Politics and Anarchy. An Original Bond

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to undertake a reading of Hannah Arendt that allows us to understand the anarchic nature of politics. To this end, first we will analyse the difference between the *oîkos* and the *pólis* according to Arendt's analysis; then we will examine her concept of natality. This will allow us to understand the crisis of the political today, in so far as it is based on a pre-political liberal principle (the family, the command, the *oîkos*, the *archê*), and in so far as it is internally threatened by the closure to all incalculable beginnings, which for Arendt would be the very essence of politics.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt; politics; *an-archê*; *oîkos*; *pólis*

Resum. *Política i anarquia. Un vincle original*

L'objectiu d'aquest *paper* és dur a terme una lectura de Hannah Arendt que ens permeti comprendre la naturalesa *an-árkhica* de la política. A aquest efecte, es durà a terme, en primer lloc, una anàlisi de la diferència entre l'*oîkos* i la *pólis*, segons la lectura d'Arendt, i, en segon lloc, una anàlisi del seu concepte de natalitat. Això ens permetrà comprendre la crisi de la política en l'actualitat, en la mesura que es fonamenta en un principi liberal prepolític (la família, el comando, l'*oîkos*, l'*archê*) i està amenaçada internament pel tancament a tot inici incalculable, que per a Arendt seria el correcte de la política.

Paraules clau: Hannah Arendt; política; *an-arkhé*; *oîkos*; *polis*

1. The question of the reemergence of politics took on a new significance following the catastrophe of totalitarianism. This much is well-known. Hannah Arendt was one of those thinkers who – having themselves been the direct witnesses to totalitarianism, and in part its victims – became profound interpreters of a traumatic experience that would require a radical rethinking of politics.

To this end, it seemed necessary to advance a critique of modernity, which had in the meantime taken on the contours of liberalism. For the totalitarian

catastrophe was merely the culmination of the modern tradition, whose most disturbing and monstrous face had been revealed. Hence also the criticism of orthodox Marxism, i.e. of that dialectic that conceives history in terms of deterministic laws. The protest movements of the 1960s, to which Arendt rallied with some enthusiasm, also drove her to recover the lost treasures of political action (Arendt, 2006a). From the uprising in Budapest to the Paris Commune and the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century – these were the periods when political autonomy and creativity had made themselves felt, and when history seemed condensed.

Even among such revolutionary periods, the Greek *pólis* holds a place apart. But what did it mean to head once more to the source of democracy? This meant not a *return*, but rather a *recourse* to the Greek experience, which had inaugurated the space of the *pólis* but moreover made its mark on philosophy. In other words, the *pólis* was not a distant model, an abstract paradigm, as the canons of prevailing thought suggested. For Arendt:

> The Greek *pólis* will continue to exist at the bottom of our political existence – that is at the bottom of our sea – for as long as we use the word politics. (Arendt, 2007a: 49)

Here appears the image of the source, which would become decisive for the various currents of radical democracy. Alongside the sense of *insurgere*, to rise up, we should also see that of *surgere*, that is, to spring up, to be born. This should not mean imagining an initial and spontaneous phase of democracy, which would mean falling back into the archaic paradigm. It is Arendt herself who – in a particularly suggestive passage of her essay 'What Is Freedom?' – refers to that 'secret fountain', that 'spring' which can remain hidden while nevertheless continuing to gush forth, managing to survive even in those periods 'when political life has become petrified' (Arendt, 2006b). Only when it finally re-emerges does freedom become tangible.

2. But what did *politikós* mean? The answer is enlightening. Since it referred to the community of the *pólis*, to the whole of that citizenry of which the Greeks felt a part, *politikós* was the antithesis of *ídios*, that which is private, selfish, self-interested. Therefore *politikós* must be considered a synonym of *koinós* or *xunós*, that which means common, creates community. It *politikós* qualified the nexus between the free and the equal that it ended up opposing *despotikós*, that is, any form of command, of the exercise of power of the few over the many. To rein in the despotic character of an oligarchy was to make it more political.

It is hard for us even to imagine the epochal change, the outright revolution, represented by the emergence of a bond that – breaking its way into communities and cutting through families – could dig up the pernicious roots of kinship and break the chains of atavistic subjugation. That is, a bond that could instead project the people thus constituted into a space and time that had

become political. This people would be the new protagonist of the democratic city that aimed at *isonomía*, the constant reversibility of power.

With great insight, Hannah Arendt sets out a profound exegesis of the *pólis* and the bond underlying it, in her first account of her vision of politics in certain key pages of *The Human Condition*. She takes as her point of departure two traumatic personal experiences: first, the trauma of her time as a refugee, when she was among those deprived even of the right to have rights and condemned not so much to statelessness as to the loss of community; and second, the rise of totalitarianism understood as *totale Herrschaft*, total domination. Her often misunderstood and even overlooked pages on the Greek *pólis* should be read in the light of these two experiences. They should be seen not as an irrelevant idealization nor as a theory of escape from government, but rather as a way of rethinking politics by recovering its dignity. In this regard Claude Lefort has suggested that Arendt

> conceives of politics as the reverse image of totalitarianism, a fact that prompts her to look not for the model (to employ this term would be to betray her intentions), but for the reference of politics in certain privileged moments in which its characteristics can best be deciphered: the moment of the Greek city in antiquity, and the moment of the American and French revolutions in modern times. One could perhaps add the moment of the Workers Councils in Russia, in 1917, and the Workers Councils in Hungary, in 1956. (Lefort, 2006: 67)

So it was by looking at these periods of council power – so eccentric in Western democratic experience – and by considering the forms in which the revolutionary spirit was realized, that Hannah Arendt examined the Greek *pólis*.

3. In an essay commemorating her and taking stock of her thought, Dolf Sternberger spoke of a 'resuscitation', a recalling-to-life of the *pólis* which, setting aside the niceties of philology and historical subtlety, has a peerless philosophical force (Sternberger, 1976: 935). We can easily share in this viewpoint, although it is to be regretted that the accomplishments of philology and history are so little valued – itself a reflection of a lack of dialogue between different fields. A friend and classmate from her university days in Heidelberg, Sternberger remained in contact with Arendt for decades, as their correspondence shows. Among other things, Sternberger was himself inspired by a passion for the political (Arendt and Sternberger, 2019). In his essay he recalls certain revealing moments. For example, in Chicago, during a seminar on Herodotus, Arendt's face lit up when she heard the words of the Greek character Otanes read aloud: 'I want neither to rule nor be ruled' (Sternberger, 1976: 939). Here love for this particular line was not due to some mere pang of nostalgia. Arendt strolled through the ancient *pólis*, Sternberger observes, 'like a *Sonntagskind* through the alleyways of a vanished city' (Sternberger, 1976: 941). Relaxed,

confident and fulfilled, as in a vivid dream, she opened her eyes and recognized the *agora*, the assembly, the marketplace; she seemed to hear the words, to see those scenes again. Above all, she was breathing the air of freedom.

The *Sonntagskind*, Sunday's Child, is a figure from legend and folklore. According to Walter Benjamin, in German folk tradition, where others notice nothing, *Sonntagskinder* see enchanted gardens; where others pass and see nothing, Sunday's children find unexpected treasures (Benjamin, 2014: 62-63). They thus differ from ordinary mortals. Still, while these visionaries have the power to look deeper, they also have something ghostly about them. So Sternberger's praise is a double-edged sword: for him, Arendt's name stands for a radical renewal of politics (or rather, of the political). But at the same time, his praise also contains a sharp rebuke. The *pólis* that she sees is a ghost town, abandoned and extinct, in which case politics may likewise have vanished forever.

This rebuke was, indeed, making the rounds back then. Its spokesman was Jürgen Habermas, who criticized Arendt not so much for her idealization of the *pólis* as for the lack of strategic action, of a normative and teleological (or teleocratic?) template. This brought the risk of a flight from governance, an omission that might fairly be characterized as *an-archic* (Habermas, 1976: 946-961). Sooner or later a decision had to be made, Sternberger insisted (Sternberger, 1976: 945). Except Arendt was surely fully aware of the need to make decisions in politics. The point is that she intended precisely to question that normative-institutional view of politics which reduces it to the preservation of an order.

4. Hannah Arendt's great enlightenment is to thank for her elaboration of a deep exegesis of the *pólis* and the bond underlying it, in her first exposition of her vision of politics in some decisive pages in *The Human Condition*. She takes as her point of departure two traumatic personal experiences: first, the drama of her time as a refugee, when she was among those deprived even of the right to have rights and condemned not so much to statelessness as to the loss of community; and second, the rise of totalitarianism understood as *totale Herrschaft*, total domination. In this sense, *totale Herrschaft*, total command, is the opposite of the Greek *pólis*. And since this German expression for 'totalitarianism' translates to no more or less than *archè*, Arendt goes to the *pólis* in search of the *an-archic* space of politics. Moreover: where there is *archè* there can be no politics. As domination, the *archè* is 'apolitical', *unpolitisch*; that is, it finds no place in the *pólis* (Arendt, 1958: 24).[1] Therefore, the *archè* constitutes its outer limit. The moment that *archè* has asserted itself – the moment in which *totale Herrschaft* appears – then politics itself has been eliminated. If

1. The term *unpolitisch* is used in the German edition. It is worth noting that this version, prepared by Arendt herself, leaves less room for misunderstandings because *Herrschaft*, power in the sense of domination, and *Regierung*, government, and their two related verbs, *Herrschen* and *Regieren*, are generally kept distinct, where in English *rule* and *to rule* appear.

totalitarianism represents the apex of Western metaphysical politics, with its '*archic*' perversion, its craze for a sovereign foundation, then in the post-totalitarian age we must start over from the *pólis*, that space of freedom.

We may say, then: politics is there where the *arché* isn't. To understand this thesis, we should reread those pages in which Arendt, examining the political bond that constitutes the city, takes up and interprets the distinction between *oîkos* and *pólis*. To this end she draws especially on Aristotle's *Politics* and only two secondary literature texts, namely Fustel de Coulanges's *Cité antique* and Werner Jaeger's *Paideia*. The rise of the *pólis* – a historical fact and not a philosophical theory – was preceded by the 'destruction of all organized units resting on kinship, such as the *phratría* and the *phylḗ*' (Arendt, 1958: 24). This made possible a phenomenon that can today be imagined only with 'extraordinary difficulty', namely, a clear demarcation between the private and the public sphere, between one's own and the common, the familial and the political. Arendt quotes an incisive phrase from Jaeger to explain that the *pólis* meant for each man to receive

> besides his private life a kind of second life, his *bíos politikós*. Now every citizen belongs to two orders of existence; and there is a sharp distinction in his life between what is his own (*ídion*) and what is common (*koinón*). (Jaeger, 1945)

Her view differs from that of Coulanges – whom she criticizes in a footnote – who argued, in the wake of the Aristotelian reading, that the Greek city, no less than the Roman city, was constituted on the model of the *gens*, and that the city sprung from the union of the communities. Nothing could be further from Arendt's thesis, which instead emphasises the gap between the two spheres. It is worth citing in full the relevant passage from her *The Human Condition*:

> The *polis* was distinguished from the household in that it knew only 'equals,' whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality. To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another and not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled. Thus, within the realm of the household, freedom did not exist, for the household head, its ruler, was considered to be free only in so far as he had the power to leave the household and enter the political realm, where all were equals. To be sure, this equality of the political realm has very little in common with our concept of equality: it meant to live among and to have to deal only with one's peers, and it presupposed the existence of 'unequals' who, as a matter of fact, were always the majority of the population in a city-state. Equality, therefore, far from being connected with justice, as in modern times, was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed. (Arendt, 1958: 30-31)

The point of discrimination, then, is precisely the *arché*. To command and to be commanded was characteristic of the private sphere, which could remain home to natural inequalities and hierarchical relations, starting with the *des-*

pótes, the head of household. The private sphere was believed to be sacred – for thanks to the work of slaves and women it ensured survival. Yet it was also subordinated to the public sphere, that second chance that allowed freedom – not being subordinated, not being subjected to any *arché*, any command. This is why existence relegated to the private sphere of the *ídion*, of one's own, was in the Greeks' perspective literally 'idiotic.' It was idiotic because it was a 'state of being deprived', such as that of stateless [*apolid*] persons and refugees, a life at once exposed to constraint and violence, a life lived 'outside the world of the common' (Arendt, 1958: 38). Obscurity, the 'curse of slaves' doomed to come and go without leaving a trace, is contrasted with the public sphere of seeing and being seen, of listening and being heard, the space of reciprocity where the other is not a subordinate but an equal (Arendt, 1958: 55).

There can be politics only where there is freedom from the *arché*, where relations are no longer debased by subordination – where *isonomía*, equality, is at work. Arendt draws the interweaving of these three concepts directly from the Greek context. Therefore, her vision of freedom is far removed from that of the liberal tradition, which conceives of it in a purely negative sense, with the obvious aim of reducing, if not eliminating, all public coercion exercised over the private sphere of the individual. By contrast, for Arendt the public sphere alone can unlock freedom. And the latter is concretely articulated in *isonomía* – the term for equality, which became emblematic of the Greek democrats. If Arendt speaks only occasionally of 'democracy' (preferring politics or republic) – at the risk of not being accepted among radical theorists of democracy – it is because, as she herself points out, she prefers to avoid the word 'originally coined by those who were opposed to isonomy' (Arendt, 1990: 30). The equal freedom that would re-emerge, long after the Athenian *pólis*, in the dawn of the modern and contemporary revolutions, is for Arendt the epiphenomenon of politics.

> Isonomy guaranteed *isótes*, equality, but not because all men were born or created equal, but, on the contrary, because men were by nature (*phúsei*) not equal and needed an artificial institution, the *pólis*, which by virtue of its *nómos* would make them equal. Equality existed only in this specifically political realm, where men met one another as citizens and not as private persons. The difference between this ancient concept of equality and our notion that men are born or created equal and become unequal by virtue of social and political, that is man-made, institutions can hardly be over-emphasized. The equality of the Greek *pólis*, its isonomy, was an attribute of the *pólis* and not of men, who received their equality by virtue of citizenship, not by virtue of birth. (Arendt, 1990: 30-31)

5. Arendt often revisited her favourite passage from Herodotus: 'Neither to command nor to be commanded'. But what does this mean? There is no more radical and prouder advocate of democracy than Herodotus. His profound, clear-cut words speak volumes. Thus his testimony has a peculiar relevance

and cannot be inserted, as often happens, into an indifferent, homogeneous sequence. Arendt liked to quote him and take him as a point of reference – and rightly so.

The term *demokratía* appears for the first time in Book VI of the *Histories*. (Herodotus, VI, 43, 3; VI, 131, 1). But we should look elsewhere, to Book III, for a passionate paean to *demokratía*, though the term used is *isonomía*, equality. The setting is a discussion of the merits and demerits of the three forms of government: monarchy, oligarchy and democracy. Herodotus puts a radical speech into the mouth of Otanes, the advocate of democracy. It is so radical that one almost wonders whether Otanes is not more an anarchist than a democrat. At the end of the debate, in fact, when the voting favours the monarchy, Otanes – who is now defeated – stands up to take the floor in the assembly one last time: 'Comrades, *stasiôtai*, comrades in struggle, comrades in stasis.'[2] He admits that he has lost; there will be no isonomy and someone will have to be chosen as king. Not him – he prefers to withdraw from the competition. And he explains why:

> I desire neither to command nor to be commanded [oúte gàr árchein oúte árchesthai]; but if I waive my claim to be king, I make this condition, that neither I nor any of my descendants shall be subject to any one of you. (III, 83, 2)

Neither exercise nor suffer *arché*. A way of reaffirming the meaning of *isonomía*, but also of *eleuthería*, of freedom.[3] This renunciation should not be misunderstood – that is, considered as a private retreat into the private *oîkos*. It is, rather, an *an-archic* exception to the non-politics of *arché*, to archi-politics.

6. Arendt notes that the equation between freedom and non-*arché* also has repercussions for the person who commands (Arendt, 1990: 31). For if he were surrounded by non-equals, the chief would not himself be free, either. To assume dominion over others is to deprive oneself of those peers without whom freedom is impossible. Where there is command and obedience, where power rises to the level of violence, any genuine public space is destroyed. In this respect, the domination under the worst despot cannot be as perfect and unchallenged as that of a head of household.

The energy which Arendt devotes to distinguishing between private and public should be grasped in terms of her aim to rehabilitate politics in the aftermath of the totalitarian experience. Eager to make out the phenomena that attest – despite everything – to continuity, Arendt denounces the disturbing expansion of the *oîkos* that transforms national organisations into giant-scale versions of the administration of the home. This means the primacy of

2. The term *stasiôtes*, derived from *stásis*, means 'on one side', 'partisan', 'belonging to a party', to a political side. In turn, *stásis* has numerous meanings, from civil war to revolt or sedition.
3. Here, freedom could border on an aristocratic freedom – see. e.g. Herodotus, IV, 35 – if it were not specified by the sharing required in isonomy.

the economy and the consequent disappearance of politics, which is reduced at best to a mere instrument for protecting that sort of collective hyper-family called society, intent on production and subsistence. In this regression to a pre-political condition, the dominant bond is that of labour. An accusing finger is pointed at Marx, who is said to have fostered this alienation, and especially at that Marxism which helped make politics a mere superstructure.[4] This has devastating results: privatism, a retreat into the private sphere that becomes the only living space, and the loss of the common world. Which is to say: depoliticization.

However, the spread of *oiko-nomia*, as Arendt understands it, also implies the affirmation of the familiar – and familistic – model that leads to the establishment of closed natural communities based on birth, descent and lineage, and nurtured by blood ties. 'Families are founded as shelters and mighty fortresses in an inhospitable, alien world into which we want to introduce kinship' (Arendt, 2005: 94). This intrusion of the family principle into the body politic makes it possible to exclude non-members and erase all diversity. In an obsessive search for boundaries and barriers, the unity of the herd is achieved and the perversion of politics is at hand. Except that this ideal of the nation-family – both hostile toward differences on the inside and animated by generalized hostility toward the outside – had already been realised by Nazism. In so far as politics is the intermingling of diverse elements, it is stripped of its role wherever the unity of the *arché* triumphs.

But without the freedom of a public space, action itself must perish. Arendt looks at revolutions, seeking to trace their phenomenology and to grasp their beginning. Ultimately, acting and beginning are synonymous. Unpredictable, unexpected, freed from any chain of causality, a beginning is like a birth. This prompts Arendt to go a step further by positing birth as a central category of politics.[5] Precisely because each of us comes into the world with birth, we can in turn give birth and initiate something. This will not be a *principium* that comes out of nothing, a sovereign principle like the one that gave rise to the world, but an *initium*, an acting that is always a re-acting in the plural interweaving of human actions. In the political sphere, the possibility of initiating is the mark of the freedom to act. *Totale Herrschaft* occurs where nothing new is allowed anymore, where everything can be predicted and calculated. The purpose of totalitarianism is to extinguish once and for all the human capacity to begin and begin again. In other words: total domination seeks to close off, to bar all beginnings.

The total *arché* puts a stop to every beginning, to any *arché*. Arendt clearly distinguishes the two meanings – beginning and command – contained in both *arché* and in the verb *árchein*, which means both to begin but also to lead.[6] Only

4. See Arendt (1958: 33 ff). On Arendt's relationship with Marx and her highly controversial critique, see Forti (2006: 110-119).
5. See Birmingham (2007: 763-777) and Marchart (2005). See also Vega (2020: 227-243).
6. See Arendt (1958: 189 ff.), Arendt (1990: 26 ss.). Both *arché* and *árchein* often appear in Arendt (2007b).

in so far as the one can be uncoupled from the other, only in so far as beginning can be set free of command, is politics possible. Otherwise, the right to command is taken by those who came first and the power to begin by those who exercise command. Arendt clearly sees the need to break this cycle.[7] Which makes it unthinkable, among other things, to exclude her from an overview of the new anarchism in philosophy.

In Arendt's later years, as she increasingly questioned the unresolved nexus between thinking and acting, she focused on judging, which she considered the political faculty *par excellence*. She did not manage to fully elaborate upon this dimension of her thought before she died; nevertheless, she did leave us important texts. In them she offers us the figure of the *theatés*, the spectator who sits in the stands watching a drama, with just enough distance from the scene to have a good view of the whole (Arendt, 1981). Spectatorship is distinguished by a liminal condition, neither entirely outside nor entirely inside, neither absent, as those who are elsewhere, nor involved, as those who are acting. The stands are the public space, where the spectator is under no illusion of grasping the truth beyond appearances but can compare her own point of view with that of others, can take up fresh perspectives, formulate common judgments. In her lectures, Arendt insists on this common dimension, where the public practice of thinking is articulated (Arendt, 1982). However, what is at issue here is not what might be called a dilated empathy. Rather, it is a broadening of the horizon, as when one travels and – partly through imagination – visits others' points of view for a while. That means retreating from the immediacy of one's own world, leaving behind what is familiar, resisting the temptation to feel at home, estranging oneself. Spectators are the citizens who know how to make themselves foreigners, moving from inside to outside, and vice versa. A second life beyond the *oîkos*, that is, the *bíos politikós*, is then envisioned as *bíos xenikós*, life as a foreigner, life that estranges itself.[8] Only in this transition can there be politics. But at this point Arendt stops – leaving us her legacy, the task of developing this thought.

With Arendt, beyond Arendt, it can therefore be said that the democratic *pólis* takes shape in a scenario that is no longer *archic.* The nexus has cracked, the link between beginning and command is broken. That fading away of the *arché*, the solid foundation, the pillar that clenched and held together the fortified city walls, gives way to a city that nothing can make secure any longer, sheltered within the confines of family-membership, of the community based on birth, of the principle of the bloodline that would claim the right to command. It is the *an-archic* opening of the *demos* that, united by political bonds and having called the *arché* into question, will itself not be able to do without continually questioning its own indeterminate boundaries.

7. On this see also Markell (2006) and Herzog (2004: 20-41).
8. Arendt (1981: 136); Aristotle, *Politics*, 1324 a 16.

7. Precisely because it is non-founded from the point of its emergence, democracy can endure only thanks to the political bond that is in fact inaugurated through democracy. To conceive disorder, magma, emptiness, groundlessness in terms of *an-arché* will allow us to consider an anarchist politics by unhinging that metaphysical fulcrum on which classical anarchism rests. But it also allows us to interpret the current context according to coordinates that have not yet been put to the test.

It is possible that the threat today looming over us is precisely the nightmare of the *archē*. It would then perhaps be more appropriate to consider the *archic* device rather than speak of totalitarianism – which, in its reference to total power, and the totalizing dimension, does not bring out the question of the foundation. Assumed to be the label of a limit, the sign of a prohibition, a perennial warning, totalitarianism is today the name of a bogeyman of the past, of a mad digression in European history, which not by chance has given way to terms such as authoritarianism, despotism and autocracy, which are all ultimately used in a generic anti-democratic sense. But the threat has not gone away, and the risk remains inscribed within democracy. This will not be clear to see, if one is looking for a chance downward spiral or the *coup d'état* by some usurper. Totalitarianism made its appearance in history at the same time as democracy, and constitutes its internal danger – neither an inevitable drift nor an overpowering force that comes from the outside.

Today we can make out two tendencies – ones clear to Arendt – that mark politics: an archaic tendency that re-proposes the identity of the beginning, and an *archic* tendency that reaffirms the identity of the command. Although the one may appear as a negation of the other, more often than not they converge. These two powers of the *archē*, seemingly alternative but ultimately complementary, are the two faces of the present that reveal the defection of politics and the crisis of democracy. There can be politics where democracy interrupts and separates the *archē*. Besides breaking the circle of a beginning that commands and a command that begins, it also interrupts the *archē* in its two senses. It abrogates the birth that orders and disposes – that is, the natural authority, the line of descent, the transmission of one's own property, the ties of blood and soil, the right of inheritance, the code of autochthony; in short, the archaic form of community. But it also interrupts *archē* understood as the power of initiation that today finds legitimacy in the state's command.

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