

Community Building According to Hannah Arendt

PAPER WRITTEN BY PIERRE TOSI

The Jewish philosopher, who was born in Germany (1906) and emigrated to the USA because of the Nazi persecution, became famous for *The origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and in particular for the expression «banality of evil» contained in the long article, then transformed in a book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). The interest and the polemics that these works aroused, by virtue of the originality of historical interpretation, obscured for some time the value of more *theoretical* writings, which were afterwards recognised as masterpieces in the 20th century's political philosophy.

With my participation I shall try to clarify the reasons why the thoughts expressed, above all present in *The Human Condition* (1958), can be very important, generally for the actual political discussion and especially for the **de-growth** movement and our experience.

In these unforgettable pages **Hannah Arendt** has the courage to put under scrutiny the entire western philosophical tradition (not by chance she had been **Heidegger**'s mindful student), from **Plato** and **Aristotle** on, accusing it to have escaped from human *praxis* (*vita activa*) in order to find a quiet refuge in *contemplation*, what resulted to be also the best premise for the Christian thoughts. The symbolic beginning for this divorce between politics and philosophy was the judgement against **Socrates** and his condemn to death. The foundation of modern thinking, due to **Descartes** (1596-1650) and **Hobbes** (1588-1679) and subsequently to **Rousseau** (1712-1778), did not change this attitude, because it led to the conception of State government as a result of complete delegation from the people, cancelling the individual personalities, reducing the citizens to an abstract, totally comprehensive unity and avoiding one more time the decision processed through useful common discussion, which had been typical of ancient Athens' assemblies. In this context **Karl Marx** (1818-1883) represented an evident and positive breaking point, since he considered human activity the fundamental point of history, instead of abstract ideas; but in Arendt's opinion he renounced to get completely out of the traditional path and the philosophical *idealism*. This is the reason why he fell into the contradiction of considering work as the basis of human's society and at the same time the end of work as the supreme final purpose of human history (clearly forgotten by most Marxist ideologists and above all by Soviet Union, the Popular Republic of China and the other Marxist countries).

To avoid this evident *aporia*, it's necessary for Hannah Arendt to distinguish among three different kinds of human activity.

Labour consists in all the activities concerning life reproduction: procuring food and water, finding the means for heating, keeping the life environment and the homes in order and cleanness, etcetera. **Work** is by the author identified with projecting, creating and manufacturing objects and tools that are destined to a duration in the time, not to a daily consumption; it builds the *artificial* world, which is for human beings as necessary as the *natural* one, in order to give to life a sense of stability. Art is a particular case of this sector. Finally, **action** is a synonym for the complex of efforts aimed to create and maintain the common, political coexistence, to gain shared decisions and to discuss again and modify them, whenever needed. This process is evidently based on speech: word distinguish human beings from other animals and it is the only way for the individuals at the same time to exist as unrepeatable units and to exist in a community together with their similars.

The actual confusion between labour and work (which did not exist in past history) is for the German thinker the origin of contemporary *consumerism*.

Goods are produced without interruption to be used, destroyed and substituted in a very fast period of time, as if they were perishable products. The society devours more and more resources, as if it was a young organism, needing abundant nourishment to grow, survive and keep healthy. This reasoning without doubt represent an early, but logical and complete, critics towards the *growth* system: every objector of the idea of never ending growth should carefully read these pages.

While in the Greek *polis* labour was a necessary, but rather despicable occupation, to be left to slaves by rich people owing them, nowadays it became the *fulcrum* of our social life, transforming each citizen into a slave. According to the philosopher, the main reason for this evolution, or better *devolution*, is the human desperate need for immortality: that's why, after the downfall of religious convictions, life conservation and implementation have become the supreme values. I would add that we should never disregard the thrust to this kind of alienation caused by the omnipresent risks and fears of collective violence, the Hobbesian *homo homini lupus*, so well meditated by the theorists of *sacrifice*, beginning from **René Girard** (1923-2015).

Which are the negative aspects of political action that brought on its abandonment or marginalisation? Hannah Arendt is sure: its unpredictability and its irreversibility. As a matter of fact, when men meet in order to take common decisions and develop political projects, interactions are so multiple and com-

plex, that we can have no idea of the result, which may even appear very destructive. The remedies, according to her, are only honest promises and forgiveness, id est acting with good faith and being ready to judge the effects with indulgence.

From my point of view, this is the central question and the main aspect. For this exact reason I decided to propose the author to you: it is dangerous and useless to come back to a closed ideology that is certain about the end and the purpose of history, it is dangerous and useless to act politically with sureness about the good and quick outcome for our efforts. These considerations constitute an antidote to bitter disillusion, like the one that hit a lot of militants in the mass movements of the Seventies, who expected a near, victorious revolution, and as well an antidote to the risk of turning *degrowth* into a blind faith in the easy and inevitable redemption of humanity after the *sinful* epoch of growth and consumerism, as the goal of the whole history. What would be a sort of *Marxism 2.0*, as I like to call it.

As the author confirmed in her last work, her unfinished (she died in 1975) spiritual testament, ***The Life of the Mind*** (1978), it is indispensable for everyone to distinguish the private life from the political one. The former is the kingdom of personal affections, the place for loving relatives, friends, maybe God, while the latter means essentially to act, obviously respecting the others and their opinions. Devoting oneself to ideologies, parties, groups, nations, collective entities is dangerously misleading.

This must not make us retain that *being in the world* corresponds for Arendt to an impulsive action without thought and reflection; on the contrary her aim is to overcome the long divorce between philosophy and politics, finding a modern union without precedents in western history of *theoria* and *praxis*, which cannot be simply copied from the Greek *polis*.

If bad surprises in political history are always behind the corner, why should we leave the *animal laborans* way to live with its quiet, reassuring safety? The answer comes once more from Hannah Arendt: political action is not just the noblest activity for humans, it is the only one granting authentic life, developing real individuality, giving the pleasure of interaction, letting our ideas have some consequences in reality. Solely through political action and community life, we can experience *power* in its most positive meaning, that is the capacity to leave a mark, although unpredictable, in history.

Every individual life to be worthwhile must be narrated, like a story that gets a sense only when told by one to another. Therefore it cannot be solipsistic, it must burgeon in a collective surrounding, comparing itself with the one of the other members of the community.

As a consequence we should not get surprised that this extraordinary woman compares political action with a second *birth*, a rebirth. Beginning political action is similar to entering into genuine life and the start (*archein*), is its most important phase, compared to conclusion, that is never given.

Although Hannah did not consider herself a feminist, she offered *feminism* a crucial idea, the one of natality. For instance, the Italian feminist philosopher **Adriana Cavarero**, inspired also by **Luce Irigaray**, criticizes the western cultural tradition, beginning from Plato as Arendt did. For her its core is the *masculine* principle of death (mortality *versus* immortality) and consequently it ignores the *feminine* principle of natality. Moreover, most part of feminist thoughts tend to refuse the abstract image of an universal, ideal human being, obviously man and not woman, just the same accusation that Arendt moved to Plato and his followers.

It has been told that Hannah Arendt and **Jean-François Lyotard** (1924-1998) are joined in a «postmodern Kantianism». Indeed many critics against the so called *metanarrative* were anticipated by Arendt's concepts. It would be useful to debate the relationships between *postmodernism* and *degrowth*, but this is for sure not the right place. What here interests me is to point out some critical observations that the French thinker addressed to the German philosopher. He believes that Arendt's thoughts are characterised by «an ontological and historical melancholy», from which she looks for a redemption and grounds for optimism. Lyotard is smitten by her conception of birth and natality, which she brings near to Christ's good news, considering that Christianity is founded on God's human birth and that forgiveness, another bearing element for this religion, is often compared to a new beginning (therefore similar to a birth), breaking the necessity of hate and vengeance. In this idea Lyotard finds something very attractive and interesting, but at the same time he assumes that there is an excess of *humanism* and anthropological faith. He proposes that probably the Jewish religion is more realistic than the Christian one, since it believes that only God can forgive, whereas this power is unknown to human beings.

Moreover, the postmodern theorist considers also the tragic aspect of birth: its *nudity*, its fragility. Birth and death (sufferance, desperation, danger...) are much harder to separate for him than in Arendt's belief. Also the literary examples shown by Arendt as a support for her strong faith in the event of birth (Heine, Lazare, Kafka and Charlie Chaplin) are in his opinion forced by her and a voluntarily misunderstanding. In conclusion, from his point of view each birth of a baby or of a community is a good promise, but almost always destined to stay only a promise without realisation or destined to ruin during

the time under the relentless laws of *entropy*. The most democratic community has no assurance for a long duration and is still only temporary.

Roberto Esposito is in my opinion the most interesting Italian political philosopher; one of his most famous books is called *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, so it is absolutely inherent to our argument. If I mention him, it is not for patriotism, but because I read him quite carefully and I agree with many statements of his. He points out about Hannah Arendt that she intensely and profoundly thought about community. Nevertheless for him she made a mistake, too strongly identifying community and *polis*.

What he openly appreciates from Arendt's writings is her refusal to the traditional metaphysical concept of *subject*: like Lyotard, he likes her strength of *deconstruction*. Then, he praises that the wish for immortality that bases the community in Arendt's vision is not a mere anxiety for self conservation, but just the contrary, dealing with the community's historical memory.

On the other side, he finds that the principle keeping the community together, which he etymologically calls *munus*, is by Arendt too *positive*, too easily founded. *Munus* is the Latin word for *gift*, but unlike *donum*, which indicates a spontaneous action, it reminds obligatory reciprocity, unavoidable link, debt, as **Marcel Mauss** (1872-1950) tried to explain in his unforgettable essay.

From this point of view, the analogy of Arendt between community and *communication* has to be carefully analysed: interactions cannot be only joyful and promising, but hide pain, violence, fear, envy, distrust... Not only because of the aggressive human nature, which makes us come back to Hobbes, but as a consequence of our «original wound», our consubstantial weakness that escorts us from birth and that each of us can imagine in every similar.

In the Italian essayist's horizon a deep *laceration* is what really joins human beings. Following Bataille's lesson, he considers the possibility of community almost unreachable and very fragile. In Esposito's opinion, **Georges Bataille** (1897-1962) is the best answer to Heidegger's «end philosophy» and «end of philosophy» (let's not forget Heidegger's clear influence upon Arendt). Well, Bataille's pages try to express a rather unseizable concept, of «inner experience», which is the experience of the impossibility of experience and *a fortiori* the consciousness of its in-communicability.

From Bataille's point of view, the individual fears what he wishes: tearing himself, his differences, his peculiarities in a common union. After all, life consists in the wish of community, but community represents life negation. Hereupon the only rare occasions that truly approach us to the others are for Bataille laugh, sex and blood. Death more than life joins all of us (once more a masculine mistake in perspective?) in the French thinker's elaborations.

Some scholars assume that Bataille's idea of *dépense* may deal with *degrowth*. That could be the argument for another conference, surely engaging. Here I

limit myself in the statement that the most problematic views of community help us not to fall into easy optimism in our political action: our (not only inner) experience should have already revealed that the risk of disillusion is large and always present. This should not sound as an invitation to disengagement, but on the contrary this wants to encourage to action for the hope of pleasure itself that is offered (naturally, together with a lot of displeasure) and because otherwise our lives would lack of something irreplaceable. But we must look away from short time results: they are absolutely insignificant.

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