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## Arendt and Foucault on Power, Resistance, and Critique<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract:

*The present article compares Hannah Arendt's and Michel Foucault's critique of typically modern forms of power or domination, as well as the modes of resistance against such domination these authors envision. It also touches upon their reflections on the status of their own critical thinking or their stance vis-à-vis modernity. Its principal aim is twofold. First, to reveal various connections between Arendt's and Foucault's political theories and thus demonstrate that they are much closer to each other than usually appears. Second, to use the comparative analysis of their works to resolve some apparent paradoxes associated with their respective theories.*

**Key words:** *Michel Foucault, Hannah Arendt, modernity, Enlightenment, critique, critical thinking, power, domination, politics, resistance, Immanuel Kant, action, public space*

### Introduction

Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault both belong among the most influential but also most controversial political thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century. Both of them were also interested in similar topics, such as the nature of political power or the nexus between knowledge and power (or theory and practice). Yet, at first glance, it may appear that they have nothing else in common. Truly enough, they are both staunch critics of contemporary liberal democracy and, at least in a certain sense, of modernity as such. Yet they appear to proceed, so to speak, from opposite directions. While Arendt is often regarded as an Aristotelian anti-modernist admirer of the lost glory of the ancient *polis*, and hence as a conservative critic of the entire emancipatory project of modernity, Foucault is usually perceived as a Nietzschean post-modernist whose political allegiance lies on the radical left.

In this paper, I intend to demonstrate that the connections between Arendt and Foucault go in fact much deeper than the above indicated overlap in the principal topics of their respective works and that their theoretical and political positions may not be as irreconcilable as they at first appear. I will focus mostly on the comparison of the two authors' understanding of the specifically modern forms of political power, as well as the modes of resistance against such power. Apart from that, I will also consider their reflections upon the status of their own critical thought, as well as their stance vis-à-vis modernity. I believe that bringing the two authors into mutual dialogue may not only reveal various hidden

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connections between their respective works, but also may help us resolve certain apparent problems or paradoxes inherent in their respective theories.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first one focusses on the similarities between the two authors, suggesting that Arendt's account of the "rise of the social" from *The Human Condition* entails a description of the genesis and functioning of a system of social domination characteristic of the current, late modern society, which closely resembles Foucault's understanding of *bio-power*. The second part draws attention to important differences between Arendt's and Foucault's conceptualisation of this typically modern form of social domination, as well as to apparent paradoxes inherent in their respective theories. The third part then attempts to partly reconcile the differences between the two authors and at the same time to resolve the paradoxes inherent in their theories by turning attention to Foucault's late texts on Immanuel Kant. The fourth and final part consists of a brief summary of the conclusions of my argument.

## I.

Both Arendt and Foucault note that the advent of modernity is accompanied by the invasion of the public realm by economic activities, i.e. activities pertaining to the maintenance of life. According to Arendt, modern society is the "*the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance*" [Arendt 1958: 46; emphasis added]. Foucault, in strikingly similar terms argues that "[W]hat may be called a society's 'threshold of modernity' has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies. For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question" [Foucault 1990: 143].

According to both authors, the development of modern commercial economy, but also of the modern nation state, hence requires formation of an entirely new form of power or domination that aims to control, develop and manage "*the state's most precious resource, its populace*" [Villa 1992: 718]. Both authors emphasize the disciplinary and normalizing character of this power that aims to create "docile bodies" that can be inserted "into machinery of production" [Foucault 1990: 141], or as Arendt puts it, to create conformist individuals who behave in a predictable fashion, who play the role and perform the task assigned to them by society but are at the same time incapable of spontaneous action [Arendt 1958: 40]. Both authors agree that this new mode of power or domination, which Foucault calls *bio-power*, targets individuals at the biological level of their existence and that the ultimate object of its control is *life* itself. "[P]ower is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population" [Foucault 1990: 137].

Foucault compares and contrast this new system of *bio-power* or, as he also calls it, *disciplinary power*, with the older model of *sovereign* or *juridical* power that is based around the notions of law and sovereignty. Disciplinary power, which started emerging in the seventeenth century, is "*absolutely incompatible with the relations of sovereignty*" [Foucault 1980: 104]. While the sovereign power, whose origins Foucault situates in medieval monarchies, is centralized, disciplinary power is decentralized, being immanently present in all kinds of social relations [Foucault 1990: 94]. In contrast to sovereign power, disciplinary power also cannot be described as a one way relationship between the sovereign who commands and the subjects who obey. In other words, disciplinary power

*“is not a thing or a kind of stuff that can be ....possessed by the sovereign,”* rather it *“emerges out of interactions among agents and ... exists only in its exercise”* [Allen 2002: 142]. Its nature can hence be described as relational or intersubjective. Moreover, while the sovereign power operates essentially in a “negative way”, by issuing commands and prohibitions and wielding punishments against the offenders who disobey, or by taking away part of production or wealth in the form of taxes, disciplinary power operates rather in a “positive” or “productive” way.

*“[It is] a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them... [It] exerts a positive influence on life... [It] endeavours to administer, optimize and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.”* [Foucault 1990: 136-137]

While the demands of the sovereign power are expressed in the language of *law*, disciplinary power formulates its demands in the language of *“natural rules, or norms”* [Foucault 1980: 106]. These norms are produced by various scientific disciplines (psychiatry, medicine, psychology, economy, etc.) that Foucault calls “human sciences” or “sciences of man” and “enforced” by various disciplinary institutions (prisons, schools, armies, hospitals, psychiatric asylums, etc.). The bulk of Foucault’s research actually consists of a detailed study of the genesis and functioning of such disciplines and institutions.

Nonetheless, the development of disciplinary power did not lead to the disappearance of the older model of sovereign power. The sovereign or juridical power rather became democratized when the principle of royal sovereignty morphed into the principle of popular sovereignty and at the same time entered into a kind of symbiotic relationship with the new model of disciplinary power: *“The juridical systems... have enabled sovereignty to be democratized through the constitution of a public right articulated upon collective sovereignty, while at the same time this democratisation of sovereignty was fundamentally determined by and grounded in mechanisms of disciplinary coercion”* [Foucault 1980: 105]. In other words, the visible constitutional and legal structures of the modern democratic nation state, which are founded upon the principle of democratic sovereignty, mask the more nefarious mechanisms of disciplinary coercion that operate beneath their surface. At the same time, however, these hidden disciplinary mechanisms *enable* the existence of the visible legal and political structures of the democratic nation state. Their purpose is to *“assure the cohesion of [its] social body”* [Foucault 1980: 106], as well as to discipline and shape the rational and autonomous subjects who can become responsible citizens and functional members of modern bourgeois society: *“The individual ... is not the vis-à-vis of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects ... [and at the same time] its vehicle”* [Foucault 1980: 98].

According to Dana Villa, there is *“a direct link to be drawn between Arendt’s conception of the [modern] state as ‘national household’ to Foucault’s notion of biopower”*<sup>3</sup> [Villa 1992: 718]. I believe we can put this point more strongly and argue that Arendt’s account

<sup>3</sup> Parallels between Arendt’s account of the “rise of the social”, i.e. the development of modern society as it is presented in *The Human Condition*, and Foucault’s description of the genesis of bio-power (or disciplinary power) were noted also by Frederick A. Dolan or Giorgio Agamben [Dolan 2005; Agamben 1998].

of the “rise of the social”, i.e. of the development of modern society, can be read as a description of the genesis and functioning of a typically modern form of power or, in Arendt’s terms, rather domination that is remarkably similar to Foucault’s conception of *bio-power*. This system of *social domination* aims to control the life-process of individual human beings, populations and ultimately of the entire species [Arendt 1958: 257]. It reduces human beings to the biological level of their existence, exploiting their life-energy and integrating them ever more tightly into economic system as labourers and consumers.

Similarly to Foucault, Arendt emphasizes the *normalizing* nature of social domination: “It is decisive that society (...) expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” [Arendt 1958: 40]. Just like Foucault, Arendt therefore underlines the indispensable role of *social* or *behavioural sciences* (in Foucault’s terms the “sciences of man”), whose task it is to define what constitutes normal behaviour. These sciences in effect “aim to reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal”<sup>4</sup> [Arendt 1958: 45]. Moreover, Arendt, like Foucault, also stresses the decentralized and non-subjective nature of such domination. Modern society is ruled by “nobody”, which however makes its rule no less oppressive [Arendt 1958: 35]. Last but not least, similarly to Foucault, Arendt stresses the positive or rather productive nature of the present system of social domination, which in her words “organizes” and “channels” but also “multiplies” and “invests” the collective “life-force” or “life-process” of society [Arendt 1958: 45-46].

## II.

While the parallels between Arendt’s account of the *rise of the social* and Foucault’s description of the genesis of *bio-power* are indeed striking, there are also some important differences between the two authors. Foucault explores the genesis and functioning of bio-power on local level, analysing the development of specific disciplinary practices and specific sciences of man. Arendt’s account of the “rise of the social,” on the other hand, describes the development and functioning of the modern system of social domination in much broader strokes, analysing its general dynamics and describing such broad and prolonged historical trends as the development of modern science and technology, the development of capitalist economy, or the rise and decline of modern nation state.

Nonetheless, the most important difference between the two authors lies elsewhere – namely in their understanding of the relationship between power, domination and freedom. For while both authors reject the typically liberal negative notion of freedom as absence of coercion, which regards freedom and power as mutually exclusive, insisting instead that freedom can be experienced only insofar as we exercise (political) power, they do not mean exactly the same thing. As is well known, Arendt insists on sharp distinction between political power and domination. Political power according to her consists of “acting in concert”, it emerges whenever a group of people act together with the aim of furthering some shared principle, or obtaining some common goal. By definition, political power excludes coercion

<sup>4</sup> Dolan apparently misses this important parallel when he argues that where Foucault “discerns the gradual consolidation of more or less explicit and patterned ‘technologies of power’”, “Arendt sees the growth of an anonymous social pressure to conform for the sake of ‘life’” [Dolan 2005: 373; emphasis added].

and violence. Domination, on the other hand, consists of coercion, which relies on force and violence. Its aim can be described as preclusion of the exercise of power by its subjects.

In Arendt's terms, power and domination are hence mutually exclusive. And it is precisely this view that Foucault explicitly rejects in a rare (and most likely the only) direct comment on Arendt's works that appears in a posthumously published interview entitled "Politics and Ethics," in which he suggests that while "*the idea of consensual politics may indeed (...) serve as a regulative principle*" it cannot "*liquidate the problem of the power relation,*" adding that Arendt's dissociation of the "*relation of domination (...) from the relation of power*" appears from his perspective as a merely "*verbal distinction*" [Foucault 1984: 377-378]. For while Foucault, similarly to Arendt, rejects to construe power in terms of commands and obedience, stressing that power is always a matter of a *mutual relationship*, he also insists that power *always* contains an element of domination. To put it differently, for Foucault, power is always exercised *over* someone (be it a different person or oneself), or perhaps it is aimed *against* someone.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Foucault defines power in terms of *will*, or, perhaps, in terms of a conflict of mutually opposed wills, which is precisely what Arendt rejects [Arendt 1968: Chapter 4].

The opposition between power and domination is related to another pair of mutually exclusive categories we encounter in Arendt's thought: *the political* and *the social*. As I argue above, Arendt describes the emergence of modern society as an invasion of public realm by economic concerns and activities, which used to be secluded in the privacy of household. Society hence constitutes "*a curiously hybrid realm in which private concerns assume public significance*" [Arendt 1958: 35]. The development of modern society therefore leads to the blurring of the boundary between the private and public spheres that was characteristic of the ancient *polis*. The problem is that in Arendt's theory this ancient understanding of politics with its clear demarcation of the private and public spheres assumes a normative role. In other words, Arendt insists that private or, for that matter economic or social concerns should not have public significance, that they should be left out of the political realm [Arendt 1979: 317-319].

Arendt's insistence that genuine political action can take place only in precisely demarcated *public* or *political realm*, which is to be sanitized of all *private* or *social* concerns, is obviously entirely foreign to Foucault. Foucault on the contrary argues that *all* social but also private or intimate relations are charged with power and therefore are, properly speaking, political. Indeed, while Arendt describes the development of modern society as a gradual disappearance of political realm, Foucault on the contrary describes the same process as politicization of all social relations, as politicization of all aspects of life. Now, it might seem that while Arendt and Foucault describe the same process in mutually opposite terms, they in fact mean the same thing; after all, their definitions of "power" and "politics" are very different. Nonetheless, it is not entirely so. As Frederick Dolan points out, for Foucault the politicization of all social relations and all aspects of life also implies "*opening up of the opportunities for political action that takes the form of questioning, contesting, and*

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<sup>5</sup> See especially *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, where Foucault defines the political power, as it was understood by ancient Greeks, as well as the associated ethical concept of self-mastery, in terms of *domination* [Foucault 1990b: 80]. This wording obliterates the qualitative distinction between *political power*, which is exercised over one's equals, and domination as power exercised over one's inferiors, i.e. slaves and to certain extent children and women.



*resisting the status quo*" [Dolan 2005: 373]. Arendt, on the other hand, insists that the rise of the social precludes any possibility of genuine political action.

Arendt's claim that genuine political action is possible only in a clearly demarcated political realm leads to the obvious question of the very possibility of such action in contemporary late modern society. More importantly, her argument that private, economic or social concerns have no place in politics, makes her interpreters wonder what should be the *contents* or *aim* of such action [Pitkin 1998; Benhabib 2003].

Arendt's work in fact contains answer to the first of these questions. Political action as Arendt understands it does *not* require the existence of any *institutionalized* political realm.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the public realm *opens up* whenever people *act together*. Instead of being a precondition of political power, the public realm is created and sustained by it. Arendt actually refers to a number of modern examples of genuine political action from the 19<sup>th</sup> century workers' movement, through anti-Nazi resistance, the Hungarian revolution of 1956, to the 1960s anti-war and civil rights movements. We should note that all of these examples can be described as instances of *resistance* against some kind of *political oppression*. Consequently, all of these movements were of transitory and episodic nature and did not lead to an establishment of some lasting, let alone institutionalized public realm. (As did, at least according to Arendt's account, American Revolution.) At the same time, however, precisely because these resistance movements were aimed against *political oppression* and motivated by some political principle, they can meet Arendt's rather stringent criteria of genuinely *political* action.

The problem is that the system of social domination characteristic of the present late modern society, according to Arendt's own account, operates in the social as opposed to political sphere and hence cannot be described as *political* oppression or domination. How could *such form* of domination be engaged or resisted through political action *without turning the social, economic but also private issues into a matter of public, i.e. political concern*? It is precisely *this* question that Arendt is incapable of answering. Indeed, her attempts to clarify the meaning of her distinction between genuinely political and social issues once led her to a patently absurd claim that any problem, that can be resolved by technical or administrative means actually belongs "*in the sphere Engels called the administration of things*", and as such should not be subject of political deliberation [Arendt 1979: 317].

Foucault's conceptualization of political power likewise entails certain problems or paradoxes that suggest important shortcomings of *his* theory. It should not be surprising that they are in certain way opposite to those we encounter in Arendt's work. While Arendt relies on normative categories and distinctions, which, upon closer examination, become untenable, the main problem of Foucault's political theory is the absence of any normative categories or standards.

Contrary to Arendt, who maintains that the rise of the social essentially precludes the possibility of political action, Foucault argues that the deployment of bio-power opens up countless venues for resistance. Nonetheless, one has to wonder what aim would such resistance have, or, to put it differently, what would be its point. Foucault's argument that power relations are omnipresent and inescapable suggests that the goal of such resistance cannot be described as *liberation*, as shattering the bonds of power that grip us. The best we can hope for is some reconfiguration of the existing power-relations.

<sup>6</sup> Arendt nevertheless does acknowledge the importance of political institutions, which according to her protect and stabilize the political realm.

However, Foucault's insistence on the intimate and inevitable nexus between power and knowledge, as well as his claim that the truth validity of any statement is always a function of the rules of the particular system of knowledge within which it is uttered, seem to imply that there are *no* standards that would allow us to distinguish between the relative merits of various possible configurations of power relations. More importantly, they invite questioning the point of Foucault's own critical enterprise. Indeed, it is precisely Foucault's relativisation of truth and freedom, which appears to undermine the foundations of his own critique of modern forms of power and knowledge, that has led Jürgen Habermas as well as other critics to portray him as a thoroughly relativistic critic of modernity whose position is both theoretically flawed and politically dangerous [Habermas 1981; Fraser 1985; Taylor 1984; Walzer 1988].

We can also say that while Arendt's political theory suffers from too strict definition of the political realm, a major flaw of Foucault's work is the lack of any such definition. Indeed, Foucault's conceptualization of power and politics seems to preclude the very possibility of any such *public* or *political* realm that could become a stage for a *common* political action, in Arendt's words for "*acting in concert*". To put it differently, since Foucault portrays political power in purely strategic terms, describing politics as "*continuation of war by other means*", [Foucault 1980: 90] there appears to be no room in his work for the notions of *solidarity* [Allen 2002: 143] or *political community*.

These two problems or paradoxes inherent in Foucault's work lead to two questions regarding the possible forms of resistance against the system of disciplinary power. While the first problem leads us to wonder what aim or goal such resistance could have, the second one leads us to ask what form or mode it could take.

The main reason why we have to be asking these questions is the fact that Foucault's allusions to possible forms of resistance against the system of disciplinary power are rather vague and enigmatic. Statements like "[w]her there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to the relations of power" [Foucault 1990: 95] or "if there are relations of power throughout every social field it is because there is freedom everywhere" [Foucault 1984b: 123] do not get us very far.

Nonetheless, the main line of Foucault's reasoning appears to be rather clear. Precisely because the subjects of disciplinary power are always in some way *actively engaged* in the relations of power rather than being passive objects of domination, they can use the freedom implied in the power-relation to act in a more self-conscious way to resist the mechanisms of power that manipulate them. Such resistance can never lead to some ultimate liberation *from* the relations of power but conceivably can lead to some improvement of the status quo – perhaps to a more equitable or less asymmetric distribution of power. Nonetheless, we are still left wondering what form might such resistance assume, or perhaps what could be the stage for such resistance, and at the same time, what could be its goal – what *kind* of reconfiguration of the relations of power and knowledge it could seek.

While Foucault insists that power can never be contested or, for that matter, criticized from "outside" because any resistance against power or any critique of power is always inevitably located *within* "*the strategic field of power relations*," [Foucault 1990: 96] it also seems rather obvious that a successful or meaningful critique of the existing conflagration of the relations of power and knowledge *cannot* be staged within the *particular* mechanisms or relations of power it seeks to change. The particular disciplinary mechanisms or institutions that Foucault describes – prisons, psychiatric clinics, or schools – are



characterized by highly asymmetrical distribution of power and do not provide space for resistance that could lead to any substantial change of the way in which they operate. For instance, while the prisoners can obviously stage a prison-riot, they can hardly challenge the legitimacy of the carceral system or demand its reform *within* the confines, or walls of the prison. It appears that such contestation of the existing relations of power and knowledge can only take place in what Arendt calls the public or the political realm.

At the same time, it seems obvious that a successful or meaningful resistance against or critique of the disciplinary mechanisms must aim at something more than just some strategic reconfiguration of the existing power-knowledge matrix. Foucault's own critique of the sexual-liberation movement, which in his account resulted merely in a strategic reconfiguration of the "*deployment of sexuality*" [Foucault 1990], suggests that the system of disciplinary power is capable of adapting to resistance and critique, of using the power of resistance against its intentions. It hence seems that to successfully contest the mechanisms of disciplinary power, we must so to say challenge or resist their basic logic, for instance by challenging the validity of the discourses that legitimize them. After all, this appears to be the aim of Foucault's own critical enterprise.

We can also say that Foucault's critical work, as well as the political activities he was engaged in (e.g. the prison reform campaign), presuppose the existence of some *public*, to whom his texts are addressed, as well as the existence of some *public* or *political discourse*, to which they are supposed to contribute. In short they presuppose the existence of something akin to Arendt's *public realm*, which is not only a stage of political action, but also, and in this context more importantly, a space of public or political discussion, a discursive space, which is for Arendt a precondition of both political action *and* of thinking [Arendt 1982].

### III.

As was noted by Frederick Dolan, Foucault actually appeals to such public space in his 1984 essay "What is Enlightenment?", when he invokes Kant's notion of the "*public use of reason*" [Dolan 2005: 377]. I believe that this essay, as well as Foucault's other texts on Kant and the Enlightenment ("What is Critique?" and "What is Revolution?"), contain valuable clues that can help us resolve some of the problems inherent in Foucault's thought. Moreover, these texts also point to further parallels between Foucault's and Arendt's work and hence might contribute, in a sort of roundabout way, to our understanding of Arendt's thought.

Foucault's texts on Kant and the Enlightenment form a part of his polemic with Jürgen Habermas, the so called "*Foucault-Habermas Debate*" [Rajchman 1997]. In other words, they constitute Foucault's response to Habermas' allegation that his work involves a "*total critique of modernity*", which rejects the "*very commitments to truth, rationality, and freedom that alone make critique possible*" [Fraser 1985: 166].

In his response to Habermas, Foucault somewhat surprisingly (given his previous critique of Kant [Foucault 1993]) appeals to the authority of Immanuel Kant, who is generally recognized as *the* philosopher of the Enlightenment, suggesting that the aim of his own work is to further the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment as it was understood by Kant. Rather than rejecting modernity, he aims to rescue it from its present impasse by reviving its original spirit or ethos.

Foucault argues that modernity should not be defined as a historical period that is preceded by premodernity and followed by postmodernity. Neither should it be defined in

terms of some values or principles that can be either upheld or betrayed. (Foucault calls this attitude the “*blackmail of the Enlightenment*“.) Rather, it should be understood as a certain “*attitude (...) a mode of relating to contemporary reality (...) a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called ethos*” [Foucault 1997: 105]. This distinctly modern *critical* attitude to the present is exemplified by Kant’s essay “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” as well as the second part of *Conflict of the Faculties* that contains Kant’s reflections on the significance of French Revolution.

Similarly to Arendt in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, Foucault singles out these seemingly marginal texts precisely because they contain Kant’s reflection on the current events and at the same time on the relationship between his own thought and these events or, rather, the present situation as such. And they do so in a peculiar and, according to Foucault, completely novel way. Rather than situating the present in some distinct historical epoch or defining it in terms of some historical teleology, Kant is asking what makes the present situation unique or different: “*What difference does today introduce with respect of yesterday?*” [Foucault 1997: 99]. “*What is happening right now? And what it this right now we all are in which defines the moment at which I am writing?*” At the same time, he is asking what task does the present assign to him as a philosopher: “*What is it in the present that now makes sense for the philosophical reflection?*” [Foucault 1997: 84].

Kant himself defines Enlightenment as “*man’s emergence form his self-incurred immaturity*” [Kant 1991: 54]. As Foucault points out, he thus presents Enlightenment both as a historical event or process *and* as a task; a task that is at the same time political and ethical, a task that demands from us certain *courage* – namely the courage to *use our own reason* and to use it *publicly*. This task, as it is conceived by Foucault, is necessarily *permanent*. In other words, we should not conceive of the Enlightenment or, for that matter, of freedom as some state of affairs or some accomplishment that can be achieved once and for all. Rather we should understand it as a permanent task that requires of us that we maintain the critical attitude towards *our* present.

Obviously enough, our present situation poses a somewhat different task for critical thinking than the historical situation that Kant faced. Today’s critical philosophy, which Foucault calls “*ontology of the present*” or “*ontology of ourselves*”, [Foucault 1997: 95] is hence not concerned with defining the limits of the legitimate use of reason. On the contrary:

*“[Th]e critical question of today must be turned back into a Positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression. (...) It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom.”*  
[Foucault 1997: 113-114]

Remaining true to the ethos of Kant's critical thinking therefore requires that we diverge from the direction outlined by his three *Critiques*, that we subject even his philosophical work to our critical scrutiny. That should not be surprising, for Kant's philosophy, which sought to define once and for all the limits of the legitimate use of reason, as well as the legitimate use of power, helped to legitimize the modern positivist science, as well as the modern rational state. And the intertwined development of modern state and modern science eventually gave rise to the mechanisms of disciplinary power that are the subjects of Foucault's critique [Foucault 1997: 50-51].

Foucault emphasizes the limited and in a certain sense modest nature of his project. His work is "experimental" and its results can only be described as provisional [Foucault 1997: 114]. It is concerned with a number of diverse subjects and does not aim at some systematic unity or completeness and certainly does not offer any revolutionary vision of a future better world. In fact, Foucault explicitly argues that we "*must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical*" both because the "*dream of freedom*" that is in the heart of such radical projects that envision some revolutionary transformation of society and man himself is ultimately "*empty*", and because the history of twentieth century has taught us that pursuing this empty dream can in reality lead to the nightmare of totalitarianism [Foucault 1997: 114, 54].

The dream of freedom that is in the heart of various revolutionary projects is "empty" not because freedom would be impossible but because it cannot be conceived in terms of some ultimate liberation or escape from all relations of power. On the contrary, freedom consists of an *active* engagement in power relations. The alternative to this dream is therefore by no means passive resignation but on the contrary a "*patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty*" [Foucault 1997: 119]. This labour can take the form of the critical thinking exemplified by Foucault's own work, of a critical thinking that is always concerned with the *present* situation, that challenges the various existing conflagrations of power-knowledge relations, but also of various political struggles that he supported or was engaged in. In contrast to the empty dreams of freedom, such patient labour is meaningful *both* because it can lead to real accomplishments, and because it in itself constitutes the *practice of freedom*.

Foucault's texts on Kant and the Enlightenment suggest that his understanding of politics might be in fact much closer to Arendt's than it often appears. As discussed above, by appealing to Kant's notion of the "public use of reason", Foucault in effect appeals to Arendtian *public space* as a stage of both political action and political discourse. Moreover, Foucault's argument that freedom should not be conceived primarily as some condition or state of affairs but rather as a kind of practice, which can take form of a collective political action motivated by concern of freedom, strongly reminds of Arendt's understanding of freedom. For Arendt also understands freedom as a form of practice, in fact she identifies freedom with action ("*men are free [only] as long as they act (...) for to be free and to act are the same*" [Arendt 1968: 153]) and argues that the very purpose of politics is to enable the experience of freedom: "*The raison d'être of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action*" [Arendt 1968: 146].

But we can also say that Foucault's texts on Kant and the Enlightenment provide valuable clues for interpretation of Arendt's work. On the one hand, Foucault's account of the practice of freedom *as a permanent struggle for freedom* may help us resolve the question of what might be the aim or contents of political action, as it is understood by Arendt.

On the other hand, his explanation of the nature or aim of his own critical thought, as well as his (re-)definition of the Enlightenment and modernity, may actually shed some light on the character of Arendt's thought as well as her attitude to modernity.

Arendt's insistence that political action should not serve any extrinsic goal because its only purpose is to enable the experience of freedom, which in turn consists of political action, leads her interpreters to wonder what might be the *contents* or *aim* of such action [Pitkin 1998; Benhabib 2003]. Especially when read in the context of her distinction between *the political* and *the social*, it tends to suggest that Arendt's exalted understanding of politics is at the same time somewhat vacuous. However, if we set aside the *normative* aspect of Arendt's distinction between the political and the social, and focus instead on its *critical* aspect, the seemingly circular and hollow definition of the purpose of political action starts making sense.

By arguing that "*men are free [only] as long as they act (...) for to be free and to act are the same*" or that the "*end or raison d'être*" of politics is "*to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom (...) can appear*" [Arendt 1968: 153-154], Arendt seems to be suggesting, similarly to Foucault, that freedom is not some state of affairs or goal that could be obtained through liberation. It is rather a form of practice that consists of a permanent struggle, permanent resistance against the forces that threaten our freedom or, rather, "the space where freedom can appear." And since this space, i.e. the *public realm*, is currently threatened primarily by the invasion of the joined forces of market and technology, it follows that the primary aim of political action in our situation must be the resistance against these forces. Arendt herself, at least at some moments arrives precisely at this conclusion:

*"[O]nly legal and political institutions that are independent of the economic forces and their automatism can control and check the inherently monstrous potentialities of this process. ... What protects freedom is the division between governmental and economic powers, or, to put it into Marxian language, the fact that the state and its constitution are not superstructures."* [Arendt 1972: 212-213]

The obvious problem is that statements like this apparently cannot be reconciled with Arendt's insistence that social or economic matters are to be left out of politics or that any question that can be resolved by bureaucrats, economists or other experts belongs to the realm of "administration of things" rather than politics. For it seems rather clear from our daily experience, as well as from Arendt's own analysis, that professional administrators or managers, as well as various experts who work in their employ, are capable of framing practically *any* issue of public, i.e. political relevance, as a merely technical question that has an objective solution. The defence or reclaiming of the public realm against its privatization or commercialization hence requires that we insist on re-politicising of such de-politicised topics, that we insist on the political relevance of social or economic issues.

We have reached a seemingly paradoxical conclusion. In order to interpret Arendt's account of political action in a meaningful way, in order to explain what might be the contents or aim of such action in today's world, we need to partly disregard the conceptual distinction between the *political* and the *social*, which is usually perceived as one of the central

tenets of Arendt's political theory.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, this appears to be the only way of reading her account of political action in a plausible way that is at the same time consistent with the main thrust of her thought. In fact, it might be argued that Arendt's misleading and counter-productive emphasis on such conceptual distinctions as the *political* v. the *social*<sup>8</sup> tends to obscure the nature or overall spirit of her work [Canovan 1992: 3; Benhabib 2003: chapter 5].

For it is precisely Arendt's scholastic obsession with distinguishing (labour from work, social from political, violence from power, etc.) that leads many of her interpreters to assume that she is trying to formulate some sort of systematic and in its core normative political theory, as we know it from Hobbes, Kant or, for instance, Rawls. These interpreters then focus primarily on *The Human Condition* and specifically on its account of the ancient Greek *polis*, which is regarded as Arendt's normative ideal of politics, and end up portraying Arendt as an essentially anti-modernist thinker, whose work has only very little, if any relevance for understanding of the problems of today's world [Wolin 2001: Chapter 3; Kateb 1984; Pitkin 1981].

Such "*standard interpretation*" [Benhabib 2003: xx] of Arendt's work misrepresents both the overall nature or aim of Arendt's thought and her attitude towards modernity. Arendt's thought is primarily critical, rather than normative. It does not aim to set some rules or standards for political action or posit an ideal model of the political realm, but to achieve *understanding* of politics, to reveal the meaning of what goes on in the political realm.<sup>9</sup> Similarly to Foucault, Arendt is concerned primarily with the *present* historical situation. Her thought is therefore not motivated by a nostalgia for the lost glory of ancient Greece, but by urgent concern for the present situation and uncertain future of Western civilization and of the world.

As Arendt argues in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, critical thinking relies on the faculty of *judgment*, which is concerned with the particular and contingent facts or events and hence may be called "*the most political of human faculties*" [Arendt 1978: 192]. Arendt's Kant lectures focus not just on Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (in which Arendt discovers the foundations of Kant's 'unwritten political philosophy' [Arendt 1982: 9]) but also on Kant's understanding of the Enlightenment or his response to the French revolution, i.e. on subjects that are discussed by Foucault in *his* essays on Kant and the Enlightenment. Moreover, Arendt's reinterpretation of Kant's political philosophy in many ways reminds of Foucault's reading of Kant. Similarly to Foucault, Arendt underlines the role of the public use of reason [Arendt 1982: 39] and implies that Enlightenment should be conceived as a permanent task, rather than an event or accomplishment. Similarly to Foucault, she also argues that the greatest accomplishment of Kant's critical philosophy is that without fully realizing it he destroyed metaphysics and at the same time opened up way for a new mode of critical thinking [Arendt 1982: 32; Arendt 1978: 13-16].

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<sup>7</sup> It could be argued that by pursuing such seemingly wanton interpretation of Arendt's work, we are merely following her own lead. Arendt herself believed that it is precisely the contradictions and inconsistencies in the work of great thinkers that reveal their most important insights. Her reading of the past philosophers, especially of those whom she found most inspiring, therefore goes frequently not just against the grain of the established interpretation but actually contradicts some of the key tenets of their respective teachings. (See especially her interpretation of Kant or Marx.)

<sup>8</sup> Other examples of such counterproductive or at least frequently misunderstood conceptual distinctions include *power, violence, force, and authority, or compassion, pity, and solidarity*.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt explicitly rejects the normative pretensions of traditional political philosophy, which is in her mind ultimately based on the philosophers' hostility to politics [Arendt 1990].



I believe that Arendt's Kant lectures can be read analogously to Foucault's texts on Kant and the Enlightenment, which constitute Foucault's response to Habermas' criticism, as a response to those interpreters who criticized her for allegedly debunking the values of the Enlightenment, for being anti-egalitarian, anti-liberal and anti-modern. In her lectures Arendt explains the status of her own *critical philosophy* and implicitly argues that it is grounded in Kant's critical project, that it is engaged in the same cause – namely in the cause of the Enlightenment.

Similarly to Foucault, Arendt does not intend to undermine the emancipatory project of modernity, but on the contrary to save it from its current impasse. We can also say that similarly to Foucault's "ontology of the present" [Foucault 1997: 95], Arendt's critical thinking in itself constitutes a form of resistance against the forces that threaten our freedom. After all, Arendt herself once defined the aim of her political thought as "*unpremeditated, attentive facing up to and resisting of reality – whatever it may be*" [Arendt 1985: viii; emphasis added].

#### IV.

As I state in the introduction, this paper has two principal aims. First, to highlight certain parallels and connections between the works of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault and to demonstrate that these two thinkers, who are often perceived to hold mutually opposite theoretical as well as political convictions, are in fact much closer to each other than it usually appears. Second, and more importantly, to bring these two thinkers into a mutual dialogue by reading Arendt's work in the light of Foucault's ideas and *vice-versa* in order to resolve what usually appears as major paradoxes or blind-spots of their respective theories.

Such Foucauldian reading of Arendt allows us to interpret her account of the "rise of the social" from *The Human Condition* primarily as an analysis of the development and functioning of a typically modern system of social domination, which is remarkably similar to Foucault's account of bio-power. Moreover, by focussing on the critical or analytical dimension of Arendt's dichotomy of *social* versus *political* (i.e. on her critique of the gradual de-politicisation of public realm in modernity) while discounting its normative dimension (i.e. Arendt's insistence that social or economic matters do not belong to politics), this approach enables us to arrive at an interpretation of her thought that is both free of internal contradictions and politically relevant.

Similarly, reading of Foucault's work in the light of Arendt's ideas allows us to discover in his late essays on Kant and the Enlightenment the presence of typically Arendtian topics of *public space* or *public use of reason*, which are otherwise missing from his work, and consequently to interpret his understanding of power, politics and freedom in a way that is much closer to Arendt's. Moreover, Foucault's appeal to Kant's understanding of the Enlightenment provides a powerful response to the critics who accuse Foucault of undermining the very foundations of the emancipatory project of modernity. As I suggest at the end of the previous section, Foucault's apology of his own work, which is implicitly present in his essays on Kant and the Enlightenment, can also help us understand Arendt's work and defend it against similar accusations. Not just because of various parallels between Foucault's Kant essays and Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* but also, and more importantly, because Arendt's work as a whole embodies the critical attitude towards present political reality, to which Foucault appeals and, similarly to Foucault, aims to preserve the project of modernity from its present impasse.

As I suggest above, this paper is written at least in part as a response to those critics of both Arendt and Foucault, who portray them as enemies of modernity and the Enlightenment, whose work is politically irresponsible and dangerous, or, at best, largely irrelevant from the point of view of contemporary democratic politics. I am sincerely convinced that the opposite is true, i.e. that the work of both Arendt and Foucault remains highly relevant especially for those of us who want to remain true to the ideals of modern democracy and – precisely for this reason – recognize the urgent need for a critical approach to the “*actually existing democracies*” [Fraser 1991]. Indeed, one could argue that recent political developments confirm the lasting relevance of Arendt’s and Foucault’s thought.

A quarter of a century ago, when Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed “*the end of history*” [Fukuyama 1989], his thesis seemed to resonate with the public opinion – especially in those countries of Central and Eastern Europe that had just shaken off the yoke of communist party dictatorship. In the hindsight, it seems rather as the first sign of what we could call “the blackmail of democracy” or “the blackmail of neoliberalism” to update Foucault’s notion of the “blackmail of the Enlightenment”. For the end of Cold War was followed by the rise of neoliberalism, which in the 1990s reached (at least in the Western world, including the newly democratized post-communist countries) the position of a hegemonic ideology endorsed by major parties on both ends of the political spectrum. In the mainstream discourse, the particular neoliberal vision of liberal democracy became equated with democracy as such, and the opponents of neoliberalism started being branded as undemocratic, extremist or even totalitarian.

The equation of the neoliberal vision of liberal-democracy with democracy as such is especially paradoxical since neoliberalism tends to weaken the democratic institutions by strengthening the power of global capital and its governing institutions at the expense of the nation states, but also through privatisation, marketisation and general depoliticisation of the public realm. These developments lend new relevance to Arendt’s analysis of the rise of the social, which can help us understand their general dynamics. On the other hand, Foucault’s analysis of modern forms of power can provide valuable insights and inspiration for analysing various specific instances and mechanisms of neoliberal governmentality at micro level. This is not to suggest that either Arendt or Foucault could provide us with answers to the challenges faced by today’s democracies. Nonetheless, I believe that both of them can help us understand these challenges and inspire us in facing them.

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