

PLURALITY AND HUMANISM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ARENDTIAN THOUGHT OF POLITICS

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ABSTRACT: Confronted with the totalitarian barbarity that had led to the destruction of the human being, Arendt will propose a political-humanist project through her concept of plurality. In fact, it is the sine qua non and per quam conditions of political life. According to the latter, plurality is a political virtue and is defined as the possibility for people to act, speak and think together, in other words, to be in correlation with others. Based on an analytic-critical approach, our ambition in this article is to present the humanistic meaning of plurality, and to show that this Arendtian paradigm, so much praised for its attachment to humanism, is only a sham. By arguing that there is true humanity only in the political space of equals, does Arendt not turn plurality into a selective paradigm? Isn't Arendt's plural humanism in its anti-humanist principle?

Keywords: *plurality, humanism, totalitarianism, action, birthrate.*

I. INTRODUCTION

From the Latin *humanitas*, which means "humanity", humanism is a movement and an attitude of mind that began in Europe, particularly during the Renaissance era, from the 14th to the 16th century. This classical ideal of wisdom and culture does not come from a spontaneous generation. It began to take shape in Greek Antiquity, particularly with Socrates' anthropocentric revolution, which had the merit of redefining the object of philosophical reflection by focusing it on human being, making the latter an inescapable value of philosophy. Moreover, humanism was at the heart of Roman civilization. Besides, Arendt reports that *humanitas* is essentially Roman, and that this word is absent or even lacking in the Greek language. In short, for the Romans, humanism was understood as that conception which stipulated that "man is the highest being we know" [Arendt; 1998: p. 337]. She made Cicero the greatest Roman humanist whose thought inspired Western humanism. The latter defined humanism as attachment to culture, the only guarantee of the greatness and dignity of man. This concept evolved during the Renaissance era to designate a return to the spirit of the *humanities* of antiquity. It was a question of reviving the art and culture of the founding fathers, who had fallen into disgrace in the Middle Ages. Arendt will reappropriate this Roman sense of *humanitas* through his concept of "Roman trinity". However, this term will evolve in modernity especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and is now understood as a philosophical-moral conception that makes man, a supreme value and worthy of respect. Humanism is considered, for example, in Kant's personalist philosophy, as amoral conception that elevates man above all costs.

Unfortunately, this classical and modern humanist ideal was desacralized in the twentieth century by totalitarian movements which, under the pretext of a supremacist instinct, trivialized the human being. Through acts of terror, these contributed to the destruction and dehumanization of the human being. With totalitarianism, the *humanities* as a "promotion of ethical-axiological resources" [Tsala Mbani; 2016: p. 16] have crumbled, reducing man to his mere superfluity. The aim of totalitarian regimes was to break with the traditional humanist canons. It was thus to put the human being back in his place, to restore his dignity, that Arendt proposed her humanist political project of *plurality*, based on thought, education, dialogue, and action, all considered as axiological pillars in order to give meaning to living together. In 1958, she published *Condition of the Modern Man*, where she elaborated "the resources of resistance and rebirth" [Ricoeur; 2005: p. 13], with a view to giving meaning to the human condition. One cannot therefore dissociate humanism from Arendt's political thought, since humanism is consubstantial with the *plurality* so dear to the thinker of the human condition.

The concept of *plurality*, on the other hand, derives from the Lower Latin *pluralitas*, which means "great number", the fact of existing in great number, or even multiplicity. It was introduced into the philosophical-

political field by Arendt: “if philosophers introduce new terms into our world, there is no doubt that Arendt (who did not want to be a philosopher) wanted to introduce the word and the concept of plurality” [Amiel; 2007: p. 51]. What can this concept introduced by our political theorist mean? This term is not to be confused with multiplicity in the sense of mass; it is not a simple assembly or gathering. According to the latter, *plurality* means a thinking, speaking and acting multiplicity. It is a political virtue insofar as it is a political space that allows people to live together, to act in concert. However, if Arendt's *plurality is a political virtue*, since it allows men to federate, it must be said that access to this community is not given: one is not born a member of Arendt's political community, one becomes one. According to her, in order to access such a community, one must first free oneself from vital necessity and social constraints. As a result, Arendt seems to exclude certain categories from her political space. In other words, she makes it a reserved space. According to her, “properly human life does not begin until one enters the bios politikos” [Faye; 2019: p. 31]. Thus, by limiting access to the political space, which is supposed to be open to all, does Arendt not tarnish the humanist character of her political project? Can we say that Arendt's plurality is at the service of the human when we know that the latter uses this concept to exclude certain men from this space? Isn't Arendt's humanism of plurality rather an anti-humanism? Moreover, her eccentric positions against the civil rights movement in the United States, do they not confirm her ostracism and her aristocratic vision of politics?

II. ARENDT AND THE CRITIQUE OF TOTALITARIANISM AS PHYSICAL-MORAL DESTRUCTION OF THE HUMAN BEING

The twentieth century, which Arendt described as a *horrific Saeculum*, was marked by an unprecedented political phenomenon, particularly with the appearance of totalitarian regimes. These regimes undermined the classical humanism to which the latter claims to belong. Thus, in 1951, the latter published *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, its first work written in three parts in which it puts the said humanicidal regimes on trial. In their Machiavellian project, these regimes wanted to take control of all aspects of social and private life. These political systems set up by Hitler's Germany and Stalinist Russia, according to Arendt, differ from other traditional forms of power by their terrorizing and ideological *modus operandi*. According to Arendt, totalitarianism “differs in essence from the other forms of political oppression we know, such as despotism, tyranny and dictatorship” [Arendt 1972: 203].

Our ambition here is not to enter into the historical analysis of totalitarian movements, but to highlight their dehumanizing character, which Arendt denounced and which gave the impetus to her political project. Thus, if the humanist ideal is to promote intellectual and moral fulfillment through artistic and cultural education, it must be said that with totalitarianism we rather witness the enslavement, even physical and moral destruction of the human being. The human being has been sacrificed to individualism and supremacist desires. These pillars of totalitarian hell have used not only terror, but also ideology.

On the physical level, by attacking the physical integrity of the person, totalitarianism has undermined the theories of human rights, for which the human condition is sacred. According to Arendt, it has contributed to the desubstantialization of man. As a result, it has distorted “all political action” [Poizat; 2008: p. 159]. Indeed, the unfortunate experience of the Third Reich consisted in setting up concentration and extermination camps to punish opponents and trade unionists hostile to the regime; to annihilate resistance movements, to exploit forced laborers in labor camps and, last but not least, to exterminate Jews and Gypsies in extermination camps (Auschwitz). The recourse to the said camps and these so-called irrational, immoral and inhuman methods undoubtedly caused greater harm, both to man as a legal person and to man as a moral person. In other words, the concentration camp society trampled on the rules of legal common sense by reducing the human being to a guinea pig for experimental purposes: “totalitarian domination ensures that the categories gathered in the camps - Jews, carriers of diseases, representatives of the classes in danger of extinction - have already lost all power of action, both normal and criminal” [Arendt; 1972: p. 186]. Totalitarianism, according to the American philosopher, by its very nature, killed in man, the legal person: “the first essential step on the road to total domination consists in killing in man the legal person. To this end, certain categories of people were first removed from the protection of the law while forcing, by means of denationalization, the non-totalitarian world to recognize them as outlaws; then the concentration camp was placed outside the normal penal system, where a certain crime is punishable by a prearranged penalty” [Arendt 1972: 185].

But, in addition to killing the juridical person in man, totalitarian movements go so far as to desacralize the juridical person in man: “The second decisive step in the preparation of a living corpse is the murder of the juridical person in man” [Arendt; 1972: p. 190]. In fact, apart from terror as a means of domination, totalitarian systems have also relied on ideology as an intellectual weapon of human destruction. According to Arendt, ideology at the base is defined as the science of ideas. However, this nature of ideology was compromised by Nazism and communism, where the idea was used as a propaganda tool to fight the idea or thought. We know that what makes man, a being worthy of respect, is his ability to think, to judge himself. With totalitarian

ideology, man ceases to be a thinking being, he is on the contrary a "thought" being. Isn't this what emerges from Arendt's thought: "These new totalitarian ideologies, she said, differed from their predecessors in that the *idea* was no longer primarily in the ideology - the class struggle and the exploitation of the workers, or the struggle of the races and the preservation of the Germanic peoples - what attracted them; what attracted them was the logical process that could be generated from it. According to Stalin, it was neither the idea nor the oratorical talent but the *irresistible power of logic that subjugated Lenin's audience*" [Arendt 1972: 221].

We can therefore say that totalitarian ideology is a kind of forcing which, on the basis of total terror, pushes men to adhere to a logic, however bad it may be. It has therefore an *ascientific* character insofar as its logic is illogical by the very fact that it destroys thought instead of consolidating it. As a system of indoctrination, it transforms and distorts thought. That is to say that totalitarianism is inscribed in a politico- moral vacuum that deforms the human being by making him a superfluous being, who no longer acts according to his will, but is acted and agitated by a heteronomous will. Moreover, Arendt said that "the goal of totalitarian education has never been to inculcate convictions but to destroy the faculty of forming any" [Arendt 1972: 215].

We can conclude this articulation by saying that totalitarian systems, by destroying thought, have favored the birth of a type of society, forgetful of its values; for Arendt, this is the advent of the mass society. The characteristic of such a society is that it does not value culture, the substratum of classical humanism: "Mass society, on the contrary, does not want culture, but leisure (*entertainment*) and the articles offered by the leisure industry are indeed consumed by society like all other consumer goods" [Arendt, 1998: p. 263]. The consequence is that these totalitarian regimes have not only destroyed the human being, they have also deprived him of the company of his fellow human beings; in short, they have deprived him of his capacity to act. Totalitarianism has thus contributed to the oblivion of the human. However, what is the political ideal that Arendt proposes to promote harmonious political action among men?

III. ARENDTIAN POLITICAL PARADIGM OF PLURALITY AT THE SERVICE OF HUMANKIND

Contrary to the totalitarian barbarity animated by an instinct of destruction, Arendt created a concept to unite and reunite men. Indeed, the refusal to live-together with different beings, the ideological substratum of totalitarian systems, revolts Arendt and motivates her to propose the humanist political ideal. Her thesis is based on the fact that "politics originates in the *space-who is among* men, therefore in something fundamentally *external to man*" [Arendt, 1995: p. 42], i.e. *plurality*. Against all the individualistic considerations of the political, Arendt will define *plurality* as a political paradigm that only makes sense in community and reciprocity: "politics deals with the community and reciprocity of different beings. Men, in an absolute chaos or from an absolute chaos of differences, organize themselves according to essential and determined communities" [Arendt, 1995: p. 41]. Thus, politics is conjugated in the plural, it is the passage from the *one* to the *multiple thinking and acting*.

The first humanistic feature of Arendt's *plurality* is its *plural* nature. In other words, it is a virtue of living together, it allows us to federate men. According to it, human existence is based on the instinct for life as opposed to the instinct for death and destruction of totalitarianism. Thus, she will say, politics "rests on one fact: human plurality. God created man, men are a human, earthly product, the product of human nature" [Arendt, 1995: p. 39]. *Plurality* is the fact of living with/and among men. It is a political space, where people live together by sharing their experiences and points of view. Plurality would be "the mode of human relations that are established wherever people live together"; it is "the possibility of speaking and acting together". Isn't sharing points of view a promotion of democracy?

The second humanistic trait of *plurality* is freedom of speech. If in totalitarianism, men did not have this freedom, Arendt's political field is open. Arendt's *plurality* is human insofar as it brings men out of their mutism and avoids muzzling them. It is the absence of speech and thought that led, according to Arendt, to the "desert" of which Nietzsche spoke. In other words, *plurality* is a way of being of individuals who seek to distinguish themselves by their actions and words. Thus, *plurality* would be at the service of the human being since it advocates freedom with a view to a harmonious living-together. For Arendt, the aim of politics is to create a liveable space where only speech and dialogue can unite people together. Here, Arendt is Aristotelian, she rehabilitates Aristotle's political thought, which made speech an instrument for action. For this Greek philosopher, initiator of ethics, there is no *lexis* without *praxis*. As we know, in *The Politics*, he thought that what gives man his humanity is the word; the word is an instrument of sociability. Arendt admired Aristotle's political paradigm, all the more so since it allows for the "pooling of words and deeds": "Even today we believe that Aristotle defined man essentially as a political being endowed with speech or reason" [Arendt, 1998: p. 158].

From this consideration of speech as a highly political existential reality, Arendt gets to her political concept which is the basis of the meaning of *plurality*. It is indeed about *action*. Actually, for Arendt, there is no *plurality* without *action*. She will make the latter the greatest activity; it is thanks to *action* that we leave our marks in the world. The *vita activa*, which she opposes to the *vita contemplativa*, is inherent to the human condition. In this term, Arendt will designate three major human activities: the first one is *labor*, which she underestimates, it is “the activity that corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and possibly corruption, are linked to the elementary productions whose labor nourishes this vital process” [Arendt; 2005: p. 41]. If the human condition of *labour* is *life* that of the *work* is belonging to the world. *Labor*, according to her, differs from the *work* because the latter is “the activity that corresponds to the non-naturality of human existence, which is not embedded in space and whose mortality is not compensated for by the eternal cyclical return of the species” [Arendt; 2005: p. 41]. However, both activities do not directly bring men together. The particularity of *action* is that it is “the only activity that directly connects men, without the intermediary of objects or matter, which corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that it is men, and not man, who live on earth and inhabit the world” [Arendt; 2005: p. 41]. From this categorization of human activities, Arendt distinguishes two foundations of human existence, namely *bios* and *zôê*. Using Greek terms, she defined *zôê* as the simple fact of living, common to all living beings. This biological sphere is common to both man and animal. *Bios*, on the other hand, is a way of life specific to a group, a political community. In other words, man's humanity only becomes truly human when he leaves this sphere to enter the world, the *bios politikos*. Consequently, *Labor* as “an activity subject to vital necessities and to the concern for individual and specific survival” [Arendt; 2005: p. 17] would be an activity proper to the *animal laborans*, unlike *work*, which is the product of the activity of *homo faber*, which is distinguished by its capacity to last, and by *action*, the fundamental condition of human *plurality*.

Also, Arendt's political humanism comes from the fact that it gives a special place to *life* to the point where it makes the *birth rate* the *per quam* condition of education. She will oppose the latter as much to the thought of her master Heidegger as to that of Plato who, both seem to give primacy to *mortality*. Arendt lived in the dark ages: the elements of shame of her time, racism and anti-Semitism, had sacrificed so many human lives that she could not base her thought on *mortality*. However, although relevant, is Arendt's thesis free of criticism? In making an in-depth analysis, should it not be said that his political paradigm is selective and tends to favor one category of people? Isn't the political humanism of *plurality* elitist?

IV. ARENDTIAN PLURALITY AS A PROBLEMATIC HUMANIST PROJECT?

At first glance, Arendt must be credited with having proposed a political project that is more practical and closer to the human than many political conceptions. The purpose of *plurality* was to bring man out of the absurdity and existential anguish imposed by the totalitarian death machine. However, what is condemnable in the Arendtian approach is that her *plurality* is basically not *plural*. On analysis, one realizes that this political space is reserved. Do not access it “who wants”, but “who can”. As a result, Arendt technocratizes the political and breaks itself with the classical humanism, even Montaignian, which rather thought that all beings are identical because they share the same human condition. Arendt in *The crisis of Culture*, especially in “what is Freedom”, opposed Stoic thought through her critique of the “freedom of will” to which Epictetus was attached. For Arendt, freedom only makes sense in the political framework, that is, in the common public space. In supporting this, however, it excludes the will, which is essential to human fulfilment. Is it not then restricting humanism and reducing it exclusively to the political field? Arendt thus *ipso facto* handed back Montaigne's humanism, which stems from this Stoic tradition. Moreover, didn't he say that every man carries within him the entire form of the human condition?

The categorization of the activities of the *vita activa*, which turns against labor, based on a simple biological necessity, brings us back to making a connection between this thought of Arendt and ideological racism, of imperialist origin and based on the belief that there is a hierarchy between human groups. This is an ideology of racial inequality. Yet in volume 2 of her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she condemned the *racism* she opposed to *racial thought*. According to her, *racial thought* “whose roots are deeply rooted in the eighteenth century”, “appeared simultaneously in all Western countries during the nineteenth century” and could be understood as an intellectual opinion, or even a simple theorization of race. It “had been part of that crowd of free opinions which, within the overall structure of liberalism, competed for public favor” [Arendt; 1982: p. 70]; on the other hand, racism “has undeniably absorbed and regenerated all the old models of racial opinion which, however, would never have been strong enough in themselves to create or rather to degenerate into that racism considered as *Weltanschauung* or as ideology” [Arendt; 1982: p. 70].

Also, Arendt only grants human status to activities that are part of the *action*. A way of disqualifying the other spheres of activity, the *private* and *social* sphere, from any political activity. As a

result, the humanist thinker and defender of the universality of the human race, Emmanuel Faye demonstrates that Arendt's political paradigm is "excluding". He goes even further by qualifying it as the "aristocratism of equality": Arendt's politics leads to "an aristocratic and very restrictive conception of equality" [Faye; 2016: p. 388]. For Arendt, humanity is not that of all, but that of *equals*. She therefore promotes a community of *equals*: in her vision, "only those who have been able to enter the free world of politics are said to be *equal* among themselves" [Faye; 2016: p. 388]. In the same way, Edern de Barros, a legal historian, will say that in the Arendtian political space, "man is authentically human there because, through his action and word in relation to others, he is authentically in plurality" [De Barros; 2019: pp. 47-48]. This means that slaves and workers are automatically excluded from the political arena. Is this not a way for Arendt to underestimate the capacity of these social classes to access the political space? Finally, is Arendt's humanism at the service of a few individuals?

Political antihumanism is even more perceptible in her approach concerning the black matter in the United States. Moreover, in her works, her position has not changed too much compared to that of the Western imperialists. On the contrary, one notes in her remarks, pejorative qualifiers that could be associated with a racist prejudice. In other words, her appreciation remains devaluing towards Africa in view of the redundancy of the words used. Does this hyperbolic use not allow the colonizer's weapon to be hidden behind it? In *Imperialism*, Arendt never hesitated to consider Europe as a civilized world. Doesn't saying that Europe is the depository of civilization mean that non-European peoples are swallowed up by sub-humanity? She said, moreover: "race provided a makeshift explanation for the existence of these beings that no man belonging to Europe or to the civilized world could understand and whose nature appeared so terrifying and humiliating to the eyes of immigrants that they could no longer imagine belonging to the same human race" [Arendt; 1982: p. 111]. It also presented the black continent as: "a continent populated and overpopulated by savages" [Arendt; 1982: p. 112]; a "ghost world" [Arendt; 1982: p. 113]; "the world of savages (which) was the ideal setting for men who had escaped the realities of civilization" [Arendt; 1982: p. 111].

Her position on the desegregation of the school particularly that of Little Rock, also undoubtedly tarnishes her political humanism. While American public opinion in particular and the intellectual world in general expected Arendt to react in favor of the Black struggle, this reaction turned rather against the Blacks. We are certainly not going to speculate too much on this question of school, which could be the subject of another publication. However, her distinction between the *private*, *social* and *political* domains leads her to analyze the black question with partiality. By reducing education to the exclusively private domain and by showing that it would have status only within the household, and that the school racism of which blacks are victims is a sub-problem, she comes to support the thesis that the private is not governed by equality; in other words, in the private sphere, inequality can reign, because it is based on power relations. As being in the *private sphere*, school is a field where each parent can freely decide to enroll his or her child wherever he or she wishes. However, this conception is problematic in the sense that it not only omits the political character of school, but also tends to justify school inequality. Moreover, in *Reflections on Little Rock*, she will say that "discrimination is a social right as indispensable as equality is a political right" [Arendt; 2009: p. 224], and she reinforces this view by stating: "what equality is to the body politic - its profound principle - discrimination is to society" [Arendt; 2009: p. 223]. By supporting "living together separately" at school, does Arendt not undoubtedly agree with the thesis of the Western imperialists who refuse to share education and science with other peoples?

Thus, if the Arendtian paradigm of politics has been well received in democratic circles, it has to be said that this much hailed Arendtian political humanism is only a sham. Although Arendt gave the image of a defender of human rights against totalitarian irrationalism, her positions on black questions were considered eccentric. She has been reticent about the civil rights movement in the United States, yet she has consistently condemned totalitarian movements for their civil rights abuses: "The rise of totalitarianism, her claim to have subordinated all spheres of life to the demands of politics and her logical non-recognition of civil rights, especially privacy rights and the right to be free from politics, make us doubt not only the coincidence of politics and freedom, but also their compatibility" [Arendt; 1998: p. 193]. The editors' disagreeable reaction to the content of the *Little Rock Reflections* is sufficient evidence of their disapproval of the theses: "the editors, however, took the trouble to dissociate themselves from the content of the article, specifying that their decision to publish it should be attributed to their attachment to freedom of expression, and not to the thesis defended therein" [Basse; 2019: p. 176]. Therefore, beyond the theses of Kathryn Gines, who will place Arendt in the wake of the white supremacists, it is obvious that Arendt even contributed in one way or another to introducing racism into the schools of the Southern United States.

V. CONCLUSION

From our analysis, which focused on the nature of the relationship between *plurality* and humanism according to Arendt, it emerges that Arendt's political thought is to be situated in the current of the unfortunate events of the twentieth century, which have undermined human dignity. They broke with the traditional humanist canons. It is in view of this totalitarian *loneliness* that our thinker, a political theorist, proposed a political project based on the axiological pillars of *plurality*: dialogue, thought, freedom and action. *Plurality*, according to her, is that unifying space that unites people and allows them to enter into a political, liveable and sociable community. But, if this paradigm has been a lifeline in democratic circles, it has to be said that it is almost undemocratic, because the political space recommended by Arendt is too elitist to be the prerogative of all. Arendt's political humanism is therefore a view of the mind. It must be said that Arendt's positions on Little Rock's educational experience, her mixed distinction between *racism* and *racial thought*, her exclusion from certain social classes, her unjustified separation between the social and political realms, are contrary to the pluralist ethic she defends. Arendt's *plural* humanism is, as far as we can tell, an anti-humanism.

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