

«The Freedom to Be Free»: Hannah Arendt on «Salvation» of the World of Politics

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Publications of recent years and decades demonstrate that, in addition to writing monographs and publishing collections of articles, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), throughout her academic career in the United States, actively used the lecture genre and non-fiction articles to clarify and popularize the ideas of her political philosophy and her approach to the problems of our times. The publication of these lectures provides us with a fresh perspective on important aspects of her ideas regarding the political world and the role of political freedom, as reflected in the words and actions of humans in their common world. The focus of this paper is on Arendt's lectures from the 1960s, which were dedicated to clarifying her two key works from the second half of the 1950s and the early 1960 — “The Human Condition (1958)” and “On Revolution (1963)” — as well as interpreting the central concepts of her political philosophy: Action, Freedom, Politics and Revolution. The article pays special attention to Arendt's interpretation of human freedom as a gift and a miracle, which is proposed in these lectures. Freedom's negative contribution to the world of human actions and words is to interrupt the automaticity of inertial social reproduction, while its positive contribution is to “save” the common political world for future generations.

Keywords: Hanna Arendt, political philosophy, action, freedom, world of politics, revolution, salvation, secular theology of redemption

In “The Life of The Mind”, a book that Hannah Arendt wrote in her final years, she compared the work of human mind to the web of Penelope, a mythical character, who was the wife of the legendary Odysseus. “The business of thinking”, she said, “is like Penelope's web; it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before” (Arendt, 1978: 88). These ideas are based on the assumption that the philosophical journey of the mind does not lead to any final conclusions that are not open to further reconsideration, but rather consists in an ongoing dialogue that the philosopher engages in not only with others, but primarily with himself throughout his lifetime, satisfying his need for thought through the very act of thinking. This principle is perfectly in line with Arendt's own ideas, as has been repeatedly emphasized by scholars of her political philosophy¹. This trait of her thought is well illustrated by her lectures and articles from the 1960s, recently published by Penguin as a separate volume (Arendt, 2020) in the “Great Ideas” series².

1. Bearing in mind this precise feature of Arendt's thinking as a philosopher, Claude Lefort speaks even of the “requirement to think, which lies at the heart of her work” (Lefort, 1986: 65).

2. In addition to Arendt, the thinkers of the 20th century whose works were honored with publication in this series include Sigmund Freud, George Orwell, Thorstein Veblen, Albert Camus, Leon Trotsky, Walter Benjamin, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, William James, W.E.B. Du Bois, Theodor Herzl, Vladimir Lenin, Peter Kropotkin, Simone de Beauvoir, Simone Weil, Martin Luther King, and Peter Singer.

These lectures and articles, although delivered and published at different times, were chosen in such a way that Arendt's thoughts unfold sequentially in three interrelated stages. The problems raised in the previous texts smoothly turn into those of the subsequent ones, creating an excellent impression of a coherent presentation. The first text provides an interpretation of Arendt's understanding of the conditions of human existence, as presented in her work "The Human Condition" (Arendt, 1998 [1958]). The second lecture reveals her understanding of politics as the highest form of human being-in-the-world, the source of which she sees in humans' ability of beginning something new and free from the pressure of vital necessity. In turn, Arendt sees revolutions — these fundamental events of the modern era, aimed at constituting a new public space for political freedom (*constitutio libertatis*) — to be the ultimate expression of such a new beginning in the political life of contemporary world³. The third text in this collection focuses on the background and importance of the great revolutions of the modern era. Thus, the drama of the political aspect of human existence, as discussed in Arendt's lectures and articles, takes place within a theoretical framework defined by her three main philosophical concepts: action, political freedom, and revolution.

Political thought, true to its purpose, for Arendt is always a test of events. She believed that, «the significance of a historical period shows itself only in the few events that illuminate it» (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 42). Only by hermeneutically thinking and interpreting such fateful events, if you will, Events with a capital E, that define the essence of the modern era, can one truly understand its nature. Thoughts that evade comprehension of fateful events are objectively empty, and events that are not affected by thought comprehending their significance are meaningless in their bare factuality. "My assumption is", Arendt wrote in the preface to her work «Between Past and Future», "that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings" (Arendt, 2006 [1954]: 14). Arendt remained faithful to this idea that the philosopher's political thought should be substantially linked to the fateful events of our time, not only in her written works, but also in her public speeches, reports, and lectures.

At the same time, it's important to remember that the lecture genre, as the genre of non-fiction articles which requires presenting the most important information in a limited time frame and printed space and making it understandable to an unprepared audience, demands a lot from those who choose to share their thoughts publicly. In this regard, we, Arendt's contemporary readers, are very fortunate, because she was able to explain complex and structured ideas that were initially understandable only to academics and experts, in simple and clear language. This is exactly the case with her first text "Labor, Work, Action" (Arendt, 2020 [1964]: 1 — 32), published in this collection, which is dedicated to presenting the main outlines of her understanding of the human condition. In this text, Arendt comprehensively examines three basic forms of human practice: Labor, Work or Production, and Action. She explores their specifics, the unique features

3. Arendt addressed this issue a separate work "On Revolution" (Arendt, 1990 [1963]).

of their historical evolution, their interrelation with one another, and their impact on the political space.

To recap, in her philosophy, Arendt divides all human activity into two basic categories — theoretical (*vita contemplativa*) and active (*vita activa*) (Arendt, 1998 [1958]: 7 — 17). The latter, in turn, is further divided into three primary types — labour, production/manufacture (work), and action. If, in the course of their labour, humans are entirely dependent on the natural processes of life, compelled to reproduce their physical and mental existence and fulfill their basic needs, then through the second form of practical activity — work — they «render themselves the masters and possessors of nature» (as Descartes put it) and shape the world of objects around them. However, it is only through the third form of human activity — action and speech — that an individual engages with others and the world, serving as the backdrop for this engagement, and can realize his freedom. By making themselves known to others through speech, humans thereby make their presence in the world public. This is an elementary action from Arendt's perspective.

Politics belongs precisely to this last, highest type of human activity. It is the deliberation and solution of common problems through speech, which involves the active participation of citizens in socially significant processes of verbal communication⁴. That is why, according to Arendt (Arendt, 1990 [1963]; Arendt, 1998 [1958]; Arendt, 2006), the normative model of a political community in her works is the ancient *polis* and the Roman *civitas*. Both represent a political community of free and equal individuals united by a shared commitment to a particular political way of life and a collective willingness to participate in solving common challenges.

This notion of interdependence between freedom and politics stands in contradiction to the social theories of the modern age. With the growing world-alienation of man in the modern age political action as a form of practice recedes into the background⁵. This is why politics is often mistakenly associated either with work, or with labor. Work refers to the manufacture of durable consumer goods, while labour refers to activities aimed at meeting immediate human needs. In this case, politics can be reduced to either bare administration, where speech-mediated interaction between people is likened to the management of things, or to a specific type of politics that, with the support of Michel Foucault and his followers, has been called “biopolitics”⁶. The result of these trends in the development of political practices and institutions, as well as political theory, in the mod-

4. Arendt defines as “political” those matters of common public interest for which there is no certain technical solution and which therefore are a suitable subject for public debate. From her point of view, «Public debate can only deal with things which — if we want to put it negatively — we cannot figure out with certainty. Otherwise, if we can figure it out with certainty, why do we all need to get together?» (Arendt, 1979: 317).

5. It is worth mentioning that Arendt is referring to the “the world-alienation of man of the modern age”. Other concepts of alienation that have become widespread in modern social thought, such as “the disenchantment of the world” (Weber) and “alienation of man (Marx)”, are perceived sharply critically by her on the grounds that they “often involve the romanticized notion of the past” (Arendt, 2006: 64). The question of whether the concept of world-alienation in Arendt's «The Human Condition» can be compared to the criticism of romanticizing ideas about the classical past is a matter for the readers to decide.

6. Cf.: Foucault, 2004.

ern world is that «the entire modern age has separated freedom from politics» (Arendt, 2020 [1960]: 37).

However, historical experience tells us that freedom and politics have not always been understood in this way. Arendt presents several arguments to demonstrate the close relationship between freedom and politics in the history of the Western world. Summing up, we can say that these arguments refer to «the oldest historical memories that have deposited themselves in our language, as well as the tradition of political thought and the experiences of the present» (Arendt, 2020 [1960]: 40), related to the experience of the right and left wing totalitarianism of the XX century. From a linguistic perspective, it is crucial for Arendt that «in all European languages we use a word for politics in which its origin, the Greek *polis*, can still be heard. Not only etymologically, and not only for scholars, this word is drenched with associations stemming from the community where politics in its specific sense was first discovered» (Arendt, 2020 [1960]: 37). Arendt also connects the idea that «tyranny is the worst of all forms of state» with the *polis* origin of both the term itself and politics as a free human activity. She believes that this idea is highly relevant for the self-understanding of statesmen and political theorists of the Western world in the second half of the 20th century. This unanimity is motivated by the fact that «among the classical forms of government tyranny is the only one that in principle cannot be reconciled with freedom» (Arendt, 2020 [1960]: 37 — 38). Consequently, this shared use of symbolic representations of the political realm by both the ruling elite and academic circles in the Western world prompts Arendt to suggest that the interests of security and reproduction of life, now encompassed in political thought by the concepts of “biopower” and “biopolitics,” as introduced by Michel Foucault, cannot be the overarching priority in the interpretation of modernity’s political objectives. After all, in this case we would have to admit that tyranny is not the worst way to govern the Earth, as it is possible to ensure safety and basic needs for those who are dominated. “If we really believed”, Arendt points out, “as the theories of the modern age attempt to convince us, that in politics security and life interests are all that is at stake, we would have no reason to reject tyranny; for it can certainly deliver security, and it has often proved itself superior to all other forms of state in protecting mere life” (Arendt, 2020 [1960]: 38). In other words, «the original coincidence of freedom and politics, which was self-evident to classical antiquity» (Arendt, 2020 [1960]: 38) but then faded away, was partly preserved or revived in the symbolic understanding of Western modernity during the second half of the 20th century. All these arguments, taken together, offer an understanding of modern politics that not only “goes far beyond contemporary political theory and its conceptual framework”, but also presupposes «a different consciousness of freedom and a different concept of politics to those we are accustomed to» (Arendt, 2020 [1960]: 41).

It is not without reason that Arendt places freedom at the heart of her understanding of man and politics. Human beings are unique creatures living in the world precisely because they have freedom. At the same time, Arendt does not understand freedom itself neither as freedom of will, in the sense of *liberum arbitrium*, or freedom to implement a rational project. Rather she sees it as an individual’s capacity to transcend the “given” and

start something new. This capacity to start something new empowers human beings to liberate themselves from the constraints of imperatives of vital necessities and disrupt the inertial momentum of societal developments. This capacity to disrupt the automaticity of historical evolution and introduce something new into the world, from Arendt's perspective, is primarily connected with the realm of politics. It culminates in the historical experience of the great revolutions of modern age.

In the work «On Revolution» (Arendt, 1990 [1963]), whose key ideas are explained and clarified in the lecture “Freedom to Be Free”, which eventually gave the name to the entire collection, Arendt settles accounts with two of the most influential intellectual traditions of the twentieth century — liberalism and Marxism. In her opinion, both these venerable traditions of political thought failed to fully understand the significance of the great modern revolutions — the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789 — because they overlooked the central event: the establishment of a new public order based on political freedom, in which free and equal citizens could collectively deal with their common affairs. They failed to grasp the true *political* significance of modernity's great revolutions, because they viewed politics not as an independent and ultimate form of human activity, but rather as a means to achieve other, non-political objectives. This was the case for both liberals, who sought to pursue personal gain without bounds, and Marxists, who aimed to establish a classless society where citizens would be free and equal (Wellmer, 2006: 220).⁷

From Arendt's point of view, the main thing in the experience of modern revolutions is the coincidence of the idea of freedom with the beginning of something new: «the idea of freedom and the actual experience of making a new beginning in the historical continuum should coincide» (Arendt, 2020 [1966/1967]: 104)⁸. It is freedom, which is at the origin of the revolutionary movement that serves as an unmistakable criterion for distinguishing authentic revolutions from those that are not. For this reason, Arendt is clearly pleased to agree with Condorcet's words, who believed that the “word ‘revolutionary’ can be applied only to revolutions whose aim is freedom” (Arendt, 2020 [1966/1967]: 81). Arendt saw the main advantage of the American Revolution in that it not only declared independence from the British crown and founded a new state, but at the same time it was also able to establish a new political freedom space based on the 1787 Constitution, whose authors were inspired by the idea of separation of powers.

Speaking about the revolutions of modernity as an experience of a new beginning, Arendt first of all emphasizes the novelty of the modern interpretation of the concept of “revolution”. Despite the fact that the word “revolution” can be used in a generic sense without taking into account either the word's origin or the temporal moment when the term was first applied to a particular political phenomenon, from a point of view of po-

7. Regarding the Marxist ideal of a classless society, Arendt in her notes from the 1950s rather sharply noted that Marx's vision of a society without classes, in which management of things would take the place of domination over people, was not apolitical but anti-political. Instead of not having any political government whatsoever, “it actually can only be rule by nobody, that is, bureaucracy, a form of government in which nobody takes responsibility” (Arendt, 2005: 77).

8. On the antinomies of this understanding of the idea of revolution in Arendt, see: Fine, 2001: 127 — 130.

litical philosophy a more differentiated approach is required that takes into account the term's historical context and its entry into the lexicon of modern political thinking. As Arendt emphasizes, "prior to the two great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century and the specific sense it then acquired, the word "revolution" was hardly prominent in the vocabulary of political thought or practice" (Arendt, 2020 [1966/1967]: 82). In the seventeenth century the term is used in its original astronomical meaning, which signified the eternal, irresistible, ever-recurring motion of the heavenly bodies, meanwhile its political usage was metaphorical, describing a motion, a swinging back to a preordained order. Therefore, until and including the 18th century, this word-concept in the European cultural and civilizational area meant nothing more than "restoration", the content of which was recovery of former freedom, or rather, restoring of former liberties (Arendt, 2020 [1966/1967]: 83). This applies not only to the English Revolution of 1640-1660 and the "Glorious Revolution" of 1689, but also to the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789. Thanks to the latter, which impacted the whole Europe, there was a significant change in the political meaning of the term, as a result of which it begins to denote the process of liberation of all people under the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. Thus, Arendt concludes, «what actually happened at the end of the eighteenth century was that an attempt at restoration and recovery of old rights and privileges resulted in its exact opposite: a progressing development and the opening up of a future which defied all further attempts at acting or thinking in terms of a circular or revolving motion» (Arendt, 2020 [1966/1967]: 84).

Like the concept of revolution, the concept of freedom underwent similar, although more complex, substantial changes during the great revolutions of modern times. At the dawn of modernity, it was still identified with those rights and liberties we today associate with constitutional government and call civil rights. However, the problem was that those rights have nothing in common with the political right to participate in public affairs. Arendt attributes this to the fact that «liberties in the sense of civil rights are the results of liberation, but they are by no means the actual content of freedom, whose essence is admission to the public realm and participation in public affairs» (Arendt, 2020 [1966/1967]: 85). On this basis, Arendt draws a broad distinction between civil liberty and political freedom. While the former, based on civil rights, is inherently *negative* in nature, protecting human life from excessive interference by the state and society, the latter, in its essence, is a *positive* phenomenon associated with the right to participate in political decision-making about public affairs⁹.

According to Arendt, it «was a passion for this new political freedom, though not yet equated with a republican form of government, which inspired and prepared those to enact a revolution without fully knowing what they were doing» (Arendt, 2020 [1966/1967]: 87). At the same time, Arendt sees the squaring of the circle of the great revolutions of modernity in the fact that, while they were associated with both liberation from the constraints of the "ancient regime" and the establishment of political freedom, the «lib-

9. For a discussion on the contradictions in Arendt's interpretation of the concepts of "freedom" and "liberty", see: Pitkin, 1988: 523 — 552, in particular 523 — 528.

eration is indeed a condition of freedom — though freedom is by no means a necessary result of liberation — it is difficult to see and say where the desire for liberation, to be free from oppression, ends, and the desire for freedom, to live a political life, begins» (Arendt, 2020 [1966/1967]: 86). If the desire to be free from oppression could have been fulfilled through the establishment of limited constitutional monarchy, then freedom as a political way of life requires the formation of a new or rediscovered form of government, namely, the constitution of a republic¹⁰. From Arendt's perspective, authentic revolutionary action aims to establish a constitution of freedom (*constitutio libertatis*), and the establishment of this constitution requires the formation of a republic that represents a constitutional government that guarantees not only basic civil rights but also the access of free and equal citizens to the political public sphere¹¹.

At the same time, Arendt reproaches the French Revolution, and with it, the symbolic universe that legitimized a specifically modern understanding of democracy's theory and practice, for putting a new absolute — the nation — in place of the old sovereign. This was a pernicious attempt to pour new wine into old bottles. In this case, we are dealing with the feature of the “modern social imaginaries”¹², which has long been observed by sociologists and social theorists, that «the old understanding of power and authority, even if their former representatives were most violently denounced, almost automatically led the new experience of power to be channeled into concepts which had just been vacated» (Arendt, 1990 [1963]: 155). And this, in turn, led to the deformation of new political concepts, forcing contemporaries to perceive and understand them in accordance with the patterns familiar from the old world. However, from Arendt's perspective, sovereignty and freedom in politics are not compatible. According to her, «where men, whether as individuals or in organized groups, wish to be sovereign, they must abolish freedom. But if they wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce» (Arendt, 2020: 57). This is another programmatic idea of Hannah Arendt — to create a democratic political theory that would be based not on the concept of sovereignty, whether it is the absolute sovereign of the “ancient regime” or a new sovereign represented by a single and indivisible modern nation.

Here we come to the most important — from the perspective of the relationship between philosophy and politics, thought and action — point in Arendt's political thought. The central place given by the author to the concepts of action, freedom, and revolution paints a normative picture of political life that is so at odds with the main trends in the development of the modern world and the prevailing approaches to these concepts that its implementation would, by the author's own admission, be a real “miracle” in practice. Consequently, numerous indications suggest that we are witnessing the emergence of a new secular redemptive theology, developed within the context of political philosophy,

10. Cf.: Arendt, 1990 [1963]: 33.

11. Some contemporary scholars believe that Arendt's position on *constitutio libertatis* is aporetic in nature, since “political freedom has an antinomical relation to the possibility of its own founding”. This view is echoed in the work of Miguel Vatter, who interprets a political undertaking as a Machiavellian return to the origins (Vatter, 2000: 221).

12. The concept of “modern social imaginaries” is revealed in great detail today in the work of Charles Taylor: Taylor, 2004; Taylor, 2007.

where political action itself serves as the primary instrument of collective salvation, if not for free and equal citizens acting individually — death and life law will take its toll anyway — but at least for the *common world* as a public space where political freedom dwells. According to Arendt, «only the world and men in the plural can anticipate salvation through the miracle that is possible in all political affairs — at least as long as freedom, the human gift of interrupting ruin, remains intact. No miracle is required to save life as such since by nature it endures with the species, nor can a miracle ever save man in the singular, who must always die as an individual. These ruinous processes can be interrupted only for the world that is common to us all, which outlasts our life or at least can outlast it, and which is the specific concern of politics. From this it follows that, although the ability to begin may be a gift of man in his singularity, he can only realize it in relation to the world and in acting together with his fellow men» (Arendt, 2020 [1960]: 72 — 73).

It seems that within the framework of this new secular theology of redemption, the gift of freedom, the ability to begin and its revolutionary refractions as acts of forming something new and interrupting automatic inertial processes of social reproduction play a role similar to that played by “miracles” in religions of revelation. Where political action, as ability to begin and freely take initiative, disappears from society for one reason or another, then «the processes that freedom first brought forth also become automatic, and an automatic process produced by men is no less ruinous for the world than automatic natural processes are for the life of the individual» (Arendt 2020 [1960], 75). If it weren't for the miracle of freedom, as Hannah Arendt called it, then today, humans would be completely subordinate to these automatic processes that could only destroy their political existence in the world.

Therefore, as Arendt emphasizes, «this time, no less than the continued existence of men on earth may depend upon man's gift of performing “miracles,” that is, bringing about the infinitely improbable and establishing it as a worldly reality» (Arendt, 2020 [1960], 76). In the context of this unorthodox view of the world and human action, Arendt and her followers can only hope that not only human freedom, as a way of being in the world, but above all, the gift of freedom itself, which was not created by humans but was given to them, will be preserved along with the opportunities they provide for revolutionary new beginnings: «without action, without the capacity to start something new and thus articulate the new beginning that comes into the world with the birth of each human being, the life of man, spent between birth and death, would inevitably be doomed beyond salvation» (Arendt, 2020 [1964]: 31). Thus, the promise of saving the common world of politics by word and deed through free human action becomes for Arendt not only an imperative for political life, but also a promise of salvation for both the humans and their freedom in the world.

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«Свобода быть свободным»: Ханна Арендт о «спасении» мира политического

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Публикации последних лет и десятилетий показывают, что помимо написания монографических исследований и издания сборников статей, значительная часть которых была первоначально опубликована в различных гуманитарных изданиях, Ханна Арендт (1906 — 1975) на протяжении всей своей академической карьеры в США активно использовала также жанр отдельных лекционных выступлений для разъяснения и популяризации идей своей политической философии и своего подхода к актуальным

проблемам современности. Их публикация позволяет во многом по-новому взглянуть на важные аспекты ее представлений о мире политического и о роли политической свободы, преломляющейся в словах и поступках людей в этом общем для них мире. В центре внимания данной статьи находятся лекции Арендт 1960-х годов, посвященные прояснению замысла двух ее ключевых политических работ второй половины 1950-х — начала 1960-х — «The Human Condition» (1958) и «On Revolution» (1963), — а также интерпретации центральных для дискурса ее политической философии понятий действия (Action), свободы (Freedom), политики (Politics) и революции (Revolution). Особое внимание в статье уделяется предложенному Арендт в этих лекциях толкованию свободы человека как дара (gift) и чуда (miracle), негативная работа которой в мире человеческих слов и дел заключается в прерывании автоматизма инерционных процессов социального воспроизводства, а позитивная — в «спасении» (salvation) общего мира политического для ныне живущих и будущих поколений.

Ключевые слова: Ханна Арендт, политическая философия, действие, свобода, мир политического, революция, спасение.