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HANNAH ARENDT ON REVOLUTION

Albrecht WELLMER

1.

In her essay *On Revolution* [1] Hannah Arendt has tried to settle accounts with both the liberal-democratic and the Marxist traditions, that is, with those two dominant traditions of modern political thought which, in one way or the other, can be traced back to the European Enlightenment. Arendt's basic thesis is that both liberal democrats and Marxists have misunderstood the drama of modern revolutions because they have not understood that, what was actually revolutionary in modern revolutions was the repeatedly failed attempt of a "constitutio libertatis" — the attempt to establish a political space of public freedom in which people as free and equal citizens would take their common concerns into their own hands. Both the liberals and the Marxists equally harbored a conception of the political according to which the final goal of politics would be something *beyond* politics — whether it be the unencumbered pursuit of private happiness, a realization of social justice or the free association of the producers in a classless society. Arendt's critique of Marxist politics has already become a locus classicus and requires no further justification. Her critique of liberal and social democracy in modern industrial societies seems more provocative from a present point of view. I want to raise the question whether the provocation is still a genuine one.

Arendt develops her basic categories, in terms of which she will renarrate the history of modern revolutions, by using the paradigm of the American revolution, which in her view was the only halfway successful revolution in modernity. Only in the American revolution

(1) Hannah ARENDT, *On Revolution*. London: Faber and Faber, 1963.

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the ultimate goal of the revolutionary people in all modern revolutions — the constitution of a space of public freedom — actually became a reality in a large modern state, thanks to fortunate circumstances, a long tradition of self-government and the political ingenuity of the founding fathers. Moreover, and this is the issue for Arendt, in the American revolution a space of freedom was established not only in the "negative" sense of a constitutional guarantee of equal basic rights for all citizens, but also in the "positive", strictly political sense of a federal system of institutions in which the self-government of citizens from the level of local self-government to the level of national polity became a reality that was anchored in the experiences and habits of citizens and which, at the same time, could be experienced as a reality ever anew in everyday praxis. Based on the American model Arendt develops the idea of a system of councils as the alternative to the traditional liberal-democratic and Marxist conceptions of the state. In the great revolutions following the American revolution, in particular the French and Russian revolutions, Arendt claims that the idea of a council system was virtually spontaneously rediscovered by the revolutionary people, in order then to be repressed, according to an always identical brutal logic, either by a revolutionary elite that had come to power or by a conservative establishment that regained power. Only the American revolution lead to the establishment of a federal system of self-government, in which until today elements were retained of the tradition of local self-government, which had once constituted the terminus a quo of the American revolution, and in which memories survived of the "public happiness" of free and equal persons acting in concert; a "public happiness" which had been experienced in the townships and wards of the prerevolutionary epoch as well as on the national level in the period when the American republic was being founded. Of course, as Arendt observes, in America too shortly after the revolution tendencies grew ever stronger in the direction of establishing a state based on partisan political parties and thus ultimately of developing a modern mass democracy; what for Arendt, however, is characteristic of modern mass democracy is the fact that its citizens are free only in a "negative" sense, because they have lost their political freedom — the freedom of self-government based on common action and shared deliberation — to their delegates, to large political parties, to representative bodies, a powerful bureaucracy and organized interest groups. The Marxist dictatorship, according to Arendt, to a

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certain extent only drew the consequences from a development within the liberal-democratic party system: in a way it only completed the political infantilization (Entmündigung) of the citizens and the de-politicization of the political, which Arendt perceived as an inherent tendency of modern mass-democracy — a tendency in which she saw a mortal danger for freedom in the modern world.

What is interesting in Arendt's theory is not this diagnosis — which is not particularly original —, but the way she tries to underpin it by means of a conceptual strategy which is meant to fundamentally question the political self-articulation of modern societies, to question, as it were, the depth grammar of modern political discourse. Political freedom, she argues, was the secret center of gravity in all modern revolutions; but a secret center of gravity it was, since the idea itself was hardly ever adequately articulated in the established political discourse of modernity, so that the most important revolutionary events of modernity were usually perceived, remembered and thought about only in a distorted way by theoreticians, by political common sense and even by the participants themselves. Arendt's critique of liberal democracy therefore is radical in a *philosophical* sense of the word: what she demands of her contemporaries is a radical break regarding the central categories by which modern democratic societies have articulated themselves politically. By setting these categories in motion and locating them in a new structural context, Arendt first of all tries to articulate an idea of political freedom that, in her view, was more or less latently at work in the revolutions of modernity, but which was always at odds with the mainstream of modern political thought. Arendt's basic objection against this mainstream of modern political thought is that it was forgetful of politics itself and therefore could not possibly articulate an idea of political freedom.

Arendt has often been described as a neo-Aristotelean philosopher of praxis; this description, however, although not completely false, is also deeply misleading. To be sure: the traces of Aristotle's practical philosophy in Arendt's concept of the political are so evident and unmistakeable, that they hardly need mentioning: Think of Arendt's oppositions (2) between the sphere of action and of "acting in

(2) Oppositions which had been worked out in ARENDT's *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958.

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concert", on the one hand, and the sphere of "work" (poiesis) and "labour", on the other; between the rationality of practical deliberation, on the one hand, and the rationality of scientific discourse, technical production, economic planning or bureaucratic administration, on the other; between the public sphere of the "isonomia" — of free and equal citizens —, on the one hand, and the social sphere of labour or the private sphere of an individual pursuit of happiness, on the other. All these oppositions echo Aristotelian distinctions; and seen this way, Arendt might be just perceived as a philosopher who tried to resurrect and reinvigorate an ancient tradition of political thought that had largely been lost in modernity. But she certainly is not simply a neo-Aristotelean. Her political thought would be better described as the site of a dramatic encounter between Aristotle, Kant and Heidegger, all of whom she brings to face the catastrophes of civilization in our time. Arendt's recourse to Aristotle, for instance, amounts, on the one hand, to a radical critique of Heidegger's politics or anti-politics, while, on the other, it rests on a deeply Heideggerian rethinking of Aristotelian categories. In a way she writes the political philosophy which in her view Heidegger, as a post-Kantian thinker, *should* have written instead of flirting with the Nazis. What I want to say is, that the profound originality of Arendt's political thought can only be grasped if it is seen how she uses Aristotelian, Kantian and Heideggerian categories to bring them into a new constellation and thereby to reveal herself as a deeply modern thinker.

2.

Traces of a Heideggerian rethinking of Aristotelian categories become obvious when Arendt describes the *constitutio libertatis* as the opening up of a common world, as a break with the continuum of history, a radically new beginning. Her critique of the "philosophy of history" — by which she means the Hegelian heritage in Marxism — and of the belief in historical "progress" are elements of a philosophy of finitude, in whose light the constitution of a space of public freedom appears, as it were, as a contingent performative act by those who decide to act together as free and equal citizens, and in whose light this space of political freedom necessarily appears limited and local, as "fenced in", as Arendt says. The space of public freedom is

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in essence a finite space, so to speak the shining forth of a light in which for historical moments the creaturely life of human beings "gleams" and opens itself onto a public world, a public world in which the actors can appear in their irreducible individuality and, in acting together, can begin something new, and in which the common world which is the habitat of our ordinary private and social life is endowed with a meaning and significance it otherwise lacks. At the end of *On Revolution* Arendt recalls Sophocles' Theseus, through whose mouth Sophocles tells us "what it was that enabled ordinary men, young and old, to bear life's burden: it was the polis, the space of men's free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendor — *tòn bion lampròn poieisthai*." (3)

3.

Arendt's thesis, that political freedom can only exist in a limited space (4), seems to mark a radical break with the liberal-democratic tradition and its universalism of human and citizen's rights. And so it does; what has to be understood, however, is, what this break really means. Arendt does not dispute the universalism of human rights in a moral — i.e. pre-political — sense; and she even acknowledges the internal link — characteristic for Kant and the liberal tradition — between the universalism of human rights and a modern conception of citizen's rights which she shares with Kant and the liberal tradition; for she takes it to be a human (i.e. moral) right to have citizen's rights. (5) However, in contrast to the liberal tradition Arendt considers citizen's rights not as the *substance*, but only as a necessary *precondition* of political freedom. Acording to her it is a fateful disaster to confuse a constutionally based guaranty of citizen's rights with the constitution of political freedom. Again this thesis must be understood in the right way: although at first sight it may appear to anticipate later communitarian theories, its point, as we shall see, is quite dif-

(3) *On Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

(4) "If we equate these spaces of freedom... with the political realm itself, we shall be inclined to think of them as islands in a sea or as oases in a desert." *Op. cit.*, p. 279.

(5) See Hannah ARENDT, ">The Rights of Man<. What Are They?", in: *Modern Review*, Vol. III, No. 1, 1949, p. 30, 34 ff.

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ferent from that of standard communitarian or "republican" arguments. A sort of indication of this difference might already be seen in another "universalist" presupposition which can also be found in Arendt's conception of politics: her conception of political freedom is "universalist" in that she takes it to signify a universal human *possibility*; according to Arendt the idea of and the desire for political freedom are rooted in the "elementary conditions of action". (6) This might be called the "anthropological universalism" inherent in her conception of political freedom. This latent universalism of Arendt's idea of political freedom comes out clearly in the following passage: "What has been concealed by the terrible catastrophes of the revolutions of the twentieth century is nothing more or less than the first, truly revolutionary hope of the European and ultimately perhaps of all peoples of the earth for a new form of state, which would allow each person in the midst of mass societies to participate in the public issues of the day." (7) What this passage shows is, that the "particularistic" aspects of Arendt's idea of political freedom must be seen on the background of a moral as well as an anthropological universalism.

4.

At this point it is important to be fully aware of the radically modern aspects in Arendt's opposition between "negative" and "positive" freedom. Arendt is no more a communitarian than she is a liberal. Communitarians wish to preserve or restore particular — national, cultural or religious traditions and value systems as the only possible ground of social solidarity and of collective identity, while the liberal dispositif rests on the awareness of an irrevocable break regarding the power of tradition in the transition to modernity. As far as this opposition between liberals and communitarians is concerned,

(6) See *op. cit.*, p. 271.

(7) This is not the original English text, but a re-translation from Hannah ARENDT's German version of *On Revolution*, in which she has added the reference to "perhaps all peoples of the earth". See Hannah ARENDT, *Über die Revolution*, München : Piper Verlag, 1963, p. 341. The original English sentence is: "It was nothing more or less than this hope for a transformation of the state, for a new form of government that would permit every member of the modern egalitarian society to become a participator in public affairs, that was buried in the disasters of twentieth-century revolutions." *Op. cit.*, p. 268.

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Arendt would rather side with the liberals, in spite of the fact that her critique of liberalism has been repeatedly claimed for the communitarian project. According to Arendt, since the time of the Romans the space of the political actually had been safeguarded in the course of Western civilization by the "trinity of authority, religion and tradition". [8] Modernity, however, came into being as a break with this "founding" trinity, so that for us no return to the premodern conditions of politics, and in particular no restoration of the binding power of tradition is possible. Perhaps one might say that the awareness of this falling apart of the "Roman trinity" of authority, religion and tradition has led to the second order political tradition of liberal democracy; consequently, in her critique of liberalism Arendt could be said to share a common ground with the liberal "tradition". Accordingly, her critique of liberalism does not rest simply on an appeal to the Greek polis or the virtues of civic republicanism. Arendt's critique of liberalism rather rests on a deconstruction of the whole "metaphysical" tradition of political thought up to Aristotle and Platon. Arendt's deconstruction of Western political thought since the time of the Greek polis has an undeniable affinity to Heidegger's deconstruction of Western metaphysics since its Greek inception, as Dana Villa has shown convincingly. [9] This means, however, that Arendt traces the shortcomings of liberal thought and its forgetfulness of the political in favour of the "social", the "private" and of instrumental action back to a tendency of Western political thought, emerging already with Plato and Aristotle, to distort the essential character of "praxis" and of the political. As I said before, however, this critique of liberalism can only be understood if it is seen as sharing a common ground with the liberal tradition, namely an anti-traditional conception of human and citizen's rights. Sharing this common ground with liberalism Arendt was immune to all regressive dreams of community and community-engendering values — whether they be national, religious or even ethnic in nature. It was the potential of the new, of what still was to come into existence in the modern world, which she tried to think with her idea of republican freedom. In this sense she was truly a revolutionary thinker.

(8) See Hannah ARENDT, "What is Authority?", in: *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 125 ff.

(9) Dana R. VILLA, *Arendt and Heidegger. The Fate of the Political*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996.

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5.

What, then, does Arendts's break with the liberal-democratic dispositif really mean? She herself often articulates it in terms of an opposition between "direct" and "representative" democracy, between a system of councils and a parliamentary party system. However, this opposition is as illuminating as it is also misleading. Misleading it is, because if it were taken literally, it would be naive (it is the naivety of political anarchism). The political institutions of complex modern societies can no longer be construed along the simple model of a system of councils. I therefore take the idea of a council system to be a metaphor for a network of autonomous or partially autonomous institutions, organizations and associations, in each of which something takes place like the self-government of free and equal participants — free and equal in various dimension, with various tasks and with various forms for recruiting members; a network whose units might be both horizontally and vertically connected, related to or dependent upon one another. Complex structural bodies of this kind can represent both the institutions of a federal political system (from the local to the national level) and the associations, organizations and institutions of a democratic "civil society" in contrast to "formal" political institutions. I think that with her concept of a council system Arendt must have meant both: the political institutions of a federal political system and a network of autonomous or partially autonomous associations and organizations along the lines of civil society. Arendt's basic point then is, that the taste for freedom and the experience of freedom can only derive from the diverse forms of active participation in common concerns; the idea of political freedom therefore has to be spelled out in terms of a network of institutions and associations, formal and informal, and moreover in a way such that freedom must begin and become lived experience where the "common issues" are as it were still physically tangible to those involved and, as their own immediate concerns, can be negotiated in an autonomous manner. It seems obvious that political freedom, seen this way, means something other and something more than a constitutionally based guarantee of basic citizen's rights. These are, as Arendt observes, a *precondition* of freedom, but not (political) freedom itself.

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6.

If Arendt's idea of a council system is interpreted along the lines I have suggested, it becomes obvious that her opposition between "direct" and "representative" democracy cannot really be understood as signifying an alternative of two entirely different political systems, but that it must be spelled out as signifying an alternative within liberal democracy itself, namely the alternative of a merely "formal" versus a "substantive" or "participatory" version of democracy. Arendt herself, as has often been pointed out, was occasionally tempted to interpret important conceptual distinctions in a "concretistic" way: direct versus representative democracy, the "political" *versus* the "social", etc. This has made it difficult to see what her real objections against liberal democracy were and has made it relatively easy to claim her critique of a "rights-based" liberal democracy for communitarian or republican theories. What I have suggested so far rather points to the possibility of integrating her idea of political freedom into a rights-based theory of democracy, somehow in the sense in which both Rawls and Habermas have recently emphasized the interdependence of "private" and "public" autonomy for any viable modern conception of democracy. ([10]) So one might wonder whether Arendt's idea of political freedom still poses any substantial challenge to the more advanced forms of democratic theory today. Now I think one should be aware that my previous suggestions do not really answer this question, since they hardly have touched the *conceptual* issues involved in Arendt's critique of the liberal-democratic dispositif. I have only tried to prepare a way for answering the question which I have raised by ruling out a naive-anarchistic reading of Arendt. The question itself — namely: does Arendt's conception of political freedom still pose a challenge to contemporary democratic theory? — has still to be answered. I shall try to answer this question by relating Arendt's idea of public freedom to the debate, which I have already alluded to, between John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas about the interdependence between "private" and "public" autonomy.

(10) Jürgen HABERMAS, "Reconciliation Through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls' Political Liberalism" and John RAWLS, "Reply to Habermas", in: *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XCII, No. 3, 1995.

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7.

Both Rawls and Habermas have claimed that the very conception of citizen's rights, adequately understood, first of all must comprise democratic rights of participation together with those of "negative" liberty, and that secondly "liberal" and "democratic" rights must be conceived as being internally related in such a way that private ("negative") and public ("positive") freedom mutually imply each other, so that, strictly speaking, the one is unthinkable without the other. Now it seems obvious that at least Rawls does not mean with "public autonomy" what Arendt means by "public freedom", since for Rawls "public autonomy" would have to be spelled out in terms of passive and active voting rights, of representative bodies, democratic procedures etc. — i.e in terms which are certainly insufficient for reformulating Arendt's ideas of "direct" democracy, of the "acting in concert" of free and equal citizens, of a *communicative* public freedom, as I would like to call it, following Habermas. The latter, in contrast to Rawls, has explicitly tried to integrate an Arendtian conception of public freedom and of "communicative power" into a rights-based theory of deliberative democracy. Therefore it is Habermas' theory which I would like to take as a test case for approaching the question I have set out to answer.

Habermas has tried to overcome the shortcomings of traditional liberal theories of democracy by combining a principle of equal liberal and democratic rights with a principle of rational discourse. It is this basic idea which implies an interdependence between private and public autonomy in Habermas' theory. For, as I have tried to show elsewhere ([11]), it suggests a kind of "circular" relationship between the two ideas of autonomy: the one meaning "negative liberty" in the traditional liberal sense, the other meaning a democratically constituted sovereignty of the people. The "circle" is this: There can be no democratic self-government of the people without an institutionalization of individual rights; and there can be no genuine institutionalization of individual rights if it is not ever anew worked out, revised, and

(11) See my "Conditions of a Democratic Culture", in: Albrecht WELLMER, *Endgames. The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The MIT-Press, 1998.

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re-interpreted in the medium of democratic discourse, i.e. democratically decided upon by the people themselves. Consequently, what *precedes* democratic discourse is only the very *principle* of equal basic rights, but not — as in traditional liberal theory — a specific interpretation and institutionalization of these rights. In Habermas' theory of liberal democracy the emphasis shifts from the word "liberal" to the word "democracy"; his thesis is that the very principle of equal basic rights demands a deliberative democracy, a process of democratic will formation as the condition of its adequate realization. And in this context a democratic public sphere — a sphere of uninhibited public discourse —, as distinct from the sphere of formal political institutions, indeed signifies for Habermas an essential precondition of an adequate functioning of democratic institutions.

Arendt, of course, would not disagree with this. In contrast to Habermas, however, she argues that although public freedom presupposes a guarantee of individual rights, the reverse is not true. What does she mean by that? Obviously Arendt believes that a "state of law" (Rechtsstaat), even with democratic representation and equal democratic rights of participation, is possible — and actually realized in many societies of our time — *without* public freedom having any sort of substantial reality. But now one might argue that Habermas probably would not totally disagree with this as an empirical diagnosis. His conception of democracy is a *normative* one, and he certainly would not deny that rational discourse is blocked in many ways in existing democracies. So the difference cannot *just* be a difference concerning the evaluation of existing democracies according to a normative conception of democracy. The difference must be a conceptual one after all. Arendt's thesis, indeed, is that a theory focussing on "rights" and "justice" — as Habermas' theory still does — cannot arrive at an *adequate* conception of political freedom. (And in this respect — but I think *only* in this respect — her theory is close to communitarian or republican theories.) What Arendt would say, is, that an adequate conception of political freedom cannot be arrived at even by combining a principle of rights with a principle of rational discourse. To show why she would say that I want to come back to her "revolutionary particularism".

To start with I would argue that Arendt's conception of revolution must be understood in terms of its internal relationship to the concept of "institution" — in the double sense of institution as a (collective)

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act and institution as the *result* of this act (i.e. a system of institutions). Not only is the institution (the institutionalization) of public freedom (the "constitutio libertatis") the terminus ad quem of revolutions in Arendt's sense, but, at the same time, for Arendt the institutions of freedom are inherently related to revolution as their terminus a quo. This means that, *on the one hand*, the inherent goal of what Arendt calls revolution is an institution — an institutionalization — of freedom, which can only emerge from the common *willing* of people who begin to act in concert and thereby *transform* their common world and create a space of public freedom. *On the other hand*, the internal correlation of "revolution" and "institution" also means, that a performative and inventive element belongs to the very reservation of republican institutions, so that — as one might say — the spirit of revolution becomes something like a condition of the permanence of republican institutions. Arendt, consequently, insists on an element of *contingency* and of *performativity* in the founding and preservation of political freedom. What is at stake here is not merely that democratic constitutions do not have any metaphysical or transcendental foundations, but rather what Arendt has in mind when she speaks about the "opening up" of a public world, about a "new beginning", a break with the continuum of history. Institutions of freedom must be *invented* — and their preservation in some sense amounts to their continuous re-invention —; the establishment of such institutions can more or less succeed or fail, and their invention, where successful, will bring about a new grammar of political discourse, new experiences and attitudes — while conversely they remain dependent on such experiences and attitudes, on judgement and political virtue. The extent to which and the forms in which public freedom can become a reality in the modern world depend on historical contingencies as well as cultural traditions, on experiences as well as the commitment, imagination and courage of the individuals involved. And what should be added is, that the institutions of public freedom have to maintain themselves against the requirements of the material reproduction of society, against the pressures caused by contingent historical circumstances and vis-a-vis the desiderata of social justice. In any case the constitution of political freedom does not mean (only) an institutionalization of basic rights, but demands an understanding and a use of such rights according to a "standard" which cannot be read off these rights themselves, even if we think their scope to be determined in the

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medium of rational (democratic) discourse; for rational discourse regarding rights — at least in its Habermasian sense — can only have justice as its standard. Arendt's idea of public freedom, in contrast, aims at an optimum concerning the self-organization of the people, which is not the same as a maximum of justice, but in a way redefines the parameters of justice itself. For inasmuch as the institutions of public freedom become a common *project*, their preservation and re-invention becomes an end-in-itself, through which the problems of "rights" and of "justice" will be seen in a new light, or, as one might say, will be "focussed" in a new way. Arendt emphasizes the "agonistic" and — with Aristotle — the "doxastic" features of such a space of public fredom; and although the "agon" here takes place in the medium of speech — i.e. non-violently —, it seems to be something different from "rational discourse" in Habermas' sense: Not only because in this "agon" doxa and persuasion reign — and this means that there are specific virtues which count and are persuasive in this public domain: courage, imagination, experience and judgement —; but above all because action and deliberation are intertwined with each other in this agon; deliberation being the deliberation of those who will decide and act, and whose action will always be a new beginning, the consequences of which the actors will not be able to fully control. An element of performativity and of contingency thus belongs to the deliberative "agon" in a space of public freedom. So although the space of public freedom may be characterized as a space of "rational" deliberation, an understanding of what "rational" here means presupposes an explication of what is the point and what are the essential features of such a space of public freedom. To put it differently: As long as the rationality of democratic discourse is basically understood only in terms of equal participation rights and of its internal reference to the problems of "rights" and of "justice", the idea of public freedom can only signify a sphere of public *discourse*, in which matters of common interest are debated, as for instance in the media. For Arendt, in contrast, the sphere of public freedom also signifies a sphere of *action*, of self-organization, of direct democracy. In such a sphere of public freedom deliberation and action are intertwined with each other; and an essential *theme* of deliberation will be the constitution and preservation of public freedom itself.

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8.

I have pointed out before that Arendt's opposition between liberal democracy and republican freedom, between representative and direct democracy does not make sense if it is understood in a "concretistic" way, i.e. as an opposition between two mutually exclusive types of political system. (And I have also pointed out that Arendt herself was not quite immune to the temptation to interpret the opposition in this way.) The opposition, however, does make sense if it is relocated into the *interior* of modern mass democracies. For in this case the opposition indicates a spectrum of possibilities *within* liberal and social democracy itself. At one end of this spectrum would be a centralistic state with formally democratic institutions like a representative body and general active and passive voting rights — and perhaps a manipulation of public opinion by mass media; at the other end of this spectrum would be a democratic culture of self-determination which could be experienced and would be alive on the level of everyday life, together with a corresponding culture of public debate. What Arendt, I think, shows is, that such a democratic culture of public debate can only exist inasmuch as it is anchored in a political praxis of self-determination which reaches down to the level of everyday life. For only such a praxis of "direct" democracy can generate the attitudes, the experiences, the virtues and the faculty of judgement, on which a viable democratic culture of public debate depends.

I think it can now be seen in which sense Arendt's idea of political freedom transcends the parameters of the liberal-democratic dispositif, even in its Habermasian version. Arendt's claim is that a deliberative democracy, to deserve its name, presupposes strong elements of "direct" democracy; and what this means cannot be sufficiently spelled out in terms of equal *rights* of participation, but only in terms of a specific *mode* of participation. This, however, affects the concept of democratic legitimacy itself. It becomes obvious now that the idea of a rational consensus, based on an equal right of democratic participation, is not sufficient to establish a standard of democratic legitimacy. For what "we" — the people, the democratic sovereign — can rationally agree upon, depends not least upon how this "we" has organized itself in the institutions of a political system. If Arendt, however, is right in claiming that the idea of public freedom was the hidden agenda in all modern revolutions, then a standard of demo-

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cratic legitimacy is thereby established which eludes any attempt to reconstruct it solely in terms of "rights" and of "rational discourse". For it demands a "constitutio libertatis" as the "construction", realization and preservation of a system of institutions, in which and through which public freedom would become a reality and a matter of experience and, at the same time, a common value which would affect the parameters of public debate as well as democratic decision processes at any level of the political system. This "value", Arendt would contend, is not just one value among all those values which may compete with one another in the will formation of democratic societies. It is rather that "value", on whose — however fragmentary realization it depends, whether — and how far — democracy is a form of government, in which the power really rests, as one says, with the people, or whether — in the words of Benjamin Rush quoted by Arendt — although "all power is derived from the people, they possess it only on the days of their elections. After this it is the property of their rulers." ([12])

In the chapters of *On Revolution*, in which Arendt deals with the American revolution, she has made it clear that a constitutio libertatis on the large scale of a modern nation state is not least a higly intricate problem of inventing and "constructing" a system of institutions, which would balance elements of direct democracy with the necessities of central government, of efficient administration and of a unitary legal system. I have not said anything about this problem of "construction", which, as Arendt well saw, remains a permanent one *within* democratic societies, today even more so as it re-emerges on the level of supranational associations. I do not want to deny that Arendt's way of dealing with this problem of "construction" is rather questionable in several respects. But my goal here was not to point to undeniable weaknesses of Arendt's political theory. My goal was rather to point to Arendt's conceptual contributions to a post-metaphysical understanding of democracy. If we call the realization of that "value" I spoke about a moment ago — I mean "public freedom" in Arendt's sense "participatory democracy", it becomes clear that Arendt's idea of public freedom has indeed been around for quite a while in the political imagination of modern societies. What is original in Arendt

(12) Qoted from *On Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

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is not the idea itself, but the way she has re-articulated it against the dominant traditions of modern political — and anti-political — thought. If I am not mistaken in my reading of Arendt, her ideas still pose a challenge to contemporary political thought.

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