

***Positioning Political Theory: plurality and difference
in the public realm***

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Abstract¹

The public realm has long been the vehicle for the political. Since the time of Ancient Greece, participation in public has been an essential feature of life, allowing the creation of human relationships and a means to fulfil individual political potential. However, in the modern world there has been a shift away from this ‘political public realm’ to a ‘social public realm’ of consumption and individualisation where words and actions are deemed significant merely by their appearance in a public space. This shift has important implications for political theory, but on a broader scale it begs the seemingly simple question, what is the public realm? In trying to answer this question it becomes apparent that it can have many answers and results in a tension being created between different theories, different theorists and even different disciplines that approach such answers very differently. From this we can see the emergence of competing conceptions of the public realm.

In this context this paper examines two such conceptions of the public realm, one political and one social. It undertakes an exploration and comparison of the ‘political public realm’ and the ‘social public realm’, highlighting the fundamental differences between them through a reading of contemporary political and social theory. With this in mind, the paper goes further to argue that this understanding of differences between public realms and the resulting contestation between disciplines is in itself political when viewed from an Arendtian perspective. For Arendt, plurality and distinction are essential features of the political and their appearance in the public realm constructs a space ‘in-between’ that enables a sense of common reality based on persuasion and action. As such, the construction of competing public realms implicitly positions political theory as the central concern in theorising the complexity of the human condition.

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History knows many periods of dark times in which the public realm has been obscured and the world become so dubious that people have ceased to ask any more of politics than that it show due consideration for their vital interests and personal liberty.

Arendt Men in Dark Times (1968:11)

Contemporary political theory is a broad discipline that encompasses many elements, but has a contemporary focus on power and justice (Rawls 1999; Farrelly 2004). As a discipline, political theory has adapted to growing influences from the increasing prevalence of social theory (Bauman), and has developed new ways of interpreting modern phenomena such as globalisation (Bleiker 2004:124), consumerism (Ritzer 2004), the push for objective scientific truth (Shapiro 2004), and a growing disenchantment with politics in general (Gamble 2000:14). As it stands, contemporary political theory is somewhat at a crossroads. Not only does it face these external threats from social theory and the modern world, just as important are the internal threats from political theory itself. Contestation abounds among theorists about just what political theory does and should cover (Vincent 1997; Held 1991; Maier 1989). While some argue that disagreement opens up space for political theory (Moon 2004:17), and others that political theory exists as a function of both pluralism and the resulting paradoxes (Berlin 1961; White 2004), such debate leads to a lack of cohesion and the splintering of political theory into various subgroups concerned with different elements of political thought. These range from empirical political science (Grant 2004; Roemer 1997), to ideological based theory (Gaus 2000; Ball & Dagger 2004), to political theory centred on freedom (Arendt), commonality of human experience (Germino 1967:6), or power (Elshtain 1997:608). Further to this, there is a new focus on governance and public policy as politics in modern society becomes synonymous with the state and methods of institutionalising laws and order (Dorsey 1966; Tully 2004). This results in contemporary political theory existing as a fragmented set of ideals, practices and knowledge and allows the space held by political theory to be threatened and the public realm to be overshadowed.

It seems then that we can begin to characterise political theory as a varied and complex discipline. However, one element clearly emerges as a central and important vehicle for the political – the public realm. Important not only as it allows the creation of human relationships and a means to fulfil individual political potential, the public realm can also be a means to understand the complexities of the human condition. To this end, this paper is focused on the public realm and explores the considerable variation between

disciplines in the ways in which it is conceptualised. It examines two such competing conceptions, undertaking an exploration and comparison of the ‘political public realm’ and the ‘social public realm’. The paper highlights the fundamental differences between each understanding through a reading of contemporary political and social theory with a particular focus on the political theory of Hannah Arendt and the social theory of Zygmunt Bauman. With this in mind, the paper goes further to argue that this understanding of differences between public realms and the resulting contestation between disciplines is in itself political when viewed from an Arendtian perspective. Plurality and difference are essential features of Arendt’s understanding of the political and their appearance in the public realm constructs a space ‘in-between’ that enables a sense of common reality based on persuasion and action. As such, the construction of competing public realms implicitly positions political theory as the central concern in theorising the complexity of the human condition.

Situating political theory

While there is a degree of consensus that contemporary political theory can be founded on Rawls and the subsequent focus on power and justice (Farrelly 2004; Ivison 1997; Moon 2004), the conceptualisation of the contemporary political space and the role of the political in modern life are characterised by intense debate and contestation by various other groups, including social theorists, that seek to offer alternate political understandings. Euben captures the importance of these debates in terms of structuring the space for political theory, by arguing that “how political theory is conceived...determines who participates in it” (2004:145). There is disagreement among different theorists of the political who each insist that that role of political theory varies according to the specific outcome sought (Tully 2004; Norman 2000; Goodwin 1997; Katznelson & Milner 2002). However the debate over whether politics is merely instrumental or an end in itself (Elster 1997:136) becomes significant as we begin to explore both the bounds of, and reasons for, political theory as a legitimate human concern.

Generally, political theory offers us an understanding of human dignity, the public and private realms and a chance to create beauty, become immortal and live lives that “transcend the life-span of mortal men” (Arendt 1958:55)². For Germino, political theory “affirms the possibility of transcending the sphere of immediate practical concerns and ‘viewing’ man’s societal existence from a critical perspective” (1967:7). Further to this, political theory has an important role in creating and maintaining identity, both on a collective and individual level, as it provides a means of orienting and reconciling us to our way of life (Moon 2004:22). One of the defining features of modern life is the search for identity (Burgmann 2003; Castells 1997) and political theory is well placed to understand the human condition and the bounds of our uniqueness as individuals. At the same time, the pressures of globalisation threaten our sense of order and serve to strain the relationships between individuals (Ritzer 2004). Additionally, increasing insecurity on both global and local levels, and the subsequent sense of isolation and fear, compound the problems of life in the modern world. These factors, and the concurrent theorising of these phenomena by other disciplines such as social theory, economics and psychology, combine to challenge political theory to extend beyond traditional barriers and forge new ways of conceptualising human freedom and existence.

Situating social theory

Similarly to political theory, social theory is difficult to precisely define but is centred on describing “contemporary life [by bringing] together ideas...and experiences of society” (Jureidini & Poole 2000:xvi). Additionally, “like most disciplines...[it] has a long and rich history of argument, controversy and differences of opinion on how best to ‘understand’ or ‘explain’ social relations and society” (Bessant & Watts 2002:29). In the same way that political theory has many subgroups, social theory can also be fragmented into the sub-disciplines of sociology, social science, social studies, and social research (Best 2003; Mills 1959:19). While these terms are often used interchangeably, each group has different ways of conceptualising society, the social and the individual, that reflect nuances within the broader field of social theory (Alasuutari 2004:8). As such, “there is

² The term ‘men’ is used here and throughout this paper in the Arendtian sense of referring to ‘men’ in the plural and not ‘man’ in the singular. It is also not gender specific.

no one definite or clear set of ideas, or bodies of research, to which the word ‘sociology’ can unambiguously be attached” (Bessant & Watts 2000:28) and indeed there is not one social theory, but many social theories. In addition, “it is important to keep in mind that there is no one single ‘sociological perspective’, but a number of different perspectives or theoretical approaches” (van Krieken et al 2000:11).

However in a general sense, social theory “is about [theorising] the nature and meaning of our existence as human beings; it is about understanding the organising principles of the society that you live in” (Best 2003:9). For Jones, social theory is “the study of how we are able to interact with one another, and what happens when we do” (2003:1). Similarly Jureidini and Poole argue that social theory “is the study of human beings in a variety of social settings; of the way in which human beings organise themselves or are organised by others; and the ways in which people think about their own identity” (2000:xiv). This results in social theory being “an inherently controversial endeavour” (Giddens 1982:3), and as such sociological thought is reflexive, both shaped by and shaping society (Giddens 1982:166). But while “all sociological theories have in common an emphasis on the way human belief and action is the product of social influences...they differ as to what these influences are, and how they should be investigated and explained” (Jones 2003:5). In this way, “the purpose of social theory is not simply to describe the social world... [it] attempts to answer the humble question: ‘How is society possible?’” (Best 2003:6). Our answer to this seemingly simple question determines our understanding of social theory as a whole.

Recurring themes in contemporary social theory include modern manifestations of insecurity, fear, loneliness, isolation and detachment (Bauman 2004; Beck 1992), and social theorists see their role as providing a search for meaning and an understanding of the consequences of these on both individuals and greater society. Mills’ conception of the sociological imagination (1959) allows the social theorist to “make clear the elements of contemporary uneasiness and indifference” (1959:13). Commonly, globalisation, postmodernism, consumerism and individualisation are offered as causes for these conditions (Bauman 1998; Bauman 1988; van Krieken 2000). For Bauman, modern

individuals have become “consumers in a consumer society” (1998:79) and while we have “freedom of unprecedented proportions” it comes “at the price of similarly unprecedented insecurity” (2001:159). This insecurity is felt in a variety of ways and is compounded by the fact that we may become “collateral casualties” of progress and subsequently deemed human waste (Bauman 2004). Also of concern, is the changing nature of the expectations we have for what our lives will become. As we view the world from increasingly isolated and fragmented positions, we perceive that others around us have what we do not and this results in a new source of insecurity classified by de Botton as ‘status anxiety’ (2004). In the modern world we are faced with an acute identity crisis and moves by society to deny difference mean that our “illusion of equality [is] secured by the monotonous similarity of everyone within sight” (Bauman 1998:47).

Conceptualising the political

As we have already seen, the question ‘What is Political Theory?’ (White & Moon 2004) is one that cannot be easily answered. In fact, like most things that come within its influence - such as freedom and democracy - political theory itself, and the bounds within which it operates, is an essentially contested concept (Gaus 2000:26). Contemporary political theory is a discipline that is as broad as it is complex, and it encompasses many areas from the state to international politics, to the politics of identity, liberty, justice, government and beyond (Faulks et al 2003). Because of this wide scope, and the imprecise nature of its boundaries (Hague & Harrop 2004:3), there is room for contestation about not only what political theory is but also how it relates to other disciplines and other sub-fields of politics more generally.

In making these distinctions, it is important here to highlight the difference between politics and the political. While ‘politics’ is a blanket term that can be used to describe interactions between people in a variety of settings, it is very different to ‘the political’ (Walsh 2002:10) which denotes a specific realm of deliberation and action and the resulting quality that is shared by those who participate in it (Martin 1999:156). It is also

important to remember that while we can politicise everything, not everything is political (Brown 2004:116).

How then can we describe the political? How are we to provide a framework in which to begin to understand the nature of contemporary political theory? While these questions are not any less difficult to answer, nor can we find a clear definition of the political (Schmitt 1976:20), what we can say with some degree of certainty is that *who we are* determines what we believe the political to be. However, while the bounds of the political are somewhat subjective, there are indeed characteristics common to the discipline as a whole. In general terms, the political describes “a collective activity whose object is the institution of society” (Castoriadis 1992:101-102; also Sparks & Isaacs 2004:1) and “is concerned with the common good” (Elster 1997:128). More specifically, the term political comes from the Greek *polis*, which describes the “organisation of people acting and speaking together” (Arendt 1958:198). This sentiment that the political corresponds to human action is echoed by Crick and Crick who argue that “the activity of politics arises from the basic human problem of diversity” (1987:6). Further to this, Arendt believes that “action...corresponds to the human condition of plurality” (1958:7) and as such the political realm is grounded in action and speech (1958:25). However, Berlin is more general in his theory that “political notions are part of our conception of what it is to be human” (1961:162). So while we cannot be concise in our definition of the political, we can find some degree of commonality among its theorists.

One thing we can be sure of is that the political “not only spans three millennia of studying politics in innumerable ways but also three millennia of dialogues among practitioners over various approaches, their relative merits, and the contestable criteria for their comparison” (Tully 2004:80). However, amid these dialogues, we must ask ourselves the question, “where is the line to be drawn?” (Brown 2004:107) What is the difference between all those claiming to *do* the political? It becomes clear in this context that language plays a crucial role in deciphering the difference between political theorists, for how we understand the political is related to how we describe it, and subsequently, how we begin to determine the bounds of the contemporary political space. This is

particularly pertinent when we are faced with a barrage of terms that each describe different aspects of the political and those that study it. This rings true for Heywood who describes “politics [as], in part, a struggle over the legitimate meaning of terms and concepts...words are seldom neutral but carry political and ideological baggage” (2004:14).

From political theory, to political science, political philosophy to political practice, each group claims ownership of different aspects of political knowledge and that theirs is the ‘true’ way of understanding the world around them. For Shapiro, it is debate among these groups that presents the biggest problem, and he remarks that “theorists spend too much time commenting on one another, as if they were themselves the appropriate objects of study” (2004:194). While this claim may have merit, it has already been highlighted that the way we describe the political determines the boundaries of the political space. However, actually drawing this conceptual line between groups is a complicated task to master. As explained by Benhabib, “the art of making distinctions is always a difficult and risky undertaking. Distinctions can enlighten as well as cloud an issue. Also, one is always vulnerable to objections concerning the correct classification of the thought of certain thinkers” (1992:73). It is with this in mind that I discuss differences between political and social understandings of the public realm.

Defining the public realm

Crucial in the formation of our understanding of the political is our perception of the public and private realms. For Arendt, while the private realm concerns necessity, the public realm is the space where men can gather together in public, and “reveal actively their unique personal identities” (1958:179). Making this distinction between public and private is the subject of much debate, and as we would expect, there is fundamental disagreement between political and social theorists about the nature and role of the public realm and its relation to the private realm in human life. While the public realm is in demise in modern society (Sennett 1977), the Greek model of the *polis* remains relevant to political theory as it highlights the centrality of the public realm for political life as a way of speaking, acting and living between human beings (Arendt 1958). In addition,

Castoriadis argues that “the emergence of a public space means that a political domain is created which ‘belongs to all’” (1992:112), echoing Arendt’s assertion that the public realm allows us all to be free and equal while retaining individual difference (1958:41). This is part of the wider belief belonging to Thucydides that “the *polis* is the men” (Castoriadis 1992:109) and that in order to live political lives and fulfil our potential we must be conscious that “the *polis* is also oneself” (Castoriadis 1992:113). In the Arendtian sense the public realm is inter-generational, existing before and beyond the living generation, and not confined to a single time or space.

In contrast to this, Habermas defines the public sphere as the “domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed” (1997:105). Further to this “a portion of the public sphere is constituted in every conversation in which private persons come together to form a public” (1997:105). For Habermas, the public sphere acts as a mediator between state and society, but once state and society became interlocked, the public sphere “was necessarily transformed as the distinction between public and private realms blurred, the equation between the intimate sphere and private life broke down with a polarisation of family and economic society, rational-critical debate gave way to the consumption of culture” (Calhoun 1992:21). These differences in conceptualising the role and construction of the public sphere, involving a complex interplay of many variables, further serve to complicate contemporary political and social theory.

On the other hand, for Warner, the problem is that public appearance “require[s] individuals to have discontinuous perceptions of themselves” (1992:378). McGuigan argues that “the public sphere is fragmented and, at best, multiple and diverse in all its manifestations” and that in the modern world, public issues are decided in private, “behind closed doors” (1996:4). Complicating this debate over the role of the public realm and the divide between public and private, there exists significant feminist literature that argues that the line between public and private runs tandem to the patriarchal divide between man and woman (Pateman 1988; Pateman 1997). In addition to this, the exclusion of women from the public realm means that men are able to be judged in two realms, while women can be judged in only one (Elshtain 1997:607).

Competing conceptions: the political public realm versus the social public realm

From the literature it becomes apparent that there is a divergence between political and social theory and the ways in which they each conceptualise the public realm. But how do the political public realm and the social public realm differ? In order to go some way to quantifying this difference, two key theorists have been chosen to represent their respective disciplines. While this critique is not exhaustive, by focussing on Arendt and Bauman, we begin to see a sharp divergence in the way that each discipline conceives of the public realm and its importance to the political and human life.

Arendt and the political public realm

Understanding Arendt's "sharp, firm, and unwavering distinction between the private and the public realms of human existence" (Kohn 2000:116) is critical in formulating a critique of Arendtian political theory. For Arendt, human life can be separated into two distinct spheres – the public and the private – and as human beings we are dependent on both. We require the shelter of the private realm to give us depth of character (1958:71), but we must master our private necessities in order to obtain freedom in the public realm (1958:31). The private realm concerns the household and those things necessary for survival (1958:29), and as such it "is based on the laws of universal difference and differentiation" (1967:301). The private realm is characterised by deprivation and those subjected to it are "deprived of political rights" (1967:141). "To live an entirely private life means to be deprived of all the things truly essential to the human life: to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others...to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself" (1958:58). Additionally, the deprived individual "to whom public and official life manifests itself in the guise of necessity" is "excluded from participation in the management of public affairs that involve all citizens, [and therefore] loses his rightful place in society and his natural connection with his fellow-men" (1967:141).

In contrast, the public realm is the realm of the political and allows freedom through speech and action (1958:28). In political terms the public realm is of utmost importance

because it allows individuals to create a common world through appearance (1958:50) and a space for interaction where our individual ideas can compete to be seen and heard through speech and persuasion. It is also the space where the actual event of coming together is a series of unfolding happenings that highlight “the miracle contained in the fact that each of us is made as he is – single, unique and unchangeable” (1967:301). As such the public sphere is based on the laws of equality, which is not given to us, “but is the result of human organization” through action (Arendt 1967:301). As the space of appearance, the public realm is “where human beings gather, and...spontaneous acting and speaking are the capacities through which the unique human person discloses his or her individuality” (Dietz 2000:100). Because of this, “the public realm...was reserved for individuality, it was the only place where men could show who they really and inexchangeably were” (Arendt 1958:41). In other words, the public realm exists not only as the realm of the political but also as an extension to, and augmentation of human life itself.

In opposition to the public/private divide, Arendt highlights the modern birth of a third realm, the social, which is neither public *nor* private. In fact, Arendt argues that society is somewhat analogous to the private realm no longer on an individual scale, but a national scale, and describes it as “the nation-wide administration of housekeeping” (1958:29). Far from augmenting public life, the social realm has actually reversed the roles of the public and private and forced matters that were once a private concern into issues of public significance. The rise of mass society has meant that as individuals we are forced to conform to some notion of the ‘common good’ where only one opinion can flourish and where difference has been made a private concern to be pursued by individuals (1958:41). In Arendtian terms, the very constructions of the social and the political are incompatible. While the political embraces difference, freedom and public appearance, the social is based on conformity, the rise of necessity and the lack of anything distinctly political. In this way, the demise of the public realm is symptomatic of the demise of the political more generally, and the wider trend to limit political theory to governance and public policy and ensure that the contemporary public realm remains confined to a very “restricted, impersonal sphere of administration” (Arendt 1958:60).

For Cavarero, the fact that the Arendtian conception of the political is founded on plural interactions between humans and that these interactions are boundless and unpredictable, means that the political is capable of expressing human uniqueness and creates “a space for reciprocal self-evaluation” (2004:63). Not only is difference assured through plurality, but natality “is a possibility for new beginnings that is given to everyone ‘by virtue of being born’ and [as such] the challenge of natality is to make this beginning in a distinctive way” (Disch 1994:56). Further to this, Arendtian understandings of both plurality and natality “promote a conception of heterogeneous community in which there is equality in light of differences, civility in disagreement, and transformation in response to criticism” (Disch 1994:57). In this sense, natality can be understood as the “miracle that saves the world”, as it can “bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, those two essential characteristics of human existence” (1958:247) and ensure the ultimate endurance of the political and the public realm by producing humans capable of living political lives.

In light of this, we face the question of what Arendt’s political conceptualisation of the public realm has to offer us in terms of understanding the human condition. Like seemingly all other questions asked in a political context, there is not one single answer. Rather, Arendt’s theorisation of the public realm offers us a multiplicity of insights that can serve as an augmentation to the fleetingness of our individual lives. Perhaps most alluring in this context then, is Arendt’s proposal of immortality, and the idea that our remembrance will be assured through our action in the public realm. However, our action does not only create our immortality. It also ensures that we can appear in the world as a unique ‘*who*’, free of the bounds of ‘*what*’, which is imposed on us in society through our work and our labor. The political public realm offers us the freedom therefore, to be unique in our plurality and to demonstrate this diversity through speech and persuasion, able to relate to one another through our citizenship and participation in public life. In order for the political public realm to exist however, Arendt acknowledges that there must be a second realm, the private, which exists in order to take care of our necessity, and therefore leaves us free to pursue the political life. In this way, Arendt’s conceptualisation does not only understand the complexities of public life, but also the

nuances of private life. This means that Arendt provides a *complete* understanding of the human condition, theorising both public and private, freedom and necessity and providing tools to understand the complexity of the human condition.

Bauman and the social public realm

Like Arendt, Bauman's understanding of the distinction between public and private is crucial in formulating a theory of the social public realm. Bauman's central concern is that we lack the ability to "translate private worries into public issues and, conversely, to discern and pinpoint public issues in private troubles" (1999:2). He believes that this has occurred because "the bridges built between private and public life are dismantled or were never built to start with" (1999:2). This understanding implies that the relationship between public and private is fluid and overlapping and that private issues are in fact capable of being translated into public concerns. As such, the public is simply constituted by the private on a much larger scale. This means that for Bauman, making the private public is a natural progression and results in the elevation of necessity over freedom and the saturation of the private even in the public domain.

Bauman is not interested in building the bridges between public and private that he has identified as missing, or even in ensuring that the public/private divide is maintained at all. Instead he advocates the construction of the agora, "the space neither private nor public, but more exactly private and public at the same time" (1999:3). This implies a merging of the two once distinct realms into a hybrid space "where private problems meet in a meaningful way" (1999:3). Bauman's construction of the agora amalgamates the once distinct public and private realms and fuses them into one all-assuming whole that attempts to explain the emergence of the social, constructing it to be *both public and private*.

The agora therefore becomes "the favoured space in which to speak out on such issues as the now unrestrained privatisation of the public sphere" (Vecchi 2004:8). Ironically, while Bauman argues that at present "the sole grievances aired in public are sackfuls of private agonies and anxieties which, however, do not turn into public issues just for being

on public display” (1999:3), he simultaneously believes that the agora, as the space both public and private can “facilitate the translation from private troubles into public issues” (1999:7). In this sense there is a degree of ambiguity about just what constitutes ‘private troubles’ as distinct from ‘public issues’ and what this process of translation does to turn one into the other. Intricately related to this issue is the modern problem of insecurity and Bauman admits that “postmodernity has not allayed the fears which modernity injected into humanity once it left it to its own resources; postmodernity only *privatised* these fears” (1992:xviii). This again highlights the blurring of the boundary between public and private. As such, although Bauman advocates a merging of the distinct public and private realms into the agora, he continues to maintain an untenable distinction between public issues and private concerns. To compound this problem, Bauman himself does not clarify which issues, problems or concerns he classifies as either public or private, but asserts that the agora can solve the problems of living in an uncertain world.

Bauman identifies individualisation as a core feature of modern life. As such, the bonds between individuals have been eroded to the point where instances of “‘joining forces’ and ‘standing arm in arm’ [are] difficult to spot” (Bauman 2001:9). This has implications for a social conception of a public realm and engaged citizenry and Bauman’s understanding means that society is comprised of individual units of multiple singularities. As a result, forging an active civic engagement is difficult in a society of disinterested and insecure individuals. Bauman argues that there is a “present-day crisis of citizenship and disenchantment with the potential of political engagement” (2002:76). In this way, Bauman’s social world has seen the demise of citizenship and instead “the public arena is filled with the concerns and preoccupations of individuals *as individuals* leaving little room for other considerations (Walsh 2002:1). For Cavarero “the modern state instead conceive[s] of the political subject as an atomised individual, free and equal” (2004:60), making the pursuit of a public realm as the space ‘in-between’ an impossible endeavour.

Interestingly, Bauman himself admits that “the rise of the consumer is the fall of the citizen” (2001:114). “In actual fact, the dismantling of (state) political constraints and

controls, far from making ‘civil society’ free and truly autonomous, opens it to the unabashed rule of market forces which members of that society, now left to their own devices, have no means nor power to resist.” (Bauman 2001:139). Similarly, Bauman concedes that “consumer skills emphatically do not include the art of translating private troubles into public issues, and public interests into individual rights and duties – the art that constitutes the citizen and holds together the polity as the congregation of citizens” (Leighton 2002:7). Compounding the problems of individualisation, increased freedom has led to greater insecurity on both a personal and collective level, and as a consequence the citizen is “sceptical or wary of the ‘common good’, of the ‘good society’ or ‘just society’. What is the sense of *common* interests unless they let each individual satisfy his or her own?” (Bauman 2001:48-49). Instead the citizen has come to be redefined in the narrow sense of being a consumer of goods supplied by the government (Bauman 2001:151).

Bauman’s understanding of the divide between public and private and his resulting conception of the social public realm highlight some fundamental inconsistencies between the theory of Arendt and Bauman and political and social theory more generally. By arguing that there is no need to maintain the distinction between what is public and what is private, Bauman’s construction of the social in terms of the agora that is both public and private is in direct contradiction to Arendt’s political understanding of the social as neither public nor private. Bauman’s reliance on the agora as a solution for social problems is symptomatic of the larger problem of understanding the human condition in economic and market-based terms. By his own admission, the market dissolves the bonds of society (1999:30), and identity is created through one’s ability to consume. “The roads to self-identity, to a place in society, to a life in a form recognisable as that of meaningful living, all require daily visits to the market place” (Bauman 1992:26). Benhabib demonstrates that this presented a particular problem for Arendt who saw that “the occluding of the political by the social and the transformation of the public space of politics [leads] into a pseudospace of interaction in which individuals no longer “act” but “merely behave” as economic producers, consumers and urban city dwellers”

(1992:75). Individuality is replaced with individualisation, citizenship with consumption, and freedom with necessity.

The Arendtian notion of the interdependence of freedom and politics therefore obviously “stands in contradiction to the social theories of the modern age” (Arendt 1961:156). Bauman’s construction of the agora highlights that public and social are incompatible in the sense that one denies the other. But what constitutes a public space for Bauman? A market place where consumers are exercising consumer freedom to create their identity, but so busy conforming to a standard set of behaviours that they are unable to act? In many ways, this confronts the inherent contradictions associated with the construction of a social public realm, as publicness requires action (in a political sense), whereas the social denies action and merely reconstitutes private concerns as public issues. To this end, Bauman recognises that “a territory stripped of public space provides little chance for norms being debated, for values to be confronted, to clash and be negotiated” (1998:25), therefore admitting that in a social sense, the public realm is inadequately developed. While the agora is meant to build a bridge between public and private, Bauman does not elaborate on which concerns are public or private and how his ‘translation’ can foster a public realm.

For Arendt the social is the antithesis of the human desire for immortality as “private interests which by their very nature are temporary, [are] limited by man’s natural span of life” (Arendt 1967:145), however in the social, these now form the foundation of public life. In addition, she argues that “finiteness of personal life is as serious a challenge to property as the foundation of a society, as the limits of the globe are a challenge to the expansion of the body-politic” (Arendt 1967:145). In this way, Bauman’s elevation of the necessities of everyday life over (political) freedom serves to reinforce Arendt’s notion that the social limits us to a restricted existence of unfreedom and work, denying us the chance to reach our full potential and ultimately claim immortality. In the end, we are faced with sharing Gamble’s “quiet despair of an entirely individualised world in which the possibility of engaging in any kind of collective project or collective self-

determination has disappeared” (2000:15), and the conviction that a life lived in the social public realm is a life lived outside the political sphere.

Positioning political theory: an Arendtian approach

While social theorists are essentially theorising the same world as political theorists, they do so from a very different perspective. Generally, social theorists are concerned with understanding human behaviour and providing a general theory that explains the reasons why society is ordered the way it is (Best 2003:10; Baert 1998:1). On the other hand, political theorists such as Arendt theorise human action and speech and the ways in which these constitute a meaningful and lasting relational space in the public realm.

For Arendt, to be human “is to live with others who are both distinct and like ourselves” (Hansen 1993:6), and plurality is therefore a fundamental element of the human condition. The public realm then, plays an important role in gathering men together to persuade and act together and forge a common reality that is secured by our equality of difference. Action corresponds to the human condition of plurality (1958:7) and “plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live (1958:8). Plurality is “the basic condition of both action and speech, [and] has the twofold character of equality and distinction” (1958:175). As such, not only is “plurality the condition...for that space of appearance which is the public realm” (1958:220), but plurality guarantees citizenship in the sense that it allows all citizens a free and equal position to appear in the public realm.

In a political sense, men must be assured equality of difference (as opposed to the singularity of equality of sameness) in order to understand one another (1958:175). This difference is essential for the political and “the fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him” (1958:178). As such “the task and potential greatness of mortals lie in their ability to produce things – works and deeds and words – which would deserve to be and, at least to some degree, are at home in everlastingness, so that through them mortals could find their place in a cosmos where

everything is immortal except themselves” (1958:19). In other words, through speech and action we can reveal our uniqueness and subsequently become immortal by leaving a trace of our individuality in the political public realm. The public realm is a “relational space – contextual, contingent and groundless – that opens everywhere for everyone” (Cavarero 2004:69), and this combination of plurality and relation-building gives the political public realm a means of creating citizenship in terms of membership and publicity.

As a consequence of both this plurality and difference, appearance in the public realm creates a common world because “being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position” (Arendt 1958:57). In a space where our difference is not only assured but demanded, our multiplicity of perspectives means that reality is created somewhere in the space ‘in-between’. “Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those that are gathered around them know their sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear” (Arendt 1958:57). Further to this, “the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised” (Arendt 1958:57). As such, the common world does not create sameness but ensures we each have a different and equally valued location.

If we can begin to theorise reality in this way as existing somewhere in the space ‘in-between’, then there is room for extrapolation from the level of individual to the level of academic discipline. In other words, what if we ceased trying to impose a disciplinary hierarchy where one discipline was seen to theorise the human condition more completely than any other? Could the jostling for ‘top position’ be superseded by taking an Arendtian approach? By considering theory in this way, *all* disciplines from political theory to social theory, economic theory to psychology, philosophy to mathematics and beyond, would be assured a space where their uniqueness was demanded and preserved. This however means recognition of disciplinary borders and maintenance of disciplinary integrity rather than integration and interdisciplinary synthesis. Taking the Arendtian

approach would mean that as all disciplines 'met' in the public realm to speak and act, worldly reality could 'truly and reliably appear'. This however does present a paradox as in doing so, we implicitly position the Arendtian approach and subsequently political theory as the central concern in theorising the human condition. Further to this, the resulting contestation, debate and attempts to persuade are inherently political acts and the coming together in the public realm is in itself political.

This aside however, the implications of this understanding are far reaching. By using the conception of the political public realm presented by Arendt we can not only begin to understand the bounds of contemporary political theory, but begin to develop a framework in which to understand human knowledge itself. By recognising and valuing plurality and difference we have a unique opportunity to ensure that our speech and action endures through time to create a reality that transcends the lifespan of mortal men and strives to comprehend the complexities of the human condition.

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