this organism" ⁵

The activity of labor is a never ending process with no enduring result. It is like a process of nature itself, and it is controlled by the biological needs. Arendt argues doing the activity of laboring, human being is called an *animal laborans*. Articulating of the meaning of labor, Arendt claims that, for *animal laborans*, the world and the self are not yet real; they only have a potential existence.⁶ For Arendt, one cannot survive only with the activity of labor since, *animal laborans* always has to defend and protect himself from the natural processes and in order to do that, *animallaborans* has to take things out of nature's hands and consume them.⁶ One then, survive not only with the condition of life itself, it also needs the condition of worldliness. Labor is necessary for life, but as a laborer, the human being is the equivalent of a slave. According to Arendt, model of Ancient Greece the sphere of labor maps onto the sphere of the household, the private economic realm where the primary movers are slaves and women. The lack of political freedom of these groups helps to underline Arendt's point that labor is a necessary precondition of any other activity, but in itself it is not far removed from an animal existence.

In Arendt's view labor is very much a natural activity, one that humans share with others species in the naturally given world. However, through the work, the second mode of the *vita active*, humans create an artificial world of their own, lasting and objective a context for uniquely human activity.⁷ This work relates to the human condition of "worldliness". This condition of human beings points out to the unnaturalness of human existence on earth. It is work that literally creates the space that Arendt sees as necessary for political life. Work covers a range of creative activities for Arendt, such as builders, architects, craftsman, artist, and legislators are all examples of *homo faber*, because all are involved in making a context for human life that will transcend both labor and work. What all the activities included in work have in common is that they are governed by a specific intention and are under human, sovereign control. For Arendt, the ideal type of worker creates the public world physically and institutionally through constructing buildings and making laws. However, he does not himself act in the space he has made.

What work makes possible is a chance for human beings to begin afresh, to be reborn into an artificial as opposed to a natural world. However, the end of work itself is its own finite product; there is no more to do once it is completed except to destroy it.⁸ The worker works alone in a

5 Hannah Arendt, "Human Condition", 98.

6 Cf. Hannah Arendt, Human Condition, 103.

7 Hannah Arendt, Human Condition, 137.

8 Hannah Arendt, Human Condition, 144.

battle against the natural world and to build a new theater for human activity will find meaningless. For Arendt, the full realization is only when acting and speaking on that stage to an audience that achievement of *homo faber*, and she argues that any one acting in the role of *homo faber* will only ruin the play. This brings us to the third mode of life in the *vita activa* which Arendt calls action.

Arendt states that action relates to the fact that “men, not man, live on earth and inhabit the world”.⁹ In other words, man always lives with other human beings in the plurality. In labor, humanity is united as a species, in work, human agents are in an isolated relation to nature; but in action Arendt claims that people act for and with each other in plurality, requires the existence of others. According to Arendt, the basic of action and speech is the human condition of plurality. This condition has a significant character namely equality and distinction.¹⁰ Arendt maintains that people are able to understand each other, if they are equal and have a plan for next future generation. Beside that distinction is also a characteristic of plurality because without distinctness, then a person would only be like everyone else.¹¹ Speech and action reveal the distinctness of human beings.

For Arendt, action represents the highest moment of *vita activa*. In essence, the human capacity of action is the capacity for doing the spontaneous with new beginning undetermined by either prior causes or articulated ends. It is action which the political form of human activity taking place within the free, open space of a shared, constructed public appearance. So politics is not a matter of achieving ends; it is an ongoing activity of beginnings and new beginning over which no action can exert absolute control. The aim of political action is actually the reason why men live together in political organization at all; without it, the life of politics would be meaningless.

3. Understanding the meaning of freedom

Philosophers define and redefine the meaning of freedom are in different means for centuries. Freedom is understood as an inward space into which people may escape from external force and feel free. It is identical with inner freedom, where certain worldly experience transformed into experiences within one's self.¹² It means also, freedom is considered

9 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 7.

10 Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 175.

11 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 176.

12 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, The United States of America: Penguin Books, 2006, 145.

as an inwardness which no other has access, since understanding that the experience of inner freedom is presupposed a retreat from the world. For Arendt, the problem of freedom is that the distortion of understanding the original meaning by removing it from realm of politics and human affairs in general as a space where people are able to encounter with others in public domain. In Arendt's view, however, if freedom refers to nothing but an inner feeling or if it is empty of some manifestation in the world that lies between people, then it is politically irrelevant. Freedom should allow a free man to get away from their home, and to go out into the world and meet other people in deed and word. Arendt acknowledges that traditional view was articulated by Epictetus and Augustine's philosophy has had significant impact on the concept of inner freedom. For Arendt, however freedom should be seen as the capacity to encounter others and not merely with ourselves.

Arendt points out that to achieve freedom; we need another people to engage in action in the presence of their fellow men in a space of appearances.¹³ The public realm is the result of the encounter between man and other man. Arendt acknowledges that modern thinking about freedom suggests that the idea of freedom exists in the power of the will. For example, in the writing of Christian thinker, particularly Augustine, the will has come to be seen as an organ of self-liberation, a means by which it is in fact possible to be a slave in the world and free at the same time. The idea of liberation is an essential element of any meaningful notion of freedom. According Arendt, the modern understanding of freedom is anti-worldly; self-liberation means liberation from the self as the locus of the worldly and intention. And since power of will is its ability to command, this power is a matter of strength, not freedom. To link freedom with the will is to decline the sphere of politic and enter the realm of necessity.¹⁴

For Arendt, freedom does not mean the ability to choose among a set of possible alternative or freedom of choice or the faculty of free will which, according to Christian doctrine, was given to us by God. Birmingham (2006: 54) states that for Arendt, the defining the concept of freedom can be articulated not in the "I will", but in the "I am able". In the sense that "I am able" must be understood as the ability to act in a public space with others, or to move in a space of freedom with others.¹⁵ Kateb (1977;148) maintains that for Arendt, freedom is to "develop fully

13 *Ibid*, 147.

14 Philip Hansen, *Hannah Arendt, Politic, History and Citizenship*, California: Stanford University Press, 1999, 55.

15 Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006, 55.

only when it is not hidden but appears...in a worldly space". To act is to introduce into the public realm something which is real and has consequences of its own. Every action is a new beginning and thus unexpected. This unexpectedness is the appearance of freedom, not freedom of the will or freedom of choice, but "freedom to call something into being which did not exist before".¹⁶ Action as the realization of freedom is, therefore, rooted in natality, in the fact that each birth represents a new beginning and the introduction of novelty in the world. The result of it is that the action has a capacity to perform the miracle that is to appeal something is unexpected. This can occur because each man has a uniqueness, so that with each birth also something uniquely new comes into the world.¹⁷ For Arendt, then, freedom offers us the opportunity to take initiative and empowers us, to begin something new in the world. In fact, the existences of human beings have the capabilities to change and renewal.

To act means to appear with the plurality and require the reality of publicity or space of publicity, acting for the sake of political freedom such as justice, equality, etc. Arendt argues in the case of Eichmann in Jerusalem that there is no plurality of action, as she states "...it is not ordinary crime and the very nature of this criminal, which was no common criminal". That is why everyone accuses and blames him, as Arendt claims that the action of Eichmann as a banality of evil.¹⁸ Hansen (1995:55) points out that to Arendt, freedom is the freedom to act in ways that produce and manifest the identity of uniqueness of individual and the "the reality" of "common sense" or plurality.¹⁹ Acting is always in beginning and plurality, together with other men in the public space. In *On the Revolution*, Arendt claims that "revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning"²⁰ since a new political space can be found in the revolution where freedom can appear as a worldly reality. The good example for Arendt is the American Revolution was an indication for freedom; the capacity of people to act and to begin something new. The American Revolution was able to focus on their political task of founding body politic and a form of government, and hence, was more successful than the French Revolution. According to Arendt, politic is a highly human activity that takes place in a specific realm for a special reason, which is freedom.

16 Hannah Arendt, *Op. Cit., Between Past and Future*, 150.

17 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 177-178.

18 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem, A Report on the Banality of Evil*, The United States: Penguin Book, 2006, 252

19 John McGowan, *Hannah Arendt Introduction*, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 16.

20 Hannah Arendt, *On The Revolution*, The United States of America, Penguin Books, 1963.

While reflecting on Totalitarianism for Arendt that totalitarian represents the attempt to destroy the plurality and freedom and hence decline the “worldly” of human action itself.²¹ For Arendt, every action requires the space of appearances, revealing oneself known through words and deeds in the plurality with other. What she means by plurality is to refer both in equality and distinction, in the sense that every human being understands each other and belong to the same species and each of them have a unique history and perspectives on the world around them. In the plurality also, every human beings has the capacity to act and relate to others in ways that are unique and distinctive. Through speech, the meanings of every action are able to be articulated and coordinated the actions of a plurality of agents. For Arendt, action and speech have potential to make people act “in concert”, and which is actualized by “only where words reveal realities and deeds establish relations and create new realities.”²² For Arendt, the capacity to act together in concert for a public purpose in public space is called power. In *On Violence*, Arendt states that power relates to the human ability, not just to act, but to act in concert. This power is never belonging to an individual, but belongs to a group who keeps together and remains with them.²³ Birmingham²⁴ points out that for Arendt, “power must be said in the plural” in the sense that gathers together with other man in public appearances. Power will be actualized when actors gather together with other for political action.²⁵ Arendt maintains that the power is considered as the initial getting together of people in order to establish a political community and to reaffirm that through medium of speech and persuasion, individuals acts together in concert. Power is generated through working with others in political action.²⁶

Through action and speech, each individual will disclose who they personally are and can show their unique identities. For Arendt, there is however, a character whose role in some sense complements and complete that of the actors is the storyteller. As she states that:

21 "The understanding the concept of uniqueness of identity for Arendt is always an intersubjective product of the interaction among people. In the other word, not something any single person can fashion or discover in isolation. “We become one whole individual, through and only through the company of others. For our individual, insofar as it is one unchangeable and unmistakable. We depend entirely on other people”. - Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, The United States of America: Harvest Book & Harcourt, Inc., 1976.

22 Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 200.

23 Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, The United States of America: A Harvest Book, 1970, 44.

24 Birmingham, Hannah Arendt and Human Right, 55.

25 Hannah Arendt, *Origini*, 175.

26 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 199-207.

“Action reveals itself fully to the story teller that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was about than participants”.²⁷

According to Arendt, in acting the actor reveals him or herself to others, but never with full knowledge of what the consequences of this might be. She explains that an actor takes initiatives and suffers but is not the author of his or her act; he or she is not in sovereign control. Then, the roles of storytellers are significant important in understanding of the actor. For Arendt, understanding the labor has neither beginning nor end, while work has both beginning and end, and action is beginning but actor cannot know the end.²⁸ For Arendt, the roles of storytellers are to preserve of what actor is doings and saying, but also they will fully reveal the actor’s identity. Arendt claims that narrative of a storyteller tell us more about their subjects, the hero in the center of each story, than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it.²⁹ Narration of storyteller can provide the range of truthfulness and the important of actions of individuals. Moreover a storyteller can preserve the memory of deeds of the actor and through time can be the sources of inspiration for the future generation. Remembrance or retelling also the important aspect to keep the deeds and actions of actors remain alive in the heart of the people. In order to preserve the actions of actor, however, an audience that is a community is necessary needed, because they become the transmitter of deeds that had been immortalized.

According to Arendt, action as the capacity to begin in public space should be governed by “principles”. She explains that principles will inspire a person from without, for outside the self.³⁰ Every action which is inspired by principles are never removed of their vitality even after the execution the act. The principles also are an action can be repeated time and again, it is inexhaustible, and in distinction from its motive, the validity of a principle is universal illuminate and inspires the action, and it is not bound to any particular person or to any particular group.”³¹ They are moved by same values, which they believe will bring a change in their society. Arendt argues that these principles are the aspect of human condition, which rooted in unique human experienced. In addition that there is another quality of the principles by which as we act freely, namely, that they become manifest only as we act. In order to have any reality,

27 Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 192.

28 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 144,190.

29 Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 184.

30 Hannah Arendt, *Loc. Cit., Between Past and Future*, 150.

31 *Ibid*, 151.

those principles have to incarnated and particularized in the public realm. Arendt offers the examples of such principles honor, or glory, love of equality become concrete and manifest only in our actual dealing with others. Those principles are inspired us to do the action and “map out certain direction”³². The most we do is act honorably. Similarly, freedom cannot make its appearance in our world, unless it is through the incarnation in action of principles.³³ In the other words, freedom appears where the principles are actualized.

Arendt is aware that action appears to public realm can create anarchic and unpredictable and expecting that one’s freedom and integrity could be protected and preserved. As regards this problem, Arendt offers the concept of creating stability by introducing the faculty of promising making, and forgiveness³⁴. In the one hand, Arendt states that promise making gives binding direction to the future of action and allows us to face the future; forgiveness redeems the unintended consequences of action. On the other hand, “without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart”³⁵. In articulating these faculties as remedy for the unpredictable action, Arendt suggests that, by forgiving, people looks backward to what has occurred and release the actor from what has done, while promise making invites people to looks forward, having hope to establish the power in the future. Both these faculties are necessity in the action since it is the expression of human freedom; and without these faculties, we become the victims, where no one can undo what we have done in the past, and without the ability to control at least partially the process we have started.³⁶ In *On Revolution*, Arendt appreciates to all the state and federal institution, all the world building, of the founding fathers that kept the faculty of promising alive and that sponsored the public happiness of expressing opinions and making judgments.³⁷

32 Hannah Arendt, *Essay in Understanding*, “On the Nature of Totalitarianism”, 335.

33 *Ibid*, 152-153.

34 Arendt notes that forgiveness is the human faculty for undoing, reversing deeds and words that haven done and spoken. Forgiveness also is “the necessary corrective for the inevitable damages resulting from action. Forgiveness addresses the boundless happenings of the past, while the human capacity to make and keep promises addresses the unpredictability of action, thereby providing some degree of security. - Elisabeth Young Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, London: Yale University Press, 2006,96.

35 Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237.

36 Hannah Arendt, *Human Condition*, 246.

37 *Ibid*, 128.

4. In conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the concept of freedom according to Hannah Arendt as the capacity to begin where man encounter with other man in the public realm. Arendt argues that understanding of freedom has been lost because the tradition highlighted more on a dialogue with the self which is the dialogue between me and myself in the course of *contemplation* and neglected the dialogue with others in the sense that participation and speech in the course of action. Arendt indicates that in fact totalitarianism rule destroyed and abolished the action and freedom form public realm. Totalitarianism rule attempts to eliminate the possible of “miracle” from the realm the realm of politics.

Arendt concerns more on freedom in the realm of politics is being experienced in public, disclosing myself with others. In the other word, freedom is the capacity to begin something anew with others and by doing that performing the unexpected events in the public sphere. Through acting and speaking in the public space, men reveal his potential to the world. In *On Revolution*, Arendt points out that in the revolution of America is a good example how freedom should be exercised as the capacity to begin together with other man in the public space, calling people to participate in the public realm to achieve the “public happiness” which is referred to in political freedom.

It is true that freedom as a mode of being together with other can be destroyed by totalitarians rulers in this modern time, however, learning from the political thought of Arendt, this paper agree that the continued existence of human being on earth and to maintain democracy depend on the people to “perform miracles” that is to bring the infinitely improbable and establish it as reality, which is participation in the public space for the political freedom.

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