

## Schools as Public Spaces: The Tensions and Resources of Arendt

Terri S. Wilson

*Teachers College, Columbia University*

Being a citizen means we initiate, collaborate and take responsibility. We take risks by initiating action. We don't just passively respond to stimuli and alternatives. We design possibilities, we imagine, we have a constructive critique, we have the gumption to explore different possibilities. We don't just choose between different schools, but we design the kind of schools we want.<sup>1</sup>

Education can play no part in politics, because in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge that Ernie Cortés, community organizer, poses to his audience — to initiate, engage, agitate, design our public schools — has become a more and more familiar refrain. The call for greater public investment, engagement, and ownership of our schools has been steadily building from different areas of educational theory and practice. Alternately, championing increased parental engagement, decentralized decision making, and community ownership, these calls share a common assumption: schools are, and should be, preeminently *public* spaces.<sup>3</sup>

Given this explosion of interest in schools as public spaces, it seems natural to turn to Hannah Arendt, whom scholars have termed the “central political thinker of this century who has reminded us of the loss of public space”; the political theorist who “wrote most powerfully on the [theme of public and private] in our time, and who tried hardest to renew our access to politics as a ‘public happiness’”; and “the woman who is arguably the most influential theorist of action, participatory politics, and the public realm.”<sup>4</sup> Following these scholars, I believe that Hannah Arendt's powerful analysis of the public realm represents a potential practical and theoretical resource for thinking through how schools are, or can become, public spaces. However, “applying” an Arendtian concept of the public to schools quickly becomes at least tricky, possibly ill-advised, and definitely problematic. For instance, how do schools intersect with the complex terrain of Arendt's concept of the public? Just what *is* that concept of the public? And what, for that matter, are “schools?” Are they spaces, institutions, groups of citizens, or ideals? Are we talking about teachers, students, or parents? In addition, any discussion of Arendt on education must also address squarely the problem of “The Crisis in Education,” her powerful argument that education and politics should be distinct and separate activities.

These questions form a conceptual minefield, beyond the scope of any singular solution, or any one essay. While attending to the complexity of these issues, I hope to advance a response to the following question: In what sense can we understand schools as Arendtian public spaces? I begin by explicating some of the multidimensional methodology and meanings of Arendt's concept of the public. I then put this understanding in conversation with “The Crisis in Education.” I will conclude by raising some tensions within this essay, and by underscoring some implications for conceptualizing schools as potential public spaces. I argue that Arendt's concept of the public — both *what* it is, and *how* she develops it — offers

considerable resources for our current conversations about the “public-ness” of public schools.

#### ARENDT’S METHODOLOGY

Arendt’s “public” and “private” do not neatly correspond to any of our everyday uses of those terms. Simultaneously realms, spaces, concepts, categories, and criteria, the public and the private occupy shifting ground and complex terrain within *The Human Condition*. In her introduction to the work, Margaret Canovan argues that Arendt’s categories remain defiantly dynamic and “systematically unsystematic.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, Arendt warned that we would encounter “extraordinary difficulty” in understanding her analysis of these terms and categories, since we have lost the experiences of both public and private life that once gave those terms specificity and meaning.<sup>6</sup> In addition, Hanna Pitkin points to Arendt’s sometimes problematic usage of the public and private: from their ordinary life as adjectives, Arendt transforms the concepts into substantive categories (“The Public” and “The Private”), as well as modifiers of particular spatial metaphors (the public or private sphere, realm, sector, and so on). As such, public and private become relative, not static terms, defined in relation to and against one another.<sup>7</sup> To add to these analytic complications, Arendt’s analysis blends aspects of the historical, conceptual, and normative in an effort to recover our “lost experiences” of the public realm and political action.<sup>8</sup> Each of these three aspects are significant for understanding Arendt’s multifaceted concept of the public.

On one level, the story of this loss is *historical*. Arendt describes the shift from the original Greek understanding of politics, describing man as *zoon politikon*, to its subsequent Roman interpretation of man as social, an *animal socialis* (HC, 22–23). While the initial shift from the political to the social began with these small translations, Arendt traces a longer, more complicated picture from ancient to modern. Through the middle ages, space between the public and the private still existed; we could find the public, in weaker and religious forms, in growing expressions of the “common good” (HC, 32–34). The rise of the *social*, however, is a uniquely modern phenomenon: one that, for Arendt, blurred public and private, changing “almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and citizen” (HC, 38). Public and private have metastasized into social and intimate, transforming action into behavior, equality into sameness, and politics into bureaucracy.

This historical analysis informs Arendt’s project of recovery; returning to ancient conceptions of public and private is not, as Canovan points out, “an exercise in nostalgia for the Greek polis,” but a more fundamental attempt to “recover the political experiences of ‘plurality’ that have “been obscured and distorted by the influence of Platonic philosophy.”<sup>9</sup> For Arendt, ancient Greek understanding placed the public realm of political action in stark opposition to the private realm of the home and family. While the private life of the household was conditioned by needs and wants, the public sphere remained a space of independence from necessity and need. Freedom, properly understood, was therefore found *only* in the public realm, only when man was freed from the necessities of life and labor, and the

instrumentalities of work (*HC*, 31). For Arendt, freedom demanded *transcending* these needs and *participating* in a political realm of equality where we “neither rule” or are “ruled” (*HC*, 32). In the public realm, men appear to one another as equals, as fellow citizens, in contrast to the “strictest inequality” that, by definition, rules the private household (*HC*, 32-33).

While historical, the loss of the public is also *conceptual*. For Arendt, our original experiences of the public and the private have shifted over time, taking with them our very *understandings* of the terms. Although etymologically concerned with how terms have conceptually changed over time, her analysis remains decisively phenomenological: we come to know the “public” through our *experience* of the public realm. Canovan concurs, linking Arendt’s phenomenological analysis to her commitment to be true to “actual experiences of political actors” and to the political events of her time. For Canovan, Arendt’s phenomenology blended “theoretical commitments” with sensitivity to the particularly modern, often unrecorded experiences of political life under totalitarianism and its aftermaths. The public and private in this understanding become “experienced landscapes,” locations and spaces that condition our fundamental human activities.<sup>10</sup>

These experienced landscapes are central to Arendt’s concern with the human *condition*, rather than with human *nature* (*HC*, 8–11). Rather than essentialize human nature, Arendt poses three fundamental human activities, each linked to a “basic condition” of human life. The triad of distinctions Arendt developed in *The Human Condition* between labor, work, and action advance a method of categorical analysis designed “to think through” the conditions that both preclude and make possible political action. Analyzing human activity in terms of these three categories allows Arendt to trace the inversion of these activities over time, following the rise of laboring at the expense of political activity, to the point where politics itself becomes synonymous with activities of production and consumption (*HC*, 321–323). Her goal, however, is not simply to explicate these three categories but to leave us with conceptual tools and lenses for thinking more deeply about the historical and phenomenological experience of human activities. We have not just *lost* the public and political, it has been transformed, inverted, corrupted; what now passes for politics is but a version — an automated one at that — of maintaining the life process. In this sense, the tripartite categories of labor, work, and action, while always dimensions of human activity; have shifted in dominance throughout historical time and human experience.

Keeping in mind this rich methodological map, the public therefore comes to have, through the development of Arendt’s analysis, a certain *normative* dimension. The term “public,” for Arendt, has two inter-related meanings, a pairing that Pitkin succinctly describes as “a plurality of perspectives and a permanence of remembrance.”<sup>11</sup> In the first sense, to be public is to publicly appear in the world: to be seen and heard. In the second sense, the term “public” means the world itself: the physical and organic world, the humanly-made and created world, and the interactions among the people who have created the world. In addition to this dual understanding, Arendt’s public realm is also importantly defined by what it is not: its

*opposite*, the private realm; and its *imposter*, the growing, invasive dominance of the social.

#### WHAT IS ARENDT'S PUBLIC?

First, and most importantly, to be public is to publicly appear in the world. While that seems like a simple statement, "the space of appearance" for Arendt precedes any "formal constitution of the public realm"; it "comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action" (HC, 198–199). More than physical location, organized government, or even the "polis," the public realm is the space between people, where we appear to one another in action and speech, where "I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly" (HC, 198–199). In other words, we appear as uniquely human: as actors, not merely workers or laborers. Arendt cautions that while all people are *capable* of appearing through the pre-eminently political dimensions of actions and speech, very few people — not the "slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity," nor "the laborer and craftsman prior to the modern age," nor the "jobholder or businessman in our world" — actually *live within* this space (HC, 199). No person occupies this space all of the time, but to be deprived of it, for Arendt, is to be deprived of "reality," of what constitutes us as human beings in the world.

Public appearance, "can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity"; it rests upon *plurality* (HC, 50). Plurality is the basic human condition that corresponds to action, "because we are all the same that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" (HC, 8). Plurality, thus, is two-fold: we are the equal, "the same, that is human," and distinct, "in such a way that nobody is ever the same" (HC, 175). Arendt's meaning here is subtle and important: equality does not mean "sameness," and distinct does not mean "otherness" (HC, 175–177). When we appear in the world, through speech and action, we are able to appear as "who" in distinction to "what" we are; we are most fully human (HC, 179).

Second, the "plurality of perspectives" inherent in public appearance is paired with a "permanence of remembrance," with a world in which we appear, a world that both outlasts and makes possible our appearance. The public world, this "in-between" encompasses the "objective, worldly interests" that relate and tie men together; it also encompasses a second, intangible "in-between," made up of speech and action itself (HC, 182–183). This intangible world, what Arendt referred to as our "web of human relationships," makes possible narrative, history, art, and a sense of "organized remembrance."<sup>12</sup> Like organized memory, the tangible world offers us something more permanent than life itself. This "world of things" relates us together and separates us at the same time; it acts, in Arendt's metaphor, as a "table," gathering us around shared space, but preventing us from falling over each other (HC, 52–53).

Third, this shared public world exists in opposition to both the private and the social realms. As stated earlier, the private realm of household and necessity makes

the public realm of speech and action possible. While in many ways subordinate to the public realm, private concerns were not irrelevant for Arendt, but simply distinct. As she develops further in “The Crisis in Education,” the private realm of family and home acts as a “shield against the world,” a “secure place, without which no living thing can thrive” (*CE*, 186). While private life still signifies “deprivation” from “being fully human,” Arendt argues that the public and private depend on the integrity of each other’s borders (*HC*, 38–39).

In contrast to the private realm, the social is an erosive force, “invading,” “devouring,” and “intruding on” the borders of both public and private, “changing almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen” (*HC*, 38).<sup>13</sup> Arendt portrays it as a “curiously hybrid realm,” where “private interests assume public significance” (*HC*, 35). The private sphere, under the influence of modern individualism, rises in importance and meaning; the public sphere becomes subordinate, relegated to a large, national “administration of housekeeping” (*HC*, 38, 28). No longer a place of privation and preparation, the private sphere becomes where we distinguish ourselves through preferences and opinions, in opposition to the “public” sphere where we are all “socially equal,” that is, the same. In other words, we flee the social conformism of this pseudo-public sphere for internal lives of consumer preferences.

Here, Arendt’s penetrating analysis of the dissolution of the public seems to have powerful implications for how we understand schools as public spaces. First of all, Arendt’s historical-conceptual analysis helps illuminate the myriad ways in which our very *concept* of the public school has changed significantly. From locally controlled and community connected, American public schools have grown progressively more centralized, bureaucratic, and remote throughout this century. As images of parents and students as *consumers* come to dominate educational discourse and reform, the idea of schools as distinctly public spheres has come to sound like a quaint idea best reserved for visions of the homogeneous one-room school house. However, what would Arendt make of the growing groups of diverse, low-income parents, exemplified in Cortes’s speech, that have come to see their public schools as central sites of neighborhood investment, local politics, and slow, steady social change? On one level these neighborhood movements seem emblematic of Arendt’s own sense of the public. On another level, Arendt posed vehement objections to the conflation of politics and education. In other words, how can we apply Arendt’s concept of the public to schools when she herself argues so strongly against connecting education with politics?

#### REVISITING THE CRISIS

Arendt’s forays into the tumult of American education occur in two much-debated essays: her “Reflections on Little Rock,” and its partner “The Crisis in Education.”<sup>14</sup> Arendt argues that the struggles for school integration have dangerously conflated politics and education, adults and children, young and old. In particular, Arendt argues that we have falsely politicized children, leaving them the “working out (of) a problem which adults for generations have confessed themselves unable to solve.”<sup>15</sup>

“The Crisis in Education” argues that battles over integration have exposed a more fundamental crisis in authority. For Arendt, adults have abdicated their dual role in education, to take responsibility for both “the life and development of the child” and “the continuance of the world” (CE, 186). This dual responsibility requires protecting each from the other: sheltering children from the premature glare of the public world, and protecting the world from being over-run by each new generation (CE, 186–187, 192). For Arendt, the crisis in Little Rock illustrated that we have given up our authority for *both*. Here, Arendt’s conservatism takes a surprising turn: we do not just conserve the world for the sake of tradition; rather, we must be conservative for the very sake of the “new and revolutionary” inherent in every child (CE, 193). By not representing the world “as it is” to children, we paradoxically hold it up against their entry into the world. By failing to teach students about the world “as it is,” we prevent the very possibility, the “hope” which “every new generation brings” of “setting the world right” (CE, 192). We “strike from their hands” their very natality, “their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us,” for Arendt, their highest human potential (CE, 196).

This dual crisis of authority rests upon the central concerns of *The Human Condition*: as Arendt notes in her essay, the reason for the crisis can be found in our prevailing “judgments and prejudices about the nature of private life and public world” (CE, 187). For Arendt, the development of public education, like other aspects of modernity, incorporated distorted concepts of public and private as “self-evident assumptions,” creating schools that celebrate the individual, liberate the child and regard the “earthly life of the individual, as well as family” as the “highest good” (CE, 187). Schools, like most other modern institutions, are no longer *public* or *private* spheres, but have become another form of “national housekeeping,” relating *individuals* to *society*.<sup>16</sup>

Arendt argues that education, properly understood, is a mediating space, between the private life of the family and the public world; it “represents the world, although it is not yet actually the world” (CE, 189). Given her argument, what can we then say about schools as public spaces? Do the rich resources of Arendt’s concept of the public simply not apply? I argue that they can, on two levels: first, by reading Arendt’s intentions carefully, and second, by challenging some of her claims.

First, Arendt aims to separate the activities of politics and education, because “in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated” (CE, 177).<sup>17</sup> Granting this assertion, what about the political acts of *adults* who come together, as adults, to form, design and govern schools? Organizing schools as institutions, perhaps at a level distinct from classrooms, involves a range of adult decisions. These decisions may be, as Arendt fears, simply a part of the ascendancy of the social and bureaucratic, rather than an example of political engagement in public space. As bureaucracy is the most “social form of government,” our schools have become increasingly centralized institutions for equalizing and coping with many of the intractable social inequities of society. But what then do we make of the ongoing efforts of parents and communities to organize for school reform, as well as affiliated

traditions of school decentralization, site-based decision making, and local control? In particular, what about community challenges to the claims that schools are simply efficient delivery systems for “social services?” From historic rural schools to contemporary charter schools, a range of community activism seems to suggest that schools are some of the primary public spaces for local political engagement.

Combining politics and education at this level may simply be different from the concerns with teaching and learning that animate “The Crisis in Education.” In fact, her charge for adults to “stand in relation to the young as representatives of a world” could be exactly what some adults have been trying to do (*CE*, 189). Rather than abdicating their authority, adults engaged in community organizing for schools, may be, in fact, claiming authority by taking responsibility for their world and acting to remake it on their own terms. This authority, of adults engaged in politics, is different from the authority of the educator, who must, for Arendt, “assume responsibility” for the world, even though “they may, secretly or openly, wish it were other than it is” (*CE*, 189). In addition, politics, while often discussed by Arendt as an abstract activity, is about issues that “matter” to us as citizens. This argument, developed in Pitkin’s essay, “Justice,” is worth quoting at length:

No account of politics or the public can be right that wholly empties them of substantive content, of what is at stake. No such account can display their potential seriousness and value to us, nor correctly tell us what they are. Political activity is not some leisure-time sport for aristocrats, in which they may cultivate their honor and display their prowess. It is the activity through which large and generally permanent groups of people determine what they will collectively do, settle how they will live together and decide their future, to whatever extent it is in their human power. Public life in this sense is of utmost seriousness and importance, and potentially of surpassing glory. But it never occurs in the abstract, without content; it always affects the lives of real people.<sup>18</sup>

Political action, in Arendtian terms, comes to life in communities around immediate and pressing issues: for many people, concerns with their local public schools. Schools, then, have provided some of the most practical and local openings for political action.<sup>19</sup> In addition, current civic organizing for school reform may represent a revitalizing turn towards reclaiming schools as public, rather than social, spaces.

In many ways, this argument is simple; it points out that Arendt’s trenchant critique of politics and education may simply not apply to the *aspect* of adults involved in schools. But what about the more difficult critique? What about the political aspects of the educator, the content of classroom teaching, and the activist roles that young people sometimes play in their own education? While Arendt’s critique is powerful, and cautionary, I believe that the picture simply becomes more complicated when concretized to the actual tasks of teaching and learning. Her call for teachers to stand as “representatives of a world” involves a range of complicated choices and decisions: What is that world? Whose world is represented? Who decides? And, assuming we know what the world is, how do we represent this world to our students? What if they object? These considerations raise more questions than answers, but highlight some of the fissures and complexities within Arendt’s call to separate politics and education.<sup>20</sup> While at times problematic, Arendt’s essay

reminds us that calls for schools to be “public spaces” should be cautious, attending to the distinct roles of parents and educators, the powerful office of teaching, the risks of using children to achieve to the political objectives of adults, and the potential for human action inherent in each child.

#### IMPLICATIONS

Proceeding with care, what then might we “recover” from Arendt’s concept of the public for schools? On one level, Arendt’s concept helps to advance an ideal of the “public” itself: involving the “publicity” of a plurality of perspectives and the “worldliness” of shared history and remembrance. While this sense of the public is important, *how* Arendt develops this concept — her historical-conceptual-phenomenological methodology — also provides some important resources for our analysis of schools. Her framework of spaces and conditions provides a rich description of how our “experienced landscapes” make possible and preclude different forms of human activity. In particular, these frameworks might help us ask, how are schools spaces that condition human experience and how does the “experienced landscape” impact and condition our experiences of public and private in schools?

In addition, these conceptual and theoretical tools gain an added layer of significance when brought to bear on historical questions. For example, how has our idea of the “public” nature of schools shifted over time? How have our experiences within schools, particularly as adults engaged in school decision-making, changed over time? How have schools developed and changed within the nexus of public, private and social articulated by Arendt? While certain scholars have attempted to link “what” Arendt says about the public to schools, I am also arguing that “how” Arendt develops her analysis of the public may be just as important. In particular, as the language and policy of privatization and consumer choice proliferate from early childhood to post-secondary institutions, Arendt’s methodology might help us revisit the subtle historical and conceptual change in our very idea of “the public school.”

---

1. Ernie Cortés, quoted in Dennis Shirley, *Community Organizing for Urban School Reform* (Austin: University of Texas, 1997), 81.

2. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking, 1961), 177. This work will be cited as *CE* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. A few examples include works by Dennis Shirley, Norm Fructer, Ricardo Stanton Salazar, Jeff Henig, Dorothy Shipps, Pedro Noguera, and David Mathews.

4. Respectively, Hanna Pitkin, “Justice: On Relating Public and Private”; Seyla Benhabib, “Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt’s Concept of Public Space”; and Mary Dietz, “Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1995).

5. Margaret Canovan, “Introduction,” in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5–6.

6. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 22. This work will be cited as *HC* in the text for all subsequent references.

7. Pitkin, “Justice,” 328–329.

8. While the “political” is not a synonym for the public, the two terms are intermingled for Arendt. We experience the political, an experience bound up in action and freedom, only in the public realm, and in opposition to the private realm. While sometimes conflated, these terms need to be read with care, as do the terms “action” and “politics.” While public is a worldly condition, and action is the activity that takes place in public, Arendt sometimes conflates action and politics.

9. Canovan, “Introduction,” 2, 4.

10. Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 102, 104–105.

11. Pitkin, “Justice,” 333.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Hanna Pitkin, “Conformism, Housekeeping and the Attack of the Blob: The Origin’s of Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social,” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Honig, 52–53.

14. While “Crisis in Education” was published first in 1958, it responded to the initial criticism that confronted “Reflections on Little Rock,” eventually published, after more than a year of delay, in 1959.

15. Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” *Dissent* 6, no. 1 (1959): 45–56.

16. While Arendt does not develop this point in depth, the “social” aspect of schools provocatively complicates asking to what extent, or even if, schools can be public spaces.

17. This understanding of politics and education should be read in the context of her work on totalitarianism, where “political education” was one of the tools that rendered citizens “harmless,” without “political opinions.”

18. Pitkin, “Justice,” 343.

19. This is not to say that these would be equally powerful political activities for Arendt. Indeed, Arendt’s concept of political action may help us look more closely at what “passes for” political engagement in schools.

20. These questions could be valuably explored by examining some of these examples in more depth. For example, what about young people mobilizing against NCLB in high schools? What about teachers becoming politically involved to contest different school policies they feel are unjust? What about parents who challenge the adequacy of their children’s education?