

Political Responsibility in the Construction of the Public Realm: Reflections Based on Hannah Arendt

Cristina Sánchez Muñoz

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

The following reflections on the strengthening of democracy through the exercise of political responsibility are based on the analyses of Hannah Arendt. She, perhaps better than anyone, understood the importance of politics understood as the collective action of the citizens, aimed at the preservation of the public realm. Faced with the delegitimation of political systems and parties, the corruption that affects many governments, and the indifference, if not the discrediting of citizen action, many voices have spoken out in favor of returning to the refuge of the private.. Thus, the realm of politics and of the public ends up as barren territory that may be occupied by destructive or anti-political forces. In those situations that Arendt described as “dark times”, that is, times “in which the public realm has been obscured and the world become so dubious that people have ceased to ask any more of politics than that it show due consideration for their vital interests”¹, the only solution is to resort to the exercise of participative citizen action and to shared public discourse. In acting and deliberating together with others, we establish important connections that do not rely on the agreement achieved, but rather on the feeling of jointly supporting the world we share, the public space in which we express ourselves and show ourselves to others.

On the other hand, in these times of darkness in which the undermining of the public realm and violence are evident, it is also necessary to consider our individual and collective responsibility, in our duty to maintain and preserve our common world. This is a task that is oriented both toward the past, insofar as we are the recipients of a legacy expressed in the form of the memory of events and of the stories that built the public realm we now inhabit, and toward the future, insofar as we must preserve a public sphere that makes it actually possible for citizen action to manifest itself, is not undermined by violence, and allows the expression of human plurality. As we shall see, this responsibility entails, above all, a negative mandate: it is our duty to prevent evil² Thus, we are responsible for that which we were or are unable to prevent, and this forms part of our duty to the world: not just to the community we belong to but to humanity itself.

Just as moral and political questions regarding responsibility arose during the times of totalitarian violence, they reappear today when we are faced with situations of violence that jeopardize the shared public realm: armed interventions, assassinations of political enemies, and state violence, as well as situations of social and political exclusion that are met mostly with indifference: for example, the situations of those marginalized in pockets

¹ Hannah Arendt: *Hombres en tiempos de oscuridad*, Barcelona: Gedisa, 1989

² Hannah Arendt: “Responsabilidad colectiva”, in: Hannah Arendt: *Responsabilidad y juicio*, Barcelona: Paidós, 2007, p. 156

of poverty, displaced populations, those who arrive at the barriers of our borders....to name a few. These are all old and new forms of harm that put our responsibility into question. For this reason, Hannah Arendt's ideas help us reflect about citizen responsibility in the face of violence, while bearing in mind that the survival democratic public spaces is precarious, since even in today's societies, it is possible to find, albeit in a latent state, some of the elements that made possible the rise of totalitarianism. As Arendt reminds us "totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man."³

It should not come as a surprise that Hannah Arendt's ideas regarding responsibility, just as those of some of her contemporaries, appeared at the time of the moral and political breakdown caused by World War II. In 1946, Jaspers published a classical essay on the subject: *The Question of German Guilt*⁴, in which he set forth the degrees of culpability of Germany and of the Germans in the conflict. On the other hand, others, like Heidegger, allowed themselves to be captivated by the totalitarian regime and turned away from the pain of others. As Arendt ironically points out, "the question at that time was not what our enemies were doing, but what our friends were doing." Arendt speaks about collective moral and political responsibility, that is, the anonymous complicity of the citizens, and about individual moral responsibility. Like Jaspers, she rejects the notion of collective criminal or moral guilt. Guilt, like innocence, is always individual, and is attributed to an individual for his or her actions or omissions. In this sense, guilt has a strong solipsistic orientation (toward the individual himself); it singles out and is strictly personal. In the case analyzed by Arendt, that of Germany's involvement in the Holocaust, it does not make sense to insist on the collective guilt of Germany, but rather on the identification and subsequent trial of the guilty individuals, as was the case in the Nüremberg trials. However, responsibility does have a strong intersubjective component: one is always accountable to someone or to a group. For this reason, the question that immediately arises is: Who are we accountable to? For Arendt, the answer is that we are accountable to ourselves in the first place, but that we are also accountable to those with whom we share a common public space regarding the preservation of that common world. Unlike guilt, responsibility can be collective; this is what we call vicarious responsibility, that is, responsibility for an action that one has not committed, that was committed in our name, and which we are responsible for given that we belong to a specific community.⁵ Thus, according to Arendt, the political (vicarious) responsibility of governments entails "assuming responsibility for the good and bad actions of their predecessors"; likewise, we can also speak of a collective political and moral (but never legal) responsibility "for the sins of our fathers, much as we reap the rewards of their merits, but we are of course not guilty of their misdeeds, either morally or legally, nor can we ascribe their deeds to our own merits"⁶. That vicarious responsibility is the price we pay for living in a community.⁷

³ Hannah Arendt: *Los orígenes del totalitarismo*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1981

⁴ Karl Jaspers: *El problema de la culpa*, Barcelona: Paidós, 1998

⁵ In this regard, see the analysis of vicarious responsibility in H.L.A. Hart: "Responsibility and Retribution", in: Hart: *Punishment and Responsibility*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1959

⁶ Hannah Arendt: "Responsabilidad colectiva", op. cit., p. 153

⁷ Likewise, Karl Jaspers points out: "There is a sort of collective moral guilt in a people's way of life which I share as an individual and from which grow political realities. For political conditions are inseparable from a

For this reason, the only way to escape that responsibility would be not to belong to any community, to be an isolated Robinson Crusoe. At the other extreme, it would imply being a stateless person or a refugee, that is, to have been expelled from some community, which would lead us to affirm, with Arendt, that stateless persons are absolutely innocent, an innocence for which the very high price of not being able to enjoy any social, political, or legal recognition has been paid.

Nevertheless, there is also a collective moral and political responsibility that is associated with the anonymous tolerant complicity with violence and terror, which promotes or tolerates collective subjection to a dictator, complicity with socially extended and accepted evil, a violence that has become commonplace and quotidian, characterized by acquiescent and anonymous participation. For Jaspers, the recognition of this responsibility is the first step in the construction of a new collective future, and the starting point in order to assume that responsibility is, as Arendt points out, the exercise of the faculty of judgment.

The issue of collective responsibility in the face of violence is a classical one among Holocaust scholars. Between the victims and the perpetrators, represented by the political elites, is the anonymous mass of bystanders, indifferent or complacent with respect to terror, those “ordinary men” who did nothing to oppose it.⁸ On the other hand, with respect to this issue, Arendt distinguishes three degrees of responsibility with respect to the rise of Nazism: those she considers “responsible in a broader sense” or the “co-responsible irresponsible”⁹, represented by those who contributed to the rise of Hitler, the sympathizers of the regime, those who applauded, supported, and voted, those who, like, Heidegger “demonstrated their incapacity to judge the political organizations of their time” and who “in a broad sense were co-responsible for Hitler’s crimes”¹⁰. But for Arendt, this connivance and generalized acceptance is not too different from that support which can be given to other tyrannical regimes. In her view, what turned out to be totally new and terrifying was the participation “of a whole people in the vast machine of administrative mass murder”¹¹, in such a way that “everyone is either an executioner, or a victim, or an automaton, marching onward over the corpses of his comrades”. According to Arendt, making the majority participants and responsible parties as cogs in an enormous death machine constituted the triumph of the totalitarian regime, and, in this sense, what the Nazi leaders understood perfectly was that to achieve that participation and responsibility of the majority they did not need born killers nor convinced

people’s whole way of life. There is no absolute division of politics and human existence as long as man is realizing an existence rather than perishing in eremitical seclusion”. *El problema de la culpa*, op. cit. p. 91

8 In this respect, see the classical study of the German situation by Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland (Aquellos hombres grises. El batallón 101 y la solución final en Polonia)*, Madrid: Edhasa, 2002). We can also say that to a great extent, studies of the Holocaust have shifted their focus of interest: from the organizational structures to the role played by bystanders. Thus, works such as that of Goldhagen concentrate on these aspects of collective responsibility (although Goldhagen is actually not very clear regarding the distinction between guilt and responsibility), while that of Robert Gellately *Not Only Hitler*, focuses on the participation of the Germans in the implementation of terror against the Jews.

9 Hannah Arendt: “Culpa organizada y responsabilidad universal”, in *Ensayos sobre la comprensión*, Madrid: Ed. Caparrós 2005, p. 158

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

accomplices, or even convinced Nazis, but merely efficient officers and good family men, the paterfamilias, concerned exclusively about the preservation of their private sphere.

What Arendt emphasizes, then, is the emergence of a type of evil, as a deeply contemporary phenomenon that is not exclusively German, an evil exercised by an efficient subject and good family man. In 1963, in her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt introduces the concept of the “banality of evil” to define that eminently modern type of evil that gave rise to so many controversies and misunderstandings, an evil that is rooted in the lack of discernment, in the incapacity to stop and think. What we can ask ourselves now is: What social mechanisms fostered the increase of these unthinking subjects in the vast whole of a society? That anonymous complicity expressed itself in what we could call a collective banal evil, which was possible thanks to certain characteristics inherent to modern societies – although they were more evident in German society – which made collective banality feasible. Therefore, we could say that certain tendencies in contemporary societies, facilitate or foster the appearance of that collective banal evil. Among these tendencies, Arendt fundamentally highlights the lack of concern of the good bourgeois about public life and his isolation in his private interests. In this sense, Himmler would be, according to Arendt, the artificer of a vast administrative death machine that took advantage of that “decline of public man”, by incorporating the characteristics of that type of bourgeois: docility, conformism, and his concern, as a good paterfamilias, for the security of his family at whatever price: a man like that “was ready to sacrifice everything -beliefs, honor, dignity”¹². In situations in which the bourgeois sees the comfort of his existence threatened, he may turn into the “desktop assassin” that prepares the schedules of the trains bound for Auschwitz, betrays his neighbors, or classifies corpses. In order to illustrate her point, Arendt tells the story of the significant encounter between a Jewish man released from the Buchenwald camp and a former schoolmate of his who was then a member of the SS: “Spontaneously, the man stared at remarked: You must understand, I have five years of unemployment behind me. They can do anything they want with me”¹³.

For Arendt, the bourgeois is contemporary mass man, isolated in the comfort and security of his own private sphere, or as we would probably say today, protected by the walls of his condominium and observing the menacing outside world through his home’s security cameras. The citizen is the opposite of the bourgeois in that he or she is actively committed to the world and to public interests, which are clearly differentiated from private interests. In contrast with this public man, Arendt sees in the bourgeois and his ignorance of all civic virtues the suitable culture medium for a social and political conformism that is typical of contemporary mass societies. Together with that lack of a shared common world, another factor that makes possible the rise of collective banality is isolation understood as one of the symptoms of contemporary societies.¹⁴ Mass-man lives in isolation, secluded in “the sad opacity of his private life”, immersed in moral and political solipsism. To a great extent, the triumph of totalitarianism in Europe was

¹² Ibid., p. 162

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ In terms that are very similar to Arendt’s, Italian writer Alberto Moravia describes the protagonist of his novel *The Conformist*, written in 1951, as a man who, in the context of Italian Fascism, seeks desperately to do what the rest of society is doing, blending into the mass and displaying a great moral indifference.

possible because society was made up of isolated individuals, without any social or political links among themselves: “Only isolated individuals can be totally dominated”. Hitler was able to build his organization on the firm ground of an already atomized society that he then artificially atomized even further. The terms “atomized society” and “isolated individuals” refer to a state of things in which people live together without having anything in common, without sharing any visible or tangible part of the world”¹⁵. This isolation, “the disease of our time”, which totalitarianism regimes knew how to use in their favor, facilitated the destruction of the public sphere and the expansion of mechanisms to exercise control over individuals whose only reference to the world was themselves.

Studies of the Holocaust, as well as social psychology studies, have analyzed, in terms similar to those used by Arendt, the importance of isolation and the rupture of social bonds as key factors to understand the mechanisms for the social production of moral indifference toward the other. In this context, Stanley Milgram’s studies on unquestioning obedience to authority and acceptance of the harm inflicted have become classics.¹⁶ What Milgram’s analysis demonstrated was that moral inhibitions against violence increase when such violence is authorized by a person or group of persons endowed with legal, social, political, or scientific authority, when violent actions are inserted into a bureaucratic routine created by government regulations and by the precise delimitation of duties, and when the victims of that violence have been dehumanized (by being deprived of their individual traits and rights, through the use of animal metaphors, etc.). In sum, before physical violence is exercised over the victims, the latter are expelled from what we call “the universe of moral obligations”¹⁷, that is, mutual obligations of help and respect. When we are unable to recognize in those potential victims what binds us to them and we only see in them the most absolute altered, their moral invisibility arises. Additionally, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out something important with respect to the role of bureaucracy in the negation of the other: strictly bureaucratic solutions to situations of social exclusion increase moral invisibility. This is so, firstly because in the bureaucratic chain there is no responsibility of each one of the intervening agents, given that the division of labor makes it impossible to see the final result. In the second place, potential moral dilemmas disappear from sight in the context of an infinite chain of independent actions. This also increases the physical and psychological distance between the agent and the potential victim. We are unable to see the victim. For this reason, some contemporary ethical proposals, such as those of Emmanuel Lévinas, appeal to an “ethics of the face”, to an ethics of a face-to-face encounter in which the other is a figure of the bareness of humanity that appeals to our responsibility: “Since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him”.¹⁸

Therefore, if evil can be understood as taking moral distance from the pain of others, it is valid to ask ourselves about individual responsibility regarding that pain. Arendt examines this question in her 1964 article “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship”, a

15 Hannah Arendt: “De la naturaleza del totalitarismo. Ensayo de comprensión”, in: *Ensayos sobre la comprensión*, op. cit. p. 429

16 Stanley Milgram: *Obedience to Authority*, New York: Tavistock, 1974

17 Helen Fein: *Genocide: A Sociological Perspective*, New York: Sage, 1993

18 Emmanuel Lévinas: *Ética e infinito*, Madrid: Ed. Antonio Machado, 2000, p. 80

question that is closely related to her reflections on the banality of evil in the context of the Adolf Eichmann trial.¹⁹

What Arendt detects are the “traps” or excuses we find when dealing with questions of responsibility. Surely the first thing we would have to point out is that speaking of individual responsibility is something that is, in principle, uncomfortable; nobody wants to accept responsibilities, but rather to evade them. And the arguments used to justify that moral evasion of responsibility are many, as Arendt says. We have those who point out the impossibility of resisting any type of temptation, whether bribes or privileges, so that, the promise of a better job, of getting to keep the property of the Jew one has denounced, or of receiving money covertly would function as excuses for moral exemption from responsibility. Nevertheless, this type of argument cannot in any way be a moral justification of the deed, since we would be forgetting that there are other alternatives for action, even though they might satisfy the selfish calculations of the agent in question to a lesser extent. Perhaps it might be worth recalling, together with Primo Levi, the tragic story of Chaim Rumkowski, president of the Jewish Council of the Polish ghetto of Lodz, who had absolute power over the life and death of his fellow Jews and who, in spite of the privileges he had been offered, also ended up in a concentration camp. As Levi reminds us:

“Like Rumkowski, we too are so dazzled by power and prestige as to forget our essential fragility. Willingly or not we come to terms with power, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the ghetto reign the lords of death, and that close by the train is waiting.”

Another one of the arguments commonly used, and which was in fact used in Eichmann’s defense, is the so-called cog theory, which evades responsibility by arguing that individuals are but a small cog in the machinery of a vast system, whether military, bureaucratic, Mafia or political machinery-related, etc. This type of justification actually constitutes a *petitio principii*, which leads to the existence of a primary responsible party who would totally bear the weight of responsibility (and of guilt, in this case), thus exonerating the rest of the members of the system from that responsibility. In this way, in the case of Germany, Hitler would be the only responsible party, a fact that would undoubtedly be more reassuring if we accepted it. A variation of this argument is that which blames History or certain historical events, thus diluting responsibility in the inevitable course of History: Hitler as the heir to nihilism or to the Versailles Treaty, the Germans as victims of the Crash of 1929, and so forth. But what Eichmann’s lawyers seemed to forget when using these types of arguments to exempt the defendant from responsibility was that courts do not try a system, or a historical trend, nor anti-Semitism, in this case. They try an individual, and as Arendt reminds us, “in most criminal organizations, the small cogs are actually committing the big crimes”.²⁰

Another type of argument used to exonerate someone from responsibility is that of the lesser evil: faced with two evils, one should opt for the lesser one. Arendt radically

¹⁹ Included in the cited work, *Responsabilidad y juicio*

²⁰ Hannah Arendt: “Responsabilidad personal bajo una dictadura”, in: *Responsabilidad y juicio*, op. cit., p. 60

opposes this thesis by reminding us that in choosing the lesser evil, we are forgetting that we are in fact choosing evil. This argument, aimed at getting the population to accept evil as such as the only possible scenario, is precisely one of the techniques used by totalitarian governments to spread terror, criminality, and complicity with its crimes. Furthermore, the lesser evil argument is usually preceded by an escalation of evil, in practice; for example, the acceptance of measures considered to be “minor”, as was the case in Germany during the early stages of the Nazi regime: the expulsion of the Jews from social life in order to guarantee the “security” of the rest of the population, or the enactment of the Nuremberg laws, measures that were in this case legal and that contributed to the radicalization and acceptance of terror. The lesser evil argument is often used as a synonym of guaranteeing the security of the population in the face of greater evils or artificially created fears, thus ensuring the impunity of those who commit acts of violence and achieving the complicity of the population.

What all these arguments aimed at the evasion of responsibility show us, according to Arendt, is the fear and incapacity to judge our actions and those of others. Indeed, the widespread use of the common expression, “Who am I to judge?” does not seem to express a sudden majority interest in respecting the privacy of others, in the style of classical liberalism. Rather, as Arendt points out, what it actually suggests is something that is cause for concern: the acknowledgment of the incapacity to distinguish between good and evil, to exercise the faculty of judgment. But, additionally, our unwillingness to judge is also due to a strong relativistic prejudice: I cannot put myself in the other’s shoes; I cannot think otherness, an otherness that the corresponding political system has already presented not as evidence of pluralism, but rather as an otherness in which we cannot recognize the human.

The ability to judge, to discern, is indissolubly linked to the ability to think. To think means “to examine and to question”²¹. But, in addition, there are maxims for the application of judgment: 1) thinking on your own, that is, thinking independently, emancipated from the tutelage of others and of pre-judices. 2) always thinking in conformity with yourself (a consistent way of thinking), and 3) thinking from the perspective of the other, that is, putting ourselves in the position of the others, representing their possible opinions to ourselves. The latter is what Arendt, following Kant, calls representative thinking or enlarged mentality, which entails a moral attitude of mutual respect and recognition of the others, that is, egalitarian reciprocity. Judgment is, therefore, intersubjective, since it requires the presence of others and necessarily takes place within a public and critical space. Through the exercise of critical judgment we create ties with others by putting ourselves in their place. This is why, for Arendt, representative thinking is the political way of thinking par excellence. In judging we recognize ourselves as equals, creating a community of understanding that does not necessarily lead to consensus, in which we know, deliberate, judge, and assume our responsibilities. In doing so, we must take the others into account by representing their positions to ourselves.

The inability to think and exercise judgment is what Arendt called the banality of evil. In using this controversial description, Arendt did not mean to say, as some have

²¹ Hannah Arendt: “Algunas cuestiones de filosofía moral”, in: *Responsabilidad y juicio*, op. cit., p. 117

misinterpreted, that the harm caused had been trivial, but rather that the most atrocious acts need not be caused for specifically evil purposes, but are rather the result of the incapacity to think, especially the incapacity to think from the point of view of the other person. The individual who causes this type of banal evil is an especially terrifying character since he combines apparent normality with the total absence from the world of others. Adolf Eichmann was not the sadist or the villain that the people attending the trial would have liked to find. On the contrary, he was a “terribly and terrifyingly normal” person, who was unable to put himself in the position of those individuals he sent on the trains bound for Auschwitz, or to establish ties of moral recognition of the other. The banal perpetrator is capable of committing evil deeds because he does not reflect on the regulations, customs, practices, or orders that cause harm; he accepts them without exercising independent thinking, or, to put it in Kantian terms, without the subject’s having been able to put into practice the maxim: “Dare to think”. Arendt clearly points out the dangers of this lack of reflection:

“When people are removed from the dangers of critical examination, they are taught to adhere immediately to any of the rules of conduct that are prevalent in a given society. What people get used to is not so much the content of the rules – a detailed examination of them would leave them perplexed- as the possession of rules under which to subsume particulars. In other words, they get used to never making up their minds” (*Thinking and Moral Considerations*)

Independently of whether the actual individual, Eichmann, fits this description, which is problematic, we can say that the banality of evil is exercised by a subject that, in Norbert Bilbeny’s words, we could refer to as a moral idiot (from the Greek term, idiotēs), that is, a morally apathetic individual who lives in isolation from others, enclosed in himself, in his privacy, concerned only about himself, and incapable of thinking about the others.²² Upon observing Eichmann’s conduct during the trial, Arendt described him in the following terms: “No communication was possible with him, not because he lied, but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such”.²³ The totalitarian system had triumphed by instilling the dangers of critical examination in an entire society, and the citizens had become used to not making moral decisions and not thinking.

However, in situations of generalized and accepted violence, we also find dissidents who refuse to collaborate. In this respect, Arendt asks herself about the types of moral arguments they used to justify their conduct. The non-participants, in this sense, were the only ones who dared judge by themselves. They were those who had doubts about the traditional moral rules, the skeptics. They did not dispose of a better system of values. They did not automatically pre-judge. They were neither among the most educated individuals, nor did they belong to a specific social class (let us recall the Heidegger case). What led them not to participate was a secular moral argument that is expressed in the Socratic maxim according to which “it is preferable to suffer injustice than to commit

²² Norbert Bilbeny: *El idiota moral*, Barcelona: Anagrama, 1994

²³ Hannah Arendt: *Eichmann en Jerusalem. Un estudio sobre la banalidad del mal*, Barcelona: Lumen, 2003, p.

injustice”. And the reason for that preference, manifested in the refusal to commit wrongs, is that otherwise those individuals would not have been able to live with themselves, since this would imply living with the wrongdoer or the assassin they would have turned into. In other words, I cannot do certain things because, once I do them, I will not be able to live in peace with myself.²⁴ In the end, the moral issue of “What should I do?” depends on what I decide about myself; thus, it is here a question of self-imposed limits. Arendt is quite aware of the fact that that the Socratic type of moral proposed is a moral for times of crisis, for limit-situations. We could then ask ourselves what it is that characterizes those limit-situations, those exceptional moral and political situations. Undoubtedly, the answer is that those situations are marked by the existence of violence, by the threat of violence against public space and the shared world we have created through our actions and deliberations. Morally speaking, in the face of violence, the only solution is to reject it and not participate in its acceptance. It is in these extreme situations that individual responsibility acquires its strength and meaning. As Arendt says, “it is these limit-situations that best provide clarity about issues that would otherwise remain obscure and equivocal”²⁵.

Thus, it is not appropriate to speak about “obedience” (a term that would only be appropriate in the domain of religion) with respect to moral and political issues. Consequently, the question addressed to those who participated should not be Why did you obey? but rather Why did you support? Arriving at the maxim that it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong is only possible through the exercise of the capacity to think. Those whom society often calls “good” or “respectable” people are not precisely those moral dissidents that we are referring to. On the contrary, as Arendt points out, those respectable people are those who constantly appeal to elevated moral principles and adhere to any moral norm available to them (the important thing is to “have principles”, the habit of holding fast to something) without exercising the faculty of judgment. Thus, Arendt tells us that those least inclined to think and judge were generally those who were most willing to obey; those who most firmly held fast to the old moral code prevailing before Nazism were also the most anxious to assimilate the new Nazi moral code.²⁶ And, as we know, moral standards can be changed overnight and replaced by others, even if the new ones are devoid of content. Let us recall, in this respect, that the motto that prevailed in Auschwitz was: “There is only one road to freedom. Its milestones are: obedience, hard work, honesty, order, cleanliness, sobriety, uprightness, and a sense of sacrifice and love of the Fatherland.” This is a motto that could well be taken up nowadays by political parties and a good part of respectable society.

In Nazi Germany, only those who withdrew completely from public life or refused to go on having an active role in public life were able to avoid being implicated in crimes. At this point it is worth making reference to the story narrated by the German historian and writer, Joachim Fest with respect to non-participation in the Nazi regime as a moral attitude, given its profoundly Arendtian meaning.²⁷ Fest’s father was a professor who belonged to the German bourgeoisie and who would be removed from public office under

²⁴ Hannah Arendt: “Responsabilidad personal bajo una dictadura”, in: *Responsabilidad y juicio*, p. 71

²⁵ Hannah Arendt: “Responsabilidad colectiva”, in: *Responsabilidad y juicio*, p. 158

²⁶ Hannah Arendt: “Algunas cuestiones de filosofía moral”, in: *Responsabilidad y juicio*, p. 118

²⁷ Joachim Fest: *Yo no*, Madrid: Taurus, 2007

suspicion of carrying out “activities hostile to the state”, and refusing to recant his opinions about the government. His opposition to the regime brought about the family’s financial ruin and a long series of economic and social hardships. Additionally, he taught his children to reject evil, to reject a regime based on lies, as a moral attitude: he made them write and always keep with them a sentence from the Gospels: “Even if all others participate, I will not” (*Etiam si omnes, ego non*). This “I will not” set itself up as a banner in the face of complacent acquiescence and moral lethargy. As a moral maxim, this “I will not” perfectly illustrates the exercise of the capacity to think and judge, the possibility of dissent in the face of violence. I believe it is essential to highlight the relevance of that “I will not” in the exercise of our individual responsibility when faced with situations of violence and exclusion: even though others may collaborate with the institutionalization of violence, I will not; even though others may try to bury the crimes in oblivion, I will not. It is additionally necessary to emphasize the transition from the individual “I will not” to the collective “We will not”. This would entail what Arendt describes as the creation of a shared, collective power, a sense of collective citizen responsibility that would lead to a robust civil society from the moral and political point of view. We can cite some recent examples of the “we will not” in the face of violence, in which citizens rise up with a collective consciousness of responsibility, such as the massive citizen resistance demonstrations throughout Europe against military intervention in Iraq. But I especially think about the reactions of citizenship in Spain in the case of the kidnapping and subsequent assassination by the terrorist group ETA of Popular Party councilman, Miguel Ángel Blanco, in 1997. The massive demonstrations held all over Spain not only repudiated such a ferocious irruption of violence in everyday political life in the form of exchanging democratic consensus for arms, but also marked the beginning of the end of moral lethargy regarding terrorism, that is, turning one’s head in the other direction. The citizens exercised their moral and political responsibility, without delegating the task to the political parties, and exercised their moral option to repudiate violence and cease to be anonymous accomplices or silent and indifferent witness.

Following Arendt, we could then ask ourselves about the path that leads us to affirm that “we will not” as a moral maxim:

In the first place, it entails teaching people how to think, not what to think (Socrates). To think is to examine and to question. Thinking must display a critical role with respect to acquired truths. To think is also, as we have seen, to put ourselves in the position of others, making them present at the moment of making decisions or acting.

Secondly, it involves cultivating common sense, understood not as a sense that is common to all persons, but as a *sensus communalis* that integrates us into a community together with other people and makes us members of that community. For this reason, the exercise of common sense requires a public space in which it may develop. Common sense triggers the imagination by making present all those who are absent from the community: Jews, immigrants, and those excluded by violence. This is precisely what it means to have an enlarged mentality: to put ourselves in the place of the other.

In the third place, it is necessary to create and preserve public spaces for deliberation. Arendt insisted on the fact that one of the conditions for totalitarianism is the previous destruction of the public sphere through the severing of citizens’ political ties, thus

turning them into isolated individuals. The weakening of the public sphere hinders the exercise of both individual and collective responsibility, and fosters the appearance of banal evil.

If the question of moral and political responsibility leads us to ask ourselves what our conduct should be in the face of evil (in the face of wrongs done to others and with respect to their suffering), we should ask ourselves, again with Arendt, what wrongs we can cause by not assuming responsibility. Her answer in this respect is clear:

“The greatest evildoers are those who do not remember because they have never given thought to the matter, and nothing can keep them back because without remembrance they are without roots. Thinking and remembering are the human way of striking roots, of taking one’s place in the world.”²⁸

Arendt seems to suggest that evil is linked to both the absence of thinking (the banality of evil) and the incapacity to keep thinking linked to memory, to the stories that constitute our collective, not individual, memory. This remembering, this memory, thus refers us to the existence of a critical public space that acts as the guardian of memory, the memory of suffering and wrongs, so that they never repeat themselves. Thus, we can say that if there is public memory of the harm and of the victims of violence, we shall not only be providing symbolic reparation to the victims, but also facilitating the identification of that type of wrong or evil. Thus, it becomes a collective responsibility of civil society, of the political agents, to keep alive that memory of evil.

To conclude, we will be able to strengthen democracy as an institution and as a political culture through the politics of collective deliberation, together with a citizenry that exercises collective responsibility, that assumes responsibility for their actions in the context of community life, while at the same time demanding accountability from the governing class as an essential part of the contract of representation.

²⁸Hannah Arendt: “Algunas cuestiones sobre filosofía moral”, in: *Responsabilidad y juicio*, p. 111