

HOW COMMON IS OUR COMMON WORLD? HANNAH ARENDT AND THE RISE OF THE SOCIAL *

Siobhan Kattago

Department of Philosophy
Estonian Institute of Humanities
Tallinn University
Uus-Sadama 5
10133 Tallinn, Estonia
E-mail: Siobhan@ehi.ee

Based on Hannah Arendt's distinction between the public and the private, the paper argues that it is possible to reconcile her seemingly elite democracy with the political ideals upon which the polis is constructed, namely, plurality, freedom and action. Such reconciliation is possible when the political is understood as the space between people, rather than as a carefully constructed physical space that excludes all aspects of privacy. Likewise, the paper argues that the rise of the social represents not only the colonialization of the political, but also a democratic expansion of those, who like Arendt herself might have been formerly excluded from political participation in our common world.

Key words: Arendt, world, politics, freedom, public, private, social.

The idea that the world is common and shared among us is central to Hannah Arendt's work. Inspired by Heidegger's phenomenological insight of being-in-the-world, she writes:

The common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike; it was there before we came and will outlast our brief sojourn in it. It is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us. (Arendt 1958: 55)

The world is more than nature or the physical space of the earth; it is what is shared publicly among and between individuals. And yet, Arendt is not only well known for her deep love of the world, but also for her scathing criticism of the rise of the social in the modern age. Throughout her writings, there is a linkage between the rise of the social, loss of authority, totalitarianism as a new political phenomenon and the modern age. Mass society, loneliness and an encroaching bureaucratic state are vital aspects of modernity. Indeed, Arendt's philosophical project in *The Human Condition* interweaves earlier themes from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The theme that this paper addresses is that of the rise of the social and the shrinking of the political

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in the modern age. Is Arendt's distinction between the political and the social necessarily so clear-cut as she describes? Or is the rise of the social and the decline of the political linked to a certain understanding of modernity that unwittingly encourages elite democracy? If that were indeed the case, the exemplary Greek polis could exist only at the expense of those who laboured for the leisure of the elite few. Based on Arendt's distinction between the public and the private, the paper argues that it is possible to reconcile her seemingly elite democracy with the political ideals upon which the polis is constructed; namely plurality, freedom and action. Such reconciliation is possible when the political is understood as the space *between* people, rather than as a carefully constructed physical space that excludes all aspects of privacy. Likewise, the paper argues that the rise of the social represents not only the colonialization of the political, but also a democratic expansion of those, who like Arendt herself might have been formerly excluded from political participation in our common world.

I. Distinguishing the Public from the Private

Arendt's project of rediscovering the ancient Greek polis and the distinction between the public and the private is part of her attempt "to trace back modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self" (Ibid.: 6).

The private realm is the sphere of the household (*oikos*), the family and by extension, biological necessity, violence, inequality, and darkness. "The distinctive trait of the household sphere was that in it men

lived together because they were driven by their wants and needs. The driving force was life itself" (Ibid.: 30). In contrast, the public realm (*polis*) is the area of plurality, freedom, speech, action and natality. "The term 'public' signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it" (Ibid.: 52). The public realm or *polis* is where we reveal our identities and selves. There, individuals are freed from those impediments of biological necessity found in the private realm. In private, we experience inequality, while plurality and freedom are only found in the public realm. "The polis was distinguished from the household in that it knew only 'equals', whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality" (Ibid.: 32). Unlike the private realm that operates through necessity and violence, the public realm is one of speech and persuasion. For Arendt, difference understood as plurality is a part of the political. "Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (Ibid.: 8). In many ways, Arendt artfully avoids the interpretation of difference as hierarchy because for her, distinction primarily evokes uniqueness and individuality. Freedom and plurality do not exist in the private realm because an equal exchange of opinions is absent from biological life in the *oikos*.

The private world of the *oikos* is inherently based on inequality and the despotism of the household. Equality can only exist when people exchange opinions, and speak to one another for the sake of discourse and action, not for the sake of power or necessity. The private world is unequal because

it does not participate in the human fabrication of the common world, but purely in that of labour and biological necessity. Like Aristotle and Rousseau, Arendt emphasizes that participation in the polis is a defining point of our humanity. “We are not born equal, we become equal as members of a group” (Arendt 1973: 301). Although we are born unequal in the private realm, we become equal in the public realm of the polis. Each person is a new beginning; a unique individual with the potential for speech and action. Each person answers the question, “who are you” in their own way (Arendt 1958: 10). And each time the question is asked, one has the chance for a new beginning and a new story. And yet, if we only become equal in the public sphere, does it matter into which group we are naturally born, and how these different groups interact with one another? For Arendt, it does not seem to be a problem that the world of the polis might *not* be historically common to everyone. She celebrated the fact that plurality was a paradoxical part of the human condition. “Human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique being” (Ibid.: 176). Hierarchical difference is an explicit feature of the private realm and not part of the public sphere. Yet, given her sharp criticism of the social, one cannot help asking who might be allowed to participate in the public realm of the polis.

II. Distinguishing the Political from the Social

Arendt’s critique of the rise of the social has to be understood within her larger framework of politics, action and freedom. Historically, the *vita activa* or active life has been denigrated in favour of the *vita*

contemplativa. In her work, most notably *The Human Condition*, *Between Past and Future* and *The Promise of Politics*, Arendt argues for a richer understanding of politics that has been lost in the modern age. If Heidegger argued for a forgetfulness of being, it is Arendt who argues for the forgetfulness of the *polis* in modern life. Arendt brings, as it were, the idea of the political from the ancient Greek *polis* to the very center of modern politics. In response to the question, what is the meaning of politics, Arendt answers unequivocally: freedom. “The answer to the question of the meaning of politics is so simple and so conclusive that one might think all other answers are utterly beside the point. The answer is: The meaning of politics is freedom” (Arendt 2005: 108). If politics is the realm of freedom, spontaneity, action and plurality, the social represents mass society, bureaucracy and the glorification of labour. Politics occurs between individuals. “Politics arise *between men*, and so quite *outside* of *man*. There is therefore no real political substance. Politics arises in what lies *between men* and is established as relationships” (Ibid.: 95).

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt describes the phenomenology of our everyday existence. Man has three activities in his *vita activa* that correspond to different ways of being-in-the-world: labour, work and action. Labour is linked to the biological process of the perpetuation of the species. For *animal laborans*, “(t)he human condition of labour is life itself” (Arendt 1958: 7). Work is the activity of man as a *homo faber* in which we artificially make the world of our existence. “The human condition of work is worldliness” (Ibid.). Action corresponds to

the activity of individuals with other people. Action does not produce a tangible thing, such as a new life or a new product, but is an activity of our *vita activa*.

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life. (Ibid.)

The rise of the social confuses the human activities of labour, work and action so that action as the most singular political activity becomes increasingly lost. Arendt links the rise of the social with mass society, bureaucracy and loneliness. “The emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state” (Ibid.: 28). The social sphere is much like the administrative household for the nation-state, or as she calls it, a kind of “collective housekeeping” (Ibid.). She equates the rise of the social with the bureaucratic rule of no one. In this way, the freedom one experienced in the public sphere was colonized by the conformism of mass society. Moreover, the rise of the social is closely connected with the emergence of totalitarianism as a new political phenomenon.

Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human being as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing

identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other. (Arendt 1973: 438)

Arendt despairs at the blurring of the political and the social. “In the modern world, the two realms indeed constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself” (Arendt 1958: 33). The rise of the social entails a corresponding blurring of distinctions between the public and the private, *polis* and *oikos*, freedom and necessity. As individuals in the social realm, we answer the question of “what” rather than that of “who” in the political realm. Moreover, individuals in the social realm are often categorized into groups governed by class, gender, language, ethnicity and race. The social is like the private realm writ large because it is governed by necessity and inequality. “We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights” (Arendt 1973: 301).

When thinking through the Greek concept of the *polis*, Arendt repeatedly links freedom to the political. The *polis* is the “sphere of freedom” (Arendt 1958: 30). One can only be free in public, among other citizens. One does not find freedom in privacy or when retreating from the world. Freedom is found in the world with others.

What all Greek philosophers, no matter how opposed to *polis* life, took for granted is that freedom is exclusively located in the political realm, that necessity is primarily a prepolitical phenomenon, characteristic of the private household organization, and that force and violence are justified in this sphere because they are the only means to master necessity – for instance, by ruling over slaves – and to become free. (Ibid.: 31)

What does Arendt, however, mean with the modern loss of the classical distinction between the public and the private? Whereas the private sphere classically denoted the sphere of one's own (*idion*), outside the polis and the common world, in modern times, the private sphere suggests intimacy and privacy (Ibid.: 38). Furthermore, the rise of modern individualism, the nation-state and capitalism creates new social-economic relations between people. For her, the "common world" of the political has become lost in the sea of mass culture. Like her contemporaries, Adorno and Horkheimer, Arendt critically laments the loss of community (*Gemeinschaft*) that mass society (*Gesellschaft*) is awkwardly replacing (Horkheimer and Adorno 1991). The social as the realm of no one replaces freedom with need or the illusion of need. Possibilities for dialogue, publicity and discourse diminish as the modern individual becomes more complex and egotistical. "The decisive historical fact is that modern privacy in its most relevant function, to shelter the intimate, was discovered as the opposite not of the political sphere but of the social, to which it is therefore more closely and authentically related" (Arendt 1958: 38).

If the political emphasizes excellence or *aretē*, the social realm re-enforces conformity and mediocrity. Tracing back the Aristotelian definition of man as a political being (*zōon politikon*), Arendt emphasizes what distinguishes the political from private life. Only human beings have the unique capacity for both action and speech. It is through shared action and speech that man is a being-in-the-world. In agreement with Aristotle, Arendt notes two types of politi-

cal action that distinguish man as a political being: those of action and speech.

Of all the activities necessary and present in human communities, only two were deemed to be political and to constitute what Aristotle called the *bios politikos*, namely action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*), out of which rises the realm of human affairs (*ta tōn anthrōpōn pragmata*, as Plato used to call it) from which everything merely necessary or useful is strictly excluded. (Ibid.: 24–25)

Seneca's translation into Latin of Aristotle's *zōon politikon* into *animal socialis* and Aquinas' *homo est naturaliter politicus, id est, socialis* indicate the loss of the *polis*. For Arendt the shift from man as a political to social being is more than a semantic issue of translation (Ibid.: 23). It is linked with the philosophical preference for the mind over that of human affairs. Beginning with Plato's decision to leave the cave of appearances for the realm of eternal forms and truth, philosophy has looked down on that of the body and men in their plurality. For Arendt, the substitution of the social for the political highlights a forgetfulness of the very meaning of politics. "More than any elaborate theory, this unconscious substitution of the social for the political betrays the extent to which the original Greek understanding of politics has been lost" (Ibid.: 23).

Is it possible though to make such clear-cut distinctions between the political and the social? Or, do such distinctions leave us with a hollow elite democracy based on the exclusion of those in the household? Is Arendt's negative interpretation of the rise of the social, and the blurring of the distinction between the political and the social plausible; or, are there perhaps other

interpretations of the rise of the social that might reveal the ambiguities of this peculiarly modern phenomenon? For the sake of the argument, it is useful to examine two models of Arendt's construction of the polis, termed by Seyla Benhabib as the agonal and the discursive (Benhabib 1990). These models help us to elucidate and uncover some of the difficulties in Arendt's distinction between the political and social realms.

III. Politics as the Agonal and the Competitive

We can examine an agonal conception of politics from three different perspectives: (1) excellence (*aretē*) as distinction, (2) a Marxian critique of labour, and (3) the administration of social needs. In the first perspective, Arendt's political realm is based upon heroic competition and excellence or *aretē*. Speaking in the presence of others is a performance akin to Homeric excellence.

Every activity performed in public can attain an excellence never matched in privacy; for excellence, by definition, the presence of others is always required, and this presence needs the formality of the public, constituted by one's peers, it cannot be the causal familiar presence of one's equals or inferiors. (Arendt 1958, 49)

Arendt emphasizes *aretē* in the Socratic sense as the ideal for discourse, yet excellence and competition can also be interpreted as hierarchical distinctions, whereby one person's speech or activity is rendered superior to that of another. Although she views the rise of the social as a negative blurring of distinctions between the public and the private, I would like to suggest other interpretations to the rise of the social,

which Arendt does not explicitly address. Can we interpret the rise of the social as the emergence of those formerly excluded from the dominant polis? Likewise, is it possible to interpret the rise of the social as a positive event that allowed a person such as Arendt herself, a woman and a Jew, entrance into the dominant political space of the polis? Without the rise of the social, it is inconceivable that certain segments of society could obtain entrance into our common political world. The rise of the social, for all its negative connotations of bureaucratic and statistical conformity, did after all uncover certain hierarchical and oppressive relationships upon which the public sphere was historically constructed. Both the exemplary Athenian polis and councils of the American Revolution were built on the partial foundation of slavery. The rise of the social moreover expanded the borders of the agonal polis and revealed the opinions or *doxa* of various minorities, who had been formerly silenced. An agonal conception of politics is, strictly speaking, a rigidly defined distinction between public and private and can only be entered when we fulfil our biological needs. Thus Arendt's one-sided critique of the rise of the social downplays important historical expansions of the democratic public sphere beyond its elite origins

Arendt viewed Marx as the end of politics, the end of action, and the beginning of labour. However, the Marxian critique of the economic conditions that brought about alienated labour is an important one. The hierarchical and exploitative conditions, under which a person must sell her labour power, are pertinent to many examples of inequality in the world. Arendt was prima-

rily concerned with what she perceived as the disastrous elevation of labour into the public realm. Curiously she didn't seem to find it problematic that certain strata of Greek society, namely slaves, women and foreigners would never have the opportunity to enter into the political realm of plurality, speech, and action. It was only in the modern age when authority was radically questioned, that certain segments of society examined the conditions of their silence and rose up seeking entrance into the political realm of freedom and action. If one were to solely emphasize the agonal nature of the polis, this public sphere could easily become a dominant elite-polis built upon the exclusion of certain social groups.

Perhaps one example of the construction of the agonal polis is the issue of multiculturalism (Taylor & Gutman 1994). Multiculturalism is comprised of various social groups, who have been historically excluded from the public sphere and now seek to have their voice and opinions legitimated – or simply recognized. Multiculturalism questions the freedom to express opinions and the exclusion of various opinions from the public sphere. This debate questions why certain people have been excluded or denied the privilege of participation in public life. Thus, we might say that those who could only speak in darkness, or in privacy, and formed alternative public spaces outside the dominant polis, now wish to have their *doxa* given the same consideration as those born within the dominant political discourse. The members of society who have been excluded from the construction of the polis no longer find their ghettoed neighbourhoods or dark kitchens large enough for their conversations; instead they seek entrance

into the dominant public sphere. They seek the plurality and equality that Arendtian discourse so majestically invokes.

A third interpretation of Arendt's agonal conception of politics concerns the satisfaction of biological needs as a formal condition for participation in the political realm. Who administers to these biological needs? Is Arendt really invoking the bureaucrats, whom she despises as social groups of statistical automatons? Is she really invoking the rule of "no-one" to oversee the amelioration of social ills? And not only who administers these needs, but more importantly what constitutes the satisfaction of biological needs: the eradication of poverty, social inequality, the environment, housing, and right to work? If Arendt's polis is constructed after the satisfaction of biological needs, then unfortunately very few people can enter into her realm of speech and action. The administration of biological needs by the bureaucrats was part of the Marxist-Leninist project that Arendt so eloquently criticized. Yet, the Marxian critique of the conditions for labour provides an insightful critique into what appears to be Arendt's elite-polis. Her criteria for the polis – satisfaction of biological needs and the distinct separation between the public and the private – suggests an elite polis based upon the principle of exclusion and hierarchical differentiation. Thus, the construction of the agonal polis stands in sharp contrast to the freedom that appears *within* that self-same public space. This tension between an understanding of politics as agonal or one that highlights discourse is one of the central paradoxes within Arendt's work (Benhabib 2000). Is it possible to reconcile the ideals of the polis, namely plurality and

freedom with the problematic distinction between the social and the political? Or, to cast it within the larger framework of modernity, as Seyla Benhabib notes, “is the ‘recovery of the public space’ under conditions of modernity necessarily an elitist and antidemocratic project which can hardly be reconciled with the demand for universal political emancipation and the demand for universal extension of citizenship rights?” (Benhabib 1990: 169).

IV. Politics as the Discursive Space between People

The second model of the political that Benhabib suggests is the discursive polis. As such, it is not a specific physical space, but a method of discourse, similar to Socratic dialogue. For Arendt, dialogue is the free exchange of opinions among friends and equals. “The political element in friendship is that in the truthful dialogue each of the friends can understand the truth inherent in others opinions” (Arendt 1990: 83). Speech is inherently political because it is public and creates our common world. In contrast to the hierarchical interpretation of the agonal polis, the discursive polis is based on impassioned and eager conversation among equals. However, Arendt did not merely want to nostalgically recover the Greek polis, but to extract its core idea – that of debate and the spontaneous exchange of ideas. More importantly, Arendt aimed to restore the relevance of opinion to political philosophy. Opinion or *doxa* is the opening to the common world. Without opinions, we do not have any possible entrance into the world that we share in common. But how can the same world be equally open to everyone if the satisfaction of biological needs

is the condition for entrance into this world? How could the same world be equally open to everyone when certain segments of the polis are exiled to the private realm of necessity and silence? Arendt’s emphasis on opinion and freedom in the public world seems to contradict who is allowed membership into the polis, and who has the right to speak within this public realm. For her, speech is a performance that reveals the identity of the speaker. “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world” (Arendt 1958: 179).

The emphasis on acting and speaking is part of what Dana Villa terms the “theatricality” of Arendt’s conception of the polis (Villa 1999). The emphasis on natality, action and worldliness highlight how the individual performs in the world. The public sphere is a kind of stage in which one experiences re-birth as a citizen. Similar to Rousseau’s sense of citizenship, one only becomes fully human, when they participate in public life as a citizen (Rousseau 1964, 2007). Theatricality is likewise deeply expressive as d’Entreves argues (D’Entreves 1994). Individuals express their freedom through performance in the public sphere. In contrast to the solitude of the private sphere, the public sphere is by nature performative, theatrical and expressive. Agonal and theatrical conceptions of the polis, though, highlight difference and hierarchy.

The discursive or communicative polis, on the other hand, can be interpreted in a more Kantian and Habermasian way to emphasise dialogue among equals. The discursive polis is then more about the public use of reason than a theatrical event. It is

also more about the process of reaching consensus than performance (Habermas 1983, 1991). The process of discussing *with others* becomes more important than the performative event of speaking *before others*. Arendt's construction of the discursive polis is an attempt to recapture the lost pearl of *thaumadzein*, or wonder; for wonder is both the beginning and the end of philosophy. In Arendt's opinion, tradition began when the Platonic cave described the world of human affairs in darkness and deception, and located truth outside the cave. Traditional political thought ended when Marx decided that "philosophy and truth are located not outside the affairs of men and their common world but precisely in them" (Arendt 1954: 17). Arendt does not agree with Marx's dismissal of philosophy, but instead wishes to restore philosophical wonder to the world of human affairs.

If philosophers, despite their necessary estrangement from the everyday life of human affairs, were ever to arrive at a true political philosophy they would have to make the plurality of man, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs – in its grandeur and misery – the object of their *thaumadzein*. (Arendt 1990: 80)

Her construction of the discursive polis is an attempt to restore wonder, free discourse among equal friends, and *doxa* to the public world. The discursive *polis* is the common world that men fabricate through their actions and speech. Discourse can only be located in the free common world of appearance and opinion. Unlike Plato she did not want to permanently leave the cave for the traditional world of truth, but preferred the citizenship of the city. For her, truthful opinions can only be revealed in a conversation, either with oneself in

the process of thinking, or in active debate with another person. The common world of fabricated artificial opinions is precisely the realm of human affairs and the object of wonder. Arendt marvels at the richness, complexity, and utter fragility of her own dark times. This wonder and love of the world is a radical return to what we share in common at a time when many wish to retreat from this world into the privacy of their inner selves.

Arendt is concerned with *how* mass society changes our understanding of the political. The rise of the social blurs the distinctions between the public and the private, a man and a citizen. In many ways, one could say that for Arendt, the publicity of the polis *is* the world itself.

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved, or at least not primarily, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. (Arendt 1958: 52–53)

The Human Condition is full of distinctions that Arendt argues are necessary for being-in-the world. The rise of the social suggests a withering away of the political and an expansion of the private. Arendt highlights the importance of the space between people. It is precisely the delicate space between people that brings us together in new ways – either through dialogue or through revolution as that most radical of

new beginnings (Arendt 1963). The space between people is furthermore the realm that identifies who, not what we are. The rise of the social collapses this precious space in between people into a collective household of bureaucratic no one.

In conclusion, it is difficult and problematic to reconcile the agonal and discursive aspects of the Arendtian polis. Both present different conceptions of democracy: elitist and egalitarian. Yet, it is precisely the difficulty at reconciliation, or of forming a neat monolithic system that is the Arendtian poetic project. Indeed, the statement that she made concerning the Marxian contradiction between means and ends might be ironically appropriate to Arendt herself.

Such fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers, in whom they can be discounted. In the world of great authors they lead into the very center of their work and are the most important clue to a true understanding of their problems and new insights. (Arendt 1954: 21)

Likewise, the distinction between the political and the social is deeply ambigu-

ous and perhaps at the “very center” of Arendt’s project to retell the story of our common world. How can one reconcile her inclusive common world that is open to all citizens with the importance she places on distinguishing the private from the public as well as the political from the social? Particularly in *The Human Condition*, Arendt seems to construct two different ideas or patterns in her thinking: an agonal conception of politics that can be entered into only after the fulfilment of biological needs and a discursive one comprised of the free exchange of opinions among equal individuals. It is Arendt’s emphasis on debate *between* people that represents the highest political action that individuals are capable of. If one examines her criteria for the agonal polis, it does appear to be constructed upon exclusion and hierarchy. Yet, if we examine *how* the polis operates as the flickering space of freedom between people, we find a radical return to the world, and a majestic emphasis on dialogue and mutual discourse, rather than an escape from the world.

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KIEK BENDRAS MŪSŲ BENDRAS PASAULIS? HANNAH ARENDT IR SOCIALUMO IŠKILIMAS

Siobhan Kattago

S a n t r a u k a

Remiantis Hannah'os Arendt įvesta viešumo ir privatumo skirtimi, straipsnyje teigiama, jog iš pirmo žvilgsnio elitinę jos demokratiją galima sutaikyti su politiniais idealais, kuriais remiantis kuriamas polis: tai įvairovė, laisvė ir veiksmas. Toks sutaikeymas įmanomas, jei politiškumas yra suprantamas kaip erdvė tarp žmonių, o ne skrupulingai suręsta fizinė erdvė, išstumianti visus privatumo aspektus. Straipsnyje

taip pat teigiama, kad socialumo iškilimas žymi ne tik politiškumo kolonializaciją, bet ir demokratinę ekspansiją tų, kurie, kaip ir pati Arendt, anksčiau galėjo būti išstumti iš politinio dalyvavimo bendrame pasaulyje.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: Arendt, pasaulis, politika, laisvė, viešumas, privatumas, socialumas.

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