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Feminist theory and Hannah Arendt's concept of public space

SEYLA BENHABIB

For contemporary feminist theory Hannah Arendt's thought remains puzzling, challenging and, at times, infuriating. The sense of disappointment and anger one experiences as a feminist theorist when confronted with some of Arendt's characteristic distinctions, such as between freedom and necessity, the public and the private, the male and the female, has best been expressed in the following sharp words by Hanna Pitkin:

Can it be that Arendt held so contemptible a doctrine – one that denies the possibility of freedom, a truly human life, and even reality, to all but a handful of males who dominate all others and exclude them by violence from privilege? And when the excluded and miserable do enter history, can it be that Arendt condemns them for their rage, their failure to respect the 'impartiality of justice and laws'? Impartiality! Justice! Where were these principles when that immense majority was relegated to shame and misery? (Pitkin, 1981: 336)

Following this devastating commentary, Pitkin herself voices the second most common reaction experienced in the face of Arendt's works by contemporary feminist theorists, namely puzzlement. 'But there is more wrong here than injustice. On this account, I suggest, one cannot even make sense of politics itself' (Pitkin, 1981: 336). Noting that something is wrong with this vision imputed to Arendt, Pitkin in the rest of her essay moves to a subtler account of Arendt's concept of the political and of the relation between the public and the private. 'Yet, can this really be what Arendt means?' she writes. 'Why should she so undermine her own efforts to save public, political life?' (Pitkin, 1981: 338).

There is no simple answer to this question. Consider some of the opening passages of *The Human Condition*.

The fact that the modern age emancipated the working classes and women at nearly the same historical moment must certainly be counted among the characteristics of an age which no longer believes that bodily functions and material concerns should be hidden. It is all the more symptomatic of the nature of these phenomena that the few remnants of strict privacy even in our own civilization relate to the 'necessities' in the original sense of being necessitated by having a body. (Arendt, 1973 [1958]: 73)

It is as if for Arendt the modern age is based on a category mistake, rather upon a series of mistakes, one of which is to assume that 'bodily functions' and 'material concerns' can become 'public matters'. What implications does this have for women? Does it mean that the emancipation of women is even more problematic than that of laborers because they seem to be 'representatives of the realm of the body' – although we are not told how or why? In entering the public realm women seem to be bringing with them a principle of reality into this sphere, namely the necessities which originate with having a body, and which from Arendt's point of view strictly have no place in the public. Expressed more pointedly, the emancipation of women subverts the architectonic of Hannah Arendt's political philosophy and her claim that 'each human activity points to its proper location in the world' (Arendt, 1973: 73). It is thus hard to avoid the impression that in these early passages of *The Human Condition*, Arendt ontologizes the division of labor between the sexes, and those biological presuppositions which have historically confined women to the household and to the sphere of reproduction alone.¹

If this is all that can be said on the significance of Hannah Arendt's political philosophy for contemporary feminist theory, then perhaps we should simply relegate Arendt to the category of those few women who, being exceptionally gifted and brilliant, were, to use a phrase of Arendt's, 'pariahs', i.e. outsiders. Although as pariahs these women did not belong in the predominantly male community of scholarship and thought, neither did they convert their pariah status into a collective challenge and questioning of the 'intellectual property which they were asked to administer'.² Why not simply admit that Hannah Arendt was a prefeminist, or maybe even an anti-feminist who, according to her biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, 'was suspicious of women "who gave orders," skeptical about whether women should be political leaders, and steadfastly opposed to the social dimensions of Women's Liberation' (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 238).

Yet a critical exchange between Hannah Arendt's political philosophy and contemporary feminist theory can be illuminating for both sides. Since the second wave of the women's movement has made the motto 'the personal is political' one of its few and continuing rallying points, there is a challenging conceptual and political problem which feminists must face when reading Arendt. Maybe not Arendt's thought but feminism itself rests on a category

mistake and the attempt to 'politicize' the private leads not to the emancipation of women but to the elimination of the last vestiges of human freedom in the modern world? From Theodor Adorno and Christopher Lasch on the left, to Gertrud Himmelfarb and Irving Kristol on the right, with liberals like Ronald Dworkin, John Rawls, and Bruce Ackerman straddling the middle, there is an important argument in western political thought that maintaining some boundaries between the public and the private spheres is essential to preserving human freedom. Have feminist theorists told us where this line needs to be drawn, or is the phrase 'the personal is political' an invitation to another version of authoritarian politics?

For contemporary feminist theory, Hannah Arendt's thought is also challenging in that there are a number of fascinating portraits of women in her work. From her early book on *Rahel Varnhagen* (Arendt, 1974 [1957]) to her essay on Rosa Luxemburg (Arendt, 1968 [1955]: 33–57), and her portrait of Isak Dinesen (ibid.: 95–111), women figures and masterful reflections on their lives are present as a theme, even if not a major one, in the Arendtian corpus. Fitting these women, their lives and aspirations, and Arendt's views of them into the categorial structure of her political thought is still a hermeneutic task to be undertaken. Finally, there are also contemporary feminists who argue not only that, despite the apparent hostility and antagonism between feminist goals and Arendt's political thought, a deeper reading of her work will yield categories which bear a genuine affinity to the radical claims of contemporary feminism, but also that in the experience of the women's movement one has rediscovered those phenomenological aspects of revolutionary politics which Arendt had so brilliantly analyzed. The first argument has been put forward by Nancy C. M. Hartssock and the second by Ann M. Lane.

In her book *Money, Sex and Power. Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*, Nancy Hartssock writes:

Arendt's argument about the close relation of power, community and action could be regarded as idiosyncratic. The modifications she makes tend, overall, to reduce tension and opposition and to provide a vision of the political community as a shared and common world in which the individual both merges with others and distinguishes himself. Issues of exercising power over others are defined in terms of 'empowerment', and the exercise of power becomes instead potentiality and capacity. But these modifications of the agonal model of politics and power share some important features with the ideas of several other theorists of power. (Hartssock, 1985: 222)

Hartssock then analyzes the views of Dorothy Emmet, Hanna Pitkin, and Berenice Carroll, discovering in their work the shift already initiated by Arendt in thinking about power in political philosophy (Hartssock, 1985: 222–30). Common to these thinkers is a shift in vision from the instrumental conception

of power, so characteristic of the tradition from Thomas Hobbes to Max Weber, toward a collaborative one; instead of viewing power as divisive these thinkers view power as integrative, instead of considering it as domination, they think of power as 'empowerment', as liberatory activity.

It is precisely these aspects of Arendt's political thought which Ann M. Lane also emphasizes in her attempt to show that Arendt's 'phenomenology of oppression and liberation' (my words) continues to illuminate women's struggles. Urging us to refocus our attention on Arendt's earlier works, and particularly upon her encounter with Zionism in the 1930s,³ Ann Lane writes:

Even if she is not a feminist, Arendt's political theory shares much with those who are. . . . Even as she turns away from Arendt, Rich [Lane is referring to Adrienne Rich] identifies the same issues for feminism that Arendt highlighted for Zionism: the quality of life as an outsider; the implicit tradition of identity for the pariah that provides resources for re-creating collectivity; the social experiments that are models for the whole community. (Lane, 1983: 112)

In this article, I pursue a strategy of questioning which I describe as 'thinking with Arendt against Arendt'. I am most sympathetic to those theorists like Pitkin, Hartsock, Lane and, most recently, Mary Dietz (1990: 232–53) who attempt to retrieve from Arendt's political thought those gems of insight which can still illuminate our struggles as contemporaries. Much as Arendt herself appropriated the political tradition of the West, not in the spirit of a scholastic exercise, but in the spirit of questioning and dialogue such as to orient the mind in the present, we too can engage with her work today to illuminate some of the deepest political perplexities of our times. One of these perplexities is the changing boundaries of the political in our societies,⁴ and with it the shifting line between the public and private realms. I argue that to engage in a 'dialectical conversation' with Hannah Arendt about the concepts of the public and the private is crucial at this historical juncture. This is the case not only because these concepts are so essential to our political life that any apparently simplistic subversion of them will at the best lead us as feminists to lose political allies and at the worst land us in authoritarian utopias, but also because this task is important. Contemporary feminist theory needs a concept of public space if it is to articulate a liberatory vision of human relations. In this dialectical conversation, the partners do not remain unchanged: while I modify Arendt's concept of public space in the direction of a dialogic and procedural model, I suggest that contemporary feminist theory, in its refusal to articulate a positive conception of privacy, has undermined some of its own emancipatory thrust.

Throughout this article I write of 'feminist theory' in the singular. This usage does not reflect my assumption that there is only one authoritative or defining tradition in feminist theory. At the present, feminist theory reflects all the fractures and fractions of current disputes in the humanities, ranging from

postmodernism to neo-pragmatism, from liberalism to psychoanalytical feminism. In the present context though, I think it is safe to assume that there is one common assumption which unites feminist theorizing and which distinguishes this body of work from gender-blind theories like Arendt's. The category of 'gender', that is, the study of the social and cultural construction, interpretation, internalization and reproduction of sexual difference, is the *differentia specifica* of feminist theory, although feminists will differ in explaining and interpreting these processes.

TWO MODELS OF THE PUBLIC SPACE

Without a doubt Hannah Arendt is the central political thinker of this century whose work has reminded us with great poignancy of the 'lost treasures' of our tradition of political thought, and specifically of the 'loss' of public space, of *der öffentliche Raum*, under conditions of modernity (see further Benhabib, 1990: 167–96). Hannah Arendt's major theoretical work, *The Human Condition*, is usually, and not altogether unjustifiably, treated as an anti-modernist political work. By 'the rise of the social' Arendt means the institutional differentiation of modern societies into the narrowly political realm on the one hand and the economic market and the family on the other. As a result of these transformations, economic processes which had hitherto been confined to the 'shadowy realm of the household' emancipate themselves and become public matters. The same historical process which brought forth the modern constitutional state also brings forth 'society', that realm of social interaction which interposes itself between the 'household' on the one hand and the political state on the other (Arendt, 1973: 38–49). Arendt sees in this process the occluding of the political by the 'social' and the transformation of the public space of politics into a pseudo-space of interaction in which individuals no longer 'act' but 'merely behave' as economic producers, consumers and urban city-dwellers.

This relentlessly negative account of the 'rise of the social' and the decline of the public realm has been identified as the core of Arendt's nostalgic 'anti-modernism' (Lasch, 1983; Habermas, 1977). Yet it would be grossly misleading to read Hannah Arendt only or even primarily as a nostalgic thinker. She devoted as much space in her work to analyzing the dilemmas and prospects of politics under conditions of modernity as she did to the decline of public space in modernity. If we are not to read her account of the disappearance of the public realm as a *Verfallsgeschichte* (a history of decline) then, how are we to interpret it?⁵ If one locates Arendt's concept of 'public space' in the context of her theory of totalitarianism, the term acquires a range of meanings rather different from the ones dominant in *The Human Condition*. This topographical figure is suggested early on in her work, at the end of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1967 [1950]), to compare various forms of political rule. Constitutional government is

likened to moving within a space where the law is like the hedges erected between the buildings and one orients oneself upon known territory. Tyranny is like a desert; under conditions of tyranny one moves in an unknown, vast open space, where the will of the tyrant occasionally befalls one like the sandstorm overtaking the desert traveler. Totalitarianism has no spatial topology: it is like an iron band, compressing people increasingly together until they are formed into one (Arendt, 1967: 466).

The concepts, 'agonistic' vs 'associational' public space, can capture this contrast. According to the 'agonistic' view, the public realm represents that space of appearances in which moral and political greatness, heroism, and pre-eminence are revealed, displayed, shared with others. This is a competitive space, in which one competes for recognition, precedence, and acclaim. The agonal space is based on competition rather than collaboration; it individuates those who participate in it and sets them apart from others; it is exclusive in that it presupposes strong criteria of belonging and loyalty from its participants.

By contrast, according to the 'associational' view such a public space emerges whenever and wherever, in Arendt's words, 'men act together in concert'. On this model, public space is the space 'where freedom can appear' (Arendt, 1968 [1955]: 4). It is not a space in any topographical or institutional sense: a town hall or a city square where people do not 'act in concert' is not a public space in this Arendtian sense. A private dining room in which people gather to hear a *Samizdat* or in which dissidents meet with foreigners can become a public space; just as a field or a forest can also become public space if they are the object and the location of an 'action in concert', of a demonstration to stop the construction of a highway or a military air-base, for example. These diverse topographical locations become public spaces in that they become the 'sites' of power, of common action coordinated through speech and persuasion. For Arendt herself examples of the recovery of such public spaces under conditions of modernity were present not only in the American and French Revolutions but also in the French Resistance during the Second World War, in the Hungarian uprising of 1956, and in the civil rights and anti-war movements of the late 1960s in the USA.

All these historically disparate instances repeated one experience (see Arendt, 1973: 26). Violence can occur in private and in public, but its language is essentially private because it is the language of pain. Force, like violence, can be located in both realms. In a way, it has no language, and nature remains its quintessential source. It moves without having to persuade or to hurt. Power, however, is the only force that emanates from action, and it comes from the mutual action of a group of human beings: once in action, one can make things happen, thus becoming the source of a different kind of 'force'.

THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF HANNAH ARENDT'S CONCEPT OF PUBLIC SPACE

While all genuine politics and power relations involve an agonistic dimension, in the sense of a vying for distinction and excellence, agonal politics also entails an associative dimension based on the power of persuasion and consensus. In this sense the sharp differentiation between these two models needs to be softened. But there is a less benign aspect to the agonal space, one which makes many feminists denounce it as articulating the predominantly male experiences of death through war and domination. In her perceptive analysis, Nancy Hartsock points out:

In the case of the warrior-hero, then, each aspect of *eros* takes negative form. Relations with others take the form of the struggle for victory in battle, a struggle for dominance that requires the other's submission or even his death. . . . The body and its needs, even for life itself, are held to be irrelevant. . . . Finally, creativity and generation, issues centering on life, are replaced for the warrior-hero by a fascination with death. (Hartsock, 1985: 189)

One of the curious aspects of Arendt's account of the agonal space of the *polis* is that she subdues and, yes, 'domesticates' the Homeric *warrior-hero* to yield the Aristotelian *deliberative citizen*. She writes:

Thought was secondary to speech, but speech and action were considered to be coeval and coequal, of the same rank and the same kind: and this originally meant not only that most political action, in so far as it remains outside the sphere of violence, is indeed transacted in words, but more fundamentally that finding the right words at the right moment, quite apart from the information or communication they may convey, is action. Only sheer violence is mute. (Arendt, 1973: 26)

In her rejection of violence as a form of political activity, and in substituting phronesis in speech for valor in war, which after all was the existential experience of the Homeric warrior-hero (think here of Achilles and his 'mute' rage), Arendt appears to have undertaken a quiet feminist transformation of the Homeric-warrior ideal into the 'tamer' and 'more reasonable' Aristotelian deliberative citizen.

The agonal model of the public sphere needs also to be criticized from a further perspective, which is neither exclusively nor uniquely feminist. One can criticize this model from a perspective that is more attuned to the political experience of modernity. Since many of Arendt's negative observations on modernity have implications for the transformations of women's lives in the modern world as well, the defense of the more modernist conception of politics, found in her associative model, and the defense of the entrance of women into the public

sphere are closely related. The agonal space of the *polis* was made possible by a morally homogeneous and politically egalitarian, but exclusive community, in which action could also be a revelation of the self to others. Under conditions of moral and political homogeneity and lack of anonymity, the 'agonal' dimension, the vying for excellence among peers, could take place. For the moderns public space is essentially porous; neither access to it nor its agenda of debate can be predefined by criteria of moral and political homogeneity. With the entry of every new group into the public space of politics after the French and American Revolutions, the scope of the public gets extended. The emancipation of workers made property relations into a public-political issue; the emancipation of women has meant that the family and the so-called private sphere become political issues; the attainment of rights by non-white and non-Christian peoples has put cultural questions of collective self- and other-representations on the 'public' agenda. Not only is it the 'lost treasure' of revolutions that eventually all can partake in them, but equally, when freedom emerges from action in concert, there can be no agenda to predefine the topic of public conversation. The struggle over what gets included in the public agenda is itself a struggle for justice and freedom.

Perhaps the episode which best illustrates this blind spot in Hannah Arendt's thought is that of school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas. Arendt likened the demands of the Black parents, upheld by the US Supreme Court, to have their children admitted into previously all-white schools, to the desire of the social parvenu to gain recognition in a society that did not care to admit her. This time around Arendt failed to make the 'fine distinction' in political matters which she otherwise so cultivated, and confused an issue of public justice – equality of educational access – with an issue of social preference – who my friends are or whom I invite to dinner. It is to her credit, however, that after the intervention of the Black novelist, Ralph Ellison, she had the grace to reverse her position.⁶

At the root of Arendt's vacillations as to what is and what is not an appropriate matter to be discussed in the public realm, lies another more important problem, namely her 'phenomenological essentialism'. By this I mean her belief that each type of human activity has its proper 'place' in the world, and that this place is the only authentic space in which this kind of activity can truly unfold (Arendt, 1973: 73 ff.). In accordance with essentialist assumptions, 'public space' is frequently either defined as that space in which only a certain *type of activity*, namely action as opposed to work or labor, takes place, or it is delimited from other 'social' spheres with reference to the *substantive content* of the public dialogue. Both strategies, in my opinion, are indefensible and lead Arendt to limit her concept of public space in ways which are not compatible with her own associative model. Different action-types, like work and labor, can become the locus of 'public space' if they are reflexively challenged and placed into question from the standpoint of the asymmetrical power relations governing them. To give a few examples: obviously productivity quotas in the factory workshop, how many chips per hour a worker should produce, can become a matter of

public concern', if the legitimacy of those setting the quotas, their right to do so, their reasons for doing so are challenged. Likewise, as experiences in the 1980s have shown us, even the most intricate questions of nuclear strategy, the number of nuclear warheads on a missile, the time required to diffuse them – all these dauntingly technical issues – can be reclaimed by a public under conditions of democratic legitimacy and become part of what our *res publica* is about. Arendt, by contrast, relegated certain types of activity like work and labor, and by extension issues of economics and technology, to the 'social' realm, ignoring that these activities and relations, insofar as they are based on power hierarchies, could become matters of public-political dispute as well.

Equally, I regard as futile Arendt's attempt to define 'public space' by setting the agenda of the public conversation. Even on her terms, the effect of collective action in concert will be to put ever new and unexpected items on the agenda of public debate. Thus the 'associational' model develops not a substantive but a *procedural* concept of public space which is in fact compatible with this view. What is important here is not so much *what* public discourse is about as the *way* in which this discourse takes place: force and violence destroy the specificity of public discourse, by introducing the 'dumb' language of physical superiority and constraint and by silencing the voice of persuasion and conviction. Only power is generated by public discourse and is sustained by it. From the standpoint of this procedural model, neither the distinction between the social and the political nor the distinction between work, labor or action are that relevant. At stake is the reflexive questioning of issues by all those affected by their foreseeable consequences and the recognition of their right to do so.

If however neither matters of economics nor of technology belong in the 'social' realm alone,⁷ in virtue of the kinds of human activities which sustain them, but can become public-political matters to the degree to which the power relations which structure them are challenged, why can we not say the same about typically female activities like housework, care for the emotional and sexual needs of the body, the bearing and rearing of children? If Arendt's essentialism is implausible in these other areas, then is it not likewise implausible when applied to the activities specific to the household, unless, of course, there is a sense in which these activities are more fundamentally 'private'? The following passage supports this reading.

Although the distinction between private and public coincides with the opposition of necessity and freedom, of futility and permanence, and, finally, of shame and honor, it is by no means true that only the necessary, the futile, and the shameful have their proper place in the private realm. The most elementary meaning of the two realms indicates that there are things that need to be hidden and others that need to be displayed publicly if they are to exist at all. (Arendt, 1973: 73)

In these and other passages, Arendt appears to me to be proposing some conception of human balance and psychic integrity, which could only be

maintained if the private and the public realms stood in a certain relation to one another. In this context by 'privacy' Arendt does not mean the freedom of religion and conscience which historically has been understood as the fundamental privacy right in the liberal polity; nor does Arendt think that there is a privacy right to economic wealth.⁸ By privacy in the above quote – 'there are things that need to be hidden and others that need to be displayed publicly' – Arendt means primarily the necessity that some aspect of the 'domestic-intimate' sphere be hidden from the glare of the public eye. What aspect then of this 'domestic-intimate' sphere must remain hidden from the public eye and sheltered from political action? An answer to this question can be interpolated by considering the distinction in her thought between 'privacy' and 'intimacy'. And here a surprising meeting between certain feminist concerns and Arendt's political theory becomes visible.

INTIMACY VS PRIVACY IN HANNAH ARENDT'S WORK

Hannah Arendt distinguishes between 'intimacy' and 'privacy', and between 'the social' and 'the political' as modes of public life.⁹ In the emergence of modernity in the West in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries, Arendt sees not only the transformation of the political-public into the social-public, but also the transformation of the private into the 'intimate'. For her, the preoccupation with intimacy and with individual subjectivity are aspects of the same process. Isolating individuals and forcing them into the confines of anonymous public activities like the exchange and commodity market, the modern age also brings forth the cult of individuality, the preoccupation and concern with the uniqueness, authenticity, and psychic harmony of the self. Rousseau's *Confessions* are the pinnacle of this preoccupation with the self and its inner space. For Arendt, the mark of the turn to individuality and to intimacy is the accompanying 'worldlessness' of these human relations. With the rise of the social, modern writers cease to locate the identity essential to the self in the public realm: the public realm in the form of the 'social', and I am referring here primarily to the market of the free exchange of commodities, ceases to be the sphere in which individuality is most authentically displayed. From Rousseau to Marx, modern theorists thematize the 'alienation' of the self from others in the social world. In Hegel's memorable phrase, 'virtue' and 'the course of the world' part company (Hegel, 1977 [1807]: 71).

Arendt here is privileging of a sense of privacy distinct from intimacy and its worldlessness. She writes:

The second outstanding non-privative characteristic of privacy is that the four walls of one's private property offer the only reliable hiding place from the common public world, not only from everything that goes on in it

but also from its very publicity, from being seen and being heard. A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real non-subjective sense. The only efficient way to guarantee the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity is private property, a privately owned place to hide in. (Arendt, 1973: 71)

Certainly, Arendt's call in this passage for 'a privately owned place to hide in' is not a call to own a condominium or a private house – as far as I know she rented an apartment in New York city and never owned anything. To approach Arendt's meaning, recall here Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The commonalities in this search for a space that provides the self with a center, with a shelter, with a place in which to unfold capacities, dreams and memories, to nurture the wounds of the ego, and to lend to it that depth of the feeling which, as Arendt puts it, allows it to rise into sight 'from some darker ground', are striking. This passage is an affirmation of 'the home'. Viewed against the background of massive homelessness today, the perspicacity of Arendt's insight is clear: the home not only lends the self the depth without which it is nothing but a shadow on the streets, the home also provides that space that protects, nurtures and makes the individual fit to appear in the public realm. The homeless self is the individual ready to be ravaged by the forces of the social against which it must daily fight to protect itself.

With Arendt's concept of the home – not her terminology but mine – we reach the most significant sense of 'privacy' in her theory, and which feminist theorists must not only share but also cultivate. Let me distinguish though between a specific domestic structure, the monogamous nuclear male-headed family, and the 'home'. This is a distinction which Hannah Arendt herself did not make, and which is the central reason why her affirmation of the private realm so often reads like an ahistorical justification of a specific gender division of labor which historically confined modern bourgeois women to the home. While feminists have shown that the patriarchal family was no 'home' for most women, the gay liberation movements in the last two decades have also made public that there are many ways to be a family and to share a home. New legislation passed in various USA cities, most notably in Cambridge, Massachusetts, names these types of human associations 'domestic partnerships', thus distinguishing between the 'home' structure and a certain type of psycho-sexual and intimate relationship. Contained in the concept of 'privacy', particularly as it has applied to the 'domestic-familial realm', have been several moral and political principles. They may be named intimacy, domesticity, and the space of individuality. What form of sexual relations best expresses intimacy can no longer be dictated in terms of categories of biologically grounded gender identity; homo- as well as hetero-sexual

human relations may succeed or fail in creating intimacy for the individuals involved. Domestic arrangements geared towards the sustenance of the human body and of its daily needs, the running of a home in which embodied selves need to be sheltered, the raising, nurture, and education of children, can be carried out, and historically have been carried out, by many different forms of kinship and family-like arrangements. Intimacy and domesticity together contribute to the nourishment and unfolding of individuality. In this sense, the primary moral and cultural purpose of the household under conditions of modernity is the development and flourishing of autonomous individualities. Although this explication expands Hannah Arendt's categories considerably and takes them in directions which she herself could not have anticipated, they are compatible with her deep reflections on the meaning of the private sphere. One very important consequence of this reformulated concept of privacy is not only the redefinition of the family unit, but also the encouragement of legislation protecting children and their care providers on the basis of the right to a home, understood as the moral and political entitlement of the individual to the physical, material, and spiritual preconditions for the development of the personality.

Hannah Arendt's concept of privacy and some concerns of contemporary feminist theory on 'a room of one's own' can be made compatible with each other along the lines suggested above. What about her highly problematic distinction between 'the social' and 'the political' as modalities of public life? Is it useful in thinking about contemporary women's struggles?

'THE SOCIAL' VS THE 'POLITICAL': TOWARDS A RECONSIDERATION OF ARENDT'S DISTINCTIONS

At the present there are three different strands of research among feminist theorists, which, in different ways, throw new and hitherto undetected light on the concept of the public sphere and the related concepts of the social and the political. First, there is a growing body of *alternative feminist historiographies of the genesis of the public sphere*. Joan Landes's *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (1988) and Linda Kerber's *Women of the Republic. Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (1986) are among the most notable works of scholarship in this area. Despite some differences in their assessment of specific authors like Montesquieu and Rousseau, for example, both works tackle a common problem: namely, the gender contradictions of early bourgeois republics that advocate universal equality and freedom on the one hand, but confine the citizen's wife and her claims to freedom to the domestic sphere alone. These works suggest but do not answer the conceptually more challenging question: is it a historically contingent fact, eventually corrected, so to speak, in the course of subsequent democratic and revolutionary

struggles, that the ideology of the emergent bourgeois public sphere confined women to the private realm alone?

Or is it the case that this historical constellation of events shows that there is a deep incompatibility between the very model of the bourgeois public sphere and the inclusion of women? Theorists who answer this second question in the affirmative can be named *advocates of the alternative model of public sphere*. Their work constitutes the second most significant strand of research among feminist theorists working on this topic. Iris Young has put forth the most challenging arguments on this issue: criticizing the liberal-Kantian model of the values of impartiality, objectivity, and detachment in practical reason, Young develops the model of a 'civic public', which would be partial to the hitherto excluded and repressed interests of certain groups, which would be perspectival, engaged, embedded and embodied. Altering the normative bases of this model of impartiality would yield a pluralistic, heterogeneous, to some extent anonymous, but more erotic and more carnivalesque public space than the more republican and sedate versions imagined by either the French or the American revolutionaries. Young sees the civic space of the city and its neighborhoods as exemplifying this ideal (Young, 1987: 56–77; 1990: 300–24).

Finally, there is a strand of feminist theorizing which is inspired by the critical social theory of late capitalism developed by Jürgen Habermas and Claus Offe, and for which the concept of public space is important from the standpoint of articulating a *feminist and radical democratic critique of the late welfare-state capitalist democracies*. Nancy Fraser's work has been one of the most significant contributions in this area (Fraser: 1990).

Although these three areas of research are closely related, and naturally lead into each other, in the present context I can only suggest how Arendt's distinction between the 'social' and the 'political' would be significant from the standpoint of the third enterprise, that is, for developing a feminist critique of welfare-state-type, late-capitalist societies within which I would situate my own attempt to reread Hannah Arendt. Undoubtedly, our societies are undergoing tremendous transformations at the present. In really existing western democracies, under the impact of corporatization, the mass media and the growth of business-style political associations, like PACs and other lobbying groups, the public sphere of democratic legitimacy has shrunk. The autonomous citizen, whose reasoned judgment and participation were the sine qua non of the public sphere, has been transformed into the 'citizen consumer' of packaged images and messages, or the 'electronic mail target' of large lobbying groups and organizations. This impoverishment of public life has been accompanied by the growth of the society of surveillance and voyeurism on the one hand (Foucault) and the 'colonization of the lifeworld' on the other (Habermas). Not only has public life been transformed, private life as well has undergone tremendous changes, only some of which can be welcome for furthering the values of democratic legitimacy and discursive will formation. Hannah Arendt's prediction that modern societies

would be increasingly dominated by the 'social', with the concomitant rule of the bureaucracy on the one hand, and an obsessive preoccupation with intimacy on the other, has proved remarkably prescient.

As the sociologist Helga Maria Hernes has remarked, in some ways welfare-state societies are ones in which 'reproduction' has gone public (Hernes: 1987). When, however, issues like child-rearing, care for the sick, the young and the elderly, reproductive freedoms, domestic violence, child abuse and the constitution of sexual identities go 'public', more often than not a 'patriarchal-capitalist-disciplinary bureaucracy' has resulted (Fraser, 1990 and 1987: 103–21; Ferguson, 1984). These bureaucracies have frequently disempowered women and other affected groups and have set the agenda for public debate and participation. In reflecting about these issues feminist theory has lacked a *critical model of public space and public discourse*. A critical model of public space is necessary to enable us to draw the line between 'juridification,' *Verrechtlichung* in Jürgen Habermas's term, or between making 'social' and 'administering to', in Arendtian terms, on the one hand, and between making 'public', in the sense of making accessible to debate, reflection, action and moral-political transformation on the other. To make issues of common concern 'public' in this second sense means making them increasingly accessible to associative models of political interaction; it means to democratize them. As feminists, we have lacked a critical model which could distinguish between the bureaucratic administration of needs and collective democratic empowerment over them. More often than not, debates among feminists have been blocked by the alternatives of a legalistic liberal reformism (the NOW agenda; ACLU positions) and a radical feminism which can hardly conceal its own political and moral authoritarian undertones.¹⁰

While Hannah Arendt's agonistic model is at odds with the sociological reality of modernity, as well as with modern political struggles for justice, her associative model of the public sphere may be an essential beginning point in the feminist critique of the transformation of public life under late capitalism. Feminist politics, particularly in the United States, has been an accomplice to the process by which the sphere of the public has extended itself while its influence and legitimacy have shrunk. The public has been all too glibly and thoughtlessly identified with the legal system and the media. As a nation of voyeurs has sat watching courtroom testimonies of abusive parents, domestic violence, marital rape, child molestation, I for one have at times cringed in shame at what, in Arendt's words, was the making public of what needed to be kept private. I do not want to be misunderstood: insofar as the rights of these women, children, spouses were destroyed and abused the law must protect them. Yet the law is too blunt an instrument at times to redress the wounds of individuals whose 'home' has been their 'hell'. As feminists, we have seen the transformation of the public into the social, into the rule by nobody, by the anonymous army of experts, judges, attorneys, social workers, psychiatrists and welfare officials. Certainly we must accept here the inevitable dialectic of social movements, which, if

successful at all, will create institutions and even bureaucracies to advocate and fulfill their claims in the public sphere; in other words, there is certain interdependence between bureaucratization and democratization. Yet there also is a sphere of politics which exhausts itself neither in the bureaucratic administration of needs nor in the clientilistic pressing forward of claims within established institutional mechanisms. This is the dimension of the political which involves transforming private shame into a public claim, private darkness and blindness into public light and visibility. This kind of politics involves giving each other the world'. In this task of recovering the political, we can do worse than to think with Hannah Arendt against Hannah Arendt.

NOTES

- 1 In a recent article Mary Dietz has given a feminist reading of the 'gender subtext' of Arendt's ostensibly gender-neutral analysis of the 'human' activities of work, labor, and action. Dietz shows quite persuasively that although these activities are not associated by Arendt herself with any specific gender organization, it is of course the women who perform those activities most essential to Arendt's understanding of labor: cooking, cleaning, sewing, mending, tidying up – those activities necessary for the daily continuation of life and the regeneration of the body; and of course those reproductive and nurturing activities, like the bearing and care of children, but also of the elderly, the sick, and the needy (see Arendt, 1973 [1958]: 96 ff.; and Mary Dietz, 1990: 232–53).
- 2 This is the phrase that Arendt herself cites from Morris Goldstein in the context of discussing the difficulty which the German Jews faced in administering a 'property', i.e. the German intellectual tradition which was not their own and which excluded them. Moritz Goldstein, 'Deutsch-Juedischer Parnass', as quoted in Arendt, 'Walter Benjamin', 1968 [1955]: 183–4. The exact quote from Goldstein reads: 'We Jews administer the intellectual property of a people which denies us the right and the ability to do so.'
- 3 Some of the less known aspects of Arendt's lifelong occupation with Jewish identity and Jewish politics have recently been documented by Dagmar Barnouw (1990).
- 4 See Charles S. Maier (1987: 12 ff.) on the welfare state, women's issues, and changing boundaries of the political; cf. also Lauro Balbo, 'Family, Women and the State: Notes toward a Typology of Family Roles and Public Intervention', in Maier (1987: 201–21).
- 5 I have argued elsewhere that the key here is Arendt's odd methodology which conceives of political thought as 'story-telling'. Viewed in this light, her 'story' of the transformation of public space is an 'exercise' of thought. Such thought exercises dig under the rubble of history in order to recover those 'pearls' of past experience, with their sedimented and hidden layers of meaning, such as to cull from them a story that can orient the mind in the future. The vocation of the theorist as 'story-teller' is the unifying thread of Arendt's political and philosophical analyses from the origins of totalitarianism to her reflections on the French and American Revolutions to her theory of public space and to her final words to the first volume of *The Life of the Mind* on 'Thinking' (1971). Read in this light, Arendt's account of the 'rise of the

social' and the decline of public space under conditions of modernity cannot be viewed as a nostalgic *Verfallsgeschichte* but must be understood as the attempt to think through the human history sedimented in layers of language. We must learn to identify those moments of rupture, displacement, and dislocation in history. At such moments language is the witness to the more profound transformations taking place in human life.

Nonetheless, Arendt is not free of assumptions deriving from an *Ursprungsphilosophie* which posits an original state or temporal point as the privileged source to which one must trace back the phenomena such as to capture their 'true' meaning. As opposed to rupture, displacement and dislocation, this view emphasizes the continuity between the past origin and the present condition, and seeks to uncover at the origin the lost and concealed essence of the phenomena. There are really two strains in Hannah Arendt's thought, one corresponding to the method of fragmentary historiography, and inspired by Walter Benjamin; the other, inspired by the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, and according to which memory is the mimetic recollection of the lost origins of phenomena as contained in some fundamental human experience. In accordance with this latter approach, reminders abound in *The Human Condition* of 'the original meaning of politics' or of the 'lost' distinction between the 'private' and the 'public'. See Benhabib, 1990 for a fuller discussion of the methodological puzzles of Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism.

- 6 See Arendt (1959: 45–56); Ralph Ellison in R. P. Warren, ed. (1965) *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York, 1965), 342–4; and Arendt to Ralph Ellison in a letter of 29 July 1965 as cited by Young-Bruehl (1982: 316).
- 7 See footnote 9 below for a discussion of some of the puzzles surrounding Arendt's usage of this term.
- 8 For Arendt property and wealth are distinct. While property, in the sense of a place of my own and that part of the world which sustains my daily well-being, is private, wealth is public, and its appropriation always subject to political action and public policy (Arendt, 1973: 109 ff.).
- 9 Although it often seems as if Arendt equates the 'rise of the social' with 'the decline of the public sphere' as such, upon close scrutiny it would be more appropriate to emphasize the 'transformation' of the public sphere under conditions of modernity from the political to the social public. Social life, in Arendt's sense of the term, is also enacted in public, but this is a different kind of 'publicness', one bound together by the forces of the life-process itself and not by political action. Cf. Arendt: 'Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public' (Arendt, 1973: 46). In this article I am not addressing the fact that Arendt nowhere in *The Human Condition* thematizes that aspect of the rise of modernity which has been considered such a crucial feature of this epoch for thinkers as diverse as G. W. F. Hegel, Alexis de Tocqueville, Jürgen Habermas and Talcott Parsons. This is the formation of an independent sphere of 'civic and political associations', and secondary institutions within the social, which have the function, among others, of mediating between the narrowly political state on the one hand and society, in the broad sense of differing and competing social groups, on the other. Hannah Arendt's sociology of modernity is curiously truncated, but as a political and cultural historian she operates with a much richer conception of the modern social

sphere. In my book, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Benhabib, 1993), I argue that Arendt did not neglect this dimension of modernity in her historical writings but that she did not thematize its philosophical import until much later in her life.

- 10 For a good example of the first trend, see Rosemarie Tong (1984); for the second trend, consult Catharine MacKinnon's work, and the amazing 'return of the repressed' Marxist orthodoxy of the state and the law in her writings; cf. her early article, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory' (1982: 1–30); and the more recent *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (1987).

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