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**HANNAH ARENDT, POLITICAL THINKING AND ACTION  
ABSTRACT OF THE DOCTRATE THESIS**

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## Introduction

Hannah Arendt is the only author who, in the second half of the twentieth century, turned political action into the cornerstone of her political reflection. Without having generated, in the classical sense of the term, a school of thought, Arendt inspired a large number of contemporary political thinkers. Her analysis of totalitarianism is the core of the whole work and the events of the twentieth century led her to review her own reflections and to move from philosophical thinking to the study of politics. Starting from classical theories, both ancient and modern, on the nature and functions of politics, Hannah Arendt developed a seemingly contradictory conception (which seemed to transgress the usual categories of contemporary sociology and political science) which, in fact, was very coherent in terms of political action.

There are three directions of reflection, largely effects of her own biography, which mark an intellectual enterprise spanning half a century: 1. the Jewish problem, which will fundamentally influence the analysis of totalitarianism and in particular the role of anti-Semitism in the evolution of this political movement, as much as murderous as original; 2. her formation in German culture and the formative meetings with Husserl, Heidegger and Jaspers, which will lead to the understanding of historicism in the broader context of the crisis of modernity and its relationship with totalitarianism; 3. the American experience that will help Hannah Arendt to formulate her own ideas about the essential role of freedom in relation to social issues and also to look at democracy - both liberal - parliamentary and, especially, participatory, in a positive light.

Regarding the controversies generated by Arendt's work, the year 2021 is a special one: there are seven decades since the appearance of the *Origins of Totalitarianism* around which there was already a very fertile intellectual controversy and six decades since the Eichmann process, whose reflection by Arendt in the famous book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, will generate the most important debate surrounding her work. Even today the echoes aroused by these controversies are inextricably linked to the theoretical development of her contributions.

In this paper I try to discern the influence of Arendt's reflection on History on her theory of political action. Moreover, I argue that Hannah Arendt's reflections remain one of the most relevant theoretical tools for the analysis of post-totalitarian societies. The method used to clarify the main question of the paper, "How does thought liberate political action in History?" it will be based on the contextual analysis of her work and its theoretical substantiation. I am placing my emphasis on those texts, sometimes translated *in extenso*, which have not yet been the subject of a thorough examination, because they have only recently come to the attention of researchers. This is the case of *The Freedom of Being Free*<sup>1</sup> (*La liberté d'être libre*) reprinted in 2017, *Thinking Freely* (*Penser librement*) or *Karl Marx* published in 2021, as well as on the

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<sup>1</sup> The text was discovered in 2017 by Jerome Kohn, who heads the Hannah Arendt Center in New York, in the Arendt collection of the Library of Congress in Washington and was first published in the *American New England Review*, then in the volume of unpublished texts in 2018 *Thinking Without a Banister, Essays in Understanding, 1953-1975*, published by Schocken Books in 2018. The edition I will use is the French one from 2019.

detailed account on the meaning of politics from *Does politics still make sense? (La politique a-t-elle encore un sens ?)*. Also, I explore the less scrutinized aspects of Arendt's thinking from *Essays in Understanding*, explored in correlation with Leo Strauss's political philosophy.

The influence of Arendtian thought in France is also relevant, so I take into consideration the main criticisms that her works generated: from Raymond Aron and his review of the *Origins of Totalitarianism* from 1953 to the present day. For Arendt, France was not only a country that offered her temporary refuge (1933-1941), but also an object of research and a point of reference. Her repeated appeal to Montesquieu and Tocqueville, two thinkers who did not fit into a rigid school of thought, is an equally theoretical and personal acknowledgement. In the paper I also focus on her key texts but also to the critics who culminated, in France, with the offensive launched by Emmanuel Faye who, by placing Arendt in Heidegger's following, tried to prove the reactionary ideological character of her work.

Arendt's view of political action can only be understood insofar as the original interpretations of concepts commonly used to explain political life are first clarified. This is also the case of the relationship between political action and history, between politics and political action. At the end of the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt conclusively explains: "But there remains also the truth that every end in history also contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only 'message' which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man's freedom."<sup>2</sup>

Due to the polemical spirit and the sincere and natural character of her writings and public statements, Hannah Arendt was not only one of the most prominent political thinkers of the last century, but also one of the most controversial. This may have been due to the fact that Hannah Arendt chose to write not only for a specialized audience, but for the general public, without making compromises on the subtlety of reasoning and richness of philosophical information. That is why Arendt was probably the political thinker who brought political philosophy closest to the needs of the general public.

The banality of evil, Hannah Arendt's most famous concept, is a good example of the pitfalls in which the public may fall into facing her ideas on political action and its consequences. As Arendt's biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl warns, placed in the subtitle of her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, the expression is full of suggestions and warnings, but without interpretation it means nothing."<sup>3</sup> The formula is so simple and telling that it seems self-evident. But, as is often the case with Arendt, the association of *banality* with *evil* does not indicate something common or ordinary, dull or inexpressive, but a reference to the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

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<sup>2</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Originile totalitarismului*, București, Humanitas, 1994, p.620

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 2006, p.2

The Arendtian banality of evil explicitly refers to Kant's *radical evil*, that category of evil which externalizes the "intention to do evil." Already in the Preface to the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt used this Kantian reference "And if it is true that in the final stages of totalitarianism an absolute evil appears (absolute because it can no longer be deduced from humanly comprehensive motives), it is also true that without it we might never have known *the truly radical nature of Evil* (emphasis-added)."<sup>4</sup>

No wonder, then, that Arendt wanted to look at the effects of radical Evil literally straight on. The experience of exile had kept her away from this meeting until, in 1961, she had the opportunity to go to Jerusalem to witness, as a press correspondent for *The New Yorker*, the trial of Adolf Eichmann, the former head of the Nazi bureau for "Jewish affairs".

For Arendt, History - as a systematic reflection on the past - does not influence the future, and the present seems incapable of reflection. "The birth of the modern idea of history did not coincide only with questioning in modern times the reality of an external world "objectively given" to human perception as an unchanged and unchanging object, but was strongly stimulated by this doubt".

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Originile totalitarismului*, ed. cit, p. 9

## Chapter I. The Crisis of History and Politics

### 1.1. Modernity, revolution and the end of Tradition

For Hannah Arendt, the crisis of political and philosophical consciousness began with what we usually call modernity. Her analysis does not see modernity as a stage, but rather looks at the circumstances of modernity, which are considered outside of temporal boundaries. And, for being able to understand the significance of this crisis, "Arendt engages in a new conception of historicity by thinking about the event."<sup>5</sup> That is why the event is seen as a crisis of reality in the sense that, in accordance with the original meaning of the word *krisis*, it marks a pause in a process. "The subject of history is these interruptions - in other words, the extraordinary."<sup>6</sup>

Arendt believed that the traditional understanding of human activities was profoundly distorted by Plato and the philosophers' later preoccupation with researching the "life of the mind."<sup>7</sup> And it could all start from the famous "Allegory of the Cave" in the dialogue *The Republic*, where Plato deliberately turned the Greek view of the world upside down, presenting it in total opposition to the image Homer had given to Hades. Was this also one of the reasons why Plato expelled poets from his "Republic"? For life in the "cave of Hades" was metamorphosed by the famous parable of the afterlife that would continue in an underground dungeon in ordinary life, to use Plato's political and ideological demonstrations. The life of the body and not that of the soul thus became as unreal as a shadow. This vision was later reinforced by Christianity, but it happened because Platonism had made the contemplation of "true reality" one of the most appreciated human activities of the last two millennia. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt explores the very reasons why labor<sup>8</sup> has become an exalted activity in contemporary times, given that it was despised in classical Greece by both action people and thinkers.

For Arendt, there is an antithesis between the random character of human action studied by the historian, and the deterministic view of political philosophies that are disguised in all philosophies of history and through which events find their own meaning.

Through history, moderns have sought to compensate for the moral depreciation of traditional ideas of premodern metaphysics. The links between politics and history are influenced by the relatively similar view through which they explain human activity even if, from the perspective of their own theoretical approaches, the two areas are fundamentally different when analyzing the present or future of an action. "Events, by definition, are occurrences that interrupt routine processes and procedures; Only in a world in which nothing of importance ever happens could the futurologist dream come true."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Myriam Revault d'Allonnes, „Hannah Arendt penseur de la crise” in *Études*, 2011/9 Tome 415, p 198

<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, „Ce este istoria?”, în *Între trecut și viitor*, ed. cit p. 47

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Canovan, A Case of Distorted Communication. A Note on Habermas and Arendt”, *Political Theory*, Vol. II, No. N1, February 1983, p. 152

<sup>8</sup> "Labor is the activity that corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous functions of growth, metabolism and final decline are related to the vital needs that work produces and introduces in the process of life. The human condition of labor is life itself". *The human condition*, Idea Design & Print, Cluj, 2007, p12

<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, „Despre violență” in *Crizele republicii*, București, Humanitas, 1999, p. 115

Although constant, Arendt's explicit interest in history was manifested only in a short text of just over 50 pages, *The Concept of History* (in Romanian translation the second chapter of *Between the Past and Future*). However, history is a permanent reference in her reflection on politics. Hannah Arendt's relationship with history, especially the history of ideas, is so well articulated that it is often difficult to separate her own vision from the conceptions of her predecessors, especially when commenting on the relevant authors of "Tradition."

As well as Arendt's thinking integrates into a long tradition of Western political thought, so was her private life affected by the unpredictability of History. But if we exclude the text quoted above, the fact that the *notion of history* has not been treated directly, but rather in passing, might make it difficult to introduce it among the major themes of Arendtian reflection. "If history teaches anything about the causes of revolution...it is that a disintegration of political systems precedes revolutions, that the telling symptom of disintegration is a progressive erosion of governmental authority, and that this erosion is caused by the government's inability to function properly, from which spring the citizens' doubts about its legitimacy." <sup>10</sup>

In *On Revolution*, a book published in 1963, Hannah Arendt, comparing the two revolutions of the late eighteenth century, builds a very interesting argument that shows that the better-studied French Revolution failed, and the American Revolution, less known and treated more as a civil war, it was a success. The difference between the two revolutions is the abandonment by the leaders of the French Revolution of the original purpose, the ensuring of freedom, to move towards the satisfaction of the demands of the masses. In contrast, in the case of the American Revolution, the founding fathers never betrayed the original goal, the constitutionalization of freedoms (*Constitutio Libertatis*), a concept by which Arendt designates a break with the continuum of history by inaugurating a common space.

Hannah Arendt's interest was directed towards empowering revolutions to build a stable political regime. After the revolution of 1789 France had the largest number of constitutions in the history of the world - fifteen in 230 years, so on average one constitution every fifteen years. Instead, the United States had only one.

Arendt preferred to deal with the problem of the revolution-freedom relationship in a system of interpretation that combines the dialectic of knowledge with the directness of action in order to understand the precarious balance between them in History. For Arendt there is a fundamental distinction between the political and the social sphere, and reducing politics to the "social question" is an error both in terms of knowledge and action.

The concept of history is - except for the first chapter of *Between Past and Future* - less discussed in her writings as compared to other concepts to which she will dedicate entire chapters or books (politics, revolution, freedom, authority, totalitarianism), the background of her reflection on "tradition". In fact, due to his philosophical background and interest in

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<sup>10</sup> Hannah Arendt, „Nesupunerea civilă” in *Crizele Republicii*, București, Humanitas, 1999, p. 75

political theory, Arendt views History (either the history of historians or that of philosophical ideas) from the perspective of its effects on public space.

For Arendt, public space aims at the theoretical analysis of the foundations of political life. From this perspective, Arendt can be considered the author of the classic model of public space.<sup>11</sup> The interest in the spatial dimension of politics follows the way in which public life is structured in relation to political action and discourse. What defines the public space is the community of individuals - *the polis* - in which people not only relate to each other but act together for a common goal.

The public space is where they debate, where unclear issues are questioned and ideas can take shape because they are expressed in front of others, but it is also the only space where you can retrieve the answers to problems. Public space is the real or ideal territory of co-participation in active life. And community cohesion is both the foundation and the goal of this dual exercise. For the public space is a political space in which the principles and conditions of living together are established.

Political action freed from constraints and arbitrariness, can save humanity from programmed destruction alone. Because to act means, for Arendt, not only to proceed in a certain way but to assume a political meaning that would give the action continuity and stability. Therefore, if the essence of politics lies in plurality, its meaning is given by freedom.

## **1.2 The place of the "Jewish problem" in post-World War II political thought: similarities and contrasts between the thinking of Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss**

There are many things between Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss that could have brought them closer but their intellectual or personal journey led them to very different conclusions. As Ann Norton puts it "Arendt and Strauss seem, in the essentials, to belong to the same worlds, as political philosophers, as Heidegger's students, as Jews, as exiles, as refugees in a foreign country. They regarded similarly the ancient philosophy, especially that of the Greeks, but also in their common ambivalence towards their adopted country"<sup>12</sup>. Yet, Arendt had a progressive view of society, emphasized by the activity in the last decade of his life at the New York School of Social Research, while Strauss was a conservative who spent his American academic life at the University of Chicago where he laid the foundations of neoconservatism, continuing a work that had already begun during the Weimar Republic and lasted until the height of the Cold War.

Beyond the differences between the two thinkers, their political philosophy can only be understood as a reflection on the causes of the Nazis' rise to power, the Holocaust and the lived experience of exile. And while Strauss's reflection has led to elitism, Arendt's converts to a radical and participatory view of democracy.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> V. Berdoulay, P.C. da Costa Gomes, J. Lolive, "L'espace public, ou l'incontournable spatialité de la politique" in *L'espace public à l'épreuve. Régressions et émergences*, Bordeaux, Presses de la MSHA, 2004, pp.11.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2004, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Shmuel Lederman, *Hannah Arendt and Participatory Democracy*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p. 211

What brings them together the most is their connection to Martin Heidegger. It is well known that Martin Heidegger had a considerable influence on his former student's philosophy, but it was only after the publication of Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's biography in 1984 that it became public that the two had a close emotional connection during Arendt's philosophy courses at the University of Marburg between 1924-1929.

Hannah Arendt is recognized for the decisive role she gives to the act of thinking, while Leo Strauss is famous for his creativity and meticulousness in reinterpreting philosophical or religious works. Thus, while Arendt was fascinated by Heidegger's thinking, Strauss was particularly impressed by the way he interpreted a book: "One of the lesser-known young people in Husserl's entourage was Heidegger. I attended his course from time to time without understanding a word, but I felt that he was dealing with something of the utmost importance to man, as a man. I understood something on one occasion: when he interpreted the beginning of the *Metaphysics*. I had never heard or seen anything like it - such a thorough and intense interpretation of a philosophical text."<sup>14</sup>

Arendt and Strauss had access, thanks to their intellectual encounter with Heidegger, to an original philosophical experience. By questioning and uprooting tradition, Heidegger helped Arendt approach ancient philosophy differently. Leo Strauss also felt a similar mood following his philosophical meeting with Heidegger. Hence his conviction that a return to the ancient and especially Athenian roots of political philosophy is certain. "Now it has become clear that that basic vision, the starting point of the vision developed by modern science, more precisely: that the world, as it is present and experienced by that natural vision, had been the subject of Plato and Aristotle's analysis. Plato and Aristotle seem to have adequately discussed what had not been discussed by the founders of modern philosophy or their successors. ... Therefore, if we want to reach an adequate understanding of the "natural" world, we simply have to learn from Plato and Aristotle."<sup>15</sup>

For Arendt, as for Strauss, belonging to Judaism was a central topic of reflection on the world.<sup>16</sup> But, although it was a political problem, experienced as such, it was not analyzed from the beginning from a theoretical perspective.<sup>17</sup> From the awareness of belonging to the specific community to the reflection on the condition of being a Jew and assuming Judaism in a secular society, especially in the Dark Times, Arendt traveled a quasi-initiatory path that meant meeting the Nothingness.

Like Arendt, Strauss, born seven years earlier, began, in Alan Bloom's terms, "his intellectual odyssey with Zionism." But if Arendt was never a Zionist, although she worked

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<sup>14</sup> Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss, „A Giving of Accounts” in *The College*, St. John's College, Annapolis, 1970, p.3

<sup>15</sup> The Living Issues of German Post-War Philosophy” in *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem*, edited by Heinrich Meier. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.136.

<sup>16</sup> In *The Last Interview* ..., ed. cit. in the interview for ZDF with Günter Gaus to the question if he had "the feeling that you are different" Arendt answers "Objectively speaking, I think it had to do with belonging to Judaism ... But I did not feel inferior, but it was simply a fact."

<sup>17</sup> In *The Last Interview* ..., ed. cit. on page 10 "I read the newspapers with interest. I even had opinions. I was not a member of the party, I did not feel the need to belong to anyone at all. From 1931 I was absolutely convinced that the Nazis would come to the helm. And I constantly had contradictory discussions with other people. But it wasn't until I emigrated that I systematically took care of these things."

with Zionist organizations, Strauss had a Zionist experience in his youth that would mark his life.

Strauss, who shared Arendt's mistrust of the consequences of modern philosophy — initially starting from the realization that a return to pre-modern philosophy was impossible but meeting Heidegger changed his perspective — tried throughout his life to understand the meaning and specificity of the relationship with modernity in Jewish culture.<sup>18</sup>

Strauss will have more than a moral objection to Heidegger's attitude toward Nazism. According to Strauss, Heidegger's adherence to the Nazi party would not have been merely a moral weakness but a genuine intellectual blindness.<sup>19</sup>

### **1.3 Between political theory and totalitarian practice: the relationship between historicism and tyranny**

Arendt criticizes Heidegger for the fact that historicity is a concept that “despite its new appearance and the way it articulates itself, shares with the older concept of history that, despite its obvious closeness to politics, it never gets there because it lacks the center of politics - man as a being who acts.”<sup>20</sup> In Heidegger but also in others, historicism minimizes the potential of human action in favor of inexorable laws. “Gobineau demonstrated exactly such a law. Without Darwinism or any other evolutionary theory to influence it, this historian boasted that he introduced history into the family of natural sciences, that he detected the natural law of all events, that he reduced all spiritual manifestations or cultural phenomena to something which, by virtue of the exact state, our eyes can see, our ears can hear, our hands can touch.”<sup>21</sup>

For Arendt, Heidegger fell into the trap of historicism because he was convinced, he could not be wrong. But the one who opened this path was Hegel, the one who released the concept of "History" giving it a meaning. Then, after the First World War, Historicity descended from this History. Therefore, for Arendt, Strauss's suggestion to overcome historicism by recovering pre modern thinking is not acceptable. Totalitarianism was a completely new form of government, distinct from previous forms of government such as dictatorship or tyranny, referring to Strauss's essay *On Tyranny* in which, starting from the dialogue of Xenophon, *Hieron or about tyranny*, he argues with Eric Voegelin and Alexandre Kojève. In *Returning to Xenophon's Hieron Writing*, Strauss explains his conception of the recovery of "classical social science": "A social science that cannot speak of tyranny with the same confidence with which medicine speaks, for example, of cancer, cannot understand *the nature of social phenomena* as what they are (emphasis added). Therefore, it is not scientific. Today's social science finds itself in this condition. If it is true that today's social science is the

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<sup>18</sup> Pierre Bouretz, „Leo Strauss devant la modernité juive” in *Raisons politiques*, 2002/4, no 8, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po, p. 34

<sup>19</sup> In "A Giving of Accounts" Leo Strauss says succinctly: "Will not talk too much about Martin Heidegger, except that I would like to say that he is the very great thinker of our time, although his moral qualities do not match his intellectual ones."

<sup>20</sup> Hannah Arendt, „Concerned with Politics In Recent European Philosophical Thought”, *Essays in Understanding*, ed. cit., pp. 432-433

<sup>21</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Originea totalitarismului*, ed. cit. p. 218

inevitable result of modern social science and modern philosophy, one is forced to think of the restoration of classical social science. "22

Instead, Arendt considers that "everything we know about totalitarianism demonstrates a horrible originality that no exaggerated historical parallel can attenuate. We can get rid of its impact only if we *decide not to focus on its nature* (emphasis added), but to turn our attention to the endless connections and similarities that certain principles of totalitarian doctrine have with the familiar theories of Western thought. Such similarities are inevitable. In the realm of pure theory and isolated concepts, there can be nothing new under the sun; but such matches disappear completely as soon as the analysis neglects the theoretical formulations and focuses on their practical application."<sup>23</sup>

For Strauss, the dramatic changes of the last century from the coming to power of totalitarian movements to World War II, from the "Cold War" and the policy of nuclear deterrence to the structural difficulties produced by the technological revolution were caused by the theoretical preeminence of positivism and historicism. By promoting the view that modern science is the most important form of knowledge, positivism has irreducibly compromised the prestige of political philosophy that sought to deepen the nature of political things so that, socially and politically, it would "necessarily turn into historicism. By virtue of its orientation towards the model of the natural sciences, the social sciences are in danger of dangerously distancing, say, in the middle of the twentieth century, the United States or, more generally, modern Western societies, from the essential character of human society. "24

Therefore, the result of the application of historicism, with its obsession with treating human theories or beliefs as historical in nature, leads to the rejection of the search for the best form of organization of society. Or, if better government is no longer possible, then anything is possible. And the crisis of modernity is nothing but the crisis of modern political philosophy which is marked by three successive devastating waves represented by Machiavelli, Rousseau and Nietzsche.

Machiavelli first, because with his *Prince*, he advised politicians not to act according to what people should do, but to what they want or what scares them. Machiavelli was the first political philosopher to contradict the teleological view of human nature, according to which human beings should do everything in their power to reach their potential.<sup>25</sup>

And this succession of crises finally paved the way for fascism. As "the theory of liberal democracy, as well as that of communism, have their origin in the first and second wave of modernity, the political result of the third wave proved to be fascism. However, this

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<sup>22</sup> Leo Strauss, "Return to Xenophon's Hieron writing", *Despre tiranie*, Cluj-Napoca, Tact, 2014, p. 207

<sup>23</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)", in *Essays in Understanding*, ed. cit., p. 309

<sup>24</sup> Leo Strauss, *What Is Political Philosophy?*, Chicago, University Chicago Press, 1959, p. 25

<sup>25</sup> Catherine Zuckert, Michael Zuckert, Leo Strauss in *The Encyclopedia of Political Thought*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118474396.wbep0980> consultată online pe 06.04.2021

indisputable fact does not allow us to return to the earlier forms of modern thought: Nietzsche's critique of modern rationalism or modern belief in reason cannot be avoided or forgotten. "<sup>26</sup>

Leo Strauss remained influential and controversial in the United States, provoking among former students at the University of Chicago, including Alan Bloom, a true cult who later defined themselves as neo-conservatives and actively promoted many of the Straussian views presented above. Or, Hannah Arendt, although very well-known and commented, did not have such a following and did not have a direct political influence. Her ideas, instead, were diffusely inserted in the "tradition" democratic political thought of the last century.

In any case, Arendt's remedy for the crisis of modernity was fundamentally different from Strauss's. Hannah Arendt did not hesitate, in several of her writings, to show her sympathy for various forms of participatory or deliberative democracy. *On Revolution* is not only a major contribution to political theory but "investigates the notion of social power as something generated and maintained by the founding institutions, hence her interest in the constitutional phenomenon. Far from being a candid utopian, Hannah Arendt does not believe that participatory democracy would not involve risks that would compromise the whole course of action. "Corruption and perversion are more dangerous and, at the same time, more likely to occur in an egalitarian republic than in any other form of government. Schematically speaking, they occur when private interests invade the public domain, when they manifest from below and not from above. "<sup>27</sup>

Seen in this way, the two perspectives on the crisis of modernity and the detrimental influence of historicism had different theoretical and practical consequences. If Hannah Arendt seems to have transformed from a "conservative" into an embodiment of "liberalism" and of the new contemporary American democratic currents, her influence being today the globalization, Strauss was recognized and sanctified as the exponent of political (neo)conservatism and, because of this, his ideas - beyond the noise of superficial debates - have become less well known. And certainly, Strauss would not recognize himself in the way the contemporary American alt-right manifests itself. On the contrary, Strauss, with his idea that the restoration of values and tradition will be possible only if it is implemented by an intellectual and political elite, would probably be critical of the new contemporary conservatism and illiberalism. On the other hand, Arendt's belief that the world could change as a result of combining political action with the honest participation of citizens gathered in a reconstructed public space is echoed in the contemporary debate on the renewal of democracy.

#### **1.4 Totalitarianism - perverse effect of modernity and a sign of the political crisis in the face of history**

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<sup>26</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Three Waves of Modernity in An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1989, p.98.

<sup>27</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, ed. cit., p. 252

In the period immediately following the end of the Second World War, Hannah Arendt devoted most of her reflections to the history and politics of the totalitarian system. First of all, and this is what she tries in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt wants to understand *What happened?, Why did it happen? and How was it possible?.* Or, totalitarianism was possible also because "at the level of historical intuition and political thought, a kind of tacit indefinite and general agreement prevailed, according to which the essential structure of all civilizations reached a point of disintegration".<sup>28</sup>

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt stressed that Nazism and Communism cannot only be seen as updated versions of old tyrannies, but will not provide, in any case not in the 1951 edition, a definition of totalitarianism but will let the reader deduce it in following the reading of the book. On the other hand, in 1953 she will make a series of conceptual clarifications that will be published first in a separate text, "*Ideology and Terror: A New Form of Government*," and then, with the German edition of 1955, will be added to the *Origins of Totalitarianism* (becoming the 13th and last chapter).

A cursory reading of the *Origins of Totalitarianism* would intrigue a relatively knowledgeable and curious reader because only in the third part, "Totalitarianism", the author deals with the subject that is indicated in the title of the book. Moreover, in this part the treatment of the subject does not seem to be autonomous. But it is only an appearance, if not a trap, because for Arendt, anti-Semitism and imperialism are the preamble to totalitarianism. Where Roy Tsao sees "an explicit lack of continuity with the first two parts of the book"<sup>29</sup> - because Arendt focuses in Part III on the analysis of Nazism and Stalinism, which would be a kind of inspired improvisation to put together three relatively distinct essays, there is a logical unity, not a stylistic one. That is why, in the first part of his book, "Anti-Semitism," Arendt examines the genesis and evolution of modern anti-Semitism — secular rather than religious — emphasizing the significance of the "Dreyfus affair" as a "rehearsal of the spectacle of our times."<sup>30</sup> Logically, in the second part, "Imperialism", is presented not only the colonial policy and the rivalry between the European powers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also its consequences, the emergence and progression of racism on The Old Continent. On this basis, in the last chapter Arendt will insist on the original character of totalitarianism that materializes in the political regimes in Nazi Germany after the "Crystal Night" and in Soviet Russia with the beginning of the persecutions against Jews in 1948 that Arkadi Vaksberg describes in detail in *Staline et le Juifs*.

Arendt managed, through her multilateral and provocative interpretation, to reach the essential aspects of the phenomenon she was researching. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt gradually elaborates her theory on totalitarianism starting from the analysis of

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<sup>28</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Originile totalitarismului*, ed. cit., p.5

<sup>29</sup> Roy T. Tsao, "The Three Phases of Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism" in *Social Research*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (Summer 2002), Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, p.580.

<sup>30</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Originile totalitarismului*, ed. cit., p.66

ideology as an explanation of the metamorphosis of the idea, of the path taken from the original reflection to the mixture that becomes the totalitarian “truth”. Through ideology, propaganda and manipulation techniques already established at the beginning of the last century, the thinking deficit that will lead to the trivialization of evil and the acceptance of terror will be generated.

The immediate source of the phenomenon of totalitarianism is found in the three historical moments that trigger it: first, Italian fascism, then Leninist Bolshevism (which in Arendt was then perverted into Stalinism) and finally, German National Socialism. The affinities between the three political regimes are not only of an ideological nature, they also come from the experimentation of new forms of power based on the legitimation of violence. For Arendt, totalitarianism not only allows crime and terror in the name of ideology, but crime becomes the very form of manifestation of the system.

What remains of Hannah Arendt's theory after the criticisms made initially by Voegelin and Aron and then by Traverso? Through her original phenomenological approach Hannah Arendt demonstrated that within her theory totalitarian systems function as original power structures: as a form of original domination, totalitarianism refers to an unprecedented historical experience that cannot be compared to classical political regimes; and as a political regime unprecedented in history, it cannot be understood by virtue of the classical typology. Including how it makes use of terror differentiates it from any form of extreme violence experienced before.

Totalitarianism, once implemented, leads inexorably to a social atomization translated into Progress and Catastrophe, the two consequences of a belief in modernity that will prove to be a simple superstition. "Progress and Catastrophe are two sides of the same coin - both are products of superstition, not faith."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Originile totalitarismului*, ed. cit., p6

## **Chapter II Political action and public space**

### **2.1 Public space and the conditions of politics**

For Hannah Arendt, totalitarianism is a perpetual danger because it destroys the common world, that public space that facilitates the meeting and communication between people. The abolition of public space transforms people into mere gears of the system, so that they can no longer have the freedom that led them to the adventure of discovering the new.

In Arendt's political thinking, understanding this is linked to her original view of power. From this point of view, she breaks with the tradition of political thought, from Plato to Max Weber, which defined power as a relationship of domination between ruled and rulers. Such an interpretation of power - as a factor of subjection and creation by force of the political order - seemed to her a grave error in understanding the political nature. This acceptance of domination resulted in a conceptual and actional distortion of power that was thus reduced to only a few - and not the most important - of its types. Starting with the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt will constantly reflect on the different forms of building power in order to discern its consensual character.

The rejection of the definition of power as human domination over man has as a consequence the rethinking of violence as an essential form of externalization of power. This reconstruction of the concept of power through the deconstruction of violence is found in the most important text of the *Crises of the Republic*, "On Violence", which sets out his conception of power which, as shown above, is contrary to the theoretical subsumption of power in relation to domination and, in line with the Weberian definition of the state, violence.

For Arendt, consent highlights the political nature of the public sphere. As no consent can be automatic, but assumed, this presupposes the cooperation of citizens in the public space in order to obtain consensus based on dialogue. "Consent - meaning that every citizen of a community has voluntarily accepted its membership - can be accused, like the original contract, of being only a fiction (except in the case of naturalization). The argument in favor of this thesis is justified from a historical and legal perspective, but not from an existential or theoretical one.

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The transformation of power, both by finding the harmony of coexistence in the political space and its nonviolent character, will not be complete unless the authority is recovered. Assuming that power fails to reconcile with authority, even if it is nonviolent, it will not be able to provide stability to current political communities. Without authority, that is, without rediscovering the foundations, the political space of contemporary democracies seems doomed to repeat the mistakes that led to the fall into totalitarian barbarism.

### **2.2 The crisis of culture - a crisis of public space?**

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<sup>32</sup> „Nesupunerea civică”, în *Crizele republicii*, ed. cit., p. 93.

The culture crisis was Hannah Arendt's big idea. The Crisis of Culture is also the title of the sixth chapter of *Between the Past and the Future*<sup>33</sup>. In this work, it seems that Arendt analyzes the impact of mass culture on the (decay) of politics in contemporary society. But, as the putting together of the eight essays suggests (initially, at the first publication of the book, in 1961, there were six, but in 1968 two more were added, "*Truth and Politics*" and "*The Conquest of Space and the Dimension of Man*"), there is an essential connection between all of them, namely that, with modernity and the political forms it has generated - liberalism and socialism being the faces of the same currency - public space has been permanently under the assault of private problems.

Arendt makes a historical presentation of the evolution of the notion of culture, and finds that, in essence, culture is the one that lasts over time, which contains and transmits the idea of permanence, and when cultural work disintegrates and culture no longer seeks perfection and beauty, the cultural product becomes a commodity like any other. This process of degeneration would have reached its peak in Germany in the 1920s, shortly before the installation of totalitarianism, preparing, in a way, society for this dictatorial experience. In a clear and profound demonstration at the same time, Arendt prophesied the evacuation of culture from the society of the future.<sup>34</sup>

Arendt refuses to subordinate politics to cultural conditions. For her, there are no cultural preconditions to forming a political community. The existence of a community formed on the basis of membership does not imply, by its mere existence, the emergence of a political community and the establishment of a public space. On the contrary, these communities are often explicitly opposed to public space (as was the case with early Christianity).

The crisis of culture, as a way of sustainable construction of something - object or process - considered valuable, reaches its peak with the emergence of mass society and mass culture. But it is not the concept of "mass" that is the common element of the two, but "rather the society in which the masses have also been incorporated."<sup>35</sup>

Culture and politics do not aim at the truth but at the possibility of building a common world, the culture crisis is a political problem in the sense that if culture is endangered, the sustainability of the world is called into question and the community of people is threatened. "In a society that knows only mass culture, there is only room for spectacle politics, a simulacrum of democracy."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> A volume that Gallimard's French editors preferred, to make the message clearer, to translate it as Crisis of Culture, just as he suggested Raymond Aron, *The Human Condition* had been made available to the French-speaking public by *The Condition of Modern Man* (La condition de l'homme moderne)

<sup>34</sup> Laure Adler, *Dans les pas de Hannah Arendt*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 406.

<sup>35</sup> Hannah Arendt, „Criza culturii”, in *Între trecut și viitor*, ed. cit, p. 207

<sup>36</sup> Mathieu Cochereau, *Arendt*, Ellipses, 2016, p. 138

## Chapter III. The meaning of politics

### 3.1 The action and meaning of events between common sense and "judgment"

Does politics still have meaning? The question, which will be answered in what has become a subchapter in the Romanian edition of *The Promise of Politics*, is - as is often the case with Arendt - misleading. For, it is not about the historicist meaning, whose relationship with religious and scientific determinism had already been clarified, it is about the ultimate meaning of politics.

For Arendt, politics is the expression of a relational but also contradictory space. Relational, because it materializes only insofar as people enter into a free and equal relationship, and contradictory because politics takes shape only insofar as the world it draws is plural. So, politics unites and divides at the same time.

Regarding the meaning of the policy, Arendt considered that the main source of confusion that prevents the expression and explanation of politics is the result of the catastrophic chain of prejudices and the consequence of this state: the rule of opinion. Dominant prejudices about political action have the effect of decoupling politicians and thereby endangering the future of the world. "Prejudices against politics - the idea that domestic politics is a web of fraud and lies woven of dubious interests and even more dubious ideologies"<sup>37</sup> - have the role of relieving the individual of "the need to be open to every facet of the reality he encounters and to confront it thoroughly" "leaving instead" global visions and ideologies (to) do so well that it protects us from any experience, apparently deciding for the whole reality".<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, when the judgment arises, the reign of opinion through the social bond diminishes to the point of disappearance.

Observing the conceptual and practical transition from the Greek *polis* to the Roman *res publica*, Arendt finds that the field of politics expands, reaching to designate not only a small community benefiting from exclusive political rights and the release from trivial obligations, but to refer to the stable relationship between what is indigenous and what is foreign. And this action directed towards what is different, and as such not part of the permanent community, allows the propagation of the political space.

After the collapse of the Marxist paradigm of social thought and analysis, Hannah Arendt became one of the few political thinkers who had an impact on adapting contemporary political theory to the new context. Her ideas, especially in terms of action, thinking and politics, contributed to the establishment of an intellectual and theoretical climate for the relaunch of democracy. Human activity in the special realm of politics, which, for Hannah Arendt, takes the specific form of the *vita activa*, is an "action" which finds its purpose in political debate, in supporting and listening to opinions to the point that theoretical reason is

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<sup>37</sup> Hannah Arendt, „Introducere în politică. Prejudecățile împotriva politicii și ce este, de fapt, politica astăzi?” in *Făgăduința politicii*, ed. cit. p. 138

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Arendt, „Introducere în politică. Ce este politica?” in *Făgăduința politicii*, ed. cit. p. 133

immersed in the common space. become not only a background of action, but an agent of fertilizing ideas.<sup>39</sup> Only now politics reunites and finds itself with / in politics, offering people the space of concertation, of joint action, free and equal to reconstitute and reinterpret humanity.

This reinterpretation begins with the place of action in relation to humans and politics. For Arendt, specifying the meaning of human action must overcome a number of difficulties, primarily those that, from philosophy, express hostility to the world of human praxis, but also those that are invoked by the modern world in its hostility to unproductive activities.<sup>40</sup>

For Arendt, political action therefore has three interlinked characteristics which form the framework of human existence and give content to politics<sup>41</sup>: *the establishment of a public space as a space of visibility*, which ensures the conditions for *direct connection of actors* and allows *the disclosure of the agent* (emphasis added).

The core of Arendt's view of the meaning of politics as it is now set out in Excerpt 3B of the *Introduction to Politics*, starts from the observation that "politics is a means to higher goals, even if the determination of such goals was naturally very different over the centuries."<sup>42</sup> And these goals make politics "an urgent necessity for human life, whether it is the life of the individual or that of society. ... its mission and purpose (of politics) lies in guaranteeing, in the broadest sense, life".<sup>43</sup>

Hannah Arendt's entire theoretical effort could be summed up in the formula of a thinker she felt very close to, Tocqueville: "We need a new political science for a new world,"<sup>44</sup> politics and history, action and thought are expressions of the human condition in a world that no longer knows how to distinguish between public and private. For Arendt, the Romans were the most political people, a consequence of the fact that they did not abandon the private space to the public and tried to keep their balance, thus building a stable world to ensure the conditions of plurality.

### 3.2 Modern alienation and historical understanding

For Arendt, *understanding* is the reverse of forgiveness; forgiveness is temporal while understanding can only be endless. And in terms of totalitarianism, understanding is not only the key to explaining, but also to combating totalitarianism. "To combat totalitarianism, it is enough to understand it: it is the more than absolute denial of freedom."<sup>45</sup> And this is also the meaning through which the understanding provokes a continuous process of illumination, of waking from the sleep of thought.

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<sup>39</sup> Michael J. Thompson, 'Inventing the "Political": Arendt, Antipolitics, and the Deliberative Turn in Contemporary Political Theory', in G. Smulewicz-Zucker, Michael J. Thompson (eds.), *Radical Intellectuals and the Subversion of Progressive Politics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 70

<sup>40</sup> Étienne Tassin, *Le Trésor perdu. Hannah Arendt, L'intelligence de l'action politique*, Paris, Klincksieck, 2017, p. 28

<sup>41</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Condiția umană*, ed. cit., pp 147-205

<sup>42</sup> Hannah Arendt, *La politique a-t-elle encore un sens ?*, ed. cit., p.10

<sup>43</sup> Hannah Arendt, *La politique a-t-elle encore un sens ?*, ed. cit., p.10

<sup>44</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Despre democrație în America*, București, Humanitas, 1995, p. 12

<sup>45</sup> Hannah Arendt, *La nature du totalitarisme*, ed. cit., 13

“Understanding”, in the Arendtian sense, is a thinking activity that expresses both the endurance and the political ingenuity of the person(s) who are in direct contact with totalitarianism. Following contact with the specter of totalitarianism, the subject will go through three successive moods - as in a platonic path to knowledge - to finally access "understanding": *immediate intuition and contestation*, then *minimization of facts*, and finally *perplexity*. In this sense, Arendt will define understanding as a process of identifying the precedent, comparing, preparing the analysis frameworks and then moving on to the subsequent phases: knowledge, action and judgment. It is a process that combines opposition to ideology and its effects with an extraordinary and liberating theoretical creativity.

The depreciation of freedom and politics occurred as a result of a new innovation borrowed from modern social and historical thinking in the natural sciences: determinism. From the national determination of history to its social determination, the evolution has been natural and has taken place over a century. The disturbance of history and it's out of phase with politics can be understood, notes Arendt, as a result of the degradation of political action, which becomes a means to achieve other goals, and the restriction, as a result, of freedom. Or, freedom is the condition of the existence of politics: without freedom, politics cannot last. Because politics defines that space of dialogical interaction, the only space, in fact, in which freedom can be experienced.

On the other hand, if freedom is a condition for the existence of politics, it is not the purpose of politics. There is only one exception: serious political crises or revolutions when freedom becomes the direct goal of political action to restore the damaged political space.

For Arendt, it was important to rethink the post-totalitarian world so that we could exercise both public and private freedom. For this reason, the understanding dates back to the Greek beginning of politics, when there was not yet a word for freedom. In Plato, for example, this problem is subsumed to the debate over justice. But, even if there is no word, the experience of the *polis* allows the creation of a space of freedom. And the Greek experience of freedom was lost because of the obsession with asserting inner freedom. Therefore, the restoration of politics is the necessary condition to interrupt the march of totalitarianism.

**Conclusion: A new history for a new policy?**  
**The reconstruction of politics and the recovery of history**  
**Hannah Arendt's legacy**

Any theory is limited and provisional, and Hannah Arendt's theory could not have been otherwise. But beyond the positions of her critics - who can be classified into two broad categories: those who criticize her method, and those who criticize the person - Hannah Arendt remains a central figure in the history of political thought in the past and present precisely because she passed beyond schools and models to try a coherent and convincing explanation. In Hannah Arendt's works we find, on the one hand, the beauty and richness of the argument. On the other hand, we find the consciousness of totalitarian evil and the nothingness it brings. Her concepts of totalitarianism, public space, freedom, politics, power, civic insensitivity, revolution or the so famous and contested banality of evil, are strongly correlated, giving a round and structured theory. If it were not so, there would be no such coordinated offensive against her.

There are many who dispute her vision of politics, considering it obsolete, but is this not a simplistic sociology that from Durkheim onwards, through Weber, has reduced politics to a simple social derivative, to a function of society? The introspection she makes, starting from the Athenian trio - Socrates, Plato, Aristotle - not only frees politics from social domination at the philosophical level, but also offers the chance of a methodological liberation that will lead for example, through Theda Skocpol, to the neo-institutionalism in political science, its first independent theory and an assertion of the autonomy of the political fact. Or, Theda Skocpol freed politics from social and economic determinations starting from the analysis of revolutions, as Arendt did it earlier. Olson later developed the neo institutional theory - which asserts that politics is its own cause influencing, rather than being influenced, the social and the economic. Moreover, the understanding of politics in relation to public space revealed not only the essence of living together, the specificity of common existence, but also the structural difference between public and private, so between political and economic also. Her theory of liberalism parts ways with the economic one, especially the neoliberalism of Austrian origin. On this basis, Traverso, in the interview quoted in the paper, considers that starting from Arendt's theory of totalitarianism, the current neoliberalism appears as a new totalitarianism.

Likewise, noting the political nature of the American Revolution, Arendt stated the need for a clear separation of political and social in order to facilitate the exit from the socio-economic blockade that inevitably leads to the totalitarianism anticipated by the expansion of mass society and the domination of mass culture. Therefore, the Arendtian revolutions are autonomous phenomena, generating influences, the results of an exercise of freedom.

As for the concept of power, here too Arendt was a forerunner. For her vision of power other than domination was used in political anthropology where Pierre Clastres theorized, in the *Society Against the State*, the theory of non-coercive power. For Clastres, however, society

tried to prevent the autonomy of politics through the state, trying to limit the possibilities of manifesting coercive power.

In fact, Arendt's thinking is an effort to generate individual and collective resilience in the sense that Boris Cyrulnik gave to this concept. If for Cyrulnik resilience is the ability of a person to adapt to a trauma, for Hannah Arendt's it was the same: finding resources to overcome the totalitarian trauma. Resilience is not an individualized psychological phenomenon, but requires social mechanisms to develop. And Cyrulnik, who experienced the trauma of anti-Semitism in early childhood in early Petenist France, also understands resilience as a chance to overcome totalitarian trauma. But a doctor by training, with a considerable body of work in psychology and multidisciplinary research, Cyrulnik did not pursue resilience in relation to an autonomous political field. However, in his latest book, *Souls and Seasons*<sup>46</sup> where he tries a psycho-ecology, Cyrulnik considers politics and sees it as autonomous in relation to the social, economic or psychological. As the presence of an external support network is essential in order to overcome the trauma, Arendt tries, *avant la lettre* we could say, to unravel the mystery of this association. And democratic councils, those utopias that his critics blame, are only these networks that can contribute to reconstruction.

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<sup>46</sup> Boris Cyrulnik, *Des amés et des saisons*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2021