

Republicanism in the History of Political Philosophy and Today

3rd Biennial *Ideas in Politics* Conference

Prague: November 3rd-4th, 2017

Panel 5.1 Abstracts

The Republicanism of Hannah Arendt: A Case of Civil Disobedience

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Even though Hannah Arendt has been often criticized that she underestimates the role of political parties and institutions, her theory of political action might be helpful to understand some of the aspects of the contemporary crisis of representative democracy. The paper focuses on the role Arendt ascribes to non-partisan political movements in the outline of desirable politics in her book *On Revolution* and on her consideration of civil disobedience as a non-conventional form of grassroots political participation. Although her idea of deliberate council (Räte) has been rightfully criticised, she pointed to important shortcomings of the institutional system of representative democracy, which might be well suited to the interests of professional bureaucrats and politicians, but which is less successful in representing the opinion of the people. The possible way out which she proposed in the book *On Republic* seems not to be feasible, but later she developed another answer in her essay on civil disobedience. In the paper I will compare her approach to civil disobedience with the liberal one and I will argue that the latter is not fit to grasp the phenomena like grassroots activism, civil disobedience or political whistleblowing in their complexity. On the case of civil disobedience, I will show some theoretical and practical advantages of Arendt's republicanism. The features of civil disobedience which might to justify it according to the liberal approach are generally three. Justifiable civil disobedience action is a (1) public and communicative action which (2) arises from reasons of conscience, appeals to conscience of others and (3) uses only non-violent symbolic measures. I argue that the liberal approach poses so many constraints on political action that they (if applied) would effect rather a conservation of the status quo than a transformation of a political practice. However, the history of suffragette, civil rights movements and popular uprisings in many parts of the world shows that political movements work differently than liberal theorists suppose they should. In contrast to liberal approaches, Arendt takes a different stance which does not pose many constraints on civil disobedients. Although she presupposes that civil disobedience is a joint communicative action, it's not the conscience which is politically relevant. Furtherly, the problem with the non-violence condition is that it depends on the definition of what violence is. Another point is that the success of the grassroots movements is often dependent on the (direct or indirect) threat of violence or on a deliberate provocation of violence by a non-violent movement. Generally, according to liberal theorists a civil disobedient recognizes democratic legality of the existing order and does not put the legitimacy of the constitutional order into question. This can be fair in "nearly just societies", but not in cases in which the disobedients are those who are excluded from political deliberation. The advantage of Arendt's republican approach is that it takes into consideration transformative effects of civil disobedience and other types of non-partisan political participation on the political and constitutional order.

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Anarcho-Republicanism? Hannah Arendt and the Federated Council Republics

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By the late 1940s, largely in response to the formation of a Jewish homeland, Arendt had become convinced that a federated council system was the best alternative to the most dominant idea in international politics, the nation state. This paper will explore the relationship between Arendt's council system and anarchism. While Arendt praised anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin for their nascent appreciation for council politics, she argued that these radicals were "singularly unequipped to deal with a phenomenon [which] aimed at the foundation of a new state and the establishment of a new form of government." This, however, says much more about her views of Proudhon and Bakunin than it does about the compatibility of her thought with anarchism in general. Arendt's brand of republicanism, which entails her conception of power and authority, bears a much closer resemblance to anarchism than previously expected.

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Hannah Arendt's Implicit Criticism of the Liberal Concept of Opinion

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The term “post-factual” has become widespread during the last year. Regarding our “post-factual age” journalists and other critical players call for a return to truth. This call simplifies the problem. It is not enough to stress the significance of facts. Although political action must of course be related to facts, the key concept of politics is the opinion.

For Hannah Arendt, the significance of opinions is what constitutes the difference between politics and sciences. In her Essay "Truth and Politics", she distinguishes between the “persuasive nature” of opinions and the “coercive character” of truth and facts. For her, political action is distinguished by the aim to change the current situation. Opinions, in trying to persuade, do exactly that: they challenge existing conditions or other opinions and try to change them. Proclaiming the truth, in contrast, does not inherently aim at change.

In my talk, I want to explore Hannah Arendt's specific concept of opinion. My thesis is: As a normative concept her concept of opinion is implicitly opposed to the descriptive concept of opinion of liberalism. Liberalism does concede a positive value of opinions but impedes the question of normative limits of the freedom of opinion.

The reason for this is that the theoretical starting point of liberalism is the free and autonomous subject, which must be protected as far as possible from state interference. The negative liberties of the individual are the lynchpin of liberalist theory. In this context, freedom of opinion is of high importance. Here, opinions are conceived in a purely descriptive manner as that which the free and autonomous individual believes.

In contrast, Hannah Arendt's theoretical starting point is the paradigm of plurality. For her, every human being is always already implicated in a community and thus in a common background of experience. Arendt calls this common background “Welt” (world). The theoretical view of an autonomous individual, that more or less as such is of a particular opinion, is not tenable from this perspective.

In consequence, Arendt does not consider an opinion as the already existing interest of an autonomous individual, which is brought into public only in a second step. In contrast, she conceptualizes opinions and publicness as always already mutually related. This basic constellation yields at the same time the normative benchmark for opinions. As we can see in the context of her theory of judgment, this benchmark consists in the communicability of opinions that she understands as the possibility of consent.

To further explore my thesis, I also want to critically refer to "On Revolution". Arendt distinguishes here between the French Revolution, which was influenced by pure interests as what individuals simply need, and the American Revolution, where discussions and debates about opinions played the principal role. In my opinion, "On Revolution" can be read as an implicit criticism of a liberal concept of opinion.