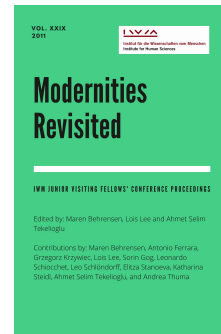


# Hannah Arendt, Agency, and the Public Space

Andrea Thuma

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Hannah Arendt's work is a major contribution to key concepts of political theory, such as freedom, political action, and the public space. Arendt's specific understanding of these concepts enables a perspective on acting in the public space as essential to a fulfilled human existence. The notion of agency is central in making Arendt's approach to the public space fruitful for contemporary interpretations. In this essay I utilize her concept of the public space as a starting point to explore agency in her work. Arendt's conception of agency has often been reduced to two aspects, namely freedom from necessity and from external pressures and "care for the world," an interest for the world which we inhabit and share with others. In my view, Arendt's approach to agency is more complex and multi-layered than this. My argument explicates four "layers" of Arendt's notion of agency and demonstrates its interconnectedness with the public space and the "publicness" of action and speech. I first introduce key notions in Arendt's work, such as freedom, action, and the public space, before outlining four criteria through which agency is expressed in her work. The last section gives special attention to the ways in which these criteria are associated with the public space and to their merit in shedding new light on issues of women's agency in the public space.

## 1. Freedom, Action, and the Public Space

Arendt's political philosophy builds on two "facts" of human existence, natality and plurality. "Natality" constitutes the human capacity of "beginning." Due to their own newness in the world they are born into, humans are both "new beginnings" themselves and are capable of making them by initiating action. According to Arendt, human beings are not "born to die" in the sense of a Heideggerian "Being towards death," but they are born to begin anew. This capacity of making new beginnings in the world is the fundamental human capacity to be free – a capacity possessed by each and every individual. Natality is hence one central aspect in Arendt's political philosophy which underpins an egalitarian reading of Arendt and her notion of action.

Plurality is the second key term in Arendt's understanding of action. Plurality is, simply put, the fact that one is born into a world populated by other people who are different from oneself and who one has to come to terms with. It is the condition in which humans are forced to reveal and communicate their uniqueness in order to facilitate living with each other. Plurality is located within public spaces – only within their borders are action and speech possible.

The “political” which Arendt seeks to revive in her work is a concept which both links and transcends these notions of natality and plurality. Its core is freedom: Freedom for Arendt is not simply liberty from outside forces or private necessities, but a freedom enabled by natality, by the capacity to make beginnings, a freedom expressed in action. It is the human freedom to act, to speak, and to create shared spaces through interaction with others. This interaction requires that a plurality of human beings communicate with each other about the terms of their coexistence. Plurality is thus both a basic existential fact of human existence which *requires* interaction, communication and cooperation, so that a shared life with others becomes possible, and plurality *enables* action and speech within shared spaces, because interaction is contingent upon the presence of others. At the intersection of these two notions we encounter the true meaning of the political: It is the realization of freedom through interaction with others in public spaces. The individual is able to realize her freedom only in action, in actively experiencing her worldly and public nature. Therefore, the public space is not a natural consequence of human coexistence. It is artificial: created by a human “web of relations” developed from continuous new beginnings. Consequently, Arendt rejects the idea that humans possess an inherent “political quality.” Despite the human capacity to act and despite the existential condition of plurality there is nothing “natural” about action in the public space. It is a mere capacity which humans possess, and, as I will show in the second section, it is contingent on several aspects of human agency which also relate to one's environment and the characteristics of the spaces one shares with others.

But the public space is not only contingent on new beginnings, on spontaneous and unforeseeable action on the part of humans living together. It also needs to be stabilized if it is supposed to persist, through rules, institutions, and the law. Hence Arendt's account of freedom within the public space is an account of *institutionalized freedom*: Public spaces will very often vanish without stabilization. Institutionalization gives them some durability; and the task of stabilizing freedom through institutionalization is in fact the hardest part. Political party machineries take over formerly autonomous free spaces, political elites replace internal equality with hierarchy, or the whole project of stabilizing a public space fails completely. But the freedom that exists within them can in fact be institutionalized, if the project of a self-organized polity can be realized. In the act of self-constitution, freedom which has formerly been expressed in spontaneous political action alone can also be expressed in rules and institutions – as long as these rules and institutions are open for amendment. The challenge of creating authentic political spaces is therefore one of making them a continuous project for everyone engaged in it.

Wherever they exist, these spaces of freedom and action are especially fragile and endangered. Moreover, such spaces have vanished in modernity. Reasons for their decline are manifold, but Hannah Arendt blames it foremost on the lack of interest in public life, the alienation from the value and dignity of such a life, and the alienation from the meaning of the political as enabling freedom. In other words, she blames it on phenomena which correspond to the relative descent of the value of action in contrast to the value of labor and work in modernity; phenomena which are highly destructive to public life, to the significance of freedom and action in the political and in one's individual existence. For Arendt, action and the public space in which it can take place possess a certain existential priority. A fulfilled human existence cannot be situated in the private realm – the realm of labor and the necessities of life – alone. Arendt attempts to demonstrate throughout her work that an existence worth living must be rooted in the public as well as in the private realm. The public space thus offers the individual her second, “mundane” home which allows her to interact and to communicate with others and therein experience a freedom which is existentially more worthy than what can be experienced in a private existence alone. Therefore, Arendt seeks to revive the notion of the political for modernity in its theoretical as well as its practical implications. Her project is dedicated to politics that breaks with the illusion of state sovereignty and open up the space for political freedom; politics which constitute this space itself instead of only providing a limited public sphere to mediate between government and citizens. Arendt focuses on the problem of creating and maintaining such spaces in modernity. Her project seeks to revive the meaning of the public space and action as enabling freedom, a meaning which is tightly interconnected with an ancient notion of the political which she derives particularly from Greek and Roman history. She recognizes materializations of this ancient notion in several forms of public spaces in modern times, such as in the American Revolution, in council systems created during and after several 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutions, or the Students' Movement in the late 1960s, and she thereby inspired later quests for such spaces of freedom, of action, and of the political – a quest that is “an effort to become human in the fullest sense.”[1]

## **2. Agency in Arendt**

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Because Arendt inextricably links the concepts of freedom, action, and the political with her notion of the public space, the latter is a highly complex but fruitful field for exploring these and other key concepts of political theory. If we break up Arendt's concept of the public space, we can open up several aspects of political space and action for discussion. One of them is the notion of agency, the individual's capacity to act. Diverging from approaches which conceptualize Arendt's notion of agency as only being dependent on the individual's freedom from external pressures and his “care for the world”, I see his capacity to act as contingent on four slightly different criteria which are tightly connected to the public space. These criteria enable us to think in more complex ways about action and agency in contemporary public spaces. Following a general discussion of these criteria, I will briefly touch on a few of the questions they trigger regarding feminist theories of female agency in public spaces.

The first of these criteria is the *subject's visibility, her appearance* in the public space. Only within the borders of the public space it is possible for her to appear before others. This appearance has several existential effects. Arendt views the public space as a kind of "stage" for the short-lived "performances" of the individual; a stage which protects against the impermanence of human existence. It is a space for her commemoration, for the remembrance of her deeds. Public spaces thus give some kind of reality and durability to human life and to the world that is created between individuals through their actions. It is thus not simply the individual human existence that persists through the public space, but also the worldly reality that is sustained by it. One's appearance in the public space is, beyond enabling some kind of "outside reality" of memory and world, also affirming the reality of the individual's identity. "Human reality is appearance", as Jerome Kohn puts it: [2] Humans appear before others in order to be recognized. Through acting in public, which means becoming visible to the others around her, the subject's identity is exposed and revealed. This "revelation" of identity cannot happen in isolation, it cannot result from self-reflection alone. Only the eyes of the others can truly disclose one's identity from all possible sides. This disclosure "makes" the subject: Becoming visible to others through action not simply means revealing, but also performing an identity. It is the performance of a public identity, a "public self" which is constructed in this space. Even if this "public mask" is not superior to other identities in a complex set of social and private identities, Arendt undoubtedly views it as an integral part of the process of individual identification and self-discovery, corresponding to the way in which action is, as one mode of human conduct among others, essential to a fulfilled human existence. A complete experience of self-identification thus demands public action. Furthermore, it is an experience of individuation – the subject becomes truly indispensable within the public space. The subject can experience and perform her identity to the fullest only in the disclosure within a space that is shared with others. Her appearance and visibility in the public space is thus one of the criteria for her agency.

Tightly linked to visibility is the *capacity to interact and communicate*. Actions are oriented toward plurality. That means that they not only address others but are contingent on their presence. This plurality of others makes agency possible – for those who are able to interact and communicate. One who is not able to communicate or interact with others will not appear in the public space as a "co-agent." This renders agency especially vulnerable to external limitations. Even though Arendt emphasizes the significance of political equality in the public space as a crucial condition for interaction, she does not pay attention to factors which may limit this kind of equality, e.g., social, cultural or communicative differences. Fundamental equality in the public space and the capacity to act together with others may be constrained by subjective limitations such as an insufficient socialization into common codes of action and communication, lacking communicative competence due to differences in education, language, or class, or an inaccurate assessment of one's own abilities, which may lead to the "voluntary" retreat from shared communicative spaces. Furthermore, Arendt's emphasis on equality makes others' willingness and ability to enter into interaction decisive: Exclusion from a "community of action" can occur through the negation of the Other as an equal co-agent

or through an intentional or unintentional exclusion from shared patterns of action. What is more, withdrawing or preventing access to a public space or to opportunities of effective interaction within it also results in the denial of agency.

The third criterion for agency is freedom. Freedom for Arendt is the *capacity for making a beginning, the capacity for initiative*. This has often been understood as being simply a matter of freedom from outside forces and pressures, particularly because Arendt was very clear about the meaning of free spaces as spaces “free from necessity.” For her, the realms of freedom and of necessity need to be strictly separated and issues of necessity such as the “social question” must not enter the public space. This line in her work has provoked much dismay and criticism by feminist readers who took Arendt’s distinction between the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity to be congruent with the distinction between the private and the public and their respective gendered “inhabitants”. In this feminist reading of Arendt, women are attributed to the realm of necessity and should not appear in the sphere of freedom. The feminist slogan “the private is public” must, for Arendt, appear to be an intolerable breach of the two realms’ borders. I do not follow this line of interpretation. Following Thürmer-Rohr,[3] I understand “freedom” in a slightly different way, focusing on Arendt’s equation of freedom with initiative: It is the agent’s initiative, not the formal ascription of her actions to the public or the private sphere, which transforms actions into acts of freedom or of necessity. Hence, the agent’s freedom is dependent neither on one’s assignment to a specific realm nor on relations of dependence or individual sovereignty,[4] but lies in her capacity to change her situation and, ultimately, in her decision to act. It is a freedom to choose action or non-action, to act this way or another. This freedom is not contingent on performing the action, because inaction can be an unforeseeable event and therefore an act in itself. But such freedom to decide and to act upon one’s decision demands a space of alternatives. Insofar as freedom is contingent on such a space of possibilities, it is not simply a subjective quality of the individual, but has an objective, a “worldly” quality. Thus it is not the lack of independence but the lack of initiative or of opportunity to initiate action that renders humans unfree. Therefore, the acts of alignment, conversion or even submission do not necessarily amount to a loss of subjectivity and agency, as has been claimed by feminist theorists. Even these acts, as long as they occur within a space of possibilities and as long as the agent retains the capacity to initiate action within this space, may indeed be real actions and expressions of agency.

Finally, the *worldly attachment* of actions affects the state of agency. Arendt’s notions of action and of agency are characterized by the actions’ effects on the world, their interference with the run of events, and thus their strong attachment to the world. Agents are capable of taking hold of the world, they are able to intervene in the course of things and to change it, and thereby “weave in” their own, personal history into the history of their time and place. In this regard, the individual’s “interest in the world” comes into play, since it motivates this worldly attachment; there is a clear relationship between her “care for the world” and her intervention in it. Only one who is interested in the world can act in it, can influence the course of things, and therein establish one’s position as an agent in the world.

Here we see how Arendt's understanding of politics might at first sight be considered "elitist." Not everyone will be politically active, since not every person has an "interest in the world". I read Arendt's approach, in general, not as elitist, but egalitarian, since she presumes a universal human capacity to initiate action and equality within the political space. However, she does imply that the interest in political action is not evenly distributed among a population. Therefore only those who are interested in it should have a voice in the course of things; [5] they will "select" themselves to be politically active citizens by their own choice, by their decision to enter the public space, that is, by taking the initiative to act. Arendt quite idealistically assumes that the opportunity of entrance into and action within a shared space is contingent on the individual's interest and initiative alone, and I take this fact as evidence that her stance is, despite its idealism, not an elitist one.

### **3. The public space as facilitator of agency**

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Although her work never makes this explicit, these four aspects appear to be crucial criteria for Arendt's concept of agency. If we view the public space as a facilitator of agency, the denial of agency becomes a denial of publicness. We can now discuss questions of agency with regard to the public space. A public space which fulfills these criteria must enable individuals to be visible before others, to reveal and perform their "public selves", in order to be a space for the realization of their identity and uniqueness. It must be a space for communication and interaction; and it must be generally inclusive enough to allow access and action to everyone while, at the same time, leveling the playing field for all agents. Therefore no space in which identities may remain hidden or underperformed, which is characterized by inequalities in interaction, or which does not allow everyone to develop and demonstrate a "public self" in order to effectively and successfully interact and communicate can be a public space. Genuine public spaces offer alternatives for action; only then would they be spaces of opportunities of public action for all agents within them. A space that is in any way predetermined would withhold these opportunities and preclude the expression of individual freedom. And finally, such a space must be a "ground" which attaches the individual to the world around her, offers her space for action, and thereby enables her to intervene in it. This space would be a starting point for experiencing the world, as a part of the worldly reality that will be changed. Precluding or withdrawing any of these opportunities for publicness and the merits of a public life from individuals results in their loss of agency. Similarly, denying them a space which can fulfill these criteria has the same effect on their capacity to act together.

This reading of the criteria for agency and the link between publicness and agency can open up new perspectives on several issues. One of the fields that might be enriched by this perspective concerns feminist approaches to women's agency in the public space. In order to appear in the public space as co-agent one needs to be acknowledged by others as an equal. This acknowledgment is based on very specific shared codes of appearance, which are sometimes difficult to understand and to meet by people who were socialized in a different community. One example for this is the public debate about the veil. The acknowledgement of veiled women in public spaces as public agents has proven to be problematic in many Western secular societies. The "public self" in these societies is

traditionally embodied and unveiled, “undisguised,” and visible. Furthermore, for many the veil is a symbol of the private sphere, symbolically dislodging the veiled woman from the public sphere even when she is physically present. In this case, cultural codes of appearance and visibility clash, rendering public agency for veiled women more difficult.

Another line of dispute in the discussion of women’s agency and role in the public space is the challenge to find a shared feminist stance toward pornography.[6] What is at stake here is the interpretation of the displayed woman’s freedom of choice and of the character of her appearance. How does her freedom of choice relate to her submission to others’ wishes? Is she, in the reading of Arendt presented above, still a free agent, that is, is she free to decide and initiate action, or is it true that – as feminist critics of pornography claim – most women working in pornography do not act within spaces of sustainable alternatives? And does a woman whose public appearance is ascribed to a private rather than to a public self still possess public agency? Taking into account the four layers of agency discussed might shed new light on these and other questions raised by the feminist philosophical discourse on pornography.

Finally, the “worldly attachment” of actions and one’s interest in the world may offer useful impulses for feminist thinking about women’s appropriation of public space. Several studies have shown that girls are, from the very beginning of their lives on, trained and socialized differently than boys regarding their active “grasp” on the world.[7] For instance, the motion experience of boys is fostered by clothing and toys which demand movement and exploration or by encouraging them to test their bodies, their strength and skillfulness in the world around them and in interaction with it. The “worldly” experience of girls is quite different. Female toddlers learn to occupy less space in the world around them and to approach it less actively and explorative. Throughout their childhood and youth, justified by the presumed fragility of their clothing, their bodies, and, in many cultures, their sexual integrity, the space of movement for girls is limited. This holds true even in Western culture; girls and women are socialized to take good care of their bodies and looks, but not to take hold of the world around them. This difference becomes virulent with regard to the demonstrated link between one’s agency and one’s “capability of intervention.” One’s capacity to act is contingent on one’s attachment to the world, the drive to inscribe one’s personality and history into the course of things. If women take less space in the world and explore it less actively, does this mean they possess a lower “interventionist behavior” than men in regard to their capacity to act? How does female agency suffer from this, and what effect does this have on female empowerment?

## 4. Conclusion

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I showed that at least four aspects determining one’s capacity to act can be found in Hannah Arendt’s work. I have discussed one’s appearance in the public space as a “public self”, which is discernibly distinct from her private and other identities, unique, and performative; one’s ability to communicate and interact with others, which depends among other conditions on others’ willingness to accept one as an equal co-agent; freedom as the capacity to initiate action within a space of alternatives; and finally,

corresponding to the worldly nature of actions, one's willingness and ability to occupy the world around one and influence it through one's actions. These aspects are in several ways associated with the public space as a crucial enabling condition of agency. On these grounds, we can conclude that Arendt assumed a strong connection between agency and publicness. I have argued that this connection can enrich our understanding of agency in fruitful ways, and have illustrated how questions of female agency may be illuminated if we explore, in more depth, the four layers of agency in relation to the public spaces they create. The feminist discourse on agency is only an example for one of the fields whose analysis might be enriched by taking these criteria into account. Regarding the decline of stable and vital public spaces in many aspects of shared community life, we may need to reconsider the ways we utilize, as public beings, public spaces around us. Only under specific conditions can they facilitate our actions and make our "public selves" be seen, heard, and capable of effective interaction. In any case, thinking about appearance, freedom, fundamental equality in our abilities to act, or the worldly attachment of our actions can extend our perspective on agency in a highly fruitful way.

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*Notes:*

1. Warren Magnusson (1996). The Search for Political Space: Globalization, Social Movements, and the Urban Political Experience, Toronto/Buffalo/New York, p. 31.

2. Jerome Kohn (2000), “Freedom: The priority of the political”, pp. 113-129, in: Villa, Dana Richard (ed.). The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt, Cambridge , p. 125

3. Christina Thürmer-Rohr (1997). “Die Anstößigkeit der Freiheit des Anfangens. Feministische Kritik – Feminismuskritik“, pp. 135-146, in: Ganzfried, Daniel & Sebastian Hefti (ed.). Hannah Arendt – Nach dem Totalitarismus, Hamburg, pp. 139-43

4. In Arendt’s view, independence and individual sovereignty have only mistakenly been understood as the essence of one’s freedom.

5. Hannah Arendt (1963). Über die Revolution, München , p. 360.

6. For a comprehensive representation of the feminist scientific discourse on pornography see Drucilla Cornell (ed., 2000). Feminism and Pornography, Oxford.

7. For an overview and synopsis see Birgit Schaufler (2003). “Körperbiografien. Geschlecht und leib-körperliche Identität“, pp. 83-99, in: Macha, Hildegard & Claudia Fahrenwald (ed.). Körperbilder zwischen Natur und Kultur. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Genderforschung, Opladen, p. 93.

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