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Sociability and Plurality

New perspectives on the Arendtian political principle

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1. Introduction. Plurality as the Principle of the Political

As has recently been reaffirmed, "the adoption of plurality as the new political principle" is the hallmark of Hannah Arendt's entire political theory (Taraborrelli 2024, 41, 78). In Arendt's effort to rethink the political in the aftermath of totalitarianism and the related collapse of "the great tradition of Western political thought" (Arendt 1961, 25; Arendt 1994, 282), plurality – understood as "the twofold character of equality and distinction" (Arendt 1998, 175) – emerges as the constitutive feature of the human condition that must be defended and enacted against the historical tendency of political philosophy to exclude it from its theoretical frameworks (Arendt 2005, 93).

Indeed, according to Arendt, beginning with the conflict between philosophy and the *polis* that led to Socrates' death, our philosophical tradition – from Plato onwards – has sought to evade at least two consequences inherent in the inescapable fact of plurality: the proliferation of opinions and the unpredictability of human action. Both are intolerable to those who aspire to the contemplation of fixed and eternal forms and who wish to see a figure such as the philosopher-king "'makes' his City as the sculptor makes a statue" (Arendt 1998, 227).

As is well known, Arendt does not arrive at Popper's conclusions and repeatedly insists on the unprecedented and disruptive nature of totalitarianism. Nevertheless, this is not enough to absolve the responsibilities of a tradition that, for the reason just mentioned, has conceived politics and action (*praxis*) in terms of fabrication (*poiesis*), thereby introducing coercion and violence into the sphere of human coexistence – to the point of interpreting, in Weberian terms, power as the monopoly of the *means* of violence (Arendt 1998, 220–230; 1970, 35).

Re-centering plurality within the political therefore entails a political critique of violence and of its alleged inevitability. The aim of this essay is to introduce a comparative term – Andrea Caffi's notion of sociability – alongside Arendt's concept of plurality, in order to clarify and expand its meaning, above all from the perspective, still tragically urgent today, of a political theory – and a philosophical anthropology – that is non-violent.

2. Plurality and Sociability

The line of inquiry just introduced is suggested by a particularly valuable archival document, namely a letter from Nicola Chiaromonte dated November 16, 1958. The Italian antifascist intellectual – who had by then returned to Rome after his years of exile in New York – commented enthusiastically on *The Human Condition*[1] and drew Arendt's attention to the following:

> don't you think, dear Hannah, that between intimate life and society at large there always was, and it became quite apparent toward the end of the eighteenth century, a third and most significant domain, namely that of society in a limited sense, or, as my friend Caffi used to call it, of sociabilité?

On December 15, 1958, Arendt replied:

> Sociabilite [sic]: I think you are quite right and I should have mentioned it. I come nearest to it in a couple of pages on the workers' movements (218 ff.)[2]

Before delving into the content of this brief exchange, it is essential to clarify who Caffi was and why Chiaromonte so clearly assumed that Arendt would know of him. Andrea Caffi (1887–1955), an Italian-Russian political thinker and revolutionary, was born in St. Petersburg to Italian parents. Educated in the tradition of Russian libertarian populism – fundamentally Proudhonian in inspiration – he embraced at a very young age socialist and federalist ideas, which he later combined with the sociology of Georg Simmel, whom he attended in Berlin during the 1910s. From the traumatic experiences of the First World War and the authoritarian degeneration of the Bolshevik Revolution, he drew the experiential material for a reflection on violence that eventually led him, during the resistance against fascism in both Italy and France, to elaborate a non-violent conception of politics, revolution, and socialism. A biographical-intellectual aspect that cannot be overlooked here is that, thanks to Chiaromonte's intercession, between 1945 and 1947 six of Caffi's essays were translated and published in *Politics*, the pacifist and libertarian New York journal edited by Dwight Macdonald, with whom both Arendt and Chiaromonte were close collaborators.[3]

Having made this necessary digression, I can now turn to the analysis of the chosen epistolary exchange. It should first be emphasized that Chiaromonte introduces Caffi's idea of sociability [*sociabilité*] by explicitly recalling the distinction between the private sphere ("intimate life") and the public realm ("society at large"), to which the entire second chapter of *The Human Condition* is devoted, aptly titled *The Public and the Private Realm*. In these densely argued pages, as was her established practice, Arendt turns to classical antiquity in search of theoretical genealogies useful for understanding

1 Henceforth appear in the text as *HC*.

2 Hannah Arendt Papers: https://www.loc.gov/resource/mss11056dig.024360/?st=gallery (imagine 7,8,9)

3 The six articles written by Caffi and published under the pseudonym European are: *The Automatization of European People* (November 1945); *Towards a Socialist Program* (December 1945); *Is the Revolutionary War a contradiction in terms?* (April 1946); *Notes on Mass Culture* (November 1946); *Violence and Sociability* (January 1947); *The French Condition* (July-August 1947). An anthology bringing together all of Caffi's essays published in the United States is forthcoming: *Andrea Caffi: The New York Essays*, edited by Mike Tyldesley, Little Big Eye Publishin.

and critiquing the present: the original distinction between the *oikia* – the domestic sphere, devoted to the satisfaction of needs and biological necessities – and the *polis* – the space of freedom and therefore of political participation – was gradually lost in the "hybrid realm" we call "society," to the point that "we see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping" (Arendt 1998, 28). Arendt thus launches a polemic against mass society, in which the public sphere is radically depoliticized in favor of administrative techniques aimed merely at securing the subsistence of vast human conglomerates.

It is well known that, Arendtianly speaking, the signifier "society" is hardly redeemable. Yet Chiaromonte's letter attempts a resignification, speaking of "society in a limited sense" and, with Caffi, of "sociability." Chiaromonte is here referring to a conceptual tripartition common among anarchist and non-Marxist socialist theorists, particularly dear to Caffi, which distinguishes between *people*, *masses*, and *society*. While in the first genuine communal elements and forms of spontaneous culture still persist, the second marks a degeneration of the people, generally brought about by the sharpening of dynamics of exploitation and oppression, dynamics that are in any case always reserved to them by a fourth term that interacts transversally with this tripartition – namely, the state and its apparatuses of authoritarian government. Yet precisely in the cracks of the latter's functioning lies the possibility that *society* might emerge out of the people. Several of Caffi's essays published in *politics* could be used to define this last term, but for reasons of both brevity and clarity, it makes sense to cite the most important one – indeed, the one Chiaromonte is most likely assuming his interlocutor has in mind: *Violence and Sociability* (1947)[4]. Here Caffi describes this "smaller groups, the 'society'" as groups animated by a disinterested pleasure in being together – that is, one extraneous to the criteria of utility – organized without coercion and capable of embodying the very opposite of the "will to power." In other words, they are groups that experience sociability, which, as the intuitively antonymic tone of the essay's title suggests, excludes violence – and vice versa. Sociability, Caffi wrote in 1947, ultimately amounts to a conception of "justice [that] implies equality" (Caffi 1947).

Turning now to Arendt's reply, it should not go unmentioned that just a few lines after the passage quoted above, Chiaromonte added that, in light of his reading of *HC*, he would further stress that in groups experiencing sociability there inevitably arises "the nostalgia for a true polis." It is therefore especially significant that, to these suggestions, Arendt responded that she had said something along similar lines in the paragraph entitled *The Labor Movement* in Chapter V – the chapter devoted to *action* – of *HC*.[5]

4 An incontrovertible archival proof that Caffi's contribution to *Politics* – and in particular *Violence and Sociability* – did not go unnoticed by Arendt can be found in her *Marginalia*. As shown in the online archive, in her personal copy of Dwight Macdonald's *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1958), Arendt underlined a passage where the former editor lists Caffi's 1947 essay among the best contributions ever published in *Politics*: https://blogs.bard.edu/arendtcollection/macdonald-dwight-memoirs-of-a-revolutionist-essays-in-political-criticism/ (see pag. 30-31).

5 Consulting the first edition of *HC*, it is clear that Arendt was in fact referring Chiaromonte to this very section of the essay.

Consistent with the theoretical framework of the entire work, in these pages Arendt reiterates that labor represents the sphere of the human condition most properly *unpolitical* – the dimension in which each individual is confronted, alone with oneself, by the bare necessity of survival. Yet, as she writes, "the European working class," situating her discussion between the uprisings of 1848 and the much-admired Hungarian Revolution of 1956, "has written one of the most glorious and probably the most promising chapter of recent history" (Arendt 1998, 215). What Arendt is referring to here is the fact that "the people's revolutions [...] have come forth, albeit never successfully, with another new form of government: the system of people's councils" (216). Invoking categories and concepts crucial to her philosophical theory, she goes on to add that "when the labor movement appeared on the public scene, it was the only organization in which men acted and spoke qua men – and not qua members of society," to the point that "it almost looked as if the movement would succeed in founding, at least within its own ranks, a new public space with new political standards" (219). Arendt thus attributes an extraordinarily positive role to the history of the labor movement: at the beginning of Chapter V, she explains that "speech and action [...] are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but qua men." These are therefore the very modalities through which the human condition can unfold most fully in its peculiar hallmark, namely the paradoxical plurality of human beings who are at once equal and distinct.

We thus return once more to plurality, and to its parallel with sociability suggested by the Arendt–Chiaromonte exchange. This parallel also extends to the phenomenal (practical-political) manifestations of plurality and sociability: if Arendt points to the council system, Caffi – libertarian socialist, revolutionary syndicalist, and among the earliest anti-Stalinists – consistently interpreted mutual-aid societies, workers' cooperatives, and the spontaneous institutions that emerged during revolutionary uprisings as the highest outcomes of the action of "society" and its "groups" and, therefore, of the unfolding of sociability.

In short, plurality and sociability, returning to the introduction of this essay, appear to be two categories deeply implicated in that "lost treasure of the revolutionary tradition" that Arendt evokes in the conclusion of *On Revolution* and that outlines the features of "another tradition" (Arendt 1970, 40), alternative to the great tradition of Western political thought – a tradition in which Marxism, at least in its hegemonic currents, must also be included. It is therefore no coincidence that *politics*, the journal where the intellectual trajectories of Caffi and Arendt intersected, was later described by Arendt as a magazine and a community of thinkers animated by a "post-Marxian mood [...] strongly anarchist and pacifist," committed to laying down "new roots in the realm of theory" and discovering "new 'Ancestors'" (Arendt 2018, 397).

3. A Non-Sovereign Anthropology and Non-Violent Power

To aspire to such a rethinking of the political necessarily entails a radical critique of the very foundations of the Western tradition. One must therefore confront the hegemonic sovereign conception of the individual, rooted in the liberal presumption of an

autonomous subject whose task is to defend a private sphere of freedom against the interference of others' freedom. *HC* is unequivocal on this point: "no [human] can be sovereign because not one [human], but [humans], inhabit the earth" (Arendt 1998, 234). Caffi fully agrees, though in a conceptually less refined vocabulary, when he writes that "outside of individuals who live together and act in reciprocal relations, there is no concrete reality" (Caffi 1958, my translation). The sovereign subject thus appears as an ideological abstraction, a distortion that runs counter to both the condition of plurality and the aspiration to sociability. Yet neither author, nor the respective categories under consideration, overlook the opposite and equally problematic counterpart of individualism: namely, the already mentioned massification.

As noted above, Arendt's critique of mass society, as well as Caffi's idea of the masses as the degeneration of a people reduced to subjugation and oppression. In the mass, equality is flattened into absolute identification, into the forced homogenization of a people-mass that moves as if it were a single gigantic individual – inevitably under the command of a leader who is at least authoritarian, if not already totalitarian. In this sense, plurality and sociability both underscore the importance of an anthropological theory aware of the constitutive interdependence of human beings, while at the same time jealously guarding the uniqueness and unrepeatability of each individual. This dyadic condition is in fact necessary if the political is to remain constantly renewable: a dimension of equality is required to make interaction practicable, above all communication; while a dimension of distinction is necessary to ensure that there is something to be discussed and, therefore, reasons to act (Arendt 1998, 175–76). For Arendt, action is indeed discursive action, and here again the agreement with Caffi is substantial: "No one," writes the Italo-Russian thinker, "will claim […] to even imagine an authentic human individual, whose essential quality is to be capable of articulate language, […] outside of any social life" (Caffi 1958).

For both thinkers, one of the political implications of such an anthropology – which, with Butler, we might call an anthropology of relationality (Butler 2012, 5) – must be a redefinition of power in terms of persuasive capacity rather than the coercive dynamics of violence. Power is thus restored to the sphere of action – and not of fabrication – and thereby situated within a communal dimension rather than that of a presumed sovereign individual: in short, a conception of power grounded in the categories of plurality and sociability. Only in this sense can we properly understand Arendt's claim that "politically speaking, it is insufficient to say that power and violence are not the same. Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent" (Arendt 1968, 56).

And this was precisely the kind of power experimented in those "new forms of government" mentioned in the passage of *HC* that Arendt identified as closest to the concept of sociability. It should not be overlooked that, on a broader macro-political level, these forms of government coincide, for both Arendt and Caffi, with the federal model – an alternative to the nation-state, which is nothing other than the ultimate political-institutional outcome of the hegemonic anthropology of our tradition: "Sovereignty," Arendt writes in *HC*, "is always spurious if claimed by an isolated single entity, be it the individual entity of the person or the collective entity of a nation" (Arendt 1998, 245).

Federalism in Arendt's theory, from her early writings on the Jewish homeland to the systematic framework of *On Revolution*, can ultimately be interpreted in terms of the twofold character of equality and distinction: to "establish a common government for two different peoples," while promoting the decentralization of power through council institutions (Arendt 2007, 400), serves precisely to guarantee a plane of political and juridical equality without sacrificing the ethnic and/or cultural specificity of anyone living in a given territory – in other words, a political-institutional architecture capable of safeguarding for all the "right to have rights." It should thus appear perfectly consistent that the editorial line of *politics* on postwar European reorganization was radically federalist, aimed at understanding, in Caffi's words, "how to dissociate the nation from the government of the territory" in order to "'get' the modern National State before it 'gets' us" (Caffi 1945). Plurality and sociability would thereby be secured both on the internal level – among citizens of an irreducibly multinational state – and on the external level, in relations between states.

4. Conclusion: Plurality and Sociability for Our "Dark Times"

It is undeniable that the hopes of both authors have been soundly defeated: we live in an age dominated by so-called "sovereigntist" politics, where nation-states are globally hardening, militarizing their borders, and, in the worst cases, reviving expansionist ambitions to the point that war has once again returned to the center of international political life. Our societies are increasingly massified in habits and consumption and are grounded in a privatized individualism, absorbed by the neoliberal paradigm of competition. Plurality and sociability thus retain a disruptive potential for critique and for prefiguring alternative social and political models.

A good example can be found in the struggles of migrants and of minorities more generally, such as LGBTQ communities. When they demand the recognition of their rights as migrants, or when they affirm the "pride" of belonging to their communities of reference, they embody a call for substantive political and legal equality without yielding to the blackmail of assimilation and homogenization: they demand, in short, both equality and distinction. The paradigm of plurality – especially when reinforced by that of sociability – has the merit of responding to the human need for rootedness and belonging, while at the same time acting as an antidote to the dangers of identitarian regression: the claim is not for a world of one's own, uniform and closed, but for a *world in common*. This perspective is of crucial importance also on the broader level of national liberation struggles, helping to prevent them from taking the shape of aggressive new nationalisms that risk, in turn, reproducing exclusionary dynamics.

To conclude, a brief remark is needed on the aforementioned individualistic and hyper-competitive character of our societies. Even though the anthropological paradigms of *homo faber* and *homo economicus* are visibly in decline – which reflect the systemic crisis of capitalism – we are still asked to adapt to them. Arendt's theorization of plurality reminds us that we are also *zoon politikón*: beings who find genuine pleasure – what she names "public happiness" (Guaraldo 2018) – in exercising thought and speech through the disinterested care for the world we share with others, always considered as both equal

and distinct. In a similar way, Caffi reclaims the figure of *homo ludens*, pointing to a dimension of life that resists the demands of utility and productivity.

Plurality and sociability thus emerge as closely connected political categories, grounded in a relational conception of the human, and capable of orienting us through the aporias of our time – shedding, to put it in Arendt's words, a light that can break through even the darkest times.

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