

Resistance in Hannah Arendt: Between Ethics and Politics

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We are going to approach the theme of resistance by linking it with Hannah Arendt's categories of *action*, *judging* and *willing*. The starting point is our conviction that Arendt was correct when she stated that contemporary societies have a protototalitarian trend. She said at the end of *Origins of Totalitarianism*: "It may even be that the true predicaments of our time will assume their authentic form—though not necessarily the cruelest—only when totalitarianism has become a thing of the past" (p. 460). The national and international happenings of recent days indicate how true the arendtian prognosis is. The tendential growth of violence in today's world generates a flow—a kind of trance—which corrodes the traditional forms of civility attained by the western world: political power, legality, the world of work and culture. The usual forms of organization do not seem to be sufficient to set aside ghostliness and the propensity to the discardability of human beings in the current ways of sociability. There is even said to be a unique trend, and thus any opposite position inside the dominant socioeconomic and cultural system is unfeasible.

In this context we find it important to return the discussion about resistance. The theme of resistance as a political possibility and an instance of legitimatization of power arises in modern political philosophy. Before that we experience tyrannies, empires and absolute governments anchored in the divine right or in the prevalent order so as to demand unconditional obedience of citizens. Naturalism—the idea that there exists an unchangeable, teleologically determined, order of the universe, and that everything is organized in function of such an order—was present in philosophical thought until Middle Ages and then made unpracticable the philosophic reflection capable of supporting the position that defends political resistance. Indeed the first time one finds the defense of legitimacy of resistance is in Saint Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. However such a defense respects the order prevalence entirely, since resistance is never legitimate unless it can happen without scandals as well as let the community free of even worse damages than tyranny. Saint Thomas reaches the limit of Saint Paul's precept disseminated by Church and taken over by him according to which every power comes from God and must be exercised and obeyed in his name.

The modern turn-- the change from cosmocentric naturalism to anthropocentrism - gives man the role of subject and then makes it possible that resistance arises as a legitimate political institute. The idea of protection of citizens against tyrants and of the

need to impose limits to every power is the basis that will motivate the birth of human rights. Their kern—particularly in the first generation and present for instance in the English *Bill of Rights* (1649)—is the idea according to which power needs to be restrained no matter if the ruler is the king or the people. Without such power restraint, i.e. without the instance of rights, citizens take the risk to be disrespected and arbitrarily manipulated. The French declaration of 1789—article two—instituted the conservation of human rights as one of the aims of political organization, and among such rights is the one of resistance to oppression. Hence one consolidates the position advocated by John Locke, who writes in the three last chapters of the *Two Treatises of Government* between 1689 and 1690, that citizens have no duty to obey the Prince when the power is exercised arbitrarily. Before the arbitrary use of power people are no more obliged to be submitted, and so they have the total freedom to resist. Such a right is viewed as natural by Locke, and therefore comes prior to any political arrangement.

Since the nineteenth century one has transferred the focus from rights to progress. Revolution is no more conceived as an instrument to establish the political organisms capable of annihilating tyranny and man's oppression of man. Instead it becomes the means to accomplish economic and technological progress. The economic paradigm comes to stand out against the political one. Thus the economic dimension is given an ontometaphysical importance which comes to be the foundation upon which resistance is organized. One attached the new man's creation to the resolution of economic problems: the redeemed, emancipated, free man—the master of nature and history. The economic reality thus receives a metaphysical importance—unknown and unacceptable to Western ethical-philosophical tradition.

It is important to consider such a perspective because the philosophies of history born in the nineteenth century— both the ones of the hegelian-marxist extraction, and the ones of the darwinian—relativize the problematic of rights and offer support to the idea according to which it is licit to sacrifice human beings provided that this sacrifice plays the functional role in the general process of Universal History. On behalf of mankind's emancipation and progress, or of race purification, killing a few individuals or groups (e.g. ethnic ones) is justified. This is the beginning of an ordinary nowadays phenomenon: the banalization of evil, the relativization of violence. In conformity to this view, evil is an accident, as the whole gives a meaning to it. Human rights are not unalienatable anymore, but in such a way conditional that their sacrifice come to be normally justified in the name of the whole: class, nation, party, progress etc.

Thus we no longer have the idea of resistance attached to the realm of rights, but to the would-be force that is maybe stronger and more necessary than the power of oppressors. The trend of twentieth century resistance movements was their being attached to an economic or ethnic perspective pointing toward the horizon of destruction not only of oppression, but also of the directions imposed by economic backwardness. The universalization of progress was the warrant of freedom. Such a perspective corrupted not only the idea of resistance, but also the foundations of political life. Politics lost the meaning of human protection against violence and natural voracity. Reduced to the natural dimension, individual life is something futile, meaningless in itself. Allowing and protecting the arising of individualities, i.e. beings able to act freely, is the meaning of

politics. Such a freedom declines when it is no longer the quintessence of political life and it is understood as a result of economy planning.

In this horizon we can insert the current crisis of State. The crisis in the political model based on the representation is intrinsically related to such an impossibility of politics as a domain where the community destinies are determined. The abstention, the passivity and the current political paralysis refer to this inexpressivity of politics and its representative organisms as instances which keep the effective power. State is no more the privileged place of domination. Statesmen have changed into mere managers of transnational interests. Everyday's life has come to be affected by decisions that go far beyond both the national boundaries, and the traditional legal and political parameters. The invisibility of contemporary tyrants has been transformed into a great challenge to political organizations. The nowadays tyrant is no longer representable in State, nor is he in the majority of electors, and not in a class either. There is no specific institutional place anymore which can make domination substantial. There is a trend toward power virtualization that allows one to eliminate the power of citizens as concrete human beings. In the current practice of power, the place or the position loses importance for the skill of obtaining information and of influencing decisions. The power of media, of *marketing* and of statistics prove that very well.

Before such a picture, a situation in which it is difficult to attach a face, a place or a position to the oppressor, the idea of resistance must be urgently reconsidered. Today there does not seem to be a conception of the whole that manages to justify resistance movements: class, ethnic group, nation, communism etc., which means the standards that used to feed resistance movements until not many years ago show themselves to now be incapable of putting the opposition energies in motion, exactly because the "subject" of the oppression is virtual, ghostly. So one enters into a defiance—the task to think an idea of resistance without an ultimate and absolute ground. For one to think of resistance today, one cannot help accepting the idea that knowing the ultimate ends of the world escapes from man. Thus in Arendt resistance is not linked with an absolute power, and it has no ambition either to install the reign of heaven on earth, or to make a specific kind of man, but to produce spaces where human continuity can be experienced in men's living together with the others. The focus is conceiving revolution not as the act of making a mankind in accordance with a standard anymore, but as the foundation of the world, which is understood as the ability to provoke situations and spaces where men communicate with one another, and refuse omnipotence and virtuality, which is the current refuge of the promise of completeness. So it means to think of resistance inside the democratic realm and not as an armed exit or another paradigm that has war or violent destruction as a means. The need to enlarge and to found spaces of resistance inside democracy is the great defiance to the people situated in a perspective of opposition to the ghostly, conformist and naturalizing status quo, which is based on the discardability of human life. It is against this perspective of superfluity of humanity that the arendtian reflection on resistance is articulated.

In a contrary position to totalitarian experiences and the current protototalitarian postures Arendt wants to conceive a worthy exit which relieves the social and political misery we are inserted in without falling in the temptation of totalitarian recipes. And it is

in this horizon that she points at the importance of reconsidering the meaning of politics and of the refoundation of public space. For her politics means the freedom that men accomplish every time they are able to spontaneously and together begin an action and found relations, institutions. In Arendt politics is the form and the adequate locus of resistance. Resisting is something more than reacting or assuming a passive behavior before the forces of destruction—it is founding. Reaction is the place of impotence and violence—foundation is the place of potency, creativity and human freedom. There exists a component of singularization in the publically conducted action which hinders the destructive potences contained in natural pressures, in the imperative logic of globalized markets and in social pressures. Politics and its inherent action, in Arendt, are not related to a realization of metaphysical values, but to man's inherent possibility to search for the constitution and disclosure of his self-identity. Politics is founded on this singularization pathos, not possible to happen in loneliness and virtuality, but in life in common. Such a pathos has no possibilities to be realized in the merely economic dimension or in a state conception of politics, reduced to a means to guarantee survival, security or material progress.

The centrality of the category of action in arendtian texts can only be understood in the limits of this situation. Action in Arendt refers to an unalienatable ethical contents—it reveals an agent. That is why the difference between acting and making is so emphatically approached in *The Human Condition*. In action man manifests himself as a beginner, an active being. Instead of a result—a “what”—just the way we are accustomed to evaluate plans of government, political action reveals a “who”—a person. The political importance of action is the fact this is the reality through which the world emerges. The beauty of great deeds and speeches lies in the very possibility of foundation held by them. Political action, thought of in this way, is endowed with such a grandeur and dignity that it can by no means be compared to the reservedness and passivity of today's man whose only big effort is no more than to earn his living and to consume. Action allows the arising of a shelter—a meaning for life in common that bars and resists the functionalization inherent to the vital process that tends to devour people, in naturalizing them and introducing the reign of the stronger ones—in short the violence.

Politics is thus a fundamental sphere if one wants to think of the category of resistance in Arendt. The theme here is a political institute that must be exercised democratically. War does not constitute a model for the author when she thinks of resistance. What is the question is not death and destruction, but something that must be highlighted and deserves applauding. This means that, in the arendtian perspective, what must be strengthened in the democratic realm is not only formal aspects, but also institutions that can maintain the human ability of beginning new things in a reified world. Consequently the guarantee of civil disobedience—explicitly defended by Arendt—shows itself to be fundamental, and together with it we could still include other institutes, such as the right to strike, to receive exile and participate in the public budget. In such a perspective democracy is no formality anymore and comes instead to be an important instance for the structural organization of our sociability; it is worth saying that resistance in Arendt is a component of the political power concept. Power in Arendt is an artifice through which tyranny and domination are blocked. Power for her is not the same as dominating or

ruling just the way it is normally exercised and regarded. Power in Arendt is really accomplished every time men found living together, every time they act in common and make up their minds democratically about the matters which have something to do with everyone.

Such a dimension of resistance is also present in the arendtian approach to judgment. In associating resistance to judgment we leave the immediate political realm and enter the sphere of ethics. The paroxysm of some experiences lived collectively today will demand a form for man to protect himself from practicing evil. In this line of thought Arendt will not recover theories of the good or of the absolute norms, just as tradition has done. The direction of her reflection is the recovery of politics, even when it shows itself to be immediately unfeasible. There are several possible approaches to the judgment theme in Arendt. In face of the crisis of values and of western institutions in the contemporary world, she will give a fundamental importance to such a human faculty. Resting on the kantian reflection on the faculty of judging present in the Third Critic, Arendt will operate with judgment as a model for political thought, as a prudential form of thinking, expressed both in the ability of considering other people's existence in the world, and in the ability of carrying out agreements with them; judgment will also function as a sort of opinion (*doxa*). Through judgment men manifest how the world is disclosed to them. Through opinion man manifests and puts no knowledge—no *episteme*—in the risky center of general attention, but his position in the world. What judgment reveals is how the world is seen from the specific place that each one occupies.

In addition there is a reconciliatory dimension present in judgment which Arendt points constantly out. Through judgment man tries to become reconciled to *what* effectively happened. Instead of escaping toward rationalizations and explanations, judgment tries to get man reconciled to what happened just the way it did. Human dignity grows strengthened when man is able to face pain and events instead of escaping from them, even if it costs a lot of tears: “All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them”, writes Arendt, following Dinesen, in *The Human Condition* (p. 175). When Arendt approaches such a dimension of judgment, she especially enhances her opposite position to the idea that the judge's role is up to History or any other universal process. Every time Arendt sets the category of judgment in motion, she somehow does so in an opposite position to the postures that try to define a human being as something statistically, economically or historically interchangeable, that is, without self-dignity and as a simple thing among the living wheels of processes.

If judgment on one side intends to attain agreement with other people and reconciliation with events, it expresses on the other side an ethical-moral dimension that is essential for Arendt. In judgment one first enters into an agreement with oneself. If man is unable of setting an agreement with himself, he will not be able to set an agreement with other people. Such an agreement with oneself brings to light the spiritual potential that each one of human beings owns. In face of the crisis of great ethical standards and customs, such an instance will mean an ethical-moral refuge capable of strengthening the resistance perspective. Although agreement with oneself is unable to prescribe a universal morality and to present a program practicable for everyone, it can be fundamental for one to stop a current willing to impose itself as a fate in its tendency to

constrain everybody. The act of judging and not acting shows itself in this situation to be the instance able of manifesting human power and dignity. It was such an ability that in accordance with Arendt constituted the basis of the behavior of several Germans which resisted the pressure of nazist movements, in spite of the connivance dominating in institutions such as the Legislature, the Judiciary, Religion, University etc. This is a primordial faculty to recover morality and politics in face of the marketing pressures in mass societies, of the progress tide trying to submerge everything and of the market iron logic that globalization tries to impose.

So we want to express that the judging faculty in Arendt is a fundamental instance for one to think the possibility of resistance in the contemporary world. This is the meaning of the epigraph present in the arendtian writing about judgment: the victorious cause pleased the gods, but the defeated one pleases Cato. Thereby Arendt wants to emphasize the resistance dimension present in the human ability of judging as a grandeur able to both lay aside the banal vision that analyses everything based on success, and thus, at the same time, to present the dignity contents inherent to judgment exercise, once it defies processes, flows, tendencies etc.

Regarding judgment enhances the fact that resistance in Arendt—an essentially political institute—is enlarged and comes to take support in man’s spiritual faculties. Thinking—in the exercise of judgment—compels one to stop. Stopping to think as something inherent to judging will entail an obstacle to the processes of virtualization and of anonymousness that tend to eliminate the abilities of utterability, nomination and foundation, which are specifically human.

Now let us go toward will. *The Life of the Mind* (TLM), in which the faculties *think*, *will* and *judge* are approached, was written in a tone of resistance. Such an inflection impressed in the book was given by the same ground that allowed Arendt to reflect on the spiritual faculties of man. We refer to her report about the trial of Eichmann, the nazist executioner. Arendt verified that Eichmann did not have any pathology and any sordid motivation and nevertheless sent millions of Jews to death. He acted just like Pavlov’s dog, as if he were conditioned: closed for thinking, judging and willing on his own. He forsook spiritual faculties and behaved as a mere gear of the deadly system. That was what motivated her to think over mental life of man as a dimension able to block the spread of evil in the world. In a particular manner such a tone of resistance is even stronger when Arendt approaches the faculty of will. Maybe this has a connection with the historical and conceptual approach achieved by Arendt. Everyone of us knows that the philosophic regard of will appears due to Saint Augustine’s question about evil’s origin and the means to resist its powers. In Arendt such a regard will entail refusing the attachment between resistance and the necessitarian or fatalist perspective that is often present in the traditional approach to resistance. This perspective does not manage to notice the recognition pathos inherent to the human condition. When man exercises will, he individualizes himself. A being that wills is not mere virtuality.

This does not mean anyway to take a voluntarist perspective. Nothing is more distant from arendtian intention than voluntarism. For Arendt, will is not the same as power. Just as we have seen, power is an action in concert. Nevertheless there is a dimension of liberty in the faculty of will that is fundamental for Arendt. It is in this faculty that an

important human ability lies—the one of saying no and of beginning a series of wholly new actions that destroy the vicious circle of mimetic behaviors and actions. Such a dimension of denial is essential since it presents resistance as a concrete existential possibility. Arendt's regard of will is marked by the defense of the human sphere as a realm free of determination. There is not a law or context that eliminates the human ability of choosing and beginning something. Even before more closed situations tending to impress a dimension of natural fatalism, the ability of saying no remains a concrete possibility. Arendt says about it: "There is a faculty in man by virtue of which, regardless of necessity and compulsion, he can say "Yes" or "No", agree or disagree with is factually given (...)" (TLM II, p. 68)

By the way, when Arendt comments Saint Paul, she says that where law is presented, it is soon contested in that very place. By this she means there is no law, obligation or omnipotence capable of suppressing human will. Man is entailed in everything coming about in the scope of the human matters. Any *I Will* arises from a propensity to liberty as a reaction of man to the yoke of someone or some coercitive situation. This is the scandal of wishing: the law that says "Thou shalt will" brings about an "I nill". Will has a potential tendency to resistance. Immanent to will (*Velle*) is nill (*Nolle*).

Such a relation between will and resistance takes place in Arendt because she views the human matters as having contingent causes. Will is the faculty of saying yes or no, of choosing or beginning something, so that someone's cause is he himself, but always contingently. Thereby she means that we are in a scope where one has an ability of doing what one could also quit doing. Will does not deal with what is subjected to a causal chain nor is it with the reality whose logic is independent of man. Indeed it belongs to the realm in which man can interfere actively, and then what happens could come about otherwise. In such a sphere there is no absolute determination. The sphere of will is thus the one that distinguishes what is in man's power from what is not.

For Arendt will lies in temporality, a sphere in which things can or cannot be. It is exactly for such a reason that Ancient Greek Philosophy was unable to regard will philosophically. Being bound to an idea of order originated from physis, which produces and determines everything in its circularity, Philosophy could not notice a realm of signification born in the realm of humanity. Meaning is in the whole. It comes from kosmos. Man fulfills only what nature dictated. Meaning comes from the final intentions of the universe and the world. Inside this horizon there is no place for one to think will, since men are no more than determined beings.

It is interesting to observe that there is no idea of future in the cosmic circularity. Everything is born, lives and dies. History follows a decadence logic. Even when Philosophy tried to think of future, it was never open for will, but it took advantage of the progress idea to transplant the same determinism which one used to conceive only about nature to the realm of the human matters. Through the notion of progress one verifies the discardability of man as a being endowed with an ability of his own to begin something, in the same terms of the Ancient Philosophy idea of being's perenniality. In such a conception, future is nothing more than a consequence of past. Having the pair of categories *act* and *potence* as its conceptual basis, future consists simply in a potentiality contained in past. Thus there is no place here for the new, and one was only able to think

of it when Philosophy came to conceive the faculty of will with all its implications. In such a moment man came to be an instance of reality with inaugural powers. Augustine distinguishes between *Principium* and *Initium*. The former comes within God's scope and is related to eternity and grace, the latter was created together with man and is linked with temporality and the free will. Man owns such an ability of beginning something completely new no matter if this is good or evil.

In accepting the faculty of will, future loses its causal link with past, which thus does not determine future. The inexorability of today, which was determined by yesterday and is followed by tomorrow, in a mimetic process *ad infinitum*, is menaced by the interference of the denying spirit and, through the faculty of will, convokes the not yet that is absent.

In this manner it shows itself to be explicit that will for Arendt is not only the faculty of the free will (choice) just as tradition thought nor is it related to an internal instance capable of protecting man from mundane vicissitudes. Will is above all the faculty of spontaneously beginning new bonds with other people, and it is attached to human natality and to the possibilities that reveal man as a singular being. It has thus nothing to do with either seizing things, taking advantage of them, or commanding people. This is a conception of will bound to the logic of completeness, to a dependence of exteriority, to an attempt of eliminating lack and need. Will in Arendt is related to a conception of man as an active being and as someone able to feel free even in a situation of incompleteness. Will, understood in such a way, gives man, endowed with self-dignity, a dimension of transcendence. Here lies the ethical dimension of the arendtian approach to will. In the quality of an internal force of affirmation and negation, it constitutes a fundamental category for one to think the resistance theme in a time when no resistance is said to be possible. If man is necessarily obliged to will, then he can take no responsibility over. On the other hand, if there exists some liberty in his will, if he is responsible for his choices and positions, this is a sign of his potentiality to create something new in an old environment of factuality.

Finally we can say that *acting*, *judging* and *willing* work as faculties of hope. In Arendt hope is not associated to a utopia of completeness or redemption of the finite condition of man, but to the idea of the world's potentiality to be ready to shelter the new human beings to come. Hope is regarded as depending on both the responsibility that we have with future generations, and the world they will inherit from us. They lead our look to a posture of hope, since acting is founding, judging is transcending the pressures of mimetism, and will is abandoning indifference. Hence will means beginning and choosing things in a much populated world. While new humans keep on being born, other beginnings and worlds will be able to come to existence, because "that there be a beginning, man was created" (Augustine).

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