

Dario Cecchi

Judgment reconsidered Political decision in Hannah Arendt, between politics and aesthetics

Abstract

Taking a political decision: what does this mean? And why has political decision, if it has, an aesthetic dimension? These questions will be tackled in the thought of one of the most influential political thinkers of the 20th century: Hannah Arendt. I will develop the aforementioned issues according to a short reconsideration of some pivotal issues of her political thought. Firstly, I will consider what kind of experience politics is for Arendt. Secondly, I will consider what kind of activity political action is for her. Thirdly, and lastly, I will consider why political actions claim for a form of judging that corresponds to aesthetic judgment, in the Kantian acceptance of this concept. I believe an idea of political decision can emerge through the reconsideration of these issues in Arendt's thought.

Keywords

Political Imagination, Decision, Judgment (aesthetic and political), Arendt, Kant

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dario.cecchi@uniroma1.it (Sapienza Università di Roma)

1. *Politics as an experience*

I think it might be useful to collocate Hannah Arendt inside the panorama of political thought. Notoriously, she gives a negative evaluation of political philosophy, which does not coincide with political thought according to her. The explicit formulations of this negative evaluation of political philosophy are to be found in *The human condition* (1958) and *Between past and future* (1968). However, we find their trace already in *The origins of totalitarianism* (1951) and in the materials of *Was its Politik?*, an introduction into politics commissioned to Arendt by the Swiss publisher Piper in the 1950s, which she has never accomplished. The criticism against political philosophy focuses at least on two points: the way philosophers deal with politics as a philosophical issue; and the specificity of their philosophical thought.

The last criticism is reaffirmed in her last unaccomplished book, *The life of the mind* (1978), whilst the former one undergoes a relative reconsideration in the same work. Generally speaking, Arendt stigmatizes the fact that philosophers present themselves as “professional thinkers”. Considering thought as a professional activity has at least two consequences. On the one hand, philosophers usually create intellectual systems, which aim at explaining the totality of our experience. On the other hand, they do not accept to put their thought at the same level of the laymen’s opinions. Plato is for Arendt a typical representative, if not the archetypical case of this attitude. But Hegel and Marx are also modern examples of this attitude. Arendt does not criticize systematic thinkers for being rigorous and having a method in their reflections. Otherwise, she would also consider Kant, her philosophical hero, as a professional thinker in this negative sense. Nonetheless, she fears philosophical systems to elevate philosophers to the role of sovereigns, while they try to explain everything. Philosophers would consequently be Platonic “philosopher kings”. But philosophical theories so construed also entrap us in a world of ideas, which filter and distort our experiences by projecting them onto a metaphysical background. In other words, philosophical systems make no room to contingency in the making of the sense of our lives.

If Plato is the archetype of the philosophical preference for all-comprehensive systems, many modern philosophers, Hegel and Marx above all, show to what extent this kind of systems can be a trap for our experience. Both thinkers explain indeed experience, individual and above all collective, through the filter of a philosophy of history. Their theories ac-

count for the meaning of the human progress, and point out to the necessity of an ultimate end of history: they thus change the understanding of political action, which is less a matter of dealing with contingency, and becomes only an element of a pre-established historical design. The concept of history also undergoes a transformation from the ancient to the modern age: it passes from being a collection of individual stories (Arendt 2006: 44-5) into the exclusive representation of the general development of the humankind as such (Arendt 2006: 67). According to this paradigm, the single experiences can only make sense as parts of a system that is revealed and validated by its own development. It does not matter whether history is considered as the progressive accomplishment of the spirit, or the progress toward social justice through different societies and forms of class struggle. Marx, despite his materialistic and practical claims, is no less philosopher than Hegel (Arendt 2006: 76-86). Turning upside down the categories of Hegel's idealism may turn them to be materialist concepts; but it does not transform a philosophy of history into a thought of contingency.

The other issue concerns the fact that philosophers, at least since Plato, consider politics as an activity to be kept under a sort of philosophical surveillance. In this case, Arendt considers especially ancient philosophy. Plato, and to a lesser extent Aristotle, do not put their political ideas at the same level of a common citizen's opinions. They believe instead that the task of philosophers is to show how political affairs should be managed. They develop general theories about politics, instead of sharing opinions on the ongoing political affairs with their fellow citizens. They believe philosophy should guide politics. As I reminded above, Plato states in the *Republic* that philosophers should be made kings. According to Arendt, there are some historical reasons for this antidemocratic turn in political philosophy. First of all, there is Plato's biography. He elaborated the trauma of the unjust death of his master Socrates, sentenced by the Athenians judges (Arendt 1978: 183-7). Plato believes philosophers should protect themselves, as well as their fellow citizens, from the very iniquities of a democratic political system. Consequently, many ancient philosophers believed they had the right of regulating the political affairs: in this way, they would be free of dedicating themselves to the philosophical "contemplation" (Arendt 1998: 289-94), without being annoyed for their ideas by the political authorities. According to Arendt, it is a reversal of the Greek traditional mind, which recognized to action a priority with regard to contemplation.

This way of considering politics creates a distance between philosophy and ordinary thought. The stance of Socrates was different. He claimed for the possibility of finding, through the philosophical investigation, a more reliable way of arguing publicly relevant ideas (Arendt 1978: 166-78). He claimed thus the right of criticizing the others' opinions, in order to examine the logical premises of their reasoning, and so enhance a revision of common sense. Every concept or idea is so susceptible of being analyzed. For Socrates, writes Arendt, the "word 'house' is something like a frozen thought that thinking must unfreeze" (Arendt 1978: 171). However, Socrates does not believe philosophy should retreat from the public space where ideas and opinions are confronted. For thinking itself is a public activity, open to contingency, and not a theory explaining reality according to metaphysical laws. Arendt consequently recovers a tradition of "non-professional" thinkers, whose political theories made room to the contingency of the concrete political affairs of the societies they lived in. We count among these political thinkers Machiavelli and Montesquieu, as well as Rosa Luxemburg. Some of them, e.g. Machiavelli and Luxemburg, were engaged political actors, before being thinkers of politics.

However, the Socratic legacy of a thought open to contingency and to the dialogue with the others does not entirely coincide with the tradition of political thinking. A philosopher like Kant can be considered as a prosecutor of Socrates's stance. Arendt considers Kant's aesthetic judgement, which does not evaluate contingent cases after universal rules, but claims for the general agreement on exemplary cases, as a Socratic pleading of public thinking. Kant represents the possibility of recovering Socratic thinking inside Western philosophy. It is true that Arendt's strong criticism of thinkers like Plato, Hegel and Marx, as well as Hobbes and Rousseau, does not let her see some of the reasons behind the formulation of their universalist theories of politics. We could reformulate her stance in a more charitable way, distinguishing between two lines of political thought. On the one hand, there are political thinkers who develop general theories, because of reflecting upon the fundamental needs to which politics must give an answer, no matter whether these needs may be material, spiritual or psychological. On the other hand, there are thinkers who reflect upon concrete political experiences, developing original exemplary insights after specific events, rather than developing general theories. The former thinkers are systematic, whilst the latter ones are critical. Arendt undoubtedly prefers the critical thinkers as far as they represent a valid remedy to the metaphysical fallacies of the systematic thinkers.

2. Political action: the Arendtian account

As a critical political thinker, Arendt is engaged in showing the meaning of political action, not of politics generally speaking. If we take *The human condition*, we see that acting makes political actor's personal identity be manifest. It is thus a way of creating webs and relationships with the others, empowering the possibility of "acting in concert". Political acting corresponds to two fundamental features of the human condition, which are "natality" and "plurality". But this stance does not completely astray Arendt from her philosophical origins, despite her criticism against political philosophy, which contains also a hidden criticism to her master and former lover Martin Heidegger (Taminiaux 1998, Villa 1995). As I will try to show, this stance brings her on the contrary to recover a different philosophical perspective, open to contingency, which finds in Kant its standard bearer.

There are at least two reasons for claiming the continuity of philosophy in Arendt's political thought. Firstly, the presence of Kant in her writings dates to her earliest theoretical writings: namely, *The human condition* and a series of essays published on journals and then collected in the volume *Between Past and Future*. We might consider *The origins of totalitarianism*, at least partly, as a historical rather than a purely theoretical book. Kant, and above all the idea that his conception of the aesthetic judgment has a political meaning, are already present in essays published in the 1950s. We do not need to expect the 1970s, with the *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* and the unaccomplished book on *The life of the mind*, for seeing Arendt using Kantian categories inside her philosophical work. The Kantian concept of imagination is present in *Truth and politics*, where she considers this faculty as a sort of "representative thinking" (Arendt 2006: 243-4). Kant's idea of common sense is adopted in *The crisis of culture* (Arendt 2006: 218-9). Both essays are collected in *Between past and future*, although *Truth and politics* appears only in the second edition of the book. *The life of the mind* employs these Kantian features as a key for developing an understanding of thinking as a public activity. *The life of the mind* could be accordingly considered as a prosecution of *The human condition*. The human condition would not be understood in its entirety if we consider only the active life, and we ignore its reflective counterparts in thinking.

Nor need we wait for the *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy* to have a very interpretation of the Kantian philosophy: Arendt's *Denktagebuch* already contains a section of notes, dating August 1957,

on the *Critique of judgment* (Arendt 2003: 569-83). The structure of her interpretation of the third *Critique* as a political text is fully discernible in these notes. What Arendt adds in the *Lectures* is the confrontation with Kant's political writings, such as *Zum ewigen Frieden* or *Die Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte*.

Let us consider first of all that, in *The life of the mind*, Arendt's idea of human condition evolves into a reflection upon human experience. Let us consider this issue from the perspective of action. Acting obeys to two criteria: natality and plurality. Action is consequently capable of representing a novelty in the public space, by sharing new ideas and values with the spectators, and empowering them to reaction and eventually cooperation. Natality and plurality can be also considered anthropological features as far as they sustain the human need for a life spent in a common world, not in isolation. One should be careful when speaking of anthropology as far as Arendt is concerned: for she explicitly states, at the beginning of *The human condition*, that "the human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to man" (Arendt 1998: 9). Human condition does not coincide with the human nature. Condition has a Kantian meaning: it is a condition of possibility of action, and more generally of life considered as a public experience. The German version of *The human condition* sheds light on this point: she speaks here of *Bedingtheit* (Arendt 2002: 16ff.).

However, Arendt's account of political action as a form of experience in *The human condition* is not complete as far as we consider only the fact that this kind of experience displays the actor's identity, letting them establish relationships with the others in the public space. Arendt has not considered yet the configuration taken by the world as a public space. The reflection upon this issue is undertaken in *The life of the mind*, more precisely in the first volume of this book, the only one finished by the author, and entitled *Thinking*. In *The life of the mind*, Arendt speaks of the world as a "world of appearances". The priority given to appearances with regard to being recalls Kant's distinction between phenomenon and noumenon, with the consequence of the impossibility of properly knowing any super-sensible reality. Arendt agrees with Eric Weil about the crucial distinction between thinking and knowing in the understanding the meaning of Kant's transcendental philosophy (Arendt 1978: 62-5). In a Kantian perspective, the subject is able to know phenomena, but is only allowed to think of noumena. There is however a shift of this distinction in Arendt's appropriation. Arendt seems to distinguish between two different forms of thinking. On the one hand we have an activity of thinking,

which deals with invisible and transcendent ideas, such as God, eternity and soul. On the other hand we have an activity of thinking, which is concerned with the meaning of human life. The latter form of thinking is close to judging, especially to reflecting judgments such as the aesthetic ones, which deal with contingent cases¹. However, judging does not consider experience or life as something given once for all. On the contrary, it accounts for the exemplarity of single cases, which make sense of life. Francesco d'Assisi is for instance an example of holiness for his deeds and speeches. But this does not mean that we can extract a universal definition of holiness from his life. And so is it for Achilles and braveness (Arendt 1982: 79-85).

Judging addresses a world made of appearances, rather than a universe consisting of beings – or Being. The agency of judging is therefore a prerequisite of decision as far as decision is intertwined with discernment. In the perspective assumed here, decision is not primarily the sovereign act of prescribing or prohibiting. Decision is first of all the act of standing for a party instead of another, and consequently needs for a complementary faculty of evaluating a political situation and the different positions presented inside it. Judging helps us evaluate the values and qualities of political leaders, aside their charisma. Judging entails other aspects of discernment: however, the aforementioned one is particularly relevant to a political life. To recognize the other features of discernment, we should consider the “world of appearances” from a point of view Arendt does not particularly highlight. The concept of world of appearance entails a general anthropological reference to our earthly condition of living beings who, by birth, are brought to undertake actions, and therefore make something new appear. Arendt understands the finitude of human life in a way that integrates Heidegger's concept of *Sein zum Tode*, and partly emendates it but without completely diverging from it. Arendt believes we cannot account for the finitude of our lives only by recognizing death as their ending point. We must be aware of the power contingency has to offer occasions for starting something new. The sense of a life, its authenticity (Ferrara 2001), is the result of both an existential project and the capability of reconfiguring it “as the play goes on”.

We are pushed by our earthly condition to exhibit ourselves to the others through action. It is even a natural impulse: Arendt cites Adolf

¹ The literature on Arendt and judging is extremely vast. Let me only mention three of the latest works, which I consider extremely significant: Ferrara 2001 and 2006, Forti 2006, Montani 2007, Schwatz 2016.

Portmann's studies in animal biology, and his concept of *Selbstdarstellung* or "self-display" (Arendt 1978: 29). It is the very nature of our earthly condition that offers us the earliest occasions of having a public existence. However, the human preference for a politically engaged public life is not just a matter of a spontaneous impulse to self-exhibition; otherwise, we would assume that politics is a quasi-biological feature of the human nature. It would be something that concerns our *zoe*, our biological life, and not our *bios*, our meaningful existence (Esposito 2009). If we push this argument to its furthest consequences, we should say that, according to Arendt's notorious classification of the *vita activa* in labor, work and action, action is actually a refined form of labor as far as the latter is the only human activity that originates from mere biological needs. But such a conclusion obviously contrasts with the sense of this classification. There is a difference between our *feeling* of life as labor and our feeling of life as action.

Arendt offers few indications concerning how we feel as dwellers of a world of appearances. Two of them are however fundamental. Introducing the concept of worlds of appearances at the beginning of *The life of the mind*, Arendt writes that in "this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, *Being and Appearance coincide*. [...] Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of this planet" (Arendt 1978: 19). We have to think of the world as a "world of appearances", in order to account for plurality, one of the crucial features of the human condition together with natality. It is a world that precedes our arrival and survives our departure, not because of being eternal with regard to our transience, but because of making room to the appearance of other living beings. Within this world, we are appearances appearing to other appearances: this is also the double sense of the Greek word *doxa*, which means both appearance and opinion. For this reason, on the one hand, the world exceeds our single existences; but, on the other hand, it depends on our care of it. Our existential relationship to the world of appearances matters the possibility of political decision in the perspective of a trans-generational justice. As we judge what is beautiful or ugly in the world, as well as what is right or wrong ethically or politically, and act consequently, we take care of a world we will leave one day to the future generations. In other words, by judging and acting, we indirectly take decisions concerning their lives.

Living in a world of appearances is therefore not just a matter of space but also of time. Arendt does not develop this issue, but employs an ef-

fective literary metaphor to describe the existential condition of the political actor: Kafka's character of Er, who lives obsessed by the past and assaulted by the future. Human beings make sense of their lives in the present. But this is not a given time, being rather a time left to the virtual meaningfulness of action, negotiated with past and future. It follows that we do not just feel the present as we behave as political actors. We live in a dialogue between past and future. Our presence springs out of the dialectic of these temporalities. Our political feeling resonates of the oscillation between past and future, as well as of the virtual character of present, which needs something to be created.

3. Judgment and decision, between aesthetics and politics

Judging is not per se a form of political decision. However, as we have seen in the previous paragraph, judging prepares the field for political decision as far as it puts on display the direct and indirect finalities of a decisional process. And judging can do that because its paradigm is given by the aesthetic judgments conceived after Kant's *Critique of judgment*. According to Arendt, disinterestedness, exemplarity and purposiveness without purpose are not just aesthetic qualities, but are also political virtues. They correspond for instance to the impartiality and equanimity of the historian who *sine ira et studio* judges an event like a war, recognizing the reasons and great deeds of both parties. By the way, in a Kantian acceptance, these qualities must be referred to the subject's judgment: they are not objective properties. It does not mean that aesthetic judgments, as well as political judgments, are arbitrary. They depend on the way one collocates contingent events and deeds inside a wider interpretive framework. The operation of collocating event within a framework might also result into a hermeneutics of history (Makkreel 1990), for the sake of which we look for our fellows' consensus. The issue of common sense is fundamental in Arendt's political appropriation of the third *Critique*.

Arendt prefers translating *Gemeinsinn* as "community sense", in order to avoid the possible ambiguities of the current translation as "common sense". Kant is not concerned with commonplaces when he argues that the validity of the aesthetic judgments depends on the possibility of the intersubjective consensus of the others. In the Kantian *Lectures*, she states that humankind or an abstract idea of humanity are not at stake here. She defines indeed human beings as "earthbound creatures, living

in communities, endowed with common sense, *sensus communis*, a community sense; not autonomous, needing each other's company even for thinking" (Arendt 1982: 27). We are speaking of plurality as it emerges through actions and speeches. Judgment defines the horizon within which an action or a speech make sense. But the opposite is also true. Actions and speeches prefigure a virtual political community. It is a community to come. The decisional agency of political actors, and spectators, therefore lies in the power of sharing a political horizon with the others (Cecchi 2021). It is not the decisional power of the sovereign who governs the state. It is instead approachable to the sometimes unexpected decisional power of the artists who anticipate the understanding of their times, and through emulation orient the understanding of the public, and accompany the creative work of other artists.

Arendt's perspective on judgment avoids some of the philosophical commonplaces concerning the analogy between politician and artist. The statesman, or stateswoman, is not a creator; accordingly, the state is not their work of art. As an artist, the politician is rather a *performer* who dwells the world as a public space: their performance waits for the judgment of the audience. To the furthest extent, the political performer creates the public space. However, it is not a creation in the current acceptance of the word. In other words, political creativity does not emerge from the alleged production of an object. The public space is not object, being rather the horizon within which the actions, lives and experiences of human beings get a sense. Political action makes this horizon appear, but does not create it narrowly speaking: for creating a horizon for deeds and events would mean that the very world in which we come by birth, and leave dying, is but a fabrication of our own. For Arendt, this way of reconsidering the nature of the world is typical of the modern drift away from a genuine understanding of politics, and of the human condition generally speaking.

The last remark helps us reconsider the logic and phenomenology of political decision. A statesman or stateswoman thought as an artistic creator makes their decision coincide with a productive intentionality. Decision is concerned with shape that has to be given to the state considered as a work of art. The ideal of this decisional process is the rationalization of a productive process that brings something into existence. Its elementary components are the form and the matter by which the work is created. The aesthetic meaning of this kind of artistic creativity is only a preliminary step toward the full rationalization of the process accompanying

political decision. By reconsidering political action as a form of performance, especially in *The life of the mind* and above all the *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy*, Arendt aims at rethinking the logic and phenomenology of political decision. Political action is a process that does not result into the production of an object, no matter whether material or ideal. Action rather results into a new sense of community among different persons who may be involved in a political enterprise, at different levels and with different positions and functions. It results, in other words, into a new form of coexistence, and a new form of collective dwelling of the earth. It does not descend from a decision already formulated in rational terms. It rather comes to the point of gathering a community charged of taking a decision concerning some common issues, if not the very fate of their life as a community. Political decision narrowly speaking comes at the end of an action: it is the practical side of the judgment concerning the meaning and sense of that action. The community can either approve or disapprove what the action means for them. This judgment practically results into a certain way of reorganizing the public space and its occupation by the community. This final passage of political judgment can be considered as political decision narrowly speaking.

Arendt's perspective on judgment sheds light on the double phenomenology of political decision, a double phenomenology that needs to be highlighted, in order to understand the logic of decision. The political performer anticipates the moment of the collective decision concerning the purposes of the community. To its furthest extent, this anticipation of decision concerns the possibility of founding a new community with those who consent to the performer's appeal, and agree with their way of presenting political affairs in the public space. It is an exercise in *sensus communis*, or "community sense". On the other hand, the community so gathered considers political decision as a momento of renewal and new beginning: it is the actualization of the natality inherent to political action. The political performer is asked to display this fundamental feature of the human condition. Political performers are judged for the sake of the disinterested and impartial delight of the community, not for the sake of their own purposes. It is only through this aesthetic moment that the political actor has an access to an idea of political decision deprived of the logic of "means-and-ends". This logic characterizes the peculiarly modern rationalized idea of politics, but is unable to account for the genuine involvement of the individuals in common political actions.

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