

Is Political Education an Oxymoron? Hannah Arendt's Resistance to Public Spaces in Schools

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Hannah Arendt's model of "public space" probably entered the mainstream of educational theory with Maxine Greene's Presidential speech, "Public Education and the Public Space," at the 1982 American Educational Research Association convention.¹ Although Greene did not then or in her other works on the public draw only from Arendt's work, the particular version of the public that she developed is especially indebted to Arendt.² As perhaps education's best known living philosopher, Greene's conceptualization of public spaces (explicitly or implicitly) has informed a range of scholarly projects.³ And while Arendt's work has only recently had a more direct impact on education,⁴ outside of education it has become increasingly popular, generating "an academic cottage industry in Arendt studies."⁵ Because in the past, figures who have risen to prominence elsewhere have often become important later on in education, interest in Arendt's work will probably continue to grow in the field.

Following Greene's lead, educational scholars often explore the possibilities of creating largely Arendtian public spaces among students in schools. Yet Arendt argued that children should never be allowed to engage in such public action, an issue that has been largely ignored.⁶ This essay evaluates her claim that public spaces, what she often termed the "political," should be excluded from schools.

ARENDT'S VISION OF PUBLIC SPACE

Margaret Canovan noted that Arendt's model of the public was largely "rooted in her response to totalitarianism."⁷ Two key aspects of her vision of totalitarianism seem most relevant to this discussion. First, Arendt argued that the experience of totalitarianism is one of submergence into a mass. As she described it, "a band of iron... holds them [members of a totalitarian movement] together so tightly that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions."⁸ Almost paradoxically, however, the totalitarian movement generates this mass by isolating its members almost totally from each other. The terror tactics of totalitarian regimes make it unsafe to express one's true opinions to others regardless of the context. Totalitarian movements destroy all space for individual action and expression by eliminating any freedom to "move" — intellectually or physically — in ways that contradict totalitarian ideology (*OT*, 466).

Arendt argued that the only way we have access to the contingency and complexity of reality is through hearing the multiple perspectives and interpretations of others.⁹ Thus, in totalitarian society reality itself dissolves. In fact, each person begins to lose any sense even of her own unique identity, the "conformation" of which, she noted, "I depend entirely upon [the responses of] other people" (*OT*, 476). A totalitarian collective, then, is constructed out of a multiplicity of essentially interchangeable components that have lost any sense of themselves or of others as

distinctive persons or agents. Contingent and often contradictory reality is replaced by the impossible consistency and purity of ideology which drives the mass forward as if it were a single unit through the inhuman power of its singular “logic.”

In contrast with totalitarianism, which eliminates the capacity for individual movement and destroys all space, the public fosters such movement, and actually creates space. Instead of being held tightly together, participants in public spaces are separated from each other by an issue or object of shared concern, perhaps best understood as a common project, that both “relates and separates... at the same time” (*HC*, 52). Because this “in-between” is interpreted uniquely by every participant, everyone can appear in a distinctive location with respect to it, generating a distinctive kind of “space.” In the ideal, the public is a realm of total equality in which each person is equal not because they are the same (as in totalitarianism) but because each has the opportunity to present themselves as equally unique. Whereas a totalitarian mass moves as a unity, participants in the public act “in concert,” each member making unique contributions to their shared project, with participants constantly shifting their positions in response to the contributions of others, generating enormous creative “power.” And because all in this space are agents, no individual can control the results of her actions, lest she eliminate the free action of others in that space to respond as they will (*HC*, 201).

Public spaces do not allow complete and unrestricted freedom, however. If participants are to appear in coherent positions with respect to each other, their contributions must be recognizable by other participants as “relevant” to the issue or object under consideration (*HC*, 51). If participants brought their full uniqueness into the public, the space itself would splinter apart as each member became lost in her own isolated realm, unrelated to all the others. Thus, public participation requires self-restraint. Because of this and other tensions, Arendt often contrasted the public with what she called the private, that, in part, provides a realm where individuals can explore their full uniqueness without the restrictions of the public.¹⁰ In fact, she argued that “a life spent entirely in public,” without access to the private, “becomes...shallow” (*HC*, 71).

Arendt also argued that entering a public space as a participant is always risky. In part, this is because instead of focusing on one’s own personal needs (as in aspects of the private) in the public one seeks to care for the shared “world” of all human beings. And “this world of ours,” she said, “because it existed before us and is meant to outlast our lives in it, simply cannot afford to give primary concern to individual lives.”¹¹

By the “world,” it is important to note, Arendt meant something more specific than simply the Earth we live on. Instead, in the most general sense, she referred to the collection of creations with which human beings have carved a “home” out of the flux of nature, focusing in her discussions of the public on a subset of these: cultural and artistic objects. Arendt argued that hopes, dreams, thoughts, ideas, actions, and the like are the most evanescent occurrences on earth, doomed to disappear unless they are “transformed, reified as it were” into “patterns of thought or ideas...into sayings of poetry,...into paintings or sculpture, into all sorts of

records" (*HC*, 95). It is these objects that provide the complex and multiply interpretable kernels that public spaces can coalesce around.

These cultural reifications are not useful simply as inert objects, however. For the materialization they [the original experiences] have to undergo in order to remain in the world at all is paid for in that always the "dead letter" replaces something that grew out of...the "living spirit" (*HC*, 95).

They must be constantly renewed in the present, appropriated to serve current contexts through the multiple interpretations individuals bring to them. The cultural "world" that provides the seeds from which vibrant public spaces might be grown, then, is itself paradoxically dependent upon its continual appearance in the public spaces it makes possible (*HC*, 55). Should all dialogic engagement with these objects cease, these suddenly dead objects would fall like rain from their places among persons. Human beings would continue to exist in "private," but would be lost without an "in-between" that could relate and separate them. As long as these objects physically exist, however, it is always possible to bring them back to life through dialogue. They constantly fall out of and then re-emerge as a part of our cultural "world."

ARENDT'S VIEWS ON EDUCATING CHILDREN

With this background, it is now possible to turn to Arendt's arguments about education. It is first important to note that Arendt made a strict distinction between adults and children. Adults, she argued, might learn from each other, but should not be taught from a position of authority.¹² To treat adults like students, Arendt was convinced, threatened the political, raising the possibility that one might treat only a subset of adults as capable of informed participation. "Whoever wants to educate adults," she warned, "really wants to act as their guardian and prevent them from political activity" (*BPF*, 177).¹³

Arendt treated the problem of the education of children quite differently, however, arguing that, for the sake of the "world," teachers must have authority over them. Because all children are fundamentally new things, they bring with them the potential either for renewing the human world with their fresh interpretations of the objects of the past, or for destroying this world by rejecting these objects as unworthy of engagement.

Arendt feared that the progressive educators of her time, in their "extreme enthusiasm for the new" were led falsely into the belief that there existed "a child's world" that was separate from the world of the past. This belief, Arendt warned, was a dangerous fantasy, implying that children could invent out of whole cloth, somehow, their own separate culture. Such an approach to education opened the possibility that a generation of youth might grow up without a "world" at all, dooming them and those around them to a society without a vibrant politics. Thus, educators must "assume responsibility [for this world] although they themselves did not make it, and even though they may, secretly or openly, wish it were other than it is" (*BPF*, 189).

Yet this assumption of such authority and responsibility must not become an excuse for domination or indoctrination, for, she noted, "we destroy everything if we

so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look” (*BPF*, 192). The goal of education is not to produce robots, but instead to prepare future actors. She argued, therefore, that while teachers must “teach children what the world is like” they should not determine for them how they will engage with it, what perspectives they should ultimately take on it (*BPF*, 195). She concluded,

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable (*BPF*, 198).

The school and other sites of education should, Arendt argued, be safe spaces “for the free development of characteristic qualities and talents [of children, the] uniqueness that distinguishes every human being from every other” (*BPF*, 189). Otherwise the danger is that children will never develop a sense of their own distinctive perspectives. And because of the risky nature of public participation and the constant self-restraint it requires, among other issues, she argued that public engagement can threaten this process of free self-development. Thus, Arendt argued that public spaces must be excluded from educational settings.¹⁴

There are at least two problems with Arendt’s separation of children from public engagement, however. First, if reality itself is only accessed through exposure to multiple perspectives, would not such a solution doom children to a kind of isolation that resembles aspects of totalitarianism? And second, how will children learn to engage in public action as adults if they are not initiated into these practices through active engagement when they are young?

The first, I think, is relatively easy to answer. Although Arendt might not have agreed, I would argue that it is, in fact, possible to imagine educational settings where students might hear multiple perspectives on different aspects of the “world” without participating in a public space. Some English literature discussions offer good examples. In a literature discussion, students are often encouraged to express and defend their opinions about the text under consideration. However, unlike Arendt’s public space, there is less pressure for the students to act “in concert.” The different perspectives do not always have to be seen as “relevant” by all. Such classrooms, although they may be termed “public spaces” by some, from an Arendtian perspective seem to embody, instead, what Nel Noddings and others have called “caring.” Instead of working together on a common project, in classrooms focused on caring the goal is for each participant to help every other member to develop his or her unique understanding.¹⁵ Thus, contingent, multifaceted reality, although not exactly in the sense Arendt meant it, seems not entirely dependent upon participation in public spaces.

The question of how children will be able to participate in public spaces as adults if they are not given opportunities to learn how is more difficult, however. And Arendt’s answer may seem somewhat surprising. For despite her detailed discussion of the many different and often subtle skills of public engagement (only some of which I have discussed here) she argued that the public was *not a learned practice* but that it was, instead, a capacity shared by all human beings that share our common conditions on the earth, and that public spaces often appear “spontane-

ously” amidst particular circumstances and conditions. To accept this would, in fact, render all discussion of the need to foster public spaces in schools (from Greene onward) essentially irrelevant.

A CULTURAL PRACTICE OR A SPONTANEOUS OCCURRENCE?

Arendt was consistent in her representation of public spaces as spontaneous occurrences that often surprised even their participants. In the Americas, in the French Revolution, in the Russian Revolution, and in the French Resistance during World War II, Arendt argued in different works, the public was simply discovered, stumbled upon, if you will. The emergence of this space of action, she argued in *On Revolution*, “seemed to repeat, under no matter what circumstances” an “amazing formation of a new power structure” that she attributed to “nothing but the organizational impulses of the people themselves.”¹⁶ “It is precisely the absences of continuity, tradition, and organized influence” between these different occurrences, she noted, “that makes the sameness of the phenomenon so striking” (*OR*, 262). With the Puritan’s creation of a social compact as they traveled to America, for example, she argued, “it is an event rather than a theory or a tradition we are confronted with” (*Ibid.*, 172). They discovered “almost by inadvertence, *the elementary grammar of political action* and its more complicated syntax, whose rules determine the rise and fall of human power” (*Ibid.*, 173, italics added).

Before I go further, however, it is important to look more closely at exactly what kind of a thing her “public” was. On the one hand, Arendt argued that theories and concepts, like “public space,” always arise from actual experiences, and that they must remain connected to the experiences from which they arose if they are to be understood.¹⁷ From this perspective, constructs one generates from different experiences in history must always be appropriated into new situations if they are to be useful, always guided by the context in which they originally took on meaning.¹⁸ And in developing her model of public space, she drew from an astonishingly diverse range of historical examples and personal experiences. Given her commitment to the historical source of particular models, one might have assumed that she would create different models of the “public” from each example.¹⁹

Instead, however, from her vast store of examples that diverged from each other in often profound ways, she appeared to develop a single idea that somehow encompassed and embodied them all. While it is certainly possible to think of this aggregate “public” as the pinnacle of a series of contextually specific cases to which her final model of the public remained tied, such a generic construct is, of necessity, far removed from the contingent complexities of actual experiences, and seems to approach the kind of free-floating framework that she rejected. Why did she do this?

The answer, I would argue, is inseparably intertwined with her conviction that the public was a spontaneous occurrence and not a cultural practice. To understand both this conviction and the apparently free floating form of her theory, I think we must return to what precipitated her search for something like the public in the first place: her experience and analysis of totalitarianism. I would argue that given this almost unthinkable occurrence, Arendt sought a light of freedom, a single model of political action, that might guide all human beings regardless of their backgrounds

and the content of their cultural practices. My point is not that Arendt saw the public as a possibility under all conditions. She acknowledged, for example, in the most extreme situations (like totalitarianism) such collective political responses seem nearly impossible.²⁰ Under less extreme circumstances, however, if it is not simply a cultural practice the public remains an achievement that is always available to those who care about freedom. No matter what you have been taught, no matter what experiences you have had, no matter how heinous your upbringing, no matter how long your totalitarian experience, the public can still appear among you “abruptly, unexpectedly... as though it were a *fata morgana*” (*BPF*, 5).

This may seem a fairly controversial interpretation. However, later in her life she explored the possibility that there might be yet another cross-cultural universal capacity, this time for resisting evil in the activity of *thinking* itself, absent any stable cultural system of morals. She asked, “could the activity of thinking as such... be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing, or even actually ‘condition’ them against it?” And she noted that, “if... the ability to tell right from wrong should turn out to have anything to do with the ability to think, then we must be able to ‘demand’ its exercise from every sane person.”²¹ (There is not space to examine what she was and was not able to accomplish in this related but separate effort).²²

Arendt denied she was seeking to describe human nature. Instead, she examined what she called the “human condition,” acknowledging that our “activities and capacities” are the result of the conditioning we receive from our environment, conditioning that shifts as our environment changes (*HC*, 9). She acknowledged that humans have wrought enormous changes in our own environment, including the incredible advances of science, the explosion of the atom bomb, industrialization, and more. She believed, however, that these changes had not yet become so radical that we ceased to share a broadly defined set of basic capacities, like that of public participation, with other human beings across history and culture (although she acknowledged this could happen) (*Ibid.*, 2-3). This argument seems highly problematic to me, however. To cite only one example, John Dewey, who made similar statements about the extent to which human beings are conditioned by their environment, argued convincingly that even by the end of the nineteenth century technological changes had resulted in a fundamentally new kind of human being with a radically new set of capacities and inclinations.²³

In fact, Arendt’s own engagements with the idea of the public betray the extent to which effective participation in public space is at least partly a result of the specific cultural practices one has been initiated into. Even within *On Revolution*, the book where she was most clear about the quasi-natural nature of the public, for example, there are indications that the prior cultural practices of a group can affect or, in her opinion, distort, the kind of public that is “spontaneously” formed. This can be seen perhaps most clearly in her discussion of the French Revolution, where she argued that many of the participants had learned an approach to interpersonal relationships from their experience of court society that hampered their ability to form an authentic public space (*OR*, 97-108). Further, her discussions about why the

Americans, unlike the French, were so successful at creating public spaces refer to the very different cultural education the Americans received through their participation in town hall meetings.²⁴

More contemporary studies of political action in this country imply that Arendt might have missed a great deal in her drive to discover the “essence” of political action. For example, Paul Lichterman noted how recent writings on social action in the U.S. often argued that because political struggles have emerged at different and seemingly unconnected sites with very similar practices, these practices reflect an almost natural form of politics.²⁵ In his own study, however, Lichterman showed that what seemed on the surface to be spontaneous emergences of “natural” forms of politics actually drew from and reflected the cultural practices of particular groups. Members of these groups spontaneously engaged in much the same form of political action at seemingly disconnected sites because they shared the same *learned practices*. Further, by studying groups from very different class, culture and racial backgrounds, Lichterman showed that what might look like similar practices as first glance revealed themselves on closer examination to embody very different ways of engaging in collective action, reflecting the different cultural resources the different groups began with. Others have explored similar issues with respect to gender, and within the “same” groups over time.²⁶ And, in fact, a number of scholars have argued that Arendt sometimes glossed (or ignored or erased) the complexities of the cases she examined in her search for a single, all-encompassing model of the political.²⁷

CONCLUSION

In the simplest sense, this essay indicates that if students are to learn to participate in Arendtian public practices they must be given opportunities to engage in them. Arendt argued that education is a mediating space between the private and the world. So why could not teachers construct quasi-publics in their classrooms, controlling the form of participation and placing limits on the kinds of actions that are allowed?

An investigation like this one serves broader purposes than simply showing that it is reasonable to use Arendt’s model of the public in schools, however. In fact, it is always dangerous to appropriate particular ideas from the works of complex thinkers and adapt them to our uses without engaging with the reasons why these thinkers felt they should not be used that way. When we do this we run the risk of not learning from these thinkers, finding in their work not visions different from our own but instead mirrors for what we already think. A more hermeneutic approach assumes that an author has something reasonable to say, has good reasons for reaching the conclusions she does.²⁸ By engaging in what seem initially to be alien ideas, we put tension on our own perspectives, even if, in the end, we disagree.

Such an effort may illuminate aspects of a scholar’s work that might otherwise remain submerged. For example, my discussion illuminates problems inherent in what sometimes appears to be Arendt’s attempt to discover, as she said, “the elementary grammar” of the political. Showing the ways in which this effort appears, in the end, to be a failure, I argue, opens up spaces for other visions of the political, letting us see Arendt’s idea of a “public space” as simply one resource

among many, albeit an important one, for those who would promote more opportunities for collective action and resistance in educational settings.

Nonetheless, I think it is important to address what I perceive as Arendt's underlying fear that without some quasi-natural political capacity that is somehow shared by human beings, it might be possible to eliminate people's ability to collectively resist oppression. I would argue that we must reject the search for such a specific capacity, instead seeking within the actual practices of the particular groups we and others belong to for abilities that might be transformed into or simply recognized as strategies of resistance. In fact, human cultures are extraordinary complex. No matter what experiences a group has had (and often as a *result* of these experiences), their broad repertoire of skills and perspectives always contain within them a myriad of possibilities for action. Moving beyond what at times in Arendt's works seems like the search for a universal form of action allows us to learn from all of these, to celebrate many visions of collective and individual struggle while acknowledging each of their limitations.

1. Maxine Greene, "Public Education and the Public Space," *Educational Researcher* 11, no. 6 (1982): 4-9.

2. See Aaron Schutz, "Creating Local 'Public Spaces' in Schools: Insights from Hannah Arendt and Maxine Greene," *Curriculum Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (1999): 77-98.

3. See, for example, Curt Dudley-Martling and Ester Fine, "Politics of Whole Language," *Reading and Writing Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1997): 247-61; Walter Parker, "The Art of Deliberation," *Educational Leadership* 54, no. 5 (1997): 18-22; Joseph P. McDonald, Bethany Rogers, and Theodore Sizer, "Standards and School Reform: Asking the Essential Questions," *Stanford Law and Policy Review* 4 (1992-3); Victor Worsford, "Teaching Democracy Democratically," *Educational Theory* 47, no. 3 (1997): 395-411.

4. See, for example, Mordechai Gordon, ed., *Preserving Our Common World: Essays on Hannah Arendt and Education* (Boulder: Westview Press, in press).

5. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark, "Rediscovering Hannah Arendt," in *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 125.

6. See Mordechai Gordon, "Hannah Arendt on Authority: Conservatism in Education Reconsidered," *Educational Theory* 49, no. 2 (1999): 161-80, for an exception.

7. Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 2.

8. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 465-66. This book will be cited as *OT* for all subsequent references.

9. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 57. This book will be cited as *HC* for all subsequent references.

10. For a discussion of some other tensions see Schutz, "Creating Local 'Public Spaces.'" I do not have space, here, to explore the full complexity of her idea of the "private."

11. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 156. This book will be cited as *BPF* for all subsequent references.

12. See Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *BPF*, 91-142. See Mordechai Gordon's discussion in "Hannah Arendt on Authority," and Arendt's discussion of this issue in "On Hannah Arendt," *Hannah Arendt and the Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979).

13. Also note that her comment implies that some adults *are* not educated enough. I complicate this in Aaron Schutz, "Theory as Performative Pedagogy: Three Masks of Hannah Arendt," *Educational Theory* (in press).

14. She also argued that the public is by definition a space of *complete* equality, and that the authority of the teacher would destroy this. See my response below.
15. See Aaron Schutz, "Caring in Schools is not Enough: Community, Narrative, and the Limits of Alterity," *Educational Theory* 48, no. 3 (1998): 373-94.
16. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1963), 256-57. This book will be cited as *OR* for all subsequent references.
17. Peter Stern and Jean Yarbrough, "Hannah Arendt," *The American Scholar* 47, no. 3 (1978): 373.
18. See, for example, her discussion of the failure of participants in the American Revolution to understand that concepts that came from Europe, once they "had crossed the Atlantic, lost their basis of reality" (*OR*, 220).
19. It is, in fact, possible to see hints of this different approach in Arendt's writings as well, although I do not stress this, here. See Schutz, "Three Masks of Hannah Arendt."
20. Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship," *The Listener* 6 (1964): 186-87.
21. Hannah Arendt, "Thinking," in *Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1978), 5, 13.
22. For a thoughtful discussion of Arendt's approach to "thinking" and its relation to her idea of the political, see Natasha Levinson, "Learning Not to be Good: Hannah Arendt's Critique of Conscience," paper presented at the 2000 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Conference, Dayton, Ohio.
23. For example, John Dewey, "Human Nature and Conduct," in *John Dewey: The Middle Works 1899-1924*, vol. 14, ed., Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988).
24. For example, *OR*, 195; See Hanna Pitkin's discussion of the useful incoherence of Arendt's *On Revolution* in *The Attack of the Blob* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
25. Paul Lichterman, *The Search for Political Community* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
26. See also, for example, Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker, "Community Organizing or Organizing Community?" *Gender and Society* 12, no. 6 (1998): 729-52, and Richard King, *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). And for a more cultural explanation of early American Puritan "compacts," see Adam Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
27. See John Sitton, "Hannah Arendt's Argument for Council Democracy," *Polity* 20, no. 1 (1987): 80-100. See also important critical essays by Joan Cocks, Joan B. Landes, and Anne Norton in Bonnie Honig, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).
28. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," in *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 82-140.