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MILESTONES IN THE CRITIQUE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE: DEWEY AND ARENDT

Abstract: This paper proposes a turnover to the theories which have fostered the 20th Century discourse upon the public sphere. By depicting the way in which the structural transformations suffered by the public sphere within the framework of modernity have been theorized by the pre-Habermasian discourse upon the public sphere, the present work aims at revealing the similarities as well as the differences between John Dewey's approach of the public sphere and Hannah Arendt's theory of the political realm. Although Arendt was not so much influenced by pragmatism, their theories share a normative dimension according to which the public sphere is structured in order to achieve certain functions, which were disrupted in modernity. Therefore Dewey's eclipse of the public, through the multiplication of its content, corresponds to Arendt's decay of the public realm through the rise of the social.

Key words: Arendt, Dewey, modernity, decay, public sphere, plurality, political theory

Argument: Why are Dewey's and Arendt's theories still necessary for the study of the today's public sphere?

In this paper, we propose an examination of the status of the public sphere in the thought of John Dewey and of Hannah Arendt in order to depict the major explanations of the fall of the modern public sphere. For this research, we will take into consideration two major texts of these authors, namely John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems*, published in 1927, and Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, published in 1958. Following this path seems to have a twofold importance for our inquiry. First, it seems extremely important if we are to consider, thereafter, the vulnerabilities to which the contemporary public sphere is exposed to today. It is certain that both Arendt and Dewey still have a major contribution to the question concerning the meaning of the public and of the influences that modernity has had over it. Second, the importance of the question concerning the public sphere for Romania or generally for Eastern Europe is obvious: after the fall of Communism we witnessed its reconstruction and the difficulties of this second genesis. The following considerations could, therefore, be pertinent for a milieu in which the level of the consciousness of the common interest, that is, the formation of the public sphere, is still low and where democracy is still in the search for its basis.

During Communism, the Eastern-European countries have been dominated by an unbalanced and distorted relationship between the public sphere and the private sphere, explicitly characterized by an "intrusion" of the public in the domain of the private sphere. In Dewey's terms, the state is seen as a political organization of human relations which presupposes all legal decisions and institutions. The former Communist states were not based mainly on the principle of the rule of law, but rather on arbitrary decisions, often interpreted as "legal". In the Romanian case, the former *Securitate*, or rather its "particular" human agents, aimed at continuously interfering into the private sphere, i.e., the family, or even the human body and/or mind. From a psychological perspective, these interferences, always on the verge of happening, may have constituted one of the fears that have caused the break of Romanian Communism. Translated into political terms, this clash emerged out of conflicting public and private spheres represented one of the "internal" flaws within the Communist ideology and regime. Thus, it would be easy to affirm that the clash between the public and the private sphere sustained by the Communist ideology and consequently promoted by the Communist regimes was one of the main loopholes that led to its breaking-up.

A lack of theoretical approaches on the public-private split is noticeable in Romania all along the Communist period, whereas western

political theory along the same period of time (cf. John Dewey in 1927 and later in 1946, in his work *The Public and Its Problems*; Hannah Arendt in her *Human Condition* in 1959, or Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Change of the Public Sphere* in 1961) has drawn the principles of democracy from a balanced public-private split, or it has discovered the origins of the democratic state in the existence of a “reasonable” public sphere.

This deficiency of a coherent theoretical approach on the necessity of a re-emergence and manifestation of a vivid public sphere, entwined with a lack of critical, intellectual solidarity concerning political involvement, might explain some of the political events like the *Mineriade* (Miner’s march to Bucharest –the last one in 1999) and some political decisions, for example, not to enforce the lustration law. It might also explain the lack of a vivid civil society in the Romanian context even (long) after 1989.

Dewey’s pragmatic reformation of the political domain and Arendt’s reconstruction of political theory

When we speak here about “sphere”, we mainly refer to a “web of relations”, not necessarily political in its essence, but at least (morally) responsible for the *direct* and *indirect* consequences of its decisions and actions/transactions. In Dewey’s terms, the consequences are considered to be direct when the “immediately concerned people are affected”¹ and indirect when other people “beyond those immediately concerned are affected.”²

It is a matter, of course, that Arendt had denied any pragmatist influences on her thought. She affirms that her thought cannot be defined by categories such as liberalism, positivism or *pragmatism*: “Voegelin seems to think that totalitarianism is only the other side of liberalism, positivism and pragmatism. Even if someone shares or not the liberal position (and I have to affirm here, that I am pretty sure that I am neither a supporter of liberalism, nor of positivism or pragmatism) – the main issue is that liberals are surely not totalitarian.”³ She did not consider herself in any way a pragmatist and also complained about the misunderstandings she had with her “English readers” mainly due to her way of thinking that was based on distinctions and not on associations: “the whole notion of thinking a matter *through* is alien to English ‘philosophy’.”⁴ An explicit passage that reveals Arendt’s perspective on pragmatism in general can be found in the first volume of her *Denktagebuch* ⁵. Citing the famous difference between ethics of responsibility and ethics of intention, proposed by Max Weber, Arendt considers the American pragmatism as being born out of the ethics of responsibility and not the other way around. The ethics of responsibility presupposes a certain belonging of men to the world as opposite to other

conceptions like the ethics of conviction or intention that only focus on the inner motives of the agent. This explains for her the American belief that the worldly and natural character of evil can be eliminated through responsible human action. This belonging of men in their plurality to the world is an important feature of Arendt's political theory, as we intend to show in what follows.

Despite this expressed and thus obvious distance between the two thinkers we consider that the distinctions made by Arendt in her theory of the public sphere could as well be discussed together with those proposed earlier by Dewey and that a certain American theoretical influence is visible in her thought after her immigration to the United States and her confrontation with another type of politics.

Coming from a totalitarian background, in which both the conservative-revolutionary ideology from the Weimar époque and the national-socialist ideology had marked her thought, the American politics and the new type of public sphere encountered by her in the USA must have constituted an important influence for Arendt as a political theorist.

The public, the political and the social

Therefore, it is necessary to begin with the first major difference between the two thinkers. Certainly, one has to take first into account the much debated model that Arendt uses in her treatment of the public, seen as similar to the structure of the Greek *polis*⁶, a structure that has even resisted the attacks and critiques that came from the Greek philosophy after Socrates.⁷ Arendt seizes a change of paradigm that begins with Plato and Aristotle and sees this change as being opposed to the way the polis was organized. Her position is critical of Plato and Aristotle and of their mistrust in the capacities of political action. Arendt's political theory's relation with the Greek polis was discussed extensively by her exegetes. For example, Seyla Benhabib, in her theory of action, sees a reevaluation of the world, different from the one proposed by Martin Heidegger in his ontological hermeneutics, "because she has disclosed the deep structure of human action as interaction."⁸

This criticism of Greek political *philosophy* is what stands as the basis for her theory of political action, in which the capacities of action, i.e., of bringing something new in the world, are not mistrusted, but on the contrary, regarded as highly positive. Action is the highest faculty of the *vita activa* and was superseded in the course of modernity with the faculty of work, the result being the distortion of the modern public and political sphere. Concerning the importance of Hannah Arendt's theory of action, Seyla Benhabib states that one of Arendt's fundamental contributions to the history of 20th century philosophy is the thesis that the human space of appearance is constituted by "the web of relationships

and the enacted stories.”⁹ Dana R. Villa considers that Arendt’s theory of action is “the most radical rethinking of political action undertaken by a theorist in this century.”¹⁰ Other scholars, such as Claude Lefort, see her experience and interpretation of totalitarianism as fundamental for the development of all her writings.¹¹

Political philosophy *versus* political theory

On the other hand, John Dewey has no “political” model whatsoever departing from which he conceives the meanings of the public. His critique is not only guided against a certain turn in the Western tradition of political philosophy, but against the whole idea of political philosophy that, according to his opinion, can only, cause a deep misunderstanding about what actually and concretely happens in the political domain and the way in which it happens. The theories of the political philosophers are regarded by Dewey therefore as ideological or easily transformable in ideological creeds. The problem with political philosophy is that it is too prescriptive and too tied to ontological and metaphysical presuppositions. It is concerned more with how things are supposed to be, than the way in which they really are or happen to be. This is the reason why Dewey prefers to take the way of a political science that borrows theories and methods from other social sciences, such as psychology, economy, and sociology, in order to analyze without metaphysical prejudices the political behavior of the actors that take part in the realm of the political.

But Arendt’s position is also more nuanced than these common places of her exegesis, according to which she is considered to be – as is Leo Strauss, due to their both being of “Heidegger’s children”¹² – a nostalgic of the Greek polis and of the pre-philosophical way of doing politics. She uses this model of the polis only as an aid for her critique of modernity, in which the public has, in a way we will further explain in relation with Dewey’s concept of the *eclipsed* public, receded. One also has to take into consideration the critique brought by Arendt to the idea of political philosophy. She explicitly declared that she did not want to be categorized as a political philosopher or as a philosopher in general. For her, only political theory can succeed in explaining what happens in the political domain. In her interview with Günther Gaus, she clearly states the fact that she rejects any belonging to the category of political philosophers and sees herself as a political theorist.¹³ In the same manner, Dewey distances himself from political philosophy, being rather preoccupied with determining the policies of decision-making in a certain social and political context and also the value and consequences of these decisions.

The second major difference lies in the way modernity is seen by Arendt and by Dewey in its relation with the public sphere, although there are some similarities. The target of the critique is for the latter not modernity as such and the way it has eclipsed the public, but individualism and the antithetical theories that oppose the individual to the social realm and distinguish strongly between what is political and what is non-political.¹⁴ Modernity is not considered as the evil cause for changes that at their turn make the eclipse of the public possible without any chance of re-formation and re-identification of its part. It is this lucid and at the same time practical view of modernity which characterizes Dewey, in opposition to Arendt, for whom modernity is something that has produced some fatal and implacable consequences out of which we cannot escape.¹⁵ The similarity between the two authors lies in the fact that what modernity most obviously puts forth (i.e., industrialization, free trade and new communication systems) brings into the public sphere what before were considered private activities. Regarding the issue of industrialization, Dewey describes it as bringing not only social disintegration, but also the necessary technological force to overcome this disintegration and consolidate the public sphere. These changes also entail a chance of overcoming a certain incompatibility between political organization and technological progress, between the advancement of “technological forces”¹⁶ and the irrelevance of the political institutions which remained the same.

Extension or extinction of the public sphere?

Let us return to the definitions that both thinkers give for the public. Dewey is concerned, as it has already been stated above, not with pure political philosophy, but with another type of method. The distinction he makes in order to define what is public consists in describing actions by their consequences and not by their supposed metaphysical or ontological causes. One shall not find in Dewey’s *The Public and Its Problems* the type of hermeneutics of action that one finds in Arendt’s *The Human Condition*. But the conclusions at which they both sometimes arrive present some similarities.

According to their consequences, actions can be, according to Dewey, direct or indirect. This distinction enables him to separate the private from the public.¹⁷ Consequences of indirect actions, which imply always more than the people involved in the “transaction”, i.e., the people directly concerned with the consequences of an action, can be perceived by those that are affected by them indirectly and this stands as the condition of the formation of the public realm. By the fact that they can be perceived by those concerned, they will also be sought to be controlled so that negative effects will be discouraged and positive ones encouraged,

therefore the interests of a thereby formed community are represented and protected. But what is here important in relation to Arendt's distinctions is that the public is not automatically identified by Dewey as the *social* realm.

Indirect actions can be perfectly useless from a social point of view, and consequently, the political realm is neither identified with the public sphere, nor with the social one. The public is also not implicitly identified with the state or with the organized political community. The latter comes into existence only when some representatives, in the sense of public officials or agents, are elected and as a consequence have as aim the control of action and the predictability of its consequences¹⁸, "in the sense of factors doing the business of others in securing and obviating consequences that concern them."¹⁹ Thus, the existence of officials differentiates between the public and the state or the government.

According to Dewey this distinction can be better seized when we confront the issue of political change. In this case a new public is forming and it has to struggle with the existing political institutions which are backed up by a so called "old" public. "To form itself, the public has to break existing political forms. This is hard to do because these forms are themselves the regular means of instituting change."²⁰ Changes, therefore, occur only through revolution and/or reform because even if the old public, which generated the political institutions, dies, argues Dewey, the political institutions are still preserved and, thus, must be violently overturned. This is a form of revolution which is also discussed by Arendt in her book *On Revolution*, with the difference that Arendt sees in this change of political regime a manifestation of the free men and of their freedom, which can enact a new beginning by the foundation of a political space of public freedom. She is therefore critical of the liberal democratic state, which she considers as only protecting the negative sense of freedom, which that guarantees basic rights, and not the positive, the truly political sense, which refers to the self-government of citizens. The concept of local self-government found in Arendt's political theory is similar to the notion of fragmentation and scrapping of the public in multiple spheres of interest and/or communities, proposed by Dewey.

Arendt, on the other hand, makes a fundamental distinction between the public/political domain and the social one. For Arendt, modernity means more than the secularization process, which cannot alone explain modernity and does not coincide with it. Modernity entails the rise of the social realm and, simultaneously, the decline of the political one. Society, appearing in modernity and being its specific characteristic, clearly endangers the political realm by the fact that it pushes what used to be activities limited to the private sphere into the public realm.

Dewey uses the word *eclipse* when writing about the contemporary public. Arendt does not privilege a particular word defining the destiny of the public, as for example more recently Richard Sennet's *fall* of the public.²¹ *Decline, decay* and *receding*²², besides *earth* and *world alienation*, are the words mostly used by her, in the last chapter of the *Human Condition*. Amongst them, *earth alienation* is a process accomplished through the modern conception of science and *world alienation* through the modern society. These terms are of concern for our investigation because the society and socialization is what causes the decline of the public.

For Arendt the main word which could be used for explaining the effect of modernity on the public sphere is *substitution*, more precisely its substitution by the social domain and further the substitution of *work* through *labor* and of *action* through *work* and more generally of the *vita contemplativa* understood in the modern sense, that is without the proper Greek notion of *theoria*, with the *vita activa*. Substitution is different from reversal, which implies that the main paradigm is still kept and only the accent on a certain term is changed, e.g., the relation of Nietzsche's philosophy with that of Plato's. Through substitution one of the terms is definitively lost and the whole paradigm must, therefore, change. These changes are traced by Arendt in her explanation of the modern "public". The idea of the rise of the social in the genealogy of modern society manifests a pessimist vision about modernity and its horizon. Seyla Benhabib sees in the problematic concept of the *social*, proposed by Arendt, "three dominant meanings": the first refers to the development of a capitalist system of exchange, the second to mass society and the third, which Benhabib also considers as being "the least investigated sense, [is that] the social refers to sociability, to the quality of life in civil society and civic associations."²³

As for Dewey, the *eclipse* of the public is not explained by a series of substitutions that took place in the different stages of modernity and which could be reflected by using the Greek model of the *polis*. It does not mean an extinction of the public, but on the contrary its expansion. The problem is not that the public has undergone a withdrawal through the transformation of the status of labor by making it public and afterwards through the series of substitutions which derived from it, like in Arendt's political theory as presented in *The Human Condition*, but that in the "machine age", "immense and consolidated unions" act "on an impersonal rather than community basis, that the resultant public cannot identify and distinguish itself."²⁴ The public has not disappeared, but finds itself in the impossibility of self-awareness because of the non-perceived and not-known consequences of a multitude of indirect actions, of public actions that largely exceed the capacities of perception: "There

are too many publics and too much of public concern for our existing resources to cope with.”²⁵

Therefore, the modern public is for Dewey too diversified and too diffused and this is the sense of the term *eclipse*: perception and knowledge of the consequences of indirect actions is dramatically affected by the multitude of the public spheres created at the same time with the economic and technological development. The public being eclipsed, it cannot use its “organs” for mediating political action and, therefore, democracy is endangered. Following this, Dewey refers to the public as a “ghost-like” apparition caused by the breaking-up of the administrative and technical matters from the governmental and political ones, the latter being founded in the public realm:

“What has counting heads, decision by majority and the whole apparatus of traditional government to do with such things? Given such considerations, and the public and its organization for political ends is not only a ghost, but a ghost which walks and talks, and obscures, confuses and misleads governmental action in a disastrous way.”²⁶

Problems that are technical and that can be solved only by experts and not through the political and democratic procedures and that are therefore opposed to the democratic practice are creating what Dewey calls a “vacuum” between the government and the eclipsed public, which struggles to identify itself. This vacuum is filled by a political *machine* that creates, in its turn, distrust in democracy and in the capacities for controlling the negative consequences of public actions. Similarly to Arendt’s position, it is by the social that the public is exceeded, so that men become tired of politics and lose their confidence in the powers of political action. He writes that “the confusion which has resulted from the size and ramifications of social activities has rendered men skeptical of the efficiency of political action.”²⁷

For Arendt also, the public stands as the fundamental condition of possibility for the political action. The first meaning of the public proposed in *The Human Condition* refers to the public as what can be heard and seen by everyone and what constitutes reality as perceived by human beings in their plurality. Like Dewey, Arendt does not identify the public with the state or with the government, but on the other hand the public is superposed with the political. The conscious public is the one that constitutes itself as the medium of virtuosity, of excellence in the Greek sense of *arete*, in which political action is performed and a *who* is revealed even against its own will.²⁸ The primary form of the public is found by Arendt, contrary to Dewey, in what she calls the “space of appearance”, which is the condition of “all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government”.²⁹ It is not therefore tied to an awakening of a common interest, but defined only as a potentiality found

where human plurality is present and people are together. This space does not survive the activities which brings it into existence. That is why political action is thought following an aesthetic model, according to which it leaves no product after its performance, and not following the model of production.

The outcome of political action is not the control and regulation of the consequences of other actions, this being the third major difference between her conception and Dewey's. On the contrary, the introduction of novelty in the world and the creation of a new process that has infinite effects are the characteristics of the political action. Only other capacities of the human condition are able to "control" the negative consequences of action and these are the human faculties of promising and of forgiving³⁰ as described in *The Human Condition*.

There is, after all, a pessimistic view present in most of Arendt's work. Modernity, through its substitutions, stands obviously against the authentic sense of the political action and thereby of the public sphere. But for Dewey, this problematic stage is only one stage in the evolution of modernity. What he calls the "Great Society", which is formed through the process of modernization, is still in search of its public, but there is still hope that a transformation into a "Great Community" will occur, through the organization of non-political forces that are the "expressions of a technological age"³¹, in order to change the existing political structures.

Conclusions

Even though, for Arendt, the difference between political philosophy and political theory has its roots in her conceiving of political plurality, seeing "Man" as the object of philosophy and "men" as the object of political theory, whereas Dewey assumes that the difference between political philosophy and political theory lies in a rather pragmatic view of the problem of the state as an organized form of the public sphere(s) and not as an archetypal entity, their common point lies in the rejection of political philosophy and their confinement to political theory.

Another common point of Arendt and Dewey lies in the discussion of the effects of modernity over the public sphere. Their major difference lies in their conception regarding political action which is made possible by the public domain. For Dewey, authentic political action and, consequently, the public sphere would rather be linked to institutions, groups or communities, whereas for Arendt it is valued as something more important than political institutions which always try, in her opinion, to obscure political actions.

Both authors describe a "transformation" occurred in the public sphere along modernity. This change and alteration of the public realm

has different meanings in their respective theories, according to their own views about the relationship between the public, political and social realm. Still, the causes they discuss, i.e., secularization, modernization, industrialization and the development of mass communication, converge. The decline of the public sphere is regarded by Dewey as an uncontrollable extension of the public sphere that shadows and eclipses its authenticity, while Arendt acknowledges the extinction of the public sphere because of the modern loss of the sense and practice of political action.

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¹ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, in *The Later Works*, vol. 2: 1925-1927 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 242.

² John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 243.

³ See her reply to Eric Voegelin review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in *Über den Totalitarismus* (Dresden: Hannah Arendt Institut für Totalitarismusforschung, 1998), 46-47.

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch. 1950 bis 1973*, Zweiter Band, (München: Piper, 2002), 771.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch: 1950 bis 1973*, Erster Band (München: Piper, 2002), 136-138.

⁶ J. Peter Euben, "Arendt's Hellenism", in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 152-153.

⁷ See Arendt's critique of Plato's deconstruction of political action in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 200-203.

⁸ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 111.

⁹ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 112.

¹⁰ Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 4.

¹¹ Claude Lefort, "Hannah Arendt et la question du politique", in *Essais sur le politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 63.

¹² Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas and Herbert Marcuse*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 11. Arendt's relation with Heidegger's philosophy could be seen as a political reconstruction of the latter. As a political theorist she is still inspired by it, although in some texts, such as *Was ist Existenz-Philosophie?*, she was very critical towards the ontological assumptions of Heidegger.

¹³ See Hannah Arendt, *Ich will verstehen: Selbstauskünfte zu Leben und Werk* (München: Piper, 1996), 44.

¹⁴ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 257.

¹⁵ See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 294-295.

¹⁶ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 276.

¹⁷ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 243-244.

¹⁸ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 268.

¹⁹ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 247.

²⁰ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 254-255.

²¹ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 13. The fall of the public sphere regards in his view a loss of distinction and vanishing of boundaries between the private and the public realm due to secularization and industrial capitalism. For Sennett the private sphere does not have economical or biological connotations, as in Arendt's case, but rather psychological-emotional ones. It concerns self-disclosure, intimacy and the sharing of feelings.

²² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 46-47.

²³ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 23.

²⁴ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 313-314.

²⁵ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 314.

²⁶ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 313.

²⁷ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 319.

²⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 160.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179.

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 210.

³¹ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 315.

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