

LIVING UNDER ECONOMIC COLONIZATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL REMARK ON ARENDT'S *HUMAN CONDITION*

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Abstract:

The culture of economic colonization is at the background and yet at the center of Arendt's Human Condition. This colonizing culture is perfectly actualized through work and labor under a rhythmic coordination of a pater familias. It is more than ever enslaving and alienating, since it excludes possibilities for self-emancipation and provides no room for individuality. Work and labor therefore stand on the opposite side to the political. The culture they offer is in nature contradictory to the one promoted by the political. Hence the political is believed to be the remedy of economic and political problems. It in essence promotes action, i.e., the culture necessary for human self-emancipation. Arendt's position on the idea of the political, however, must not be taken for granted. Arendt's insistence on direct participation in political life has reminded us that citizens must be able to take care of their own desires and interests. It would be naïve to uncritically entrust one's destiny, life, and future to the political authority or to the state.

Keywords:

work • labor • action • the political • economic colonization • absorption of the social • self-expression

Introduction

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) has been widely known as a political philosopher *par excellence*. Arendt's critical analysis on the realm of political phenomenon and her emphasis on the significance of a forum for human self-expression are relevant social and political issues to be aware of, since narrow understanding of the political and the lost of the public space have been quite prevalent even in the so-called modern democratic societies. Indonesian political and economic turbulence which had taken place over ten years and various massive riots staged nationwide as the protest and rejection to the existing political and economic mismanagement, for instance, can be considered the best example that must awaken even every modern society to take seriously Arendt's radical understanding of the political.

This essay focuses on giving some philosophical remarks on Arendt's idea of the human condition. Through this philosophical effort, I attempt to reveal as long as I can the richness of the philosopher's idea of the human condition. To a certain extent, this essay is aiming at unfolding the silent ideas of Arendt's *Human Condition*.¹ It will be done by showing, first, the intrusion of the private sphere (characterized by labor and work) and its implications on the public sphere (characterized by the absorption by the social) on the one hand; and, second, the political as the remedy and, at the same time, the realm of human self-emancipation, on the other. Dwelling deeper the philosopher's ideas, particularly, about work, labor, and action would be of highly inspiring for even modern societies to be aware of the problem of economic colonization over human beings.

It is worth noting that there might be different perspectives to read Arendt's political philosophy. The problem, however, is not so much about the perspective one has to take in reading Arendt. Rather, whether the very perspective we choose is viable enough to bring us to a better understanding of the philosopher's position. Relying on this purpose, reading Arendt's ideas of work, labor, and action not as work, labor, and action as such but rather as a kind of political culture, might help unfold political values she tried to defend in her major work *The Human Condition*.

The essay starts with a discussion on the philosopher's idea of work and labor; followed then by a discernment of the social as the antithesis of both labor and work, on the one hand, and action, on the

other. And since economic and political difficulties arising due chiefly to the slave culture brought about by work and labor, this paper will be closed with a discussion about the idea of *polis* as the remedy of the problem. Arendt's optimistic position on the political, however, must not be taken for granted. Economic colonization has been so pervasive that even the political is not immune of the negative impacts prompted by economic interest.

Economic Enslavement

Arendt took the realm of labor as human biological cycle. It is the realm that operates in a circle of necessity merely for the sake of preserving human life. In such realm human beings are totally dictated by natural necessity for the fulfillment of their daily life; they are entirely subject to the natural rhythm of biological necessity. It is the manifestation of family life and patriarchal relationship within which all members of the society and their activities are totally controlled by a figure of father in the family. The presence of a "father" is indispensable since laborers' performance and the best result they may create depend very much on a rhythmic coordination of all individual movements.² The culture of labor in essence nearly provides no room for self-expression or freedom. Labor in itself is, therefore, nothing but the manifestation of slave culture.³

It would be reasonable to say that in the realm of labor there is a strong tendency to see people simply as a mass of persons without self-identity. To put it in Marx's mouth, in the realm of labor people are alienated from both their work and themselves for they actually have no autonomy in producing things. Applying tools and machine to ease his work, human being is able to boost and increase his/her productivity. Hence, to a certain extent, the realm of labor and the machines or the technology it adopts to ease the whole process of production has brought with it material wealth. It eases and provides human being with more comfortable life to enjoy. In short, the quality of human life in terms of economy has increased due to the economic growth boosted by the technology. Unfortunately, the product he/she has fabricated, in fact, stands relatively independent from its creator. Products are even stand against its creator because the creator, due to his/her voracious needs and wants, is now controlled by things he/she has produced. And once they

are totally subject to their life cycle necessity, they must be at the same time alienated from the circumstances they live in.⁴ In other words, human being is living in a repressive and totalitarian condition for he/she is not able to release him/herself from economic enslavement.⁵

Arendt step further to dismantle the core political problem culturally folded by labor. She believed that human being is not only a *homo laborans* but also *homo faber*, which is characterized by the durability of things he produces. Beside the realm of labor, there is the realm of work, within which *homo faber* as “the lord and master of the whole earth” who under “the guidance of a model” is able to produce things which “by definition bound to result in a Promethean revolt because it could erect a man-made world only after destroying part of God-created nature”.⁶ Human being in the realm of work, thus, demonstrates his strength and power over nature. Nature is now under the control of human being. In this sense, Arendt tried to encourage even modern societies to realize the power of anthropocentric approach to nature. Arendt seemed to emphasize that nature has lost its value due to the colonization of economic interest. Its value is rather determined by its functionality in serving and satisfying human desires and wants. Human being is no longer a part of nature. He/she puts him/herself above and beyond the nature. In such position human being is free to control and even to explore as much as possible the nature to fulfill his/her needs.

It is clear that the realm of labor and that of work are different to each other. The former is characterized by consumption, while the latter is identified by durability of products. Yet, they have certain traits in common. First, both of them present an ethos of relationship that provides no room for individuality. All people are treated merely as a mass of society whose activities and way of life are inevitably under the control an external power. Just like *homo laborans*, who is entirely subject to life's necessity, *homo faber* in the whole process of fabrication is entirely dictated by the model of the produced-object as such that “what guides the work of fabrication is outside the fabricator and precedes the actual work process in much the same way as the urgencies of the life process within the laborer precede the actual process”.⁷

Second, both the realm of labor and that of work have developed as such that human being (the maker) can no longer put them under its

own control. In the realm of labor, people might be so over abundant that they are unable to realize themselves from the enslavement dictated by their own life's necessity. What Arendt worried most is that the never-ending demand of material happiness would push *homo laborans* to pursue more and more consumed-materials so that they are unable to release themselves from material enslavement. This uncontrolled-consumption tendency would even in turn put all objects of the world in danger. There might be no object of the world that really safe from annihilation through consumption. Forests devastation, uncontrolled explorations of natural resources, biosphere quality degradation, the increase of the earth's temperature, or the environmental destruction in general, obviously exemplify the unintended implications of uncontrolled appetite of consumption.

To such extent, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin is absolutely right when she wrote: "We are destroying species, exhausting resources, fouling the earth so that it may soon be unfit for inhabitation."⁸ Thus, the point is not so much about human greed as such, but rather that his or her greed has become a kind of civilization: consumerism. Living in such civilization would be easy for human being to see nature simply as means for the fulfillment of his or her own needs. This attitude in turn would impose him or her to exploit nature, and so to do violence on nature, without having respect for it as something meaningful in itself.

Thus in the realm of work and in the never-ending process of fabrication, people's way of thinking and behaving is in essence shaped by means-end approach. In such approach, every product or object of production is considered the new means for a new end. A table is, therefore, a product that comes to existence by a machine designed to produce it. A table, however, in the means-end way of thinking, is nothing but a means by which *homo faber* is able to gain, say, money as a new end. This process and approach will continue as such that human beings are trapped in a never-ending chain of means and ends. Following Kant, it must be admitted that, in such process, there is nothing considered meaningful in itself. The principle of "usefulness" has replaced and even given priority over the principle of "meaningfulness". The so-called meaning has been alien to *Homo faber*. The meaningfulness of the world is "beyond the reach of *homo faber*".⁹

Moreover, the implication of the means-end approach in the whole process of production has no less malicious impact on human relationship than that which has appeared in the realm of labor. The means-end approach has led people in authority to see all workers merely as means of production. A human being is therefore no longer viewed as, borrowing Kant, an end in him or herself since his or her meaningfulness is entirely dependent on his or her usefulness in the whole process of production. In short, all things, within the realm of work, are at risk of losing their intrinsic value. Using Kant's way of thinking and following Marx in *Das Kapital*, Arendt emphasized that man as *homo faber* tends to capitalize and force everything to be the object of fabrication. Even the earth in general and all forces of nature which by nature independent of human world are subject to change as the will of man requires it.¹⁰

The above emphasis unfolds another serious ethical problem regarding the quality of the biosphere within which human beings reside and spend their lives. *Homo faber* and the culture of instrumentation it carries out has provoked another challenging problem that might risk the quality of human life. The problem is that within a culture of means-end relationship man has positioned himself as central point or the measure of all things in the world. Such culture has stipulated the existence of a naïve anthropocentrism—i.e., an absurd opinion that takes man as the highest being and hence everything else must be subject to the exigencies of human life. This way of thinking has indeed put everything in the world in a vulnerable position. It reflects human arrogant domination over the rest of creatures. Means-end relationship developed by *homo faber* has annihilated things' intrinsic value and treated them simply as means for the satisfaction of human needs. Thus, the culture of means-end relationship is basically a vulgar demonstration of human beings' domination over nature at large. The problem, therefore, "is not so much whether we are the masters or the slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy world and things".¹¹

Arendt's profound concern on the machines' destructive capacity is absolutely reasonable. Human beings' desire to increase the quality of their products, as the indispensable requirement of market competition,

would continuously encourage them to increase the efficiency of the machines they use to produce. In other words, technology must be more and more efficient in order to support and even to win the market. But, it is the nature of technology that the more efficient it is, the more powerful and so the more destructive it could be. Thus, human beings are able to benefit from technology; they, however, at the same time, are actually threatened by the destructive power of the technology.

The implication of technology on human civilization is, therefore, actually crucial to be aware of. Technology and its power to produce things have commonly recognized as unavoidable part of human life. Technology has gigantic power to make everything available to use. Technology can even become so powerful that it can create not only things to meet human needs, but also human desire itself. Herbert Marcuse, (1898-1979), at this point must be right when he, in his *One Dimensional Man*, (1964), stated that it is not we but technology that determines our needs of things. Marcuse as such is saying that we are no longer the master of our own desire. Technology creates our desire and wants. We are unconsciously subject to the spirit of consumerism that inevitably imposed on by technology. And when technology turns out to be the determinant and creator of our desire, its development and the destructive power it entails would be really out of our capacity to control. Technology and the products it fabricated has become so repressive and even totalitarian that human beings are put entirely under its control and strictly directed them to see economic satisfaction as the only human goal.¹² To such extent, technology and the products it fabricates has reduced human being to be *homo economicus*.

Under the repressive control of economy, a product as an object, which has been created by man is even separated from the subject as its creator for it now puts human being in a never ending temptation to produce and to consume. The object has turned out to be a new threat of the subject. Thus, human being, by using technology, is able to demonstrate his or her domination over nature; but technology, to a certain extent, can turn out to be harmful to human being itself; that is, its expansion has developed so excessively that human being can no longer be able to release him/herself from its repressive domination.

The use of technology has in fact transformed human relationship into a means-end relationship, a relationship in which people see each

other as a means rather than as a person who has intrinsic value in his/herself. Thus, in the realm of labor, people are working together but they actually never enjoy the beauty of being together. Labor therefore has become the cultural handicap for people to get into, following Carol Gilligan, “relational” sphere¹³, a condition within which an individual is able to grow up to be a person in the fullest sense of the word. To be a person in the true sense of the word, presumes very much freedom to choose and to act. But the problem is that under the domination of a patriarchal culture and the enslavement of economic necessity, people are conditioned in such a fashion that they do not even realize the economic enslavement they are suffering of.

The Absorption of the Social

The above discussion has revealed a paradoxical progress that human beings have achieved as one of the consequences of the development of both economy and technology they have created. On the one hand, it must be admitted that we, the modern people, have demonstrated an astonishing achievement in producing things, even the things that, as described by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, people of “earlier centuries only dreamed, things they used to exemplify the humanly impossible (flying to the moon, say), things of which they did not even dream.”¹⁴ However, such powerful capacities that have enabled human beings to enjoy extraordinary achievements in almost all aspects of their life, on the other hand, cannot make people happy or even powerful. Since economic resources are not fairly accessible to all people, economic benefits and power are mostly confined to a very small number of people. But the most tragic thing is that even those who benefit do not really control the products they have produced. They are enslaved by the products they have created. They are dictated to use the product to produce more and more things to the point that they can no longer enjoy the real benefit of the product. What they achieve through this never ending lust of producing is nothing but the marginal advantage of the products. To such extent, producers are, to use Karl Marx’s words, alienated from their products.¹⁵ This is the logical consequence of the means-end culture that commonly grows and characterizes every modern capitalist society.

Thus, again, we are now facing a paradoxical condition concerning

our own capacity to create. Living in a culture of means-end relationship, we, on the one hand, glorify our power and domination over the world; and yet, on the other hand, the progress we have achieved turns out to be an indispensable threat to our humanity at the moment its development and the consequences it has brought about are really out of our capacity to control. In short, we are now experiencing a collective powerlessness at the moment we are unfortunately entrapped by our own activities and enslaved by our own products.

Such phenomenon is the signal and, at the same time, the character of what Arendt terms as “the social.” What is that? In *The Human Condition* Arendt interchangeably used “the society” and “the social” without providing her readers with a clear distinction between these two terms. She even some time called it “the social realm” or “the social sphere” as if to say that the term has entailed a nuance of culture or civilization that specifically characterizes human relationship within certain period of their life progress.

Arendt devoted in her *The Human Condition* a long account of the topic under the title “The Rise of The Social”. The social refers to the rise of a society which in essence fails to put a distinct borderline between the private and the political. It opens the door for intervention of the private to the political in a fashion that changes the meaning and even the significance of the terms for human beings as both the individual and the citizen.¹⁶ The society or the social, therefore, has become a threat to human life. Arendt as such went through the line with Jean-Jacques Rousseau to hold dear that “the social”, as a modern phenomenon, has its main basis in the transformation of the private life into the public life which is driven by the emergence of the society. Rousseau in his *A Discourse On the Origin of Inequality*, in contrast to Hobbes, explained that human beings in the state of nature had lived a harmonious and happy life, even a harmonious relationship with animals. In the state of nature, man even enjoys so healthy and convenient life that he “has no need of remedies, and still less of physicians”.¹⁷ Living in such situation, the savage is not really challenged with the problem of how to live or how to enjoy a better life.

The state of nature enjoyed by the savages is possible because they undertake and confine themselves only on what they really need. In

other words, they just undertake what the nature allows them to do. The savages realizes that human beings have the right to make use and to get the benefit from the nature they live in, but it must be balanced with a natural duty to maintain and to take care of it. In so doing, the savages also give the opportunity even to the next generation to enjoy the same natural benefit. Such condition, however, has changed when the savage “becomes sociable and a slave”. Living in a society has changed his way of life and this situation has made him “grows weak, timid, and servile; his effeminate way of life totally enervates his strength and courage.”¹⁸ He can no longer enjoy a mutual relationship that, based on the common awareness of equality among all members of the family, enables him to benefit from it without, at the same time, disadvantaging others.¹⁹

In the same line of argument Arendt came to hold that it is the social that has caused the emergence of inhuman relationship. Arendt believed that conflicts, which are taking place in our modern society, are just the indispensable consequence of the rise of the social “for society always demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest”.²⁰ Thus, there is no space for freedom and self-expression in true sense of the words. In the other words, the rise of the social is but the emergence of the household (*oikia*) and its activities in the public realm which has distort the public realm in such a way that it can no longer fit for human beings both as individuals and citizens to live a descent life. At this level, the social is no longer the opposite side of the private but of the political; or, the social is the non-political sphere which is circumscribed by private sphere in the ancient traditional understanding of the term. The social is the hallmark of the non-political communities in which the *agora* is not the meeting place for free citizens to discuss common good issues, but rather the place wherein everyone could exhibit and exchange their products. Thus, *agora* has become the arena of free competition merely for the sake of economic interest.²¹ Politics, at this point, as properly put by Pitkin, would change to be the source that supplies “the collective body with a head to reassert human direction of its biological processes, of the socioeconomic forces generated by large numbers of interdependent people making their livings.”²²

The main point to underscore is that the transformation of the

private or *oikia* into the public has brought with it the transformation of the culture within the realm of the public. Operating within the household civilization, the public is now entirely subject to the domination of *pater familias* who nearly never allows any space for freedom and self-identity. Hence, the rise of the social has promoted in the public realm not only the uncontrolled development of economy, but also a mode of power centralization in terms of both economics and politics. Its corollary is terrible: a huge and gigantic centralization of power. This centralized and complex power, according to Arendt, has been well manifested in the form of complicated political bureaucracy. This is a “monster” that ready to impose its own rule and create an alien interdependence under the control of an unidentified power.²³

Arendt must be right. The emergence of complicated bureaucracy commonly characterizing the governments of so many (developing) countries is the best justification of Arendt’s theory. Arendt unmasked our inability to keep the distance between the private sphere and the political sphere and this would result in the emergence of authoritarianism and absolutism. “No-man rule” is the best terminology that properly describes such complicated bureaucracy. This is a terrible political atmosphere since “the rule by nobody is not necessarily no-rule; it may indeed, under certain circumstances, even turn out to be one of its cruelest and most tyrannical version.”²⁴

Thus, Arendt was inclined to remind us that the state must not be treated in the way we treat a family. The state is a public entity. It operates in its own sphere and under the control of its own rule and regulation. So does a family; it is a private entity which operates in accordance with the natural necessity under the direction of a familial head. They cannot be treated in the same way and with the same attitude. So, we have to be careful of, for instance, Rousseau’s idea that tends to see the family as the first model of political society. Rousseau, however, seems to realize the unintended consequences of such a notion so he felt necessary to add: “and all, being born free and equal, surrender their freedom only when they see advantage in doing so”.²⁵

This careful formulation, however, must not make us be blind of its potential malicious consequences on human life, for once the distinction between the two is blurred or even eliminated, then, social

problems would come in return. Social, economic, and political crisis which had been suffered by Indonesia in the last decade, started with the “1997 economic and political turbulence”, for instance, is the best example of negative effect brought about by the intrusion of private sphere upon the public sphere wherein the state is governed and treated as a big family. Its effect on social, economic, and political life is highly terrible. Hegemony of power--in terms of economy and politics--and monopoly of truth by political authority had come to the fore as the main atmosphere of familial state. All these have happened precisely because the ruler, by figuring himself as a father of a big family, was able to escape all kinds of public control.

In such a situation, all economic advantages were going into the regime’s and its cronies’ pockets. Campus and its academic activities were put under the strict control of the government. Freedom of expression and assembly, freedom of press and citizens’ right to political participation in general were amputated. Bureaucracy had been growing up to such a fashion that public accountability had become impossible thing to require.

Those phenomena have become indications revealing that the state, in the spirit of a big family, is governed by a ruler whose very words are by themselves laws for all citizens. In short, when the state is treated as “national household”, then, the public sphere is absorbed by the social. Or, once citizens’ daily affairs are entirely controlled by, in Arendt’s words, a “nation-wide administration housekeeping”, social miseries would exist as its inevitable consequence. So, social disaster suffered by Indonesia in last period of the Orde Baru regime, is the consequence of the ruler’s inability to prevent the private household civilization from its penetration into or intrusion upon the public realm. The 1998 Reformation Movement, promoted by Indonesian students nationwide, and the extensive awakening of common awareness in insisting the public space for the exercise of citizens’ basic freedom and rights, ethnic rebellions and separatism movements in Aceh (North Sumatra), Moluccas, and Papua island, “only indicate that the various social groups have suffered the same absorption into one society that the family unit had suffered earlier”.²⁶

In the realm of the social, where overlapping between private sector and public sector have become so coagulating, a ruler would prefer to consider the enforcement of rule and law as the only possible way to

maintain social order and, at the same time, securely preserve his power. In this way, society is able to “normalize” its members and able to take control over them. This treatment, however, has eliminated, borrowing Rousseau, “compassion” as the most basic virtue in human private life. In society, human relationship, said Rousseau, is no longer directed by natural compassion, but by “morality and rule of laws” which are arranged or set up by society as the new norms for social interactions between its members. Thus morality and rule of laws are the normative apparatuses serving to prevent people from doing bad or injustice in accordance with the will of the authoritarian ruler who takes control over citizens just like the “*pater familias*, the *dominus*, ruled over his household of slaves and family”.²⁷

Rousseau, however, does not believe that morality and rule of laws can effectively function to prevent people from doing bad or committing injustice. He on the contrary held that people are not bad because they naturally live their life in the “peacefulness of their passion”. To him, compassion is a “natural feeling, which, by moderating the activity of love of self in each individual, contributes to the preservation of the whole species”. Such peacefulness, however, has lost when the state of nature is eliminated and replaced by society or by the state of reason.²⁸

Thus the point is that the emergence of society or the rise of the social has caused a chaotic sphere because of the confusion between the intimate private household and the public realm, which by nature are sharply different from one another. That is why Pitkin, describing Arendt’s basic stance on this matter, said: “Relating the social to family... seems to imply an unhealthy expansion of private into public life.”²⁹ This reveals that Arendt had shared the same position with Rousseau in ascribing social disorder and miseries to the elimination of the privacy due chiefly to the rise of the social. The privacy, therefore, is not the opposite side of the political but that of the social. Arendt even sees the political as the remedy of social miseries caused by the social, for she believes that only in the political can freedom and individuality take place.

A Need for self-emancipation

Arendt demonstrated here one of the main problems commonly faced by authoritarian societies. She tried to attract our attention to be

aware of the elimination of freedom and individuality from true political civilization due to the penetration of non-political civilization into the political. It must be acknowledged that work and labor, to a certain extent, are humanizing. Human beings cannot live without work and labor. "But work and labor also have their harsh, even alienating, aspects".³⁰ Politically speaking, citizens' rights to political participation have been annihilated even as the unintended implication of the politic of domination represented in the form of the social. The political is therefore imposed to adopt and operate within a culture that by nature is alien, even harmful, to the political itself.

To simplify, what is decisive about society or the social is that it "excludes the possibility of action"³¹ and, instead, imposes a culture of "conformism". It is on this problem that Arendt focused her philosophical analysis and recommended the political as its remedy. Her recommendation was based on the belief, which she actually shared with the Greek tradition, that living a social life is the way that leads human beings to their truly human life. To be truly human, human beings need mutual recognition and this can be reached only in being with others.³²

Arendt as such reemphasized Greek's traditional belief of the importance of a *polis*³³ and clear distinction between private sphere and public sphere, between the sphere of household and that of *polis*. It stands in contrast to the slave culture promoted by labor and work. A *polis* in Greek tradition is, borrowing Seyla Benhabib, a "agonistic political space"³⁴ within which people—except women, slaves, children, laborers, and non-citizens—are able to express and demonstrate their greatness and, at the same time, execute their rights to participate in political life. In Arendt's words, *polis* is the realm of action. It provides rooms for everyone to express him or herself. It promotes opportunity for everyone to talk to each other. It is a public realm which is strictly differentiated from private realm because its aim is not simply for the good life as that in the sphere of the household. It is the only place within which "men could show who they really and inexchangeably were".³⁵ *Polis* is therefore the arena in which "one competes for recognition, precedence, and acclaim". For the Greeks, *polis* is the *respublica* in the Romans tradition.³⁶ Thus, all people who are excluded from the *polis* are considered slaves or barbarians, the people who are not really human being.

Although putting a great admiration of Greek's idea of *polis*, Arendt is not simply a nostalgic thinker. Her critical exploration of the realm of labor, work, and action definitely demonstrates Arendt's thoroughly discernment and careful diagnosis and explanation of political dilemmas in the modern societies. Her basic position in viewing social dilemmas as the consequence of the substitution of making (the culture of labor and work) for action (the culture of action in *polis*) is an invention. Arendt provided a new perspective to read and to understand better the idea of *polis*. It must even be acknowledged that Arendt, inspired by Greek's *polis*, was successful to introduce a radical understanding of the political.

Politic for Arendt is no longer relevant to be conceived of in a conventional way and attached exclusively to the government and those who are directly involved in it. Rather, following Greek's traditional concept of *polis*, the political is a way of life which is fundamentally characterized by action and actualized through citizens' free participation in political life. Politic as such is no longer an exclusive business of those in the government. Rather, it has become the arena or *agora* accessible to everyone within which—at this point Arendt's position is different from the traditional understanding of *polis*—all people can freely compete to each other as the process towards the articulation and formulation of their common good. The political is, therefore, an arena of public meeting for consensus building. So, “to be political, to live in a *polis*”, emphasized Arendt, “meant that everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through forced deliberation. Arendt emphasized here the centrality of reason in every conflict resolution process.³⁷ It is important to give priority to the unforced force of reason, that is, the way of deliberation in which arguments play a very central role in the whole process of decision making and consensus building. That is why Aristotle's idea of *zoon politikon*³⁸, according to Arendt, “can be better understood in pair with his idea of man as a *zoon logon ekebon* (a living being capable of speech)”.³⁹

Arendt's defense on the centrality of action is reasonable. Through action human being reveals or discloses him/herself. The act of revealing and disclosing in itself, at the same time, presumes the presence of others or togetherness. To say that we are disclosing ourselves without the presence of others would be absurd. An individual is not able disclose

him or herself in isolation. In other words, speech and action always take place in plurality. Human plurality is, therefore, the basic condition for speech and action. Yet, it would be true likewise to say that speech and action have become so significant in human life precisely because we are living in a pluralistic society.⁴⁰

A pluralistic society requires all members of society to share the same and fair access into public affairs. In a pluralistic society, the so-called “public affairs” or “common good” can no longer be entirely entrusted to the ones in authority. This is however not to say that those in authority are not worthy of public trust. Rather that *polis* or a republic would grow stronger and greater under strong and genuine supports of its citizens who are in fact pluralistic.⁴¹

The problem is that authoritarian rulers tend to overlook plurality and diversity and so banish the public realm within which plurality and diversity take place. They tend to view themselves as the only legitimate persons eligible for public positions and authority. They fail to realize that in so doing, they actually pave the way for the social, that is, the pre-political culture, to reign. At this point, the pre-political culture penetrates into the political and violence would come to take place because the culture of domination, operating in pre-political societies, is by nature contradictory to the culture of freedom and action growing up in political societies.

Every great and civilized society is therefore must be very careful of the ideology of “general will”. In reality, every authoritarian regime tends to see the idea of general will as the most effective ideological instrument to promote his/her own interest. It is in fact used simply as the means by which citizens’ basic rights, particularly citizens’ right to freedom, are confined and, at the same time, the regime’s interest is selfishly promoted. Once freedom is amputated, the value of humanity would be in trouble.⁴²

It is true that through an open interaction among citizens as free and equal persons, they might find themselves to be truly human beings. They can even realize that only through a free and open interaction can they come to a real progress. Public realm is therefore of highly important element in the political. Or as Machiavelli put it: “...public life depends on a living structure of relationships among citizens, relationships that extend beyond the personal and face-to-face to the impersonal, large-scale, and remote”.⁴³

Some Critical Remarks

Arendt's idea of the political as the realm of excellence, however, must not be taken for granted. It is too optimistic to identify the political entirely as the realm of free exchange of ideas and social interaction. Real and common experience tells us the opposite. More often the political is used to support the dominant parties or the ruling class' egoistic interests. The phenomenon of the so-called transactional politics has become so popular that even the ordinary people are so familiar with the terminology. Transactional politics is nothing but the commoditization of the political due to the domination of economic interest. Hans George Gadamer would be right as he pointed out that everything is interest. And one of the most stipulating interests (beside woman and power) is economic interest. The political actually has been influenced and even colonized by economic interest. The domination of economy over the political has blurred the culture of speech and action in such a fashion that freedom and excellence as the characteristic of the political tend to be eliminated.

Karl Marx's criticism of capitalism is, therefore, still valid.⁴⁴ Marx is quite right as he identified the domination of the infrastructure, i.e., economy, over the superstructure, i.e., politics, philosophy, law, and even religion. Whereas Karl Popper's defense of capitalism based on his belief that young capitalism—that is, exploitative capitalism—has died must be wrong.⁴⁵ Consumerism and economic greediness followed by massive corruption have become the blatant evidences of the colonization of economy over the modern societies. Even economic turbulences are the logical consequence of the economic colonization over human beings. Arendt, therefore, fails to realize that even the political in reality is not entirely free even from the domination of life necessity. Speech and action as the reflection of freedom has been so distorted by economic interest that the political can no longer become the open arena for self-actualization in the true sense of the word.

Negative impacts of economic colonization are too real and obvious to neglect. Common experience tells us that more and more disadvantaged people are marginalized. Access to economic opportunities is so limited that the disadvantaged ones can no longer have real opportunity to enjoy a descent life. Chasm between the rich and the poor has increased to the point that the number of the poor has growing remarkably even in the

societies that claim themselves modern societies.

To keep the political to be the arena for self-expression, or the domain of excellence, is therefore one of the real challenges that must be faced prudently and intelligently by modern societies. Three things can be considered important to maintain the political as the domain of excellence. *First*, we need a ruler who has no interest to be a ruler. He/she becomes a ruler simply because citizens want and fully support him/her to be their ruler. And he/she is supported to be a ruler because they find him share a genuine compassion and caring for the good of others (that is, for citizens as a whole). *Second*, economy must be turned back to its original position as an embedded economy.⁴⁶ The colonization of economy (i.e. the domination of work and labor) over the political is the reflection of human inability to release his/herself from economic greediness. Economic value is even put beyond human social relationship and, hence, eradicated from its role as the instrument of social cohesion. Economy has become disembedded economy and even overvalued beyond any other social values, including political values. To minimize the domination of economy over the political is, therefore, necessary to do. This can be done by turning back economy to its original position in which it serves as a value among many other values that plays the very central role to promote human welfare at large. Economy is not the end in itself; it is, rather, an instrument by which human beings get into a free interaction between both themselves and human beings and the environment around them. In short, to save the political as the domain of excellence, it is necessary that economy must be an embedded economy. This requires the shift of economical paradigm, that is, the shift from gain-oriented economy to human welfare-oriented economy; from formal or calculative economy to substantive economy. But economy can contribute to social welfare only, if there is a shared culture in society to recognize and to treat private property as an entity which by nature is trans-individual.⁴⁷

Third, it is necessary that the political must be strongly supported by fair constitution and consistent law enforcement. Massive corruption, transactional politics, political hegemony, civil illegal and immoral disobedience, and abuse of power which in turn distort the political as the domain of excellence is the logical consequences of government's inability to fairly and responsibly enforce the rule of law. A lawful society,

identified civil obedience to the rule of law and consistent enforcement of the rule of law, are therefore a *sine qua non condition* for the existence of the political as the realm of excellence. It is a society, in which everyone's rights and obligations are fairly observed and protected. Without real support of a lawful society, the existence of the political as the realm of excellence would be a utopia.

Closing Remarks

It would be reasonable now to say that a healthy and strong political society is the one that provides, as much as possible, its citizens with opportunity to freely actualize themselves as both human being and legitimate member of a political community. Right to economic and political participation would be essential to observe since it is the condition necessary to live a decent life as both an individual and citizen.

However, it must be kept in mind that uncontrolled economic drive can lead human beings to a never-ending struggle for economic interest. This condition would simply pave the way for human beings to be enslaved and live their life under the colonization of economy. Such condition would become worse as even the political, i.e., the realm of action, can no longer be free from economic enslavement.

Keeping the political fairly free from economic enslavement is the *sine qua non condition* for all free and great societies, since only in such condition can every citizen have fair and equal opportunity to participate and to enjoy economic and political benefits. Hence, transactional politics driven by economic interest must be eliminated, on the one hand, and every citizen's right to economic and political participation, on the other, must be protected and fairly accommodated.

Thus, the principle of right must be taken as the fundamental guiding principle of political and economic activities. In other words, political and economic activities are tolerable only insofar as everyone's political and economic rights are secure. But, more than that, all political and economic access to political and economic participation would be justified, if common good is taken to be chief goal of such activities. All political and economic activities must, therefore, promote mutual benefit among citizens as a whole. To use Polanyi words, disembedded economy must be turned to be embedded economy.

It is in such background that Arendt's concept of the political be more relevant and significant to observe. Arendt's insistence on direct participation in political life has reminded us that citizens must be able to take care of their own desires and interests. It would be naïve to uncritically entrust one's destiny, life, and future to political authority or to the state. The rationale of such position would be very simple. Citizens know better the real live they live in. Citizens are even more prudent, asserts Machiavelli, for there are many heads ready to think and to judge in accordance with the real interests they have. But to make sure that every citizen's right is secure, two conditions must be observed: first, there must be a shared culture of taking property right as a trans-individual right; and second, building up a lawful society to make sure that everyone's rights are fairly protected and accommodated.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).
- 2 *Ibid.*, 145.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 83-84.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 255.
- 5 See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man, Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Sphere Books, 1964) 5.

- 6 Arendt, *op. cit.*, 137-139.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 140-141.
- 8 Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack Of The Blob. Hannah Arendt's Concept of The Political* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 7.
- 9 Arendt, *op. cit.*, 155.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 12 See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man, op. cit.*, 5.
- 13 Susan J. Hekman, *Moral Voices, Moral Selves. Carol Gilligan and Feminist Moral Theory* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) 3-8.
- 14 Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob, op. cit.*, 6-7.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 7.
- 16 Arendt, *op. cit.*, 38.
- 17 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse On The Origin Of Inequality*, Translated with an introduction and notes by Maurice Cranston (New York: Penguin books, 1984) 382-383.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 384.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 401.
- 20 Arendt, *op. cit.*, 39-40.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 160-161.
- 22 Pitkin, *op. cit.*, 11.
- 23 Arendt, *op. cit.*, 35-41.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 25 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, (1762), translated and introduced by Maurice Cranston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 50.
- 26 Arendt, *op. cit.*, 41.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 28 Rousseau, *A Discourse On the Origin of Inequality, op. cit.*, 393.
- 29 Pitkin, *op. cit.*, 14.
- 30 Wilfried Ver Eecke, *Ethical Dimensions of the Economy. Making Use of Hegel and the concepts of Public and Merit Goods* (Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2008), 206.
- 31 "Action" by the term expresses activities which are deliberately chosen or deliberate choice (Greek: *proairesis*). Thus action in itself presumes human capacity to think and to choose. In this sense an action in essence is determined by rational deliberation. See Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 1113a9-14; translated by Terrence Irwin (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995).
- 32 Arendt, *op.cit.*, 58.
- 33 To have a comprehensive understanding of the topic, see Aristotle's work *Politics*, particularly Book One: Chapter 2; translated with introduction and notes by C.D.G. Reeve (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998).
- 34 Seyla Benhabib, "Models of Public Sphere" in Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The MIT Press, 1996) 75.
- 35 Arendt, *op. cit.*, 41.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 78.

- 37 The idea of “the force of reason” was elaborated in details by Jurgen Habermas in *The Theory of Communicative Action*, volume 2 (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1987) 1-112.
- 38 See Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a7-18; 1278b15-30; *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1162a16-19; 1169b16-22.
- 39 Arendt, *op. cit.*, 27.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 175. To get more idea about the concept of “pluralism”, please read John Rawls’ work *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). Pluralism is a fact, even a reasonable fact, argued Rawls. It is identified by diversity of comprehensive moral, religious, and philosophical doctrines upon which citizens as free and rational persons develop and live their lives.
- 41 Nicolo Machiavelli, *Discourses On Livy*, Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) 240.
- 42 Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, *op. cit.*, 55.
- 43 Machiavelli, *Discourse on Livy*, *op. cit.*, 48 – 50.
- 44 Wilfried Ver Eecke, *Ethical Dimensions of Economy*, *op. cit.*, 199-200, 206.
- 45 See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) 7-11.
- 46 Karl Polanyi, *Great Transformation. Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Foreword by Joseph E. Stiglitz, Introduction by Fred Block (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001). The whole idea was elaborated in details by Karl Polanyi in his essay “Economy as Instituted Process”, published in Karl Polanyi et al. (Eds.), *Trade and Market in the Early Empires, Economies in History and Theory* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957) 243-270; 348.
- 47 See Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, (New York: Blackwell, 1987) 21.