

Drawing out the implications of Pitkin's perspicacious observations, we can conclude that the "political" for Arendt need not define a given and predetermined set of issues, nor refer only to certain specific institutions. Rather, what constitutes the political is a certain quality of the life of speech and action, of talking and acting in common with others who are one's equals. This quality is characterized by the willingness to give reasons in public, to entertain others' points of view and interests, even when they contradict one's own, and by the attempt to transform the dictates of self-interest into a common public goal. Hannah Arendt was to work out the epistemological bases of this concept of public life and the political much later, in her posthumously published *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.³⁷ On one occasion, though, Hannah Arendt's ability to draw distinctions, and in particular her insistence upon a razor-edge separation between the "social" and the "political," seriously misled her. Unlike her observations on the European labor movement, which initiate a halfway workable and defensible differentiation among the economic and political agendas and goals of the working classes, Arendt's reflections on court-ordered school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas applied the distinction between the social and the political to radically different conditions and failed.

"Reflections on Little Rock"

This essay was written in 1957 at the request of the editors of *Commentary*, but did not appear until 1959 when it was published by *Dissent*. The editorial disclaimer that announces that the article was published not because the editors agreed with it but, to the contrary, because "they believe in freedom of expression even for views that seem to us entirely mistaken,"³⁸ already anticipates the tone of shock and acrimony with which liberal white and black intellectuals were to meet it. In this essay, Arendt discusses the civil rights program of the Eisenhower administration, and in particular enforced school desegregation. The essay is not only a provocative meditation upon black-white race relations in the United States but also the most extensive application of her controversial distinction between the social and the political to contemporary conditions.

What disturbed friends and critics alike were statements such as the following:

However, the most startling part of the whole business was the Federal decision to start integration in, of all places, public schools. It certainly did not require too much imagination to see that this was to burden children, black and white, with the working out of a problem which adults for generations have confessed themselves unable to solve. (p. 50)

Furthermore:

To force parents to send their children to an integrated school against their will means to deprive them of rights which clearly belong to them in all free societies—the private right over their children and the social right to free association. As for the children, forced integration means a very serious conflict between home and school between their private and their social life, and while such conflicts are common in adult life, children cannot be expected to handle them and therefore should not be exposed to them. (p. 55)

Finally Arendt states, "Segregation is discrimination enforced by law, and desegregation can do no more than abolish laws enforcing discrimination; it cannot abolish discrimination and force equality upon society, but it can, and indeed, must enforce equality within the body politic" (p. 50, emphasis added).

Arendt's concern for the rights of the parents to decide about the education of their children, and her fears that social wrongs are being righted by adults on the backs of children, follow directly from her desire to preserve some domain of private autonomy and nurturance intact under conditions of a growing mass society. The question is, though, whether these fears are the appropriate ones in the face of black-white relations that dominated at the time, and in particular with respect to integration in the schools. Certainly, for Hannah Arendt the persecuted Jew, discrimination in the schools was not unknown. Her mother, Martha Arendt, had instructed her that whenever one of her teachers made anti-Semitic remarks in the classroom, she was to report this at home, whereupon Ms. Arendt would send one of her endless notes to the school authorities.³⁹ Indeed, at the beginning of her article, Arendt appeals to her position as

an "outsider" writing on these issues. "I have never lived in the South," she says,

and have even avoided occasional trips to Southern states because they would have brought me into a situation that I personally find unbearable. Like most people of European origin, I have difficulty understanding, let alone sharing, the common prejudices of Americans in this area. Since what I wrote may shock good people and be misused by bad ones, I should like to make it clear that as a Jew I take my sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed or underprivileged peoples for granted and should appreciate it if the reader did likewise. (p. 46)

This is one of the rare occasions in the Arendtian corpus when she appeals to one's identity rather than to one's arguments, beliefs, and positions in public as supporting evidence for one's views. Arendt knew very well, through her reflections on Palestine and Zionism, that being a member of a persecuted minority was not a guarantee of the validity of one's views. Her attempt to distance herself from American racism, on the grounds that like "most people of European origin" she had difficulty understanding it, is also painfully self-contradictory. The author of the sections on "race-thinking before racism" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* surely knew that racism was no exclusively American phenomenon; and Europeans were not untainted by it! In a rare moment of blatant self-contradiction, she exculpates North Americans for the evil of slavery, putting the blame instead on the Europeans.

The color question was created by the one great crime in America's history and is soluble only within the political and historical framework of the Republic . . . for the color problem in world politics grew out of the colonialism and imperialism of European nations—that is, the one great crime in which America was never involved. (p. 46)

This remark that now implicates European imperialism and colonialism in "the one great crime in America's history" is historically just as inadequate as her previous observation that somehow Europeans did not share racial prejudices against black people. Arendt seems bent on putting the blame on either one or the other pole, without paying heed to the fact that European colonialism was part and parcel of the legacy of the white

settlers of North and South America in their encounters with Native American populations of the Americas. Equally, patterns of consciousness and behavior characteristic of the European "scramble for Africa" would be reproduced in the southern plantations of the United States and in the treatment of the black American slave population. What is at stake in these personal disclaimers and historically untenable generalizations?

I would like to explicate the uneasy oscillations of judgment and observation in this essay through the use of a metaphor. Arendt looked at the experience of black-white race relations in the United States through glasses whose lenses were crafted in another context. This is the context of European anti-Semitism and discrimination against Jews. She drew an erroneous analogy between the desire of the emancipated Jews in Europe to be integrated into a society that excluded and rejected them from its social and cultural elites and centers, and the wish of the black American population to end discrimination as well as segregation. When she writes that "segregation is discrimination enforced by law," and that desegregation can abolish laws enforcing segregation but that it cannot abolish discrimination (p. 50), she appears to be saying that for the self-conscious pariah, what matters is that segregation be abolished because it is against human rights and dignity; but discrimination is the coin of the realm in the social domain, and it is only the social parvenu who cares about social acceptance and conformism. The distinction between the pariah and the parvenu, which was so illuminating in her analysis of patterns of European anti-Semitism and Jewish responses to them, now fails her.

It is in this context that Arendt launches into an extensive discussion of the "social," which otherwise would appear curiously out of place in an article on school desegregation and race relations in the South. "Society," she writes,

is that curious, somewhat hybrid realm between the political and the private in which, since the beginning of the modern age, most men have spent the greater part of their lives. . . . In American society, people group together, and therefore discriminate against each other, along lines of profession, income, and ethnic origin, while in Europe the lines run across class origin, education, and manners. . . . In any event discrimination is as indispensable a social right as equality is a political right. The question is not how to abolish discrimination, but how to keep it confined within the social sphere,

where it is legitimate, and even prevent its trespassing on the political and the personal sphere where it is destructive. (p. 51)

What does Arendt mean by "social discrimination"? She means the right and freedom of like-minded individuals to associate, to communicate, and to create a space in common without making this accessible to all. Social discrimination appears as the obverse side of the right to freedom of association. Her examples are hotels, recreation areas, and places of amusement, some of which are designated exclusively for Jews, for example (p. 52). But surely there is no unlimited right of free association in any polity, and Arendt is fully cognizant of this. In fact, she establishes a hierarchy of rights, the inalienable human rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," where the latter includes the right to marry whomever one wishes. She believes in this context that laws against miscegenation are a far more fundamental violation of human rights than discriminatory laws concerning the use of public facilities, buses, and so on (p. 49). Universal rights to vote and eligibility for office follow human rights in order of importance insofar as they are fundamental political rights in a democracy; civil rights to "attend an integrated school, the right to sit where one pleases on a bus, the right to go into any hotel or recreation area or place of amusement, regardless of one's skin or color or race" are tertiary in her view. These universal human and political rights limit discriminatory practices in the social realm as well as drawing boundaries around the right to freedom of association. Arendt's query is how the concept of equal civil rights would lead to a redefinition of the boundaries between the social and the political.

Arendt insists that there is a distinction between hotels, resorts, and other amusement and entertainment-oriented associations, on the one hand, and buses, railroad cars, and public facilities, on the other, because

we are dealing with services which, whether privately or publicly owned, are in fact *public services that everyone needs in order to pursue his business and lead his life. Though not strictly in the political realm, such services are clearly in the public domain where all men are equal.* (p. 52, emphasis added)

This right of access to public services, which are needed because they are "necessary to pursue one's business and lead one's life," is a curiously

hybrid argument on her part if one takes the strict separation between the social and the political. Arendt appears to be suggesting a right of access to public services to secure a decent human life—a curious echo in her formulations of welfare state considerations.⁴⁰

But how does this distinction between social associations and public services, which must be accessible to all, redefine the extent of civil rights? In the light of Arendt's conception of a public service in the public domain, it is quite hard to see why she would think that schools would be more like vacation resorts in their public-political status than like buses, railroad stations, and movie houses. Schools are major public institutions in any society, whether they are funded publicly or privately, in that they are settings through which the future generations of a polity are formed. Schools are not "services"; they are crucibles of identity formation. In Arendtian language, a world is passed on to future generations not only in the family but also, and equally significantly, in the schools. How can schools segregate and discriminate against certain groups in a political community while the polity upholds principles of political equality? As a Jewish child growing up after Jewish emancipation and assimilation, Arendt was not prevented from attending public schools in Germany. Why could she not see that the desegregation of publicly funded schools was essential to respecting the equality of black American children as citizens of this republic, equally entitled to public resources and services as white children were? Schools, like many other associations that exist in the social realm—civic and political organizations, parties, religious associations, and the like—have a hybrid status because as formal organizations with a charter, they become institutions in the public domain, which must comply with the constitutional essentials of the liberal-democratic state.

Viewed in this light, Arendt's attempt to build a *cordon sanitaire* around resorts and vacation places is also untenable. Why should the liberal-democratic constitutional state accept the incorporation of an institution, and hence its emergence as a quasi-public entity, even if it provides private services, when the charter and rules of associations of such organizations violate fundamental rights of nondiscrimination? If the state endorses such institutions, it also endorses the legitimacy of practices of discrimination. Arendt's example of vacation resorts reserved for Jews only is not different in its discriminatory logic than country clubs, corporations, or men's clubs that do not allow blacks, Jews, Asian Americans, or women

among their members. A distinction between *informal social practices* of association and affiliation, on the one hand, and *formal institutions* in the public sphere, on the other, would have helped Arendt here. Discrimination at the level of informal practices, of modes and habits of thought, feeling, and association will no doubt continue to exist in society among all forms of social groups, classes, and races; but whether formal institutions in a liberal-democratic state can establish themselves via a public charter, which would have to be approved by procedures of the due process of law, if they are based on a denial of civic as well as political equality, is a contestable issue. The rights of freedom of association and of free speech may be contested through other principles, as, for example, in contemporary debates about the use of hate speech in schools and universities, or the legality or illegality of neo-Nazi groups. Arendt cannot have it both ways: political equality and social discrimination cannot simply coexist. Social discrimination is always essentially contestable through the principle of political equality. Her formula, "discrimination is as indispensable a social right as equality is a political right," is an inherently unstable one. Not only are certain amounts of social and economic equality—access to the basic services in order to lead a decent human existence, as formulated above—indispensable to the exercise of political equality, but certain forms of social discrimination, insofar as they formalize the public exclusion of certain groups of human beings on the basis of their identities, are incompatible with political equality. Indeed, precisely because equality is a value created by the political process, it requires constant vigilance, redefinition, redeployment, and extension into the social sphere. It is one question whom I invite to dinner or spend my vacations with, but another to have the major institutions of a society, like the schools, be segregated along racial, ethnic, or religious lines. Again, the distinction between the social and the political, as Arendt draws it in this context as well, does not serve her well and collapses under closer scrutiny.

Before concluding this discussion, I would like to address briefly the issue of black-white race relations in the U.S. context as they surface through Hannah Arendt's article. There is little question that the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s social leadership, the subsequent radicalization of black America, the eruption of urban violence in the ghettos, and the formation of the Black Panther Party were all events

that deeply concerned and agitated Hannah Arendt.⁴¹ She "trembled" many times for the "republic" of the United States of America, and stated explicitly that the "one great crime in America's history"—that is, the chattel slavery of black people—needed to be addressed at the constitutional level through drawing up a new social contract with black Americans that would explicitly make them members of the republic.⁴² As early as January 29, 1946, she wrote to Karl Jaspers:

The fundamental contradiction in this country is the coexistence of political freedom and social oppression. The latter is, as I've already indicated, not total; but it is dangerous because the society organizes and orients itself along "racial lines." . . . *The racial issue has to do with a person's country of origin, but it is greatly aggravated by the Negro question; that is America has a real "race" problem and not just a racial ideology.* (emphasis added)⁴³

But Arendt's comments a few lines later about a Jewish woman friend of hers who met non-Jewish Americans for the first time in her home⁴⁴ may signal the problem in her perception of these issues. Arendt did not think of the "race question" exclusively in terms of black-white relations; for her, relations between Jews and Gentiles were also race issues. The problem of American blacks seemed to her to be one among many other "racial divisions" that existed in this country.

In resisting casting the category of race in terms of "white/black" alone, and in enriching our understanding of racism through her treatment of "race thinking before racism," Arendt was not wrong. Where she was wrong, in my view, was in not taking public cognizance of the fact that it is not racism as such but a *racially based condition of social slavery* that marks relations between white and black peoples in North America as well as in other countries in the American hemisphere—Brazil and Cuba, for example—where chattel slavery has existed.⁴⁵ Racially based chattel slavery is not to be compared with conditions of Greek slavery either, for some Greek slaves had been free men at one time. Some, though not all of them, were ethnic Greeks, coming from neighboring city-states that had lost in war. Arendt was not sufficiently sensitive to distinctions between Greek slavery and the slavery of the black people, who were considered members of an inferior race, at times judged to be barely human.⁴⁶

It was Ralph Ellison who pointed to the gravest error of perception in Arendt's "Reflections on Little Rock." He berated her tone for its "Olympian authority,"⁴⁷ ironically drawing attention through this phrase not only to Arendt's more than mortal distance from the events but also casting a jibe at her "Grecophilia." In his interview with Robert Penn Warren, in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Ellison stated,

At any rate, this too has been part of the American Negro experience, and I believe that one of the most important clues to the meaning of that experience lies in the idea, the *ideal* of sacrifice. Hannah Arendt's failure to grasp the importance of this ideal among Southern Negroes caused her to fly way off into left field in her "Reflections on Little Rock," in which she charged Negro parents with exploiting their children during the struggle to integrate the schools. But she has absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile people. . . . And in the outlook of many of these parents (who wish that the problem didn't exist), the child is expected to face the terror and contain his fear and anger *precisely* because he is Negro American. Thus he's required to master the inner tensions created by his racial situation, and if he gets hurt—then this is one more sacrifice. It is a harsh requirement, but if he fails this basic test, his life will be even harsher.⁴⁸

In a personal letter to Ralph Ellison, Arendt acknowledged that she had not understood this "ideal of sacrifice" or the "element of stark violence, bodily fear in the situation."⁴⁹ It would have been desirable for Arendt to have made her communication to Ellison public; it would have been important for her friends and opponents to know what she herself had learned through this exchange and what had gone wrong in her judging black parents to be like the Jewish parvenus of a different era and a different culture. In not doing so, Arendt failed to articulate in appropriate public terms her views of black-white relations around the school desegregation issue. No doubt, Arendt, the immigrant Jew who escaped persecution and extermination in Europe, was and remained grateful to the new republic whose citizen she had become. She was protective of her new country and homeland, although never becoming an apologist for it. Perhaps precisely for this reason, she could not really empathize with the standpoint of those who were brought to this country forcibly, under conditions of inhuman violence, whose cultures, villages, histories, and

identities in Africa were decimated by slave catchers and their helpers. Arendt tried to exercise the art of "enlarged mentality" in thinking about the issue of school desegregation. Instead, however, of truly presenting to herself the standpoint of the others involved, she projected her own history and identity onto those of others. The "Reflections on Little Rock" essay shows not only the failure of the distinction between the social and the political but also the failure of the art of practicing "enlarged mentality" in the public realm. Oddly enough, Arendt was to be accused of the same failure one more time in her life: during the Eichmann controversy and vis-à-vis her own people.

On Revolution and the "Social Question"

Arendt was confronted with harsh criticisms of her distinction between the social and political realms already during her lifetime, and, in fact, increasingly so in the final years of her life. During a conference at the University of Toronto dedicated to her work, it was none other than her longtime friend, Mary McCarthy, who confronted her with some of the questions I have been discussing in this chapter. McCarthy asks,

I would like to ask a question that I have had in my mind a long, long time. It is about the very sharp distinction that Hannah Arendt makes between the political and the social. It is particularly noticeable in her book *On Revolution*, where she demonstrates, or seeks to demonstrate, that the failure of the Russian and French Revolutions was based on the fact that these revolutions were concerned with the social, and concerned with suffering—in which the sentiment of compassion played a role. Whereas, the American Revolution was political and ended in the foundation of something. Now I have asked myself: "What is somebody supposed to do on the public stage, in the public space, if he does not concern himself with the social? That is, what's left?" . . . On the other hand, if all questions of economics, human welfare, busing, anything that touches the social sphere, are to be excluded from the political scene, then I am mystified. I am left with war and speeches. But the speeches can't be just speeches. They have to be speeches about something.⁵⁰

In her answer to Mary McCarthy, Hannah Arendt concedes that she has asked herself this question, and that topics of public conversation and public interest at every given period change constantly, but that there will

11. See Václav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless" and "Politics and Conscience" in *Living in Truth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987); Georg Konrad, *Antipolitics* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984); and Milan Kundera, *The Incredible Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Heim (New York: Harper & Row, 1984).
12. In recent years, there has been renewed attention to the "agonal" elements of Arendt's views of action; see in particular, Bonnie Honig, "Arendt, Identity, and Difference," in *Political Theory* 16, no. 1 (1988), pp. 77-99; and Dana Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action," *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992), pp. 274-309.
13. Arendt discusses this concept of a principle of action in her essay, "What Is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future*, pp. 152 ff.
14. Hannah Arendt, "Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought," first and second drafts (1953), container 71 in the Hannah Arendt Papers in the Library of Congress. Arendt had applied for a Guggenheim fellowship grant with the title, "Totalitarian Elements of Marxism," which she was awarded in 1952. See also the essay, "Von Hegel zu Marx," container 79, Library of Congress holdings.
15. Canovan, *A Reinterpretation*, pp. 63 ff.
16. See Jürgen Habermas, "Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel's *Jena Philosophy of Mind*," in *Theory and Practice*, trans. John Viertel (Boston: Beacon, 1973), pp. 142-170; Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1.
17. See Max Weber, "The Meaning of Ethical Neutrality in the Social Sciences," in Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, ed. and trans. E. A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (New York: Free Press, 1949), pp. 40 ff.
18. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes that the "Utopian ideal" that guides Marx's theories is that "the distinction between labor and work would have completely disappeared; all work would have become labor because all things would be understood, not in their worldly, objective quality, but as results of living labor power and functions of the life process" (HC, p. 89). But Marx not only reduced work to labor; in his early writings at least, he sought to elevate labor to the status of work. For Arendt's comments on Marx's deification of labor, see also "Karl Marx and the Tradition of Western Political Thought," Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress, container 71, p. 4. This argument is incorporated into the essay "Tradition and the Modern Age," in *Between Past and Future*, pp. 17-41.
19. Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1964), p. 57.
20. I have dealt extensively with this Hegelian model of expressive activity, and Marx's indebtedness to it, in *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, pp. 43-69.
21. Karl Marx, *Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 75, emphasis in the original.
22. In *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, I have argued that there is a more radical strain in Marx's thinking, which stresses human plurality, intersubjectivity, and the essential dependence of human beings on others as well as on the objects around them. I have called this position "sensuous finitude." If these aspects of Marx's thought had dominated over his Hegelianisms, the condition of human plurality and the narrative structuration of action could easily have been made compatible with Marx's philosophical anthropology. Already in *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, I attempted a synthesis of Arendt's thought and the insights of the critical Marxian tradition; see pp. 58 ff., 346 ff.
23. For a brilliant analysis of this dimension of Marxian thinking, see Andre Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class* (Boston: South End Press, 1982).

24. Mary G. Dietz, "Hannah Arendt and Feminist Politics," in *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*, ed. Molly Shanley and Carole Pateman (Oxford: Polity, 1991), pp. 239-240.
25. Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future*, p. 186.
26. For a contemporary exploration of these issues, see Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Free Press, 1989).
27. Pitkin, "Justice," p. 336.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 338-339.
29. See Arendt's statement: "After all, the world in which we live has to be kept. We cannot permit it to go to pieces. And this means that 'administration of things,' which Engels thought such a marvelous idea, and which actually is an awful idea, but which is still a necessity. And this can be done in a more or less central manner." In *The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Hill, pp. 327-328.
30. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966).
31. Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), p. 23.
32. V. I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, trans. Joe Fineberg and George Hanna (London: Penguin, 1962); rev., trans. Robert Service (London: Penguin Classics, 1988).
33. Georg Lukacs, "Class Consciousness," in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 46-83.
34. See Rosa Luxemburg's writings "Social Reform or Revolution?" and "Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy," in *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Dick Howard (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).
35. Pitkin, "Justice," p. 347.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
37. Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed., with an interpretive essay by, Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).
38. Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* 6, no. 1 (1959), pp. 45-56. Included in the same issue were criticisms by David Spitz and Melvin Tumin. In *Dissent* 6, no. 2 (1959), Arendt replied to these criticisms, pp. 179-181. The editorial note cited here precedes the article on p. 45. All references in the text are to this edition.
39. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 11.
40. For a criticism of Arendt's rather offhanded remarks about matters of distributive justice, see Richard J. Bernstein, "Rethinking the Social and the Political," pp. 251 ff.
41. See Arendt's essay *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1969), pp. 18 ff., 65 ff., 95-96. Arendt was particularly concerned with the outbreak of violence among the student movements of 1968, and addressed what she saw as the political faults of the Black Power movement in this context.
42. See her remarks in the essay "Civil Disobedience": "We know that this original crime could not be remedied by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; on the contrary, the tacit exclusion from the tacit consensus was made more conspicuous by the inability or unwillingness of the federal government to enforce its own laws. . . . An explicit constitutional amendment, addressed specifically to the Negro people of America, might have underlined the great change more dramatically for these people who had never been welcome." *Crises of the Republic*, pp. 90-91.