

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF HANNAH ARENDT

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Abstract: This article focuses on the ancient and modern meanings of the “public” and the “private” spaces – carefully analyzed by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* –, and on the way in which these meanings appeared, also on how they reflect themselves in establishing the relation *public-private*. The perspectives of the relation between “public” and “private” shade away the tendency of “being together”, alienating the public space from that spectacular attribute of the commonly shared deliberations, bringing the decisions towards an absolute sovereignty. Whereas in the ancient Greece the question of the conflict between the “public” and the “private” has appeared, through the shading of the private sphere and through the over-bidding of the public one, in the Western exegesis the inability to make a distinction between the public and the private did not have the same explanations, but it is rather based on an interpretation and transfer gap. The author acknowledges the decline of the “public” to its extinction in the totalitarianisms of the 20th century, as being due to the modern loss of the meaning and practice of the political action.

Keywords: public, private, political, social, Hannah Arendt.

In 1958 Hannah Arendt published an original study in philosophical anthropology. Later, this writing became her most influential work: *The Human Condition*, in which she pleads for a tripartite division among the human activities of work, labour and action.

One of the most significant problems that Hannah Arendt brings up for discussion is the one regarding the relation between the *political* and the *social*. The author underlines the confusion caused by the fact that “political” has been translated into Latin with “social”. This contradicts the meaning that the Greeks had attributed to the term “political”, which meant that the individual had received a kind of second existence beyond his private life, which overcame things that were only necessary and useful. Not only that the political was not a given fact of life, but moreover it opposed it as a particular human

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approach through the fact that it escaped the natural need. *Action* (praxis) and *speech* (lexis) were the specific ways of the political life. In the author's opinion, the Greeks essentially delimited the *polis* from the home. The home and the family represented the place of the biological, of the natural need, which was characterized by a strict hierarchy (hence by inequality), while the *polis* was the place of equality, of personal freedom, detached from the tension of natural needs. Equality meant exactly *not being conducted*, but also *not conducting*. In this regard there is also certain confusion or rather a meaning displacement, in that the "common good" overshadowed the political field as it only took into consideration the existence of some convergent individual aims and interests. This is a case of expansion of the domestic sphere, which favoured, through certain mechanisms what Hannah Arendt called the "ascension of the social" to the detriment of the political.

The private sphere does not oppose the political, especially during the modern period, but mainly the social. The initial meaning was that of deprivation of something, of decrease of activity in the domestic sphere that is the "deprivation" of the political life (exclusively human activity). Gradually, through the enrichment of the individual sphere, the term lost its negative connotation. The family nucleus started to decline, while the social began to function according to the family structures. The society became a kind of big family for everybody, and the public sphere, a space of individuality, where each had the chance to demonstrate that he or she was the best. The demographic growth favoured conformism, that state in which "the conduct replaced the action". In this context it is consolidated the idea of "natural harmony of interests", which Hannah Arendt considers to have a basis of statistical, rather than metaphysical nature. The expansion of the social has determined a state in which neither the private (intimate sphere), nor the political could defend themselves.

H. Arendt gives a special importance in her discourse to the relationship between the public and the private and to their permanent dynamics. Starting from the original meaning of the two concepts in each case, the author identifies a series of conditions and mechanisms through which either the one or the other impose itself on the humanity.

The public sphere designates "that which is common". There are two aspects of the "common", each of them constituting in its turn a new dimension of the public sphere. Firstly, that which is common

means that which is seen, perceived by everybody. Secondly, it means the world which is common to all of us, a unitary whole, which “assembles all of us together”. Thus, the existence of reality itself is an aspect which derives from the feeling associated with “that which is common”. This unitary whole, to which each of us belongs to, constituted the foundation of the Christian perspective that saw humanity as a *corpus*, starting from the model of the human body; the constituting parts of this *corpus* were the individuals. The objectivity is put forward only starting from the reality of the public sphere, and in no circumstances does it mean “something” that remains completely independent from the individual, but it has as a sub-layer that which is “common” to the multitude of perspectives (Arendt 2007, 52). The end of the common world would take place when it would be regarded only from a single perspective; in this case there could not exist something that is common and the concept of objectivity itself would be affected.

Starting from these ideas, we observe that the public sphere itself, basing on what is common, has its foundation in the manifestation of individuality, of some multiple individualities which can confine a space of the “common” only together. On the other hand, we will see that the “private” is also constituted exactly within this dynamic reference to what is public, underlining this complementarity of the two spheres, both conceptual and existential.

The private sphere, as already mentioned, refers – at the origins – to deprivation that is, it concentrates on those essential things, which are the only one really human: “The depriving character of the private lies at the basis of the absence of the others; the private person does not show itself to the others, and that is why, it is as if it did not exist” (2007, 53). The one who leads an exclusively private life cannot make himself observable; no matter what he does, that thing it is not seen by the others. The defining element of the private is constituted by the propriety, which should not be confused with richness; richness is not necessarily the result of propriety. Private propriety has always had a sacred character, as “[...] being an owner means, no more and no less than having a place in a certain part of the world and belonging thus to the political system that is, being the head of one of the families, which, together with others, constituted the public sphere” (2007, 55).

The private propriety does not initially hold a value in itself, but only as long as it largely legitimates the participation of the individual in the political life. At the same time, the political represents

the sphere where only the one who owns private propriety can manifest himself: “The private was similar to a reverse, dark and hidden side of the political sphere, and if being political meant realizing the supreme possibility of the human existence, then having no place that belonged to you literally (as a slave) would mean ceasing to be human (2007, 57).

A characteristic of the present-day society is the expansion of the social over the private, parallel with a development without precedent of the private sphere. However Arendt observes that the private sub-layer does not result in a stronger “participation” in the political sphere – as it should have happened considering the essential nature of the private – but on the contrary. The expansion of the social has had as a consequence important mutations regarding the role of the public and of the private sphere. On the one side, the public sphere has become a function of the private one, on the other side, the private sphere has become the only remaining common preoccupation.

Propriety has gradually lost its “objectual” character, taking the form of “manpower”, and the private confined and consolidated itself within the sphere of intimacy, as a last citadel in front of this situation. In this way, “the distinction between the public and the private sphere, which is seen more from the point of view of the private as from that of the political body, amounts to the distinction between things that have to be shown and things that have to be hidden” (2007, 63).

The distinction between the public and the private, concludes Hannah Arendt, suggests eventually a simple fact: namely that in order to be able to exist, some realities have to be kept hidden, while other ones, on the contrary, have to be made public, and every human activity “refers to its proper place in the world”. This is valid for all three human activities: work, labour and action. However there is also an exception: the goodness that Christianity promotes. But goodness has a paradoxical character in itself: on the one side, it needs the “other” in order to manifest itself, but the “other” is excluded as its assessor, as it refuses any exposure to the public sphere and even to the private one (2007, 67).

The whole palette of conceptual delimitations, distinctions and phenomena that Hannah Arendt proposes in her study aim, as the author herself states, not at the exhaustion of the sphere of *vita activa*, but at the political implications and meanings of the discussed activities: work, labour and action.

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