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How the Unseen and Unheard Become Subjects:

The Political Potential of the "Social" in Hannah Arendt

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Abstract

This paper examines the political potential of the "social" by focusing on Hannah Arendt's (1906-1975) theory of "civil disobedience."

Arendt's political theory has often been interpreted through the lens of the public/private dichotomy. However, her discussion of "association" within the social realm appears to describe a process through which those who are unseen and unheard make their existence visible. This paper explores the political possibilities embedded in Arendt's conception of "the social" by interrogating its meaning in her thought. Specifically, it highlights "association" as a foundation for civil disobedience, compares it with Judith Butler's concept of the subject, and examines its potential as a site for the emergence of those who are unable to appear in the public sphere.

Key words: Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, the "social," appearance, subjects

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine the political possibilities of the "social" by focusing on Hannah Arendt's (1906-1975) theory of "civil disobedience."

Arendt's political theory has traditionally been understood through the lens of a public-private dualism. However, this paper seeks to reinterpret that framework by interrogating the meaning of the "social" and exploring its political potential.

In particular, this paper will focus on "association" as a foundation for civil disobedience and examine its potential as a site for the appearance of those who cannot emerge in the public realm.

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1. Subject(ization) in Hannah Arendt

Although subject(ization) is a central theme in Arendt's political thought, she does not address the concept directly or thematically. While Arendt frequently explores what it means to exist politically, she appears to deliberately avoid using the term subject(ization) in her discussions.

From her perspective, understanding political existence is difficult if approached through a subject-object dualism or by seeking common traits shared by all subjects. For Arendt, politics is constituted by the free speech and actions of individuals, but crucially, it is mutual action among a plurality of people (men), not the solitary act of a single person (man) [HC:7].

Even if we posit a political subject, it does not precede this mutual action; rather, it emerges through it.

Accordingly, if we are to identify the subject in Arendt's work, it is most evident in her concept of "appearance." In *The Human Condition*, Arendt uses "appearance" to describe how people emerge in the world: through being "seen and heard by others" [HC:57], one can "show who one is" [HC:57].

She further explains this as "exposing who-ness (who)" [HC:175], referring not merely to identity but to the dynamic nature of being perceived by others. The "who" is exposed through interaction in the public realm. Subject(ization), in Arendt's account, is thus a relational process that arises through speech and action in the presence of others.[1]

This understanding shares common ground with Judith Butler's (1956-) view of the subject, which she formulates in critical dialogue with Arendt. Like Arendt, Butler sees subjectivity as fluid and shaped by social context and discourse.

However, in Butler's account, politics involves the struggle of those excluded or rendered invisible within the public realm to make that exclusion visible (to be seen and heard). She criticizes Arendt for maintaining a rigid division between the public and private realms, thereby overlooking the struggle over who is recognized as a legitimate subject of politics (Butler, Spivak 2008). While Arendt redefined politics through the concept of "appearance" and laid the theoretical groundwork for reconstructing the

[1] Muramatsu, for example, points out that "the issues of will and voluntariness are of unique significance in that they open up the possibility of understanding them differently under chance and fundamental passivity, rather than recovering and discarding them to the modern concept of 'subject'." (Muramatsu 2017:10).
Higuchi also points out the "non-sovereign nature of 'action'" by stating that "action" is not performed by a "singular person" but assumes a "plurality of persons" and that the 'actor' is "not only a doer but also a sufferer at the same time." (Higuchi 2025:128)

public-as-political realm, her framework remains bounded by the public-private dualism.

Indeed, scholars have noted that the more Arendt sought to redefine and reconstruct the public realm , "the more she continued to set firm boundaries between the private and public realm s" (Okano 2007:39).

Butler's critique targets this limitation: that in theorizing the politics of manifestation, Arendt overlooks the possibility of manifestation by those who remain invisible in the private realm . But was Arendt solely concerned with the dualistically defined public realm? Might her delineation of boundaries instead be understood as an attempt to make possible their configuration?

2. The "Appearances" of Those Who Are not Seen and Heard.

Arendt does not neglect the question of how those who are not seen and heard might become visible in the public realm.

Her discussion of civil disobedience offers important insights into how individuals rendered invisible in politics can come to appear in the public-political realm.

In particular, her analysis of "association" in the social realm appears to describe the process by which those previously unseen and unheard make their presence visible. In what follows, we examine Arendt's theory of "association" to explore the possibilities of political subjectivation within the social realm.

(1) Civil Disobedience and Association

Arendt contrasts the French Revolution with the American Revolution, assessing the former as oriented toward liberation from poverty, while the latter pursued political freedom. She then highlights the political potential of civil disobedience, pointing to the fact that it was civilly disobedient individuals who propelled the civil rights movement in the United States.[2]

First, Arendt identifies the existence of "associations" as the "core" of such movements.

According to her, "association" refers to "a group established and acting in

[2] Analyzing Arendt's interpretation, Canovan also wrote, "The American Revolution succeeded and set up freedom because it was a political revolution and had been so all along, and because it gave priority to freedom and to the form of governance. In contrast, the French Revolution failed and became a tyranny because it was quickly overwhelmed by political considerations, namely, the desire to free the masses from poverty" (Canovan, 1995:159).

accordance with the principle of consent based on mutual promises," formed when people voice their demands or resistance. By asserting their objections and resistance collectively, "their words are listened to" [CR:95].

However, Arendt argues that this alone does not necessarily constitute political resistance. A union of individuals brought together by mutual consent may qualify as an "association," but it is the emergence of civil disobedience as a form of voluntary association in a state of emergency that signifies political resistance [CR:101-102].

(2) Civil Disobedience

What, then, does Arendt mean by "civil disobedience"? Following her classification, we examine it through three key characteristics.

1 The Distinction Between "Conscientious Objection" and "Association" Based on a Promise

According to Arendt, there are two forms of resistance to the prevailing political order: "conscientious objection to military service" and "civil disobedience."

While both forms resist existing political structures (i.e., law), the former is motivated by "common interest," whereas the latter arises from "common opinion" and is grounded in mutual agreement.

In other words, Arendt distinguishes civil disobedience as resistance based not on personal interest or moral conviction, but on dissent expressed collectively (CR:56-57).

2 Homogeneity

The second characteristic is homogeneity. Civil disobedience arises "when a significant number of citizens become convinced that their complaints will not be heard or addressed" (CR:74). When many citizens share an understanding of their grievances and objections (CR:76), they are bound together by "common opinion" or "agreement," forming a homogeneous group.

This may be described as solidarity in the realm of the "what" preceding the "who" in the public realm.

3 Open and Public

The third point is characterized by openness. Civil disobedience involves openly asserting one's rights within the existing polity, rather than breaking the law to avoid public attention (CR:75).

(3) The Perils and Political Potential of "Association"

However, Arendt does not value "association" in and of itself.

The danger of "associations" lies in their tendency toward homogeneity and uniformity, as they are inevitably bound together as groups operating under the principle of the "protection of life." There is always the risk that people may become "animalized" within them. This risk is reflected in Arendt's critique of the "social." For Arendt, "the social" refers to a realm in which the boundary between public and private becomes blurred, and matters related to human life and its needs are reduced to economic and material concerns (HC:41).

3. Education as the "Social"

Given Arendt's concepts of "appearance," "association," and "civil disobedience," what kind of educational "association" could serve as a potential foundation? Can schools function as centers of resistance (civil disobedience), and if so, in what sense?

In Arendt' thought, clear boundaries exist between the public, social, and private realms, and it is not easy to trace a direct path from "civil disobedience" to "appearance."[3] However, by redrawing these boundaries, that is, by reconsidering the relationships and their recombination within "social things," we may find possibilities that point toward

[3] For example, Maniwa analyzes the principle behind the legitimization of civil disobedience by referencing the concept of "tacit consent," but he remains cautious about its political potential. He argues that "to make civil disobedience possible and to guarantee the possibility of restructuring the public realm, any political entity must recognize the opportunity to deny its absolutes and guarantee the opportunity for resistance to appear in the world as a new 'beginning' in its own right" (Maniwa 200: 271-279). In other words, the opportunity must be guaranteed, which makes him cautious about the political feasibility of civil disobedience (Maniwa 2020: 271-279).
Kawai similarly points out that the argument for locating publicness in associations remains insufficient. He notes that in the "Little Rock" essay, associations are categorized under the "social," and that "voluntary associations" are likewise discussed as "social" in the "Civil Disobedience" essay. At the same time, however, he observes that Arendt looks beyond a mere understanding of "social things" toward the possibility of public "activities." He emphasizes that Arendt's thinking reflects a commitment to engaging with the contemporary world in pursuit of publicness, without being overly optimistic about either category (Kawai 2020: 261-270).

subjectification.

＊This paper is a substantially revised version of the following.

・Mayuko Ishigami, Azusa Egawa, Satoshi Eguchi, Tomoki Tanaka, Yasuhiro Suzuki, Sunji Lee (2016)
"Rethinking Education as "the Social" : How "the social" becomes political, and in what scene?"
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