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The public realm and revolution: Hannah Arendt between theory and praxis

O campo público e revolução: Hannah Arendt entre teoria e práxis

El reino público y revolución: Hannah Arendt entre teoría y praxis

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Abstract: The main goal of our paper is to analyze Arendt's idea of the influence of revolutions on the public real by examining its theoretical and practical scope. In the course of our analysis, we will also answer the question whether Arendt's understanding of revolution could be used in the modern context. After a critical investigation of Arendt's idea of revolution and of her thesis about the impact of revolution on the public realm, we will briefly investigate several examples of modern revolutions from an 'Arendtian' standpoint in order to draw a conclusion about the current applicability of Arendt's key arguments concerning violence, power, social issues, collective political action and communication.

Keywords: Revolution; Public realm; Violence; Social question; Communication.

Resumo: O objetivo principal de nosso trabalho é analisar a ideia de Arendt sobre a influência das revoluções no âmbito público, examinando seu alcance teórico e prático. No curso de nossa análise, também responderemos à questão sobre a aplicabilidade da concepção de Arendt sobre revolução no contexto moderno. Depois de uma investigação crítica da ideia de revolução de Arendt e de sua tese sobre o impacto da revolução no âmbito público, investigaremos brevemente vários exemplos de revoluções modernas a partir do ponto de vista arendtiano para chegarmos a uma conclusão sobre a aplicabilidade atual dos argumentos-chave de Arendt sobre violência, poder, questões sociais, ação política coletiva e comunicação.

Palavras-chave: Revolução; Espaço Público; Violência; Questão Social; Comunicação.

Resumen: El objetivo principal de nuestro trabajo es analizar la idea de Arendt sobre la influencia de las revoluciones en el ámbito público, examinando su alcance teórico y práctico. En el curso de nuestro análisis, también responderemos a la pregunta si la comprensión de Arendt de la revolución podría ser utilizada en el contexto moderno. Después de una investigación crítica de la idea de revolución de Arendt y de su tesis sobre el impacto de la revolución en el ámbito público, brevemente investigaremos varios ejemplos de las revoluciones modernas desde el punto de vista arendtiano para llegar a una conclusión sobre la aplicabilidad actual de los argumentos clave de Arendt sobre violencia, poder, asuntos sociales, acción política colectiva y comunicación.

Palabras clave: Revolución; Reino Público; Violencia; Cuestión Social; Comunicación.

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1

Revolution represents for Hannah Arendt an attempt to radically reshape the public realm. It represents the true spirit of politics, as a new beginning – a foundation of something new. According to Arendt, the true aim of a revolution consists in the appearance of a free public realm, where freedom would be guaranteed for all. Still, based on her analysis of revolutions of the past (from the early modern period until the middle of the XX century), Arendt comes to the conclusion that none of them could have reached that goal.

Arendt gives a twofold definition of the concept of the public realm, including its importance for political activity. Firstly, the public realm is an inter subjective space. Arendt's public realm is a place common to everyone. It always appears whenever acting and speaking people communicate with each other. Appearance is revelation of oneself, of one's position regarding the order of the common world and, hence, the presentation of oneself and one's essence to "others":

[...] action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but proclaim their appearance explicitly (ARENDT, 1998, p. 198-199).

Secondly, the public realm is the place where people express their opinion openly and expect to be heard by the others. This realm does not emerge automatically wherever several people gather just because they are creatures capable of acting and speaking. On the contrary, even where it exists, the majority prefers to remain outside its boundaries. The public realm is a space, where the will is manifested, the authority emerges, and judgments and actions are possible because it enables manifestation of human diversity. It brings together and separates at the same time. We can compare the public realm to the game of chess, since a chess player is connected to his partner through the board, which brings them apart and together simultaneously, as part of their own world.

However, Hannah Arendt distinguishes between the private and the public realm. It is a very important element of Arendt's political theory since she clearly separates politics from all other spheres of human

activity. Unlike the private realm, the public one is plural, that is, it contains a vast number of different and even contradictory perspectives. This plurality that creates a reality which

is not guaranteed primarily by the "common nature" of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object. If the sameness of the object can no longer be discerned, no common nature of men, least of all the unnatural conformism of a mass society, can prevent the destruction of the common world (ARENDT, 1958, p. 57-58).

Only the public realm can guarantee what the private life alone cannot. The essence of the private is the absence of others: "as far as they are concerned, private man does not appear, and therefore it is as though he did not exist" (ARENDT, 1958, p. 58). In private life, human being behaves as if there existed no other person, its actions in private realm have no significance for the public one, they concern no one except that very person. At the same time, private life creates a private realm whose existence is itself a condition for the possibility of showing one's worth in the public realm. The public and the private realm supplement each other and are integral parts of an organic whole. The absence of one of them is distressing and negatively affects the quality and content of human life in general.

In her work *On revolution*, Hannah Arendt asserts that a human who does not feel free can not be happy. This unhappiness urges human beings to fight for their liberation. Therefore, the prerequisites for a revolution lie in the desire of un free people for freedom. In other words, revolution could be defined as a reaction of one part of the population to its perceived lack of freedom. According to Arendt, this freedom must be interpreted not only as freedom from poverty and physical violence but as freedom of action in the political sphere, i.e. as public freedom. The original intention of insurgents is not to destroy the old political space, but rather to transform it, so that each person is assured of freedom, equality and absence of oppression.

It should be stressed here that Arendt draws an explicit boundary between freedom and liberation. Arendt understands liberation in two ways: as liberation from the yoke of necessity and as freedom from tyranny (ARENDT, 1990, p. 74). Poverty stands in the way of free action in the public space. For Arendt, it means not only material need: it is a

state of subjection, a state of absence of a subjective capability (MORUZZI, 2000, p. 20). Abject poverty makes people spend all their time earning their living and denies them the opportunity to be active in the public space. The abject poor are so oppressed by physical needs of their bodies that they seem to lack, for Arendt, any political capacity (MORUZZI, 2000, p. 20). The hope of liberation from poverty is pushing masses to participate in the revolution and to overthrow the old regime. But the ousting of the old regime only leads to the ability to establish freedom since it does not solve social problems. Here is why, according to Arendt, so many revolutions, and particularly the French Revolution, fail to achieve their goal. The goal of a revolution is being substituted: happiness, material welfare of the people become the purpose of revolution, instead of freedom. But for Arendt, freedom is the only meaning of politics: trying to reach material goals through politics and means-ends thinking can neither solve social problems, nor liquidate poverty. Moreover, according to Arendt, “no revolution has ever solved the “social question” and liberated men from the predicament of want” (ARENDT, 1990, p. 112). It could not be done not only because it is impossible to solve social problems by political means: even if people ever were able to obtain material wealth as a result of a revolution, it did not lead to their participation in the political life (ARENDT, 1990, p. 70). Free time was spent on anything else but not on the action in the public realm. Therefore, liberation from material needs –e.g., from the need to earn a living – is an important pre requisite since it can give leisure, a free time for further gaining freedom, but freedom from need should not be the aim of revolution. For Arendt, neither deliverance from oppression nor acquisition of citizenship is freedom. Revolution can throw off their shackles, but it should also give the people a place for freedom, the public room. Therefore, a successful revolution should deal with two tasks: a negative, i.e. to liberate the people, and a positive one, i.e. to give them their freedom and the space for its realization.

For Arendt, liberation is associated with violence. Violence may be the means to reach liberation, i.e. to reach the end of rebellion, “while the end of revolution is the foundation of freedom” (ARENDT, 1990, p. 142). Revolution, just like war, is closely connected with violence, setting them apart from all political phenomena: “One of the reasons why wars have turned so easily into revolutions and why revolutions have inclination to unleash wars is that violence is a kind of common denominator for both” (ARENDT, 1990,

p. 18). Violence can be used to found new political bodies and to reform the corrupt ones (ARENDT, 1977, p. 139), but the founding role of violence does not represent a contradiction in Arendt’s thought despite her premise that violence is non-political. This point in Arendt’s understanding of violence is stressed by Annabel Herzog, who argues that violence of foundations is non-political while the real politics can only begin where the violence ends (Herzog, 2016, p. 7; ARENDT, 1990, p. 142; FINLAY, 2009, p. 34-35; MCGOWAN, 1997, p. 275). It is possible to act against something unjustifiable using violence, but such actions will not be political because real politics needs acting and speaking together (KIM, 2013, p. 396). Another thing is that this violence can be minimized while taking quite peaceful forms: civil disobedience to laws, rulers, and institutions, refusal of external support and consent (see ARENDT, 1970, p. 49). But even such minimal violence as civil disobedience, which is needed to destroy old power, enhances group consensus, acting in concert (HERZOG, 2016, p. 7). Likewise, this consensus is necessary for the founding of new power, because power is an ability to act in concert and exists only in a group of people: “Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together” (ARENDT, 1970, p. 44). The decisive factor here is the degree of weakness of the current government. Arendt believes that revolution is a consequence of the disintegration of power in the state (ARENDT, 1970, p. 49). When the government does not have enough power, when its power breaks down, revolutions become possible. But “disintegration [of power] often becomes manifest only in direct confrontation; and even then, when power is already in the street, some group of men prepared for such an eventuality is needed to pick up and assume responsibility” (ARENDT, 1970, p. 49).

Revolution is an intermediate point, a moment of transition from the old to a new public realm, a point between past and future. It destroys the old public realm and founds a new one. However, this moment of transition is problematic, since it is impossible to destroy something old and to create something new simultaneously. Therefore, revolution does not demolish the whole public realm as such: it destroys only its unity in the state. There is no moment in time when public realm does not exist at all, since revolution needs it for its own realization. The public realm, wherein a revolution occurs, arises in the form

of councils (workers' councils in the factories, soldiers' councils in the army), meetings of urban and village communities and so forth. Arendt characterizes these local meetings as spaces of freedom for the people. She emphasizes that the councils (or similar forms of union) appeared during the revolutions in France, Russia, and Hungary. They filled the vacuum after the abolishment of the old regimes and the old public realms. For some time, they remained the only centers of power in the ocean of anarchy. The councils brought order into the emerging chaos, but at the same time, they were not subordinated to any higher instance. These "elementary republics" and councils are for Arendt the only space where everyone could be free in a positive sense.

However, the question arises as to whether revolutions manage to reach their goals and to guarantee a space of people's freedom in a long-term perspective. Arendt comes to the deplorable conclusion that none of the revolutions ever succeeded in achieving its main goal, that is, to create permanent and free elementary public realms with full access for every citizen of the country. A revolution comes to its end with the establishment of central power authorities. Acting subjects in the republic are people's representatives, but not people themselves.

Elementary public spaces – in the form of councils, town hall meetings – gradually lose their power, ceasing to be spaces for public politics. In the best case, they become administrative units subordinated to central power, an instrument to solve social issues. In the worst case, they are completely abolished. Arendt stresses that in the post-revolution republic "as it presently turned out, there was no space reserved, no room left for the exercise of precisely those qualities which had been instrumental in building it" (ARENDT, 1990, p. 232). Neither in France, nor in Russia did the revolution succeed in transforming the public realm into a real space of freedom. Even the American Revolution, considered by Arendt as successful in comparison to the later ones, has still failed to achieve this goal in the end: although the revolution "had given freedom to the people", it "failed to provide a space where this freedom could be exercised" (ARENDT, 1990, p. 235). Only people's representatives, not the people themselves, had now an opportunity to engage in politics.

What are the reasons of this failure? What hindrances prevent revolutions from reaching their final destination, that is, from ensuring the existence of a space of freedom? In her writings, Arendt mentions several causes. The first one is "a conflict between

parliament, the source and seat of power of the party system, and the people, who have surrendered their power to their representatives" (ARENDT, 1990, p. 248). This conflict also expresses itself in contradictions between party representatives and constitutional assemblies which consist of representatives chosen from local councils. Arendt finds this conflict wherever "the councils, born of revolution," turn "against the party or parties whose sole aim had always been the revolution" (ARENDT, 1990, p. 265). In the end, the constitutive power is seized by the central authorities, while councils gradually lose their political validity.

Arendt describes the course of this conflict through examples of the revolutions in France and America. Many popular societies and clubs, i.e. different organs of self-government (including the famous 48 sections that formed the Paris Commune), have emerged during the French Revolution. When Robespierre came to power, he declared war on popular societies under the pretext of defending the unity and indivisibility of the French nation. The Jacobins managed to take popular societies under their control, so that the first organs of the republic "were crushed by the central and centralized government, not because they actually menaced it but because they were indeed, by virtue of their existence, competitors for public power" (ARENDT, 1990, p. 246). It was again the parliament and not the people which proved to be a center of power.

Arendt sees the cause of the Soviet system's defeat in the external influence exercised by the party system and the central organs of power. However, another explanation may be given in this case. The need to participate in public politics was felt only by a small active part of the population. The larger and less active group was only interested in finding a solution to social issues. During the revolution, the politically active part of the citizens has engaged itself in professional politics and became elected representatives in different organs of power. The more passive part of the population was, on the contrary, satisfied with this transformation of councils into institutions whose goal was to solve social problems. In other words, the issue is not about the people being robbed of their freedom space, but about the natural process of population splitting into the politically active and passive parts. This option is also mentioned implicitly in *On Revolution*, namely in the form of an elitist idea that a place in the public space is reserved only for those who are free, i.e. who really need it and are ready to spend their time and energy for political activity:

Politically, they are the best, and it is the task of good government and the sign of a well-ordered republic to assure them of their rightful place in the public realm. To be sure, such an 'aristocratic' form of government would spell the end of general suffrage as we understand it today; for only those who as voluntary members of an 'elementary' republic have demonstrated that they care for more than their private happiness and are concerned about the state of the world would have the right to be heard in the conduct of the business of the republic (ARENDT, 1990, p. 279).

For Arendt, the problem lies not in the elitism of the political activity, but rather in the fact that "politics has become a profession and career and that the 'elite' is being chosen according to standards and criteria which are themselves profoundly unpolitical" (ARENDT, 1990, p. 277). However, we might ask ourselves whether it would be possible to govern a large republic without any professional politicians.

Arendt calls excessive concentration of power in the central authorities the second reason for defeat of revolutions. The so-called "town hall meetings" were not incorporated into the constitution of the new federation during the American Revolution:

[...] by the virtue of the Constitution, the public business of the nation as a whole had been transferred to Washington and was being transacted by the federal government [...]. But state government and even the administrative machinery of the county were by far so large and unwieldy to permit immediate participation; in all these institutions, it was the delegates of the people rather than the people themselves who constituted the public realm, whereas those who delegated them and who, theoretically, were the source and the seat of power remained forever outside its doors (ARENDT, 1990, p. 251).

In other words, people have lost their most important space for implementation of their freedom. Arendt reasonably points out that no revolution could avoid destruction of power balance for the benefit of the central government. The main reason is probably the fact that a new government is needed for defense against internal or external enemies. This requires good coordination and a single center of power where military and economic issues come to the fore and the political agenda retreats into the background.

Arendt calls confusion of political issues with social ones the third reason for breakdown of different revolutions, for instance, of the French Revolution: "And the trouble is that this passion for public or political freedom can so easily be mistaken for the perhaps much more vehement, but politically essentially sterile, passionate hatred of masters, the longing of the oppressed for liberation" (ARENDT, 1990, p. 125). Consequently, "revolution basically perishes in terms of creation of a new form of government or freedom space, etc." ("geht im Grunde die Revolution im Sinne der Gründung einer neuen Staatsform, des Freiheitsraums etc. zugrunde": DAS RECHT AUF REVOLUTION, 1965). The direction of the revolution undergoes a change, since freedom is not its aim anymore: the new goal is "no longer freedom but happiness" (ARENDT, 1990, p. 75). Nevertheless, no revolution could solve any social problem by political means: all revolutions that pursue this aim suffer an inevitable defeat, ending in terror (ARENDT, 1990, p. 143). These last Arendtian arguments are based on a strict separation between politics and economy, criticized by many scholars, such as Seyla Benhabib (BENHABIB, 1996), Richard Bernstein (BERNSTEIN, 1986), Hanna Fenichel Pitkin (PITKIN, 1981) and Jacques Rancière (RANCIÈRE, 2011), for its artificiality. Indeed, numerous examples confirm the fact that economic causes of revolutions are closely linked with political causes. Economic hardships and social problems are no less an impulse for a revolution than people's aspiration of acquiring political rights and freedoms. Without liberation from the yoke of poverty and from the hard work, which leaves no time for political activity, free action remains impossible in the public realm. Therefore, social demands during the revolution are inseparable from the political ones.

Finally, Arendt also mentions external intervention as a cause of failure for revolutions. For instance, the Hungarian revolution failed not due to internal factors, but because of the suppression by Soviet troops. The main problem with Arendt's argument in the case of the Hungarian revolution lies in her disregard of the important question whether the revolution in Hungary could fail due to internal causes, even if no intervention had ever happened. Nevertheless, intervention is undoubtedly a factor that negatively affects internal processes in a revolutionary state. This is particularly true for cases of excessive and compulsive centralization and militarization of a new republic under the pretext of the so-called 'revolutionary necessity'. Political debates are being postponed to a later date, while

military and economic issues come to the fore. A perfect example is the October Revolution, with the following intervention of European armies: due to the need to ward off the external aggression, the power of the people's councils was quickly transferred to the central organs of the revolutionary Soviet Russia.

In Arendt's works, we find four main reasons of revolution's failure on its way to create the realm of freedom. Three of them are determined by internal factors and the fourth, by an external one. Internal reasons are defined as a result of suppression of the council system by the party system and central power organs, or as the consequence of shifting the focus from political to social issues. On this level, Arendt's arguments are not always correct. The suppression of the council system through the party system and through the central power organs is determined by the inner logic of formation of a new republic, e.g. through the unavoidable centralization of power. The necessity to concentrate power in one place for the purpose of an effective protection against inside and outside enemies limits the competence of the councils only to 'social' problems. In addition, the natural outflow of politically active revolutionary participants from the low to a higher level of public policy leads to the weakening of the councils. In this light, Arendt's problematic thesis concerning confusion of political and social goals of the revolution can also be disputed. Intervention, as an external cause, however, is an undeniable factor that can negatively influence the course of a revolution.

2

Among the most important conditions to be met by a philosophical theory or idea in order to stay relevant in the course of time is its capability to adequately describe new realities without conflicting with its own basic foundations. Having previously cleared the foundations of Arendt's idea of revolution, e.g. her distinction between successful and unsuccessful revolutions, we will now proceed to investigate its modern relevance. This investigation will be carried out in two steps. First, we will take a rather straightforward approach, expanding Arendt's list of examples and describing 3 most important modern cases from an 'Arendtian' perspective. The main positive and negative results of this analysis will then be taken into account in order to additionally clarify and/or modify some of her initial points, using the resources of Arendt's own philosophy.

Following her own criteria, Arendt does not define the outcome of any revolution of the past as an absolute success. Still, in the short as well as in the long term, these revolutions had different social and political consequences of significant importance, leading to the increasing freedom of political action. This specific criterion of the 'relative' success of a revolution allows us, following Arendt's train of thought, to compare one revolution to another. If we decide to examine the problem of the applicability of Arendt's main points to some modern revolutions as well as to the older ones not directly mentioned by Arendt, we have to return to the foundations of her argument, with the intention to define the limits of her concept of revolution.

In her radio interview with political scientist Carlo Schmid (North German Radio, 19.10.1965) which was primarily focused on her recently published work *On Revolution*, Arendt makes a distinction between 'true' revolutions and alternative forms of social and political changes, although these changes are traditionally defined as revolutions in the scholarly or in the broad public discourse. The Cultural Revolution in China, for instance, does not apply as a 'true' revolution since it was no social movement 'from below' but rather an organized movement 'from above', at least in its first phase orchestrated and directed by the Chinese Communist party. At the same time, Arendt's idea of revolution excludes some conventional expressions and lexical formulas, such as 'Copernican revolution' or 'Kantian revolution'. Arendt also sets a clear historical-chronological frame for her analysis. In her description of the beginnings of the European idea of revolution, she emphasizes that there were no revolutions before XVII–XVIII centuries: There were only 'rebellions' whose sole goal was to replace a bad ruler with a better one, with no intention to eliminate the current political authority. We will stick to this frame (from the XVII century onwards) while expanding the list of Arendt's key examples (French, American, Russian and Hungarian Revolution) with the help of some new ones.

Keeping in mind that each revolution is always unique, having its own beginnings and distinctive features,¹ we can still ask ourselves, what kind of revolutions can serve as examples of significant changes in the public realm. Since not all revolutions

¹ Still, it would be entirely possible, at least in certain cases, to speak of defining structural similarities between revolutions from the same short time period (like in the case of European Revolutions of 1848-49 and the recent revolutions of the 'Arab Spring').

of XVII-XXI centuries fall under Arendt's criteria, our list of potential candidates turns out relatively short. The newest examples are the Tunisian Revolution and the Euromaidan Revolution in Ukraine. As the first historical example of a revolution (although with some reservations), we could name the key events of the English Civil War (1642-1651) as well as of the four subsequent decades, ending with the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, since these events resulted in a brief abolition of the monarchy, serving as a catalyst for the rapid evolution of parliamentarism in England.

Although Arendt directly indicates the XVII century as the lower chronological limit for her analysis, she rarely mentions the sole noteworthy example from this period – the English Civil War, which, for the first time in the European history, ended in the conviction and execution of a monarch.² The reason for Arendt's caution could lie in the possibility of a conceptual confusion, mentioned by Arendt herself: The 'real' English Revolution – the abolition of monarchy – is not often described as such. Instead, the word 'revolution' is, somewhat ironically, associated with the restitution of the king's authority in 1688 (ARENDT 1965, p. 51-52). Another reason (not directly mentioned by Arendt) could consist in the evaluation of the consequences of the Civil War for the next few generations, since the war only contributed to the growth of the parliament's authority rather than to a long-term abolition of monarchy, although it also mitigated some social tensions (which is an important contribution in itself, especially if we compare these events with those in France). While it is in no way surprising that the example of the Civil War in England cannot achieve the status of Arendt's key examples of the French and American Revolution, it still holds a significant importance – as a prelude to these two. Arendt's many allusions to the fate of Charles I are thus perfectly understandable.

Among the most interesting cases which could expand the subject of Arendt's analysis are also the July Revolution of 1830 in France, a string of

European Revolutions of 1848-49, the Mexican Revolution, the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, the Cuban Revolution, the 'Prague Spring' of 1968, the Iranian Revolution, the Nicaraguan Revolution and the Revolution of 1989 in Romania. Still, from the perspective of Arendt's analysis, only a few of these can be described as 'successful' – not in the sense of victory over the respective opponent but in the sense of a general increase of freedom in political action. The Revolution of 1848-49 has failed to achieve its main goals in German speaking countries, since the Frankfurt National Assembly was quickly dissolved while many of its members were persecuted by the authorities. The Mexican Revolution, started in 1911, turned into a lengthy civil war which costed at least 1 million of lives, until it was finally possible to organize regular Presidential elections in the 1920s. Egyptian Revolution of 1919 was only a moderate success since it contributed to the creation of a parliamentary governmental system; still, this was not enough to achieve full independence for the country. Revolutions in Cuba and in Iran resulted in the formation of *de facto* autocratic regimes, manifested in the form of one-party states. Like the Hungarian Revolution, the 'Prague Spring' ended with the intervention of Soviet forces (although this time these forces were accompanied by the military of some East European States of the Warsaw Pact).

In order to answer the question concerning the actuality of Arendt's concept, we will examine 3 modern examples which – at least on the surface – seem to perfectly correspond with Arendt's idea of revolution: Romanian Revolution of 1989, Revolution in Tunisia (2011) and the Ukrainian Revolution (Euromaidan of 2013-14). As the only non-peaceful revolution which marked the collapse of the USSR together with the system of its satellite states, the Romanian Revolution could be a 'classical' example for Arendt. Even in their initial phase, the peaceful civilian protests of 1989 in Romania were accompanied by numerous acts of violence, committed by the communist regime of *Ceaușescu* as well as by its opposition. The key phase of the revolution began with *Ceaușescu's attempts to forcefully suppress the December protests in Timișoara while its end was marked by his quick condemnation and execution, together with his wife*. The last public speech of the Romanian General Secretary, held on the *21th of December – shortly after the tragic events in Timișoara* – begins with the recollection of the achievements of the 'socialist revolution' and ends with the outbreak of the anti-Soviet and anticommunist revolutionary

² An important exception in the German edition of Arendt's work (aside from ARENDT, 1965, p. 51f) is a short mention of Charles I as an enemy of freedom of political action of his citizens (p. 313): "[...] so haben viele absolute Herrscher gesprochen – nicht zuletzt und nicht am schlechtesten Karl I., dem England den Prozeß machte und der zu seiner Verteidigung erklärte: Die Freiheit des Volkes "besteht darin, daß es von Gesetzen regiert wird, die ihm Leben und Eigentum garantieren; sie besteht nicht in der Teilnahme an der Regierung, das geht sie nichts an". Jedenfalls hören wir in diesen Worten das Todesurteil für alle Organe, in denen das Volk sich spontan zusammengeschlossen hat..."

protests in Bucharest. The swift Romanian Revolution has many distinctive features coinciding with the ones mentioned by Arendt: it started in the form of protests ‘from below’, quickly followed by the formation of local councils (cf. DAS RECHT AUF REVOLUTION, 1965); its main goal was primarily to achieve political freedom³ which would allow the citizens to reform their own land (this last goal, however, was not achieved, since the first ‘free’ elections of 1990 presented no real political competition⁴). Neither the elected president Ion Iliescu nor his successors have shown any interest in a careful and detailed investigation of the events of 1989-90. Those who research the Romanian Revolution (e.g. HUTTER, 2015, p. 57-59) rightly describe its short-term results as the beginning of a post-Soviet autocracy whose chief principles succeeded both to the Soviet and to the pre-Soviet (monarchic) governmental systems. From the Arendtian perspective, this lack of any essential renewal turns out as the most striking deficiency which prevents us from defining the Romanian Revolution as a perfect modern illustration of Arendt’s idea of revolution. We should also point out that the mentioned impossibility to form a government representing a broad specter of public positions and opinions, marks a sharp contrast to Arendt’s idea of the public role of individual opinions (δόξαι). In *On Revolution*, Arendt argues that the French and the American Revolutions resulted in a conscious or at least unconscious rehabilitation of opinion, which was discredited by Protagoras and Plato in order to give more weight to the collective interests of the many. This line of argument follows, with some conceptual corrections, the line of Rousseau, whose work *The Social Contract* (1762) stresses the necessity of different opinions in parliament – in the light of political dangers, such as the formation of big political unions whose goal is to propagate one opinion as the only possible truth. In the case of the Revolution of 1989, the underestimation of public opinion should not be explained solely by the historical context of the events in Romania: its most important causes lie elsewhere – in the realm of communication. In this regard, there are significant differences between the Romanian Revolution and the more recent Tunisian

and Ukrainian Revolutions. We will explain these differences in the course of our further analysis.

Even against the background of some recent political developments in North Africa and in the Near East, the Tunisian Revolution is still rightly considered the first and perhaps the only successful revolution of the ‘Arab Spring.’ Unlike other countries, the post-revolutionary government in Tunisia represented various (religious, economic, etc.) opinions and interests. Also, its form was not altered after the second parliamentary elections (e.g. there was no political intervention of the military, like in Egypt). Contrary to Arendt’s idea of the primacy of political problems before the ‘social question’, the initial phase of the Revolution in Tunisia was defined by social protests, caused by at least two concrete economic problems – high food prices and unemployment, especially among young people. On the other hand, the well-known tragic event which served as the main trigger for the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ – the self-immolation of the street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi – was caused not solely by social but also by political issues:⁵ Bouazizi decided to commit a public suicide because of the helplessness of his situation and the futility of his attempts to make the local government hear him out, i.e. at least to take his opinion into consideration. His act was a public symbol of the injustice he felt. The same injustice, i.e. the impossibility to have an influence on the social and political situation in their own country, was felt and publicly expressed by many citizens, e.g. by the absolute majority of Tunisian lawyers who took part in the national strike and in the protests. The magnitude of the latter was, on the one hand, the result of their coordination in the social media and, on the other hand, the consequence of the government’s many unsuccessful attempts to suppress the protests by force. After the president Ben Ali fled the country on the 14th of January 2011, further protests took place, ending only in March, after the dissolution of the former ruling party and the announcement of the elections to the Constituent Assembly. In this regard, the Tunisian Revolution appears to be more successful than the Romanian Revolution (at least according to Arendt’s criteria) – not because it helped to

³ The same point is made in SIANI-DAVIES, 2005, 286.

⁴ The new president Ion Iliescu, a former member of the Communist party who lost his position many years prior to the revolution because of a conflict within the party, claimed an overwhelming victory in the elections of 1990, with about 85 percent of votes for him. Civil protests, immediately following the elections, were – yet again – suppressed by force.

⁵ The argument that the Tunisian citizens regard social (or economic) issues as equally important as the political ones is supported by several public opinion polls. For instance, during the polls of 2014 between 24 and 27 percent of citizens mentioned social care and protection of human rights as the most important objectives of a democratic government (cf. BENSTEAD et al., 2014).

resolve the ‘social question’ (an impossible task from the short-term perspective) but because of its important political and juridical consequences, including the increasing freedom of political action of Tunisian citizens.

Just as in the case of the ‘Jasmine Revolution’, the origins of the Ukrainian Euromaidan (November 2013 – February 2014) are twofold, defined by a number of social and political problems. One of the reasons for the first wave of protests was the refusal of the Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union. In the eyes of the protesters, this agreement whose actual content was known only to very few, had not an exclusively political significance, symbolizing a chance for a future European integration, but also an economic importance, as a possible tool for resolving of social problems. The initially peaceful protests were soon met with brute force, contributing to their quick expansion and long-term persistence. Like many prior revolutions, the revolution in the Ukraine ended with the resignation of the president and with the formation of an interim government. After the end of the active phase several political and social reforms were announced. Still, not many of them were actually carried out as of yet, even though a large number of prominent participants of Maidan have become members of the Ukrainian parliament after the new elections, gaining the power to realize their plans. Also, the events of the revolution have sparked the already present tensions between the citizens of the Eastern and Western part of the country, resulting in counter protests and in the outbreak of an armed conflict in the regions of Lugansk and Donetsk. A thorough evaluation of the events in Ukraine proves yet to be a difficult task – not only because of the recent evolvement of the events (some of which are still unfolding) but also in the light of the still unclear path of many Ukrainian reforms, combining democratic features with some autocratic and nationalist tendencies. Still, even though the judgement about the most important results of these events has to be suspended, it is clear that the Euromaidan is one of the most prominent cases of modern revolutions.⁶

⁶ Like in the case of Romania, there were several claims about Ukraine, pointing out the possible ‘non-genuine’ (i.e. intentional and arbitral: cf. ARENDT, 1970, p. 12) character of the revolution as an actual coup-d’état. Still, no hard evidence was presented to support these claims. Arendt herself was more than skeptical about theories whose main goal is to prove that revolutions are “made” (cf. ARENDT, 1970, p. 48).

The previously described examples highlight the strong points as well as ascertain the strains and possible gaps in Arendt’s analysis of revolutions. One of the central problems is the discrepancy between Arendt’s own definition and some aspects of the modern usage of the word ‘revolution’. Since Arendt herself gives a negative answer to the question concerning the possibility of a peaceful revolution,⁷ we seemingly cannot add the GDR revolution of 1989-90 (as well as several further cases) to the list of Arendtian examples,⁸ even though the origins as well as the most goals of this revolution coincide with the ones mentioned in her works. A possible way to overcome this obstacle can be found in Arendt’s own description of violence which does not limit itself to physical violence. On the one hand, the absence of physical violence can prove that the current government is powerful enough to sustain crises without resorting to violence while a violent response to civil protests (as in cases of Romanian, Tunisian and Ukrainian revolutions) can mean that the government is unsure of its own power, thus resorting to such direct measures.⁹ In Arendtian terms, the absence of this kind of violence during certain revolutions can be explained twofold: the protesters do not want to provoke the government to use violence while the government’s loss of power is such that the army and the police do not obey its orders (cf. ARENDT, 1970, p. 48).¹⁰ During the revolution, there is also non-physical violence which is directed against governmental systems and institutions: as opposed to “essentially peaceful activities of thinking and laboring” (ARENDT, 1970, p. 13), violence can also be expressed verbally (ibid.) or, as we previously stated, in public acts of civil disobedience. Still, the problem with Arendt’s concept of violence in the light of her idea of revolution stems from the fact that she does not pursue the analysis of non-physical forms of violence in greater detail.

Unfortunately, Arendt also does not fully elaborate on how to treat the problematic and uncertain differences between revolution and civil war: she never

⁷ In *On Revolution*, Arendt claims that violence plays a predominant role in both revolutions and wars (ARENDT, 1963, p. 18-19), as a necessary tool for achieving liberation (ibid., p. 144).

⁸ This problem was repeatedly pointed out by some scholars, e.g. in BÄCKER, 1994, 117. The question concerning the possibility of a non-violent revolution was initially brought up by Noam Chomsky during his debates with Arendt and Susan Sontag: CHOMSKY et al., 1967 <<https://chomsky.info/19671215/>>.

⁹ For Arendt’s opposition of violence and power, see ARENDT 1970, p. 46 ff.

¹⁰ If there is a dissent among soldiers or policemen, physical violence can still erupt, in some cases starting a civil war.

makes such distinction in her works, describing the civil war as a possible (and very probable, as we see in the cases of the French, the American and the Russian Revolutions) consequence of a revolution but giving her readers no word about the exact moment when a revolution turns into a full-fledged armed conflict. Moreover, several of her points concerning violence connect wars and revolutions, thus making the said distinction a rather impossible task, as opposed to the one concerning the previous issue.

Next issue, namely the already mentioned underestimation of social motives of revolutionary protests (also clearly visible in the modern cases of the Tunisian and Ukrainian revolutions), represents a well-known critical spot of Arendt's theory. Of course, it cannot be disputed that the economic demands exclusively associated with the well-being of a private person (or his *oikos*, as Arendt demonstrates in chapter 2 of *Human Condition*) should not be confused with the problems of the public realm. Still, these demands can – under certain circumstances – turn into the political ones. Lack of food and other basic commodities leads to the necessity of doing hard work, which in turn means that one cannot freely choose his occupation since he has no free time to do so. Although the impossibility to break this eternal circle (to get a higher salary, to find a better job, to make his claims heard by those in power, etc.) does not necessarily make one into a political activist, one's lack of freedom can incite him to critically reevaluate his current social circumstances, thinking of alternative ways – not only for him or his own family but also for his friends, colleagues or other people from his social environment. Thus, the social question, as a question of private well-being, can be turned into a more general question of the well-being of a social group within a state and of the state itself.

An important distinctive feature of Arendt's thinking lies in its actuality. Her efforts to understand specific social and political tendencies of the present in the light of the important changes of the past have helped her to successfully describe several phenomena of her time. These same aspects, however, present a serious risk of gradually becoming obsolete due to cultural, social and political changes. In our case, this problem arises with Arendt's statement on the role of local councils which are formed during revolutions. In the light of the recent events of the Tunisian and the Ukrainian revolutions, we could ask ourselves if we should reevaluate this statement from the background of the modern forms and instruments of communication. Would it be, perhaps, more appropriate to speak of communities on

the basis of social networks? However, if we shift our attention from the narrow political role of local councils to Arendt's idea of political organization of individuals, as a necessary prerequisite for a collective action, we can see that Arendt herself would be able to describe the new means of communication and political action in her own terms, such as 'space of appearance' and 'acting in concert'. Further still, the same issue can be used as a means to establish a new connection between Arendt's theories of thinking and action.

First of all, we have to admit that the communicative and organizational role of social networks (e.g. *Facebook* and *Twitter*) as a new public field – although somewhat overestimated in the initial studies of the Tunisian and the Ukrainian Revolutions¹¹ – remains mostly unnoticed in Arendt studies. To make this aspect fruitful for the analysis of the recent revolutions, we have to take into consideration Arendt's notion of opinion, based on her studies of Plato's and Aristotle's works (mainly in ARENDT, 2004), linking it to her ideas of community, thinking and action. In Arendtian terms, the political role of social networks would consist in making a wide range of individual opinions accessible to the broad public. On the one hand, gaining considerable support of the 'community' helps to garner attention from the traditional media and politicians, so that in certain cases private opinions can have long-term consequences, giving impulse to political actions. On the other hand, each individual statement of a politician, while also being interpreted by traditional media, which not always represent the whole spectrum of opinions, becomes the subject of a broad public discussion, in certain aspects analogous to the Greek *agōn* between equal opinions, each of whom does not negate the others.¹² This expansion of the public sphere by the means of social networks helps to reduce the gap between thinking and action. A detailed study of the chief consequences of this new phenomenon from an Arendtian standpoint could shed a new light on the long-debated problem of the relation between the two main parts of Arendt's philosophy.

¹¹ In some aspects, however, these studies underestimated the more general political role of *Facebook* and *Twitter*, at least in Eastern Europe (especially in Ukraine and in Russia), since these social media are much more often used as platforms for political debates in these countries than, for instance, in Western Europe.

¹² It is, of course, clear that the political role of social networks is not always a positive one. Social and political debates in the Internet can be manipulated and radicalized, while social network 'communities' can isolate themselves from the others in order to prevent the discussion of certain subjects and alternative opinions, promoting a single opinion as the only 'objective' truth.

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