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Economics: The Science of Labor, Work, and the Social

Introduction:

The modern notion of politics consists of outlandish scandals, the most recent statements by talking heads on CNN, and the president's latest Tweets. Most people only really "care" about these things around a major election. Politics has become a sideshow to many people's lives and they see no strong correlation between the events in their lives, and whoever happens to inhabit the Oval Office. This concept of politics is relatively new, and is really only characteristic of the certain style of politics that dominates in Western democracies. In the *Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt lays out a framework for what she believes caused this evolution in the concept of politics. She traces ideas back to the Ancient Greeks, and describes how the Greek notion of the Political in the public was overtaken by another notion which she calls the Social.

A very important part of her analysis is what she calls the *vita activa*. "With the term, *vita activa*, I propose to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man." (HC 7) The first is labor which is simply the activity of biological processes for keeping oneself alive. It is necessitated by the condition of life. The second is work which is the activity of creating "unnatural" things that are intended for their temporary usefulness. It is necessitated by worldliness. The third is action which corresponds to those activities which take place directly between men without things or matter, meaning those actions which when achieved continue on past death in the memories and stories told by others. It is necessitated on the plurality of men, or the fact that we are men and not multiple "Mans". Action is also unique in that it is totally free in relation to its necessity or usefulness unlike labor and work.

Action is the most important to her as it is the basis for all truly political life. The individual that freely commits actions was called by Aristotle the *Bios Politikos*. She denotes three kinds of actions. The first is the life of the aesthete, which is those actions that relate to

the consumption of beautiful things such as gourmet food, beautiful people, and beautiful art. The second is the the Political life, which is those actions that relate to the creation of beautiful deeds that will last on in the plurality of men. The third is the *vita contemplativa* or the contemplative life that consists of the contemplation of eternally beautiful things.

Arendt's conception of the political life obviously has major differences from the modern notion of politics mentioned earlier. A majority of her work attempts to explain how men have shifted from a conception of Politics that is made out of beautiful deeds to a mundane political public life. Arendt also has a concept that she calls the social and she argues that it is what the modern notion of politics is a part of. The social is comprised not of action, but of labor and work. It is not concerned with the creation of actions intended to last past an individual's lifetime granting them immortality, but rather with the consumption of things in the present. The irony of the situation is that labor and work to some degree are required to lay the groundwork for an action to occur, and to make the individual free in the public. "What all Greek philosophers, no matter how opposed to polis life, took for granted is that freedom is exclusively located in the political realm, that necessity is primarily a pre political phenomenon..." (HC 31) The Greek philosophers would characterize that which is necessary to create the political sphere as the private household. Arendt's criticism of the social is that it is not laying the groundwork for actions, but rather suppressing them in order to continue it's own march into the future. The modern notion of politics is not made of people studying actions, but rather it is the employment of economics and government, which are forms of labor and work, in order to get only further economics and government. "...politics is never for the sake of life. As far as the members of the polis are concerned, household life exist for the sake of the "good life" in the polis." (HC 37)

The Rise of the Social:

To understand how Arendt conceives of the social, we must first understand how she thought it arose. She first looks at the Greek concepts of the Public and the Private and how they relate to the *vita activa*. The Public has two aspects. The first is that it is the realm in which individuals see and are seen. In other words, it is the realm where you may be freely criticized interpreted and understood by the others in the public. In this way does the public allow for the Political Action as it creates the plurality which is the condition that allows for the action. The second is called the common or the space which both binds men together and separates them. The Private in Greek thought is also known as the "household". This is the realm in which labor and work take place. In the times of Ancient Greece, the household may

be comprised of other human beings that remained in the private such as slaves or women. The household is ruled by a monopoly of violence from the household head.

Another aspect of the distinction between the public and private can be found in the classical distinction between property and wealth. Wealth is quite simply material products of labor and work. They are the physical materials within the private that were based on the necessity of life and usefulness. Property on the other hand was more related to the public, and was considered the gateway from the private life into the body politic. It was what it meant to be in your own separate part of the common public. "Originally, property meant no more or less than to have one's location in a particular part of the world and therefore to belong to the body politic, that is, to be the head of one of the families which together constituted the public realm." (HC 61)

Arendt examines the shift from the Greek notions of public to what is called the social, interestingly enough, coming out of Christian thought. Christianity is primarily concerned with other worldly or heavenly things and highly advocates for prayer and other less physical or public methods of being. This makes it similar to the form of action, *vita contemplativa*. Ironically, though it is an action, *vita contemplativa* is relatively passive as you are not actively engaging with the world and just contemplating it. "Christian morality, as distinguished from its fundamental religious precepts, has always insisted that everybody should mind his own business and that political responsibility constituted first of all a burden, undertaken exclusively for the sake of the well-being and salvation of those it freed from public affairs." (HC 60) Politics was seen in Christian thought, as purely a means of allowing one to pursue God contemplatively. In this way, *vita contemplativa* became the primary action and the political life was pushed to the wayside. When this happened the aspects of the *vita activa* which were formerly relegated to the private, labor and work, now made their way into the public in the form of the social. Now what it meant to see and to be seen, and what it meant to have things held in common was to have one another's products of labor and work exposed and judged by one another. The distinction between property and wealth was collapsed. The Public was no longer ruled by consensus and judgement of the actions of other individuals, but by the violence that was formerly relegated to the private.

Another development came with various revolutions of the modern age and with the emancipation of individuals who had no property or wealth to speak of entering the public realm. "Prior to the modern age, which began with the expropriation of the poor and then proceeded to emancipate the new propertyless classes, all civilizations have rested upon the sacredness of

private property. Wealth, on the contrary, whether privately owned or publicly distributed, had never been sacred before.” (HC 61) The newfound sacredness attributed to wealth came along with those who had never had wealth of their own to speak of coming into contact with it, and seeing it as the reason that their emancipation into the public was valuable.

All of a sudden, the public was no longer a place for the creation of immortal actions, but a place for the public, violently - ruled, self-sustaining activities of labor and work to thrive and grow in a never ending cycle. What was now relegated to the private were very few things, mostly those which are ontologically incapable of becoming public most notably the thoughts and feelings inside one’s head. The social has many similar aspects to the classical private in that it functions as a single large household. In some forms of the social this household had a singular figure as it’s head such as a king, but after the enlightenment it was for more likely for society to be led by no one in particular, but the general well-being of the society motivated itself. “The equality of the members of these groups, far from being an equality among peers, resembles nothing so much as the equality of household members before the despotic power of the household head, except that in society, where the natural strength of one common interest and one unanimous opinion is tremendously enforced by sheer number, actual rule exerted by one man, representing the common interest and the right opinion, could eventually be dispensed with. The phenomenon of conformism is characteristic of the last stage of the modern development.” (HC 40) The social has given rise to it’s own sciences in order to maximize the goals of this common good, mainly in the sciences of behavior, namely economics, and in government to regulate the massive household with violence and to enforce this common goal.

Economics and Government:

Arendt notices with the rise of the modern social, the rise of the science of economics. In the former conception of the public realm, the public was reserved for individuals to show who they really were in contrast to everyone else. When the social has overtaken the political in the public this unique individuality is replaced with behavior, the subject of study in economics. “It is the same conformism, the assumption that men behave and do not act with respect to each other, that lies at the root of the modern science of economics, whose birth coincided with the rise of society and which, together with its chief technical tool, statistics, became the social science par excellence. Economics... could achieve a scientific character only when men had

become social beings and unanimously followed certain patterns of behavior, so that those who did not keep the rules could be considered to be asocial or abnormal.” (HC 42).

Arendt also comments on both the economic thought of classical liberal economics via Adam Smith and the work of Karl Marx. She says that Smithian Political Economy supposes that man acts in their own self-interest and is driven by the desire for acquisition. She also mentions Smith’s famous concept of the invisible hand which promotes ends that were of no man’s intention. This she says proves that there is too much unpredictability in Smith’s economics to have it constitute a science. “Adam Smith’s introduction of an “invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of anybody’s intention” proves that even this minimum of action with its uniform motivation still contains too much unpredictable initiative for the establishment of a science.” (HC 42) Marx substituted personal interests with class interests, and boiled economics down to a class conflict between capitalists and workers. She says that this is more coherent and appears as a better science than liberal economics.

In this regard, I believe that Arendt is ignoring a large portion of economic thought by limiting her view of classical economics the work of Adam Smith. By even the time that she wrote *The Human Condition*, many great achievements had been made in economics, and the ideas of Adam Smith have been mostly ignored except in some sentimental drawbacks to him being a “godfather” of the science. Smith’s invisible hand is not meant to be a part of his science, but rather a metaphor for how the various endeavours of men can interact, converge, and conflict creating various end-products that were in none of their original designs. The science continued to grow more rigorous with time, particularly with the so-called Marginal Revolution in which the inherent values that Smith and the classical economists placed on resources was rejected, and instead economists following Carl Menger adopted the idea of subjective valuation, and the pursuit of ends with the marginal employment of means. This has developed into modern neoclassical economics that could be considered a legitimate science.

Arendt’s critique does come in properly when considering how the science of economics is employed. In consideration of the *vita activa*, economics can quite succinctly describe the realms of labor and work, the classical private realm. It can also therefore describe the public social as that is also comprised of labor and work. What Arendt sees economics lacks is the ability to describe the Political Action. Economics properly describes the realms of labor and work as they are engagements relative to the production of wealth, but they cannot fully explain how actions will arise. When an individual in the public attempts to create an action, they very well may fail. All that economics can predict is perhaps the various choices that people will

make relative to the scarcity of their economic position in the world, but it cannot fully grasp what it is about something that makes it in a political action.

Economics works very well in describing the way that individuals act out of necessity and usefulness through their labor and work in the social. This makes it then a tool by which others can judge someone's value not on their actions, but on their necessity and usefulness. This leads to the modern notion of politics, which is really just the game of determining how management is done by a government. Governments attempt to manage individual behavior in order to maximize their usefulness. In the modern notion of the social however the government may not be a single entity, but instead a nameless faceless crowd, which serves the same purpose as the public in which individuals can see and be seen. However, now the public does not exist for the creation of political actions, but to be another part of national housekeeping, judging individuals based on how they serve society's common goal by their economic usefulness.

Conclusion:

Arendt is very concerned that we have lost a very important part of human life by creating the social. It usurps the ability that the public has to turn the attempts of individuals at immortality into beautiful actions that last past their lifetime. The social instead uses the functions of government, economics, and the gaze of the crowd to manipulate behavior towards useful ends. Ultimately, violence and subtle coercion strips away people of the individuality which they formerly experienced as citizens of the public and they become interchangeable. This she believes has also led to some of the great atrocities that we have seen, such as the Holocaust, are a result of the social. Nazi Germany employed it's government and turned the gaze of it's people on those who were supposedly destroying German society. Jews, blacks, homosexual, and gypsies were not seen as useful members of society and were in fact considered a cost leading to the justification of mass slaughter. Economics and Government are useful tools and great sciences for the management of the household in the private and the creation of wealth, but when applied as national housekeeping in place of the classical notion of free individuals of the public, people become dehumanized, interchangeable, and unable to gain a public immortality.

Works Cited

1. Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. N.p.: U of Chicago Press, 1998. Print.