

## **From Protest to Contest: Dialectics of individuality and ‘being against’**

A dialogue of thought between Arendt and Badiou on equality and plurality

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### **Introduction**

The word ‘protest’ has its origin in the Latin verb ‘pro-testari’. ‘Testari’ means originally to testify, to assure and to prove. The word ‘testament’ also goes back to ‘testari’. To comprehend this original meaning in a plausible way, one may think here of the ‘New Testament’. This book testifies first and foremost to what unites Christians: if we think it with Saint Paul, the foundation of Christianity is based on nothing, but a public testimony, namely the testimony that Jesus Christ has risen. What allowed the very first Christians to count as Christians despite their sometimes ‘clashing’ differences has been this public testimony, which gathered them together, in ‘utter difference,’ around the ‘same’ cause.

The preposition ‘pro’ in pro-testari, emphasizes the public character of testifying, insofar as it means here that testimony is put ‘before’ the public. A quite commonly used word today both in German and in English for protest, that is ‘demonstration’, still hints at the sense of publicly testifying, even if the common abbreviation, ‘demo’ – at least in German socio-political culture – one-dimensionalized the meaning, to speak with Marcuse. In short, we can say that the verb ‘protestari’ as such contains a predominantly affirmative sense, it means a public witnessing ‘for’ something.

What is ironic here is that today’s predominantly negative sense of protest as ‘expressing a dissent from, or rejection of something’ has emerged within merchant language, and indeed first appears in the 16th century, as “a public notarization of refusal to accept or pay a bill of exchange.”<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, what is publicly testified or witnessed has been narrowed down more and more to ‘being against something’. Finally, in the course of modernity and the emergence of ‘protest movements’ we can speak of a gradual decline of the affirmative moment in protests, so that ‘pro’-testari has been turned into a ‘contra’-testari. Yet, particularly within the context of ‘pandemic protests’, we could even say that

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.dwds.de/wb/Protest> and also: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/protest>

the protests in our present become more and more like 'contests', in the sense of a combative competition for public visibility in testifying to what one is 'against'.

It was, indeed, all we saw in the course of the pandemic: gatherings around 'being against'; either against what one does not want (such as government measures) or whom one does not want (such as head of states or certain politicians); or against protesters, that is the ones who demonstrated against government measures. Overall, the contest of 'against vs. against', insofar as in both cases what has brought people together, was nothing more than, what or who one does not want.

It is certain that the manifestation of a negation has gained a primacy in the protest movements in the unfolding of modernity over an affirmative moment. However, what gave the big protest movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century strength has been a 'creative' negation, that is, a negation with an affirmative moment. For how else could protests in the modern era have become a significant political form of action and have brought about massive changes?

Having posed this question, it must become apparent that this paper has a social philosophical stake. This is to say that my focus lies foremost on contemporary 'pathologies of the social'<sup>2</sup> which have become for the first time visible in the waves of protests during the COVID pandemic. In that sense, I do not approach the notion of protest in itself as a sociological, anthropological or historical category but rather I conceive contemporary protests as a significant symptom of the crisis of 'late-modern'<sup>3</sup> times, consisting in a critical tension between two concurrent promises which have distinguished modern democracy as a unique political formation: 'equality' and 'right to difference'. What I will try to unravel here is a metamorphosis of 'protest' from a way of action to a 'contest'; a constant search for self-distinction as a symptom of the second promise, that is 'the right to difference' gaining primacy over the first promise, i.e. 'equality' eroding today paradoxically any basis for action. Accordingly, the main argument that I will unfold will be the following: It is everyman's 'I,' or perhaps more accurately, "me," that has become the 'substance' of 'actuality' [*Wirklichkeit als Bewirken des Ich*] and replaced the 'world' in what Arendt calls the 'worldly actuality' [*weltliche*

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2 With 'pathologies of the social' I refer to aberrations; or 'undesirable developments' in society, which, according to Axel Honneth, have been the main field of social philosophy since Rousseau (Honneth 2000, 16-19). It does surely not mean that the perspective which I develop here would have the claim of embracing all 'forms' of protests all over the world which have taken place in recent years, or which will take place any time. I would like to emphasize that I have no ethnographic claim or interest, that is why I do not feel the need to 'circumscribe' to a specific 'case', that is a certain form of protest, taking place in a 'national' or a 'cultural' context.

3 Philip Sarrasin is against the term 'late modern', which is popularized by Andreas Reckwitz and his highly influential "Society of Singularities". Sarrasin explains his objection to that term based on a comparison to 'late afternoon'. He says that we can talk of 'late afternoon' only if we are sure that afternoon will end, and evening will come. So late modern could only make sense, if we already knew what is to come after modernity (Sarrasin 2021, 28-29). This argument might have some plausibility in itself, yet I follow the term 'late modern' for I think that with Andreas Reckwitz, this term now has a 'baggage'. So, as soon as you start talking about 'late modernity', this term calls to its corresponding principle, that is 'singularity', as the consummate form of 'right to difference' in our present, which has an importance for the critical gesture that I am trying to bring here. On this key term, 'singularity', see: Reckwitz (2020, 33-46).

*Wirklichkeit*] today. So, it is not a reality of the world anymore whose experience in common constitutes what Arendt calls 'actuality' [*Wirklichkeit*] but just an appetite for solitary 'egos' to 'make an impact on the world', without needing paradoxically either a world or any reality which is to be experienced in common. On that basis, I will show that in such a context, we cannot regard a gathering self-evidently as an expression of 'plurality', just because we see that numerous people gather 'seemingly' around a cause.

Why?

For plurality, as far as it is to be understood as a 'political' concept, cannot be comprehended numerically. So, the question to pose then is the following: If it is not just a gathering of the numerically plural, that is the indifferent equivalency of the infinite diverse more-than-one 'egos', how can we then think the 'political' as plural?

I will unfold my answer through a dialogue of thought between Hannah Arendt and a somewhat unusual partner for her, namely: Alain Badiou.

### **Alain Badiou and Hannah Arendt: Would they sit at the same table?**

One of the most well-known metaphors in Arendt's works – and probably one of the most beautiful in the entire history of thought – is the metaphor of a table "which relates and separates us at the same time" (Arendt 1998 [1958], 52). As is well known, the point of this metaphor is to demonstrate the belonging together [*Zusammengehörigkeit*] of relation and separation in human affairs. In a passage where Arendt talks about this metaphor in order to emphasize its fundamental character, she calls us to imagine that the table suddenly vanishes from the midst of two sitting people to illustrate that without the table there would remain nothing which would separate them, but also nothing, which would relate them. Yet, is there actually not something more latent and perhaps more fundamental in that metaphor, which precedes this belonging together of relation and separation and thus 'conditions' it? Does this metaphor not presuppose a 'will to sit'?

To the extent that in order to be separated and related at the same time thanks to a table, we must first be 'seated'. If nobody forces us to sit, there must be a fundamental willingness to sit around this table with others, which the metaphor silently presupposes. Mentioning 'a will to sit' as a condition of this metaphor can matter; especially in a time, like ours, in which polarization becomes the most attractive – and perhaps even the sole way – of confirming one's own identity, such that today everyone is defined by 'with whom she or he would never sit around a table' rather than with whom one would be willing to sit.

So, in the face of such a mood, one could find enough reasons to claim that Badiou and Arendt would 'cancel' each other and not sit at the same table at all. For the oppositions are many and quite strong, at least at first sight. Just to name very few of them: Badiou is a proponent of communism 'to be reinvented in the 21<sup>st</sup> century', whereas Hannah Arendt must be considered as a prominent critic of what she calls the "communist fiction" (Arendt 1998 [1958], 43). For Badiou, 'politics' itself is a thought, thus he criticizes the

term 'political philosophy' and holds Arendt's thought responsible for the rise of 'political philosophy' in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a major de-politicizing force, which "reduces politics just to a plurality of opinions" (Badiou 2005, 10-25). In turn, Arendt would never forgive Badiou for raising 'philosophical truth' to the central and focal point of politics, for she thinks that philosophical truth "transcends the realm of the many; the world of human affairs" (Arendt 1968 [1961], 237). In short: It is easy to find points of dispute. Yet, I choose the relatively harder task, that is to think what relates them, as I am convinced that today we can bring Arendt and Badiou to engage in a fruitful dialogue of thought.

### **Why is thinking Arendt and Badiou together 'dialectic'?**

The conjuncture of the current crises brings these two thinkers quite close – which factually can only mean that this conjuncture brings Badiou close to Arendt. In the current context, a concern that both Badiou and Arendt would share, that is an overall disorientation of the world for the former and the dissolution of common sense for the latter, points out the same discontent with modern liberal democracy, albeit in different modes; same is the diagnosis that modern democracy fails to realize 'political' equality. What is different here is the focus: Whereas Arendt focuses on the problem of 'sameness' which constitutes an obstacle over plurality in the absence of political equality and dissolves individuality, Badiou focuses on the opposite problem, which is the over-emphasis on difference which results in an 'in-differentiation,' rather than yielding any plurality. So, when Badiou speaks against modern democracy, he does not do so because he is against what modern democracy claims to embody, namely equality and plurality; rather, his critique is grounded on the conviction that the 'concept' of modern democracy is today irredeemably bound to the principle of capital, yet the principle of capital is not equality but equivalence. This means for Badiou that modern democracy serves only as an apology for capital and thus an apology for the inequalities inherent to its principle, insofar capital treats the equal and non-equal 'equally'. Capital promotes the promise of 'unique' differences to boost the circulation of commodities and dissolves them in the indifference of being just equivalent means of exchange. This means that subjugated to capital, 'equality' is not truly possible to realize, but in fact, neither is 'plurality'.

This transition may appear a bit too arbitrary here and its plausibility may seem challenging. Yet, I claim to be able to support it with Arendt.

It is certain that 'capital' is not Arendt's object of critique concerning the modern democracy, although hers, that is 'labor,' is not far off. Let me elaborate on this: Arendt is quite skeptical about what came to be known as modern liberal democracy in mass society. This 'skepsis', however, does not stem from an inegalitarian tendency in favor of the "few", as e.g., Sheldon Wolin argues (Wolin 2018, 240) or from some "elitist" tendency as Margaret Canovan almost scandalizes as an inconsistency in Arendt's thought by calling it "baffling" that "a woman with such a profound sense of the worth of every human being [...] should be so elitist" (Canovan 1978, 15). In fact, it is true that Arendt

does not favor a flat 'sameness'. So, if you like, we can determine Arendt as 'elitist', yet only insofar as we are ready to determine the maxim of her elitism as a paradox, that is demanding "elite for everyone"<sup>4</sup>. One can call this an inconsistency only if one cannot grasp the difference between unpolitical sameness and the political equality. This is to say that Arendt's conception of 'political' equality has, indeed, something noble, as far as it is not based on a passive sameness of being of the same species, yet an active realization of differences in action and communication, to which each and every human being not only has a capacity but to which each and every one should also be encouraged. In that manner, Arendt's concern with modern democracy is rather about the fact that it dissolves political equality in the pacifying unpolitical sameness, grounded in consumption. The reason for this tendency can be explained by the fact that modern democratic society has been based on the primacy of 'labor', such that according to Arendt it is not the "laborers" but the "laboring activity" itself which has been "emancipated" in modernity (Arendt 1998 [1958], 126). Yet, with 'labor' gaining primacy, the field of 'the political' erodes, for, according to Arendt, the principle of labor is 'sameness' and sameness is not to be confused with (political) equality, which would always presuppose a community of the 'unequal' realizing 'equality', first in and through interaction (Arendt 1998 [1958], 214-215). That is why Arendt refers to the principle of labor in *Vita Activa* as *Gleichartigkeit* [sameness] and not *Gleichheit* ['political' equality] (Arendt 2021 [1967], 303). This means that plurality can only be realized in a community of the unequal in and through action and communication, through 'equating' differences; and not through 'equivalizing' them in the mediation of laboring activity to sustain the circulation of exchange which renders each human being to the 'same' laborer, which is equal to say for Arendt: to the same 'consumer'<sup>5</sup>.

Having opened a dimension of a relation in the concerns of both thinkers, I will start with Badiou's diagnosis on protests, i.e., on the incapacity of affirmation in current protest movements. I will unfold the link between Badiou's diagnosis of 'disorientation' and what Arendt calls 'loss of common sense' in five moments that I call 'dialectics'. Yet, why call them that?

According to Hegel, we call dialectic the rational movement of thought, in which two moments which seem utterly separated pass over into each other (Hegel 2010a, 80). In other words, dialectic is the exposition of the movement which is immanent to the negativity of the 'concept'. So, we can 'understand' or grasp, i.e. reach a 'concept' only

4 This is a phrase which Badiou attributes to the French theater director Antoine Vitez (See Badiou 2012, 147) in a passage in *Plato's Republic*, in which we find, ironically, a similar 'elitist paradox' in his conception of equality. There, Badiou determines the "fifth system of government as a "universal" or "popular aristocracy". He justifies this 'paradox' with the following words: "An aristocracy, since everything is guided by the most subtle and far-reaching thought, and universal since everyone can and must promote that thought" (Badiou 2012, 147).

5 What we should keep in mind here is that capital is not 'money'; it is in fact nothing else than accumulated abstract 'labor', insofar that we can regard capital with Marx in a very Hegelian manner as a 'specific mode' of mediation of abstract (fluid) labor with itself (Marx 2008 [1964], 57-58). So, we can then see Arendt's critique in a different light: if the substance of 'capital' is 'labor', then it is the same principle of 'sameness' which must also apply to 'capital'. If the principle of capital must be regarded also as 'sameness', then we can comprehend why a 'political' formation subjugated to capital cannot bring about plurality either; of course, assuming that the apology for capitalism does not reach the point of such a conspicuous shamelessness that one would start to tout the 'social inequalities' intrinsic to capital as 'colorful' expressions of 'plurality'.

through movements of extreme opposition, which go into the unity of the concept itself (Hegel 2018, 81-82). In that vein, we will find out the dialectical relation between individuality and 'being against' through thinking the problematization of two extremes together in substantialization of the 'ego' today, that is the 'difference' with Badiou and 'sameness' with Arendt, which, as I will show, both point out the same 'problem', that is the fact that there can be neither affirmation nor action if 'ego' becomes the substantial category of politics.

### **Alain Badiou on the disappearance of Affirmation in Protests**

Badiou notices a complete lack of affirmation in recent notable protest movements of our still young century. Tracing this back to the 'Arab Spring', he refers to a form of protest characterizing our times, which he calls "dégagisme."<sup>6</sup> The reason why Badiou coins such a term is that these protests exercise their negative unity against a proper name – usually against the head of a state that they want to get rid of – as the symbolic slogan 'Mubarak dégage!' [Mubarak out!] during the Arab Spring makes apparent. So, 'dégagist' protests want this 'one individual' gone, but without having the slightest idea about who or what should come instead (Badiou 2021a, 126). Thus, based on the lessons derived from these protests (e.g., Mubarak was gone, but instead 'a worse' head of state came, namely El-Sisi) what Badiou stresses is that the mere negation of an order without an affirmative moment only ends up reinforcing and even stiffening that order itself. (Badiou 2022a, 22).

Badiou's worry about the lack of any affirmation deepened all the more in the context of the 'yellow vest protests'. For what he has detected in this movement was an alarming political confusion. Alarming, on the one hand, because this movement was based on a strange mixture of the "extreme right" and the "left", whose entire merit was "nothing but to unleash a useless violence against the security forces" (Badiou 2022a, 16). Thus, this movement was not capable of bringing any affirmative idea into world. Alarming, on the other hand – and for Badiou probably an even more serious cause of concern – because many contemporary 'intellectuals' were quite keen to see great potential in this movement and were enthusiastic about it, for they believed in a new form of politics in that movement. As a country that experienced the rise of Napoleon the Third, however, the phrase, *tout ce qui bouge, n'est pas rouge* [not everything that moves is red], still has an echo in France. In the case of the yellow vest movement, it was precisely this caution that drove Badiou to reemphasize the lack of affirmation (Badiou 2021a, 105). Having introduced the 'symptom', let us try to reveal what may underlie the disappearance of any affirmation in protest in the following five dialectics.

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<sup>6</sup> Badiou derives this term from the infinitive form of the French verb 'dégager'. So, 'degage!' means in that manner 'get out!' and we could translate 'dégagisme' as 'get-outism'

### **First dialectic: From 'hatred' and 'anger' to 'love of hatred and anger'**

The 'Covid protests' constituted a peak point of a tendency which was already there. What Badiou in fact noticed about Covid protests in France was an alliance of four groups,<sup>7</sup> unthinkable in earlier times, which he named as follows: "true democrats", "authentic nationalists", "modern liberals" and a "neo-left", or the remnants of a "left radicalism" (Badiou 2022a, 5). Common to all these groups is a persistence in negation and "the belief that politics consists only in criticizing the government and demanding its fall" (Badiou 2022a, 6). Thus, this factual alliance, fed by the common 'fear' of eroding the ground of 'individual freedoms', reduced the field of political reflection to two poles, these are: 'my freedoms' on the one hand and 'authority' on the other (Badiou 2022a, 48).

It is this context of the protests during the pandemic which brought Badiou to elevate his previous diagnosis on the lack of affirmation and his assertion of political confusion to a more systematic term, namely "disorientation of the world" (Badiou 2022a, 11). Badiou conceives 'disorientation' as a synthetic concept by which he refers to different forms of blurred consciousness from the most diverse fields. What is common to these diverse phenomena, which allow Badiou to come up with this conceptual synthesis, is their common inability to affirm, that is the persistence in pure negations expressing itself in protests. So, in the absence of a contemporary affirmative form of politics, our presence is determined solely by what Badiou calls the tendency toward "weak negations" (Badiou 2022a, 22). Yet, what does weak negation mean here? Weak is a negation that lacks any ability of universal affirmation. Therefore, a weak negation always remains within a given order, i.e., in its interiority and remains dependent on it (Badiou 2022a, 22). So, if a weak negation is characterized by the fact that it lacks the ability of affirmation, should this not also mean that a strong negation necessarily contains an affirmative moment in itself? Indeed. A negation can only reach affirmation by means of an 'idea'<sup>8</sup>. Badiou speaks here of a dialectical relationship of coherence in a strong negation, namely between *negation*, *idea* and *affirmation* (Badiou 2022b). Accordingly, "politics exists only when the negation of a given order can participate in an affirmation" (Badiou 2022b). Thus, a negation is indeed necessary for any politics; however, without a "creative will" it cannot affirm anything (Badiou 2021a, 126).

To elaborate a bit more on what differentiates a strong, or a 'true' negation from a weak one, let us turn to an anecdote that Badiou has given in one of his recent seminars with reference to 'hatred' and 'anger'. "In every true or strong negation" (e.g., in a protest

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<sup>7</sup> Albeit not exact the same in its contours, these groups are similar to the ones which have emerged during the pandemic in Germany.

<sup>8</sup> It is to be underlined that Badiou talks about 'idea' and not 'ideology'. Idea and ideology are not the same. The elaboration of that point could make up one of the most 'tense' moments in the dialogue of thought between Arendt and Badiou, for it is true that Badiou, as a Platonic, is a clear supporter of 'idea' in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and he also traces the lack of political orientation today back to an 'imperative' that he attributes to 'modern democracy,' which he calls 'live without idea!' (Badiou 2009, 511) Regarding the given conjuncture of the world, I claim that Arendt and Badiou could meet even on this quite disputable topic on a minimum common basis, yet such a discussion exceeds the boundaries of this essay.

movement), says Badiou, “both hatred and anger may constitute a moment; mostly the very first one. If there is an organization, these affects can never direct the action” (Badiou 2021b). However, if any political orientation is lacking, what emerges is then a metamorphosis, that is a shift from just hatred or anger to a ‘love’ of hatred, or a ‘love’ of anger which starts to gather people together. These kinds of ‘love of anger’ or ‘love of hatred’ are “basically negations as pure destruction, without any access to creative subtraction” (Badiou 2021b). ‘Subtraction’ here refers to “a withdrawal from a dominant configuration to propose another configuration” (Badiou 2021b). In that sense, subtraction is itself a “dialectic of the affirmation and negation, but it is under the reign of the affirmation” (Badiou 2021b). The problem to note here is, if destruction is separated from subtraction, as it would come to the fore in a nihilist claim “to do without any transmission of rational thought” (Badiou 2021b), the result will be an impossibility of politics. As far as Badiou is concerned, this would correspond to our situation today.

### **Second dialectic: From “I am me” to Identitarianism**

Let us turn to one of the most infamous terms of our recent times, against which perplexingly diverse groups in ‘Covid Protests’ could gather, that is ‘authoritarian liberalism’. A short detour will allow us to draw a diagonal from the ‘authoritarian liberalism’ as the ‘common enemy’ to a hatred of ‘others who are not *me*’.

Badiou thinks that it is not liberalism that has become more authoritarian; rather, it is the obsession with one's individual freedoms which became in fact authoritarian.<sup>9</sup> (Badiou 2022b) What the obsession with one's own ‘ego’, which Badiou calls the ‘cult of Me’ [*culte de Moi*] or as he otherwise defines as the cult of ‘I am me and I will remain me’, conceals behind such a “puppet enemy” like authoritarian liberalism, is simply one's alleged ‘right’ to have to do or think nothing that in any way takes notice of the existence of others, who are not ‘me’. (Badiou 2022a, 15)

There is a striking dialectic between the ‘cult of Me’ and ‘responsibility of others’. For the ‘cult of Me’ raises the individual to the highest political category, but only on the basis of the same cult can other individuals be held absolutely responsible for what one considers as one's personal misfortune “for the outrageous fact that ‘my eminent merits’ are not recognized” (Badiou 2022a, 48). What Badiou detects in this obsession with individual freedoms and the cult of ‘Me’ is a ‘plague’, namely the identitarianism that it reveals. For the central proposition to work, namely “I am so worthy, but there are many others who are worth nothing!” (Badiou 2022a, 48), collective categories are needed. This is the point at which Badiou regards it to be possible for the cult of ‘Me’ to turn into hatred of others. For, eventually, this cult leads “identitarian ‘me, me, me’ sayers” to

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<sup>9</sup> This is also somewhat the point of the recent work of Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey. For they invert the infamous concept of “individual complaints”, namely ‘authoritarian liberalism’ and turn it into ‘libertarian authoritarianism’; giving the sense that the libertarian demands themselves become authoritarian today. So, the inversion itself creates an effect of a critical answer. See: Nachtwey and Amlinger, 2022.



demand the total disappearance of others, to whom they rashly attest their 'cultural foreignness' (Badiou 2022a 49).

The whole pandemic and post-pandemic experience so far show us that we can also add the remark that the 'love of hatred' and 'love of anger' of 'others' do not only take place solely on the ground of cultural foreignness. The sheer reason that the other is not 'me' may simply suffice. For self-distinction, which is constituted under the banner of 'singularity' (Reckwitz 2020), the 'ideal' of late-modern individuality, does not always have to function ideally on the basis of success or 'creativity' but may also resort to hatred and 'downplaying.' This is to say that distinction serves today as a wider tool of acquiring a desired identity, rather than asserting itself solely through 'ethno-cultural' hierarchical differences.

Badiou himself does not mention it, yet we can put his diagnosis of the cult of 'Me' in a different light by linking it to the logic of identity through polarization and calling Arendt back to the 'table': It is today either 'those elites' and 'pedophiles' 'drinking children blood' or 'those *Querdenker*', 'Putin or Trump lovers' constituting the biggest 'danger' to 'civic democratic values', being against whom helps 'me' in defining myself. It must show us that this is not the affirmation of others anymore, who can actually save me from a solitary ambivalence, as I can never realize and confirm my identity on my own, but the notorious polarization, that is 'whom I am against' which helps me fictitiously and virtually maintaining a phantasmatic confirmation of my identity on my own. The protests during the pandemic, but also the alleged answers to these protests, in that regard have become just a means to extract that desired confirmation of identity virtually and demonstrate in various modes how important 'I' am. Thus, the current form of individualism, in short, relies on a dialectic "that has lost its orientation somewhere between the cult of 'Me' and hatred of the other" (Badiou 2022a, 51). That is why the dialectical relationship in an 'alienated world' passes from order to disorder.

### **Third Dialectic: From the disappearance of individuality on the basis of 'sameness' to the disappearance of individuality on the basis of aspiration to 'absolute difference'**

The elevation of 'ego' as the 'individual' to the highest political category creates a seemingly paradoxical, yet dialectically comprehensible effect, that is the dissolution of the category of the 'individual' itself. What I claim is that our experience today corresponds to an inversion of what Arendt has determined once as the danger of disappearance of the individual. In how far an inversion? Let me unfold:

I have indicated above that Arendt determines modern mass society on the basis of labor and that the (un)political principle of labor is 'sameness' [*Gleichartigkeit*]. So, in a mass society driven by the primacy of labor, the individual disappears, as in Arendt's conception an individual can only appear under conditions of plurality. It means that the

sameness on which 'worldless' labor is based, does not leave any room for the individual, since being an individual cannot be based on sameness but on difference. It is here crucial to emphasize again that the key moment of 'political' equality lies in the relationality, that is in the realization of differences with others in action and communication which alone can bring about plurality and realize equality. It means that what Arendt understands by individual is not literally 'in-dividual', conceived as a substantial, monadic undividable 'I' that is a 'wordless' ego, but the undividable in individual must be grasped here as the experience of the world in plural, that is as the 'factum of plurality' (Arendt 2021, 24) which precedes every human experience. So as striking as it may sound, it is to say with Arendt that 'ego' cannot be the substance of individuality as plurality rather precedes individuality and conditions it.

Yet, where is the dialectical point of inversion here? It will become apparent in the following: If not the 'ego' but plurality is the substance of 'individuality,' then we can consider two opposite poles, in which ego remains the substance and thus individuality fails to be realized. If sameness would be the one pole, leading 'individuality' to disappear, then a claim to 'absolute difference', that is an obsession with a unique 'ego' or as Badiou calls it, 'the cult of Me,' would then be the other pole.. In short: As long as we remain on the substantiality of 'ego', dialectically seen, sameness and absolute difference are identical. For 'ego' itself entails nothing plural; it is just an abstract universal category lacking any relationality.

Only on the grounds of this dialectic can we also save Badiou's critique of 'late modern' individuality as a cult of 'Me' from falling into another possible 'cult', which would consist in the best case in an average conservatism, but in the worst case in a fascistic aspiration, that is a cult of community. What I mean to say is that in criticizing the cult of 'Me', Badiou is not aspiring to a sacred, higher community, or order and duty to which we should otherwise have to 'sacrifice' ourselves.<sup>10</sup> The point lies rather in the fact that an obsessive aspiration to be 'Me' and only 'Me', which we can call an 'absolutization of individuality', dialectically regarded, can be able to produce the opposite result: 'absolute authoritarian.' Why? For if my being 'Me' does not accept any relationality, if "my unmistakable identity" cannot be given to 'me' only by 'you' in the saving grace of your companionship<sup>11</sup> in experiencing the same world, that is, if my being 'me' aspires rather to a brutal fantasy of being 'absolutely unique' without needing 'you', then I could be under appropriate circumstances perfectly ready to subjugate myself likewise to an 'absolute authority', which could guarantee to me a status of 'me being only myself' at the cost of a

10 The 'devotion of the individual to a higher order' could correspond to a proto-fascistic position of a figure like 'Arnold Gehlen', who in criticizing 'ego' based freedom theories claims that it is not the self-setting 'ego' of Fichte, but only a service to something external to that 'ego' (such as an established order and a community) which can save men from 'the void', meaninglessness and bring about a 'true freedom.' See: Gehlen 1983, 378-379.

11 I refer here to Arendt's determination of 'confirmation of one's own identity' in the 'great saving grace of companionship', precisely the following passage: "For the confirmation of my identity I depend entirely upon other people; and it is the great saving grace of companionship for solitary men that it makes them 'whole' again, saves them from the dialogue of thought in which one remains always equivocal, restores the identity which makes them speak with the single voice of one unexchangeable person." (Arendt 2017 [1951], 626)

deserted loneliness; and, of course not least, at the cost of cleansing the phantasmatic 'others' who would be considered an obstacle to the realization of my 'identity', i.e. my 'difference'. So, the point in short is the following: If the dissolution of individuality through mass society and its principle of sameness driven by labor constitutes one pole of the dissolution of individuality, what we are faced with today is the other extreme 'pole' of what Hannah Arendt has revealed as the dissolution of individuality. For a principle of uniqueness, not on the basis of relationality but on the substantiality of a solitary, monadic 'ego' dissolves individuality again in sameness, for an abstract category of 'ego' cannot give anybody a confirmation of an unmistakable identity. So, it is the point, where I would like to 'give the word' again to Arendt to further the dialogue of thought.

#### **Fourth Dialectic: From 'worldly actuality' [*weltliche Wirklichkeit*] to 'Impact of ego' [*Wirklichkeit des Ich*]**

Just like Badiou, yet without any dialectics, Arendt also considers a case of disorientation of the world. So, rather than an 'inability to affirm' or 'weak negations', Arendt talks about 'common sense' which may fade and cause a 'disorientation.' Let us lean here shortly on the German Edition of *The Human Condition* as only there Arendt mentions a disorientation:

Das Einzige, woran wir die Realität der Welt erkennen und messen können, ist, daß sie uns allen gemeinsam ist, und der Gemeinsinn steht so hoch an Rang und Ansehen in der Hierarchie politischer Qualitäten, weil er derjenige Sinn ist, der unsere anderen fünf Sinne und die radikale Subjektivität des sinnlich Gegebenen in ein objektiv Gemeinsames und darum eben Wirkliches fügt. Vermöge des Gemeinsinns, des sog. gesunden Menschenverstands – dessen „Gesundheit“ so ausschließlich an den Wirklichkeitscharakter der Welt gebunden ist, daß er den ihm eigenen „Verstand“ verliert, sobald er durch Rasonieren versucht, das real Gegebene zu übersteigen - entscheiden wir jeweils darüber, ob den sinnlichen Wahrnehmungen Realität zukommt oder nicht. [...] Ein merkliches Abnehmen des gesunden Menschenverstands und ein merkliches Zunehmen von Aberglauben und Leichtgläubigkeit deuten daher immer darauf hin, daß die Gemeinsamkeit der Welt innerhalb einer bestimmten Menschengruppe abbröckelt, daß der Wirklichkeitssinn gestört ist, mit dem wir uns in der Welt orientieren, und daß daher die Menschen sich der Welt entfremden und begonnen haben, sich auf ihre Subjektivität zurückzuziehen. (Arendt 2021 [1967], 296)

To fully grasp the importance of that passage, we need to determine the relation of two concepts, though. These are: Reality [*Realität*] and actuality [*Wirklichkeit*]. For the sake of comprehensibility and plausibility of what will follow, I would like to remark that Arendt is a very 'special' Kantian thinker. In how far Kantian and in how far special? She is a Kantian thinker insofar as, for Arendt, human consciousness cannot merely rely on what it produces itself. Consciousness must always be bound to the experience of the

'world of things' in order not to spin out its own products without any relation to 'reality', which also simply means: to not become 'insane.' Arendt is a 'special' Kantian thinker, insofar as, for Arendt, common sense has a primacy over ego. Thus, one could look in vain for Kant's transcendental consciousness in Arendt's thought in the 'originally synthetic unity of the apperception of the ego'. For we find this in the common sense itself. So, for Arendt, the human experience of the world always takes place in plural.

Reality, in this context refers to the world of things, "which shows and holds itself as common in the midst of human plurality" (Arendt 1998 [1958], 58). It is important to mention here that Arendt thinks reality 'literally'. Thus, in the concept reality she hears the word *res*. The *res* means basically a 'thing' that stands between us; and as Heidegger would say: one that can concern us together, lets us recognize vicinity and remoteness (Heidegger 1994, 14; 17). The experience of the world thus remains bound to the world of things, to this table like 'in-between'. So, it does not arise from the solitary reasoning [*Räsonieren*] of the ego that tries to transcend the world of things.

In its everyday use of 'reality', the English language can easily devour the difference between 'actuality' and 'reality'. Yet, conceptualizing this difference is crucial for grasping the silent shift in the principle of 'actuality', so that it can become understandable why we cannot conceive any gathering today as politically plural—just on the basis of being numerically plural.

As it is a quite metaphysical language, the conceptualization of the difference between actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] and reality [*Realität*] in German is not only more comprehensible than in English but also the spectrum of meaning of the German term *Wirklichkeit* brings us to the point of the 'pathologies of the social.' The word *Wirklichkeit* has a metaphysical depth which can easily be traced back to its 'daily use', whereas in English it is probably not that easy to bridge the meaning of the word 'actual' in its daily use with its metaphysical ancestor, that is Latin *actualitas*: The word for 'actual' in German, that is *wirklich* can be used in daily usage solely as 'real'. Yet, if you just take the word itself and let the language 'say' the word, it means 'impactful' [*wirk-lich*]. This can help to conceptualize the difference between actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] and reality [*Realität*]. If we think of this relation in terms of Arendt's thought, then we can say the following: Actuality is not reality. As far as being 'worldly', actuality is rather 'caused' by the 'reality' of the world. So, what we call actuality is just the 'effect', or 'impact' [*Wirkung*] of reality [*Realität*], that is of the world of things, so that something can come to appearance. So, we can simply say that the actuality of the world corresponds to an experience of a humane world which is affected or impacted [*be-wirkt*] by the reality of the world. For only an 'actual' world grasped as such can appear from utterly different perspectives as one and the same (Arendt 2021 [1967], 280).

Here, I want to focus shortly on the link between 'appearance' and 'actuality.' For in the German Edition of *The Human Condition*, Arendt mentions that link in reference to

an example of life which could help unfold the relation between actuality and reality a bit more. Arendt says in a passage that 'being alive' and the feeling of 'livelihood' corresponding to it, is not the same as 'being actual' [*wirklich*]. For, according to Arendt, livelihood does not guarantee actuality. For a 'life' to be actual, it must come to appearance. Thus, "a 'life'" says Arendt, "which does not come to appearance, which takes place outside space will perhaps not lack a feeling of life but the feeling of actuality [*Wirklichkeit*]" (Arendt 2021 [1967], 280). This is to say that, politically and in human terms, 'actuality' [*Wirklichkeit*] and appearance are the same. (Arendt 2021 [1967], 280)

So, what we must determine with Arendt is that today the actuality of the world [*weltliche Wirklichkeit*] dissolves, for the common experience of the world of things vanishes. Yet, the question here is the following: If worldly actuality disappears, that is if it is not the reality of the world anymore whose impact is the 'actuality', could there be a non-worldly actuality? To answer this question, I suggest focusing again on the literal meaning of *Wirklichkeit*, namely 'impactedness.' For if it is not the reality which 'impacts' our experience of the world anymore, then the impact of 'something else' might have already replaced it so that 'actuality' may perhaps lose its worldly 'real' character and becomes worldless. Yet, what could have replaced the 'worldly' actuality?

One may simply think here of the ever louder demands for recognition of 'alternative facts' and 'narratives of hidden truths' (or also of the answers to those claims which do not differ much in form). As a consummate form of the liberal principle of 'letting everyone have his/her opinion', we see that today 'actuality' [*Wirklichkeit*] undergoes a similar 'liberalization', if we understand liberalization here predominantly economically, that is, as a synonym for privatization. In a world whose material principle consists in letting the 'same', that is absolutely equivalent and therefore indifferent, commodities circulate freely in perfect competition, why should creative, innovative offers of reality also not compete with each other, on which each 'ego' can base its own 'impact', that is its own *Wirklichkeit*? Seen in this light, would that not be a radical 'taking serious' of the liberal promise of freedom and plurality of opinions? Perhaps. However, as the word *privatization* [private = bereaved] already entails this ambivalence: privatization of actuality as the impact of monadic egos is not possible without its 'price' which is being 'deprived' of any actuality of the world [*weltliche Wirklichkeit*]. This means, only when actuality is not grasped as the 'impact' of worldly reality but as the 'impact' of 'Me' as the sole basis of reality, we can 'individualize' it. In that regard we can consider the advertising slogan 'make an impact!' which we encounter in both relevant or irrelevant realms as a perfect expression of the principle of actuality today. For it is a general desire of having or creating an 'impact' of the late-modern individual, which, as unworldly as it may be, replaces any 'actuality' of the world.

However, we must note that for Arendt a world consisting of a plurality of 'world views', that is individual solitary consciousnesses 'viewing' the world just for themselves,

could never appear as actual. Plurality itself needs a common sense, so that a world can appear at all. Therefore, Arendt says the following:

Nur wo Dinge, ohne ihre Identität zu verlieren, von Vielen in einer Vielfalt von Perspektiven erblickt werden, so daß die um sie Versammelten wissen, daß ein Selbes sich ihnen in äußerster Verschiedenheit darbietet, kann *weltliche Wirklichkeit* [Emphasis ZA] eigentlich und zuverlässig in Erscheinung treten. (Arendt 2021 [1967], 85)

### **Fifth dialectic: From a 'totalitarian idea' to a 'democratic ego' in the principle of logical deduction**

In order to unfold the concept of a 'distorted' actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] as the impact of the ego [*Be-Wirken des Ich*], I would like to turn briefly to Arendt's remarks on 'logical deductions' in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Philosophically the most interesting point in Arendt's analysis of 'totalitarian rule', which is not subjugated to a somewhat controversial comparison between Nazi and Stalinist regimes is a 'conceptual' diagnosis. According to that diagnosis, what constitutes a totalitarian rule is its ability of de-actualizing the world. It means that what distinguishes totalitarianism is that it dissolves this 'in-between', that is the world of things, which relates and separates human beings and let them appear. Yet, how come the experience of this in-between disappears in the case of totalitarianism?

This point is worth noting. For Arendt traces that disappearance to the essence of ideology or more precisely: to the 'logic' in it. So, what Arendt focuses on in the concept of 'ideo-logy' is the logic itself, as she believes that 'logical thinking' is symptomatic for modernity. 'Ideology' only seals the victory of the 'logical' that already has been pervading modernity by attributing to the 'idea' itself a logic, or releasing the 'inner logic' of ideology which is attributed to it (Arendt 2009, 1161). Yet, how can we define the essence of 'the logical' so that we can comprehend how it can become the symptom of a disappearance of 'worldly reality'?

According to Arendt, 'deduction' through 'the solitary consciousness' is the essence of logic. So, a 'logical reasoning' understood in that way, does not need any reality of the world, thus logic does not necessitate any experience of an 'in-between' and accordingly, no common sense either. It is thus not a coincidence when Arendt says that where isolation gets so severe that it turns into loneliness in which one is thrown back to a deserted self, the only principle to rely on remains the basic rules of logic, that is deduction. For even if I am lonely; deserted and have lost my trust in any reality of the world completely, I can still deduce that  $2 \times 2$  makes 4. The link between the principle of deduction and disappearance of the worldly reality lies in the fact that a logical argument does not need any 'experience', which comes to expression clearly in the following passage:

Ideological argumentation, always a kind of logical deduction, corresponds to [...] emancipation from reality and experience [...] because it transforms the one and only point that is taken and accepted from experienced reality into an axiomatic premise, leaving from then on the subsequent argumentation process completely untouched from any further experience. [...] (Arendt 2017, 620)

When the deduction of the individual consciousness establishes itself as a principle of reality and the in-between of a 'common experience of the world in plural' disappears, then this is, according to Arendt, one of the clearest signs of an isolation which already has turned into loneliness. To comprehend the link between loneliness and deduction, the following passage is crucial:

The only capacity of the human mind which needs neither the self nor the other nor the world in order to function safely and which is as independent of experience as it is of thinking is the ability of logical reasoning whose premise is the self-evident. The elementary rules of cogent evidence, the truism that two and two equals four cannot be perverted even under the conditions of absolute loneliness. It is the only reliable 'truth' human beings can fall back upon once they have lost the mutual guarantee, the common sense, men need in order to experience and live and know their way in a common world. (Arendt 2017, 627)

It is the same link that Arendt discovers in one of Luther's biblical writings, in which Luther refers to relation between loneliness and the principle of deduction. In the passage, Luther says that a lonely person always deduces one thing from another and thinks everything in the worst light (Arendt 2017, 627).

In order to draw a diagonal to our present day, let us ask: If Arendt indicates a 'one and only point taken as axiomatic premise' under the condition of 'totalitarian ideologies', what has been this first and only not to be doubted point, like a substance which could carry all other deductions? The answer may lie in a banal simplicity, yet it is in our current context not insignificant: It is the 'idea'. So, according to Arendt, what has carried all the deductions of 'logic' in the case of totalitarianisms was nothing else than the idea in 'ideo-logy.' Interestingly enough, today such a principle of 'logical deduction', insofar as we understand hereby a solitary reasoning without any 'worldly reality', characterizes the human experience perhaps more than ever. To consider the plausibility of that claim, it would suffice to think again of the inflation not only in the claims of 'alternative facts' and of course, 'conspiracy theories' but also the likewise 'logical' answers to them which may differ in content but remain the same in form. For neither the 'conspiracy theorist' nor the 'civic' 'reasonable citizen' seems to need any 'worldly reality' or any 'common sense' in asserting their being right today. For they all claim to be based on self-evident logical arguments. The 'arguments' of the 'reasonable civic citizen' aside, one has to mention that even some 'conspiracy theories' are sometimes really breath-takingly well-woven webs of logical arguments. However, if we call them 'conspiracies', we do it, not primarily because

they do not sound 'logical' but because they have no relation and perhaps more importantly: 'no interest' in any common experience of the reality of the world, which takes place always in plural. Overall, on both 'fronts', what seems to be forgotten is that not 'one man but men in plural inhabit the world.' Nevertheless, this is for Arendt, the only basis on which we can trust to our experience of the world (Arendt 2017, 625).

Let us ask now: If also today, the principle of logical deduction is that decisive, what carries its principle, or what is its substance? Bitterly, but in line with Fukuyama's infamous declaration of the 'end of ideologies' (Fukuyama 1992), we must state that it is indeed, not any 'idea' anymore, which carries the logical deductions of our day, but something quite duller than that: It is simply 'Me'; everyone's 'ego' or, as Heidegger and Arendt both would say, the pursuit of the shallowest experience of *cogito me cogitare* (Arendt 1998 [1958] 280), (Heidegger 2014, 452), meaning the most flat form of the 'saying-of-I' [*Ich-sagen-Können*], that is subjugating any experience to the enjoyment of the 'feeling my emotions'; feeling of just being 'Me' (Heidegger 1989, 53).

So, the principle of actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] whose substance is ego, must be grasped in nothing else than the appetite for making an impact, that is the 'impact of being 'Me' on the world [*Be-Wirken* des Ich]. The reality of the world is subordinated to this appetite. Only based on this latent shift, the advertisement slogan, 'make an impact!' can become an effective imperative and 'life motto' and only in this manner can Descartes' *cogito me cogitare* celebrate its absolute victory ironically first in late modernity; albeit in its most shallow form.

### **Conclusion: Rethinking the relation between Equality, Plurality and Protests**

'My mere difference or my claim of uniqueness in itself cannot build any world, if I become independent and completely disconnected from other fellow human beings with whom I experience the world in plural.'

Could we conclude that this would be a point on which Arendt and Badiou would agree?

For if the experience of the worldly reality is subjugated to the impact of 'ego' but not to the common experience of the world of things, no action would be possible, but only pure relations of domination and struggles for self-distinction, thus no affirmative form of politics could emerge, either.

It is no coincidence that Arendt determines the basic experience of 'the republic' in the German edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, with Montesquieu, as "the equality and the happiness of not being alone" (Arendt 2009, 1166), whereas the basic experience of monarchy or all its hierarchical rules is determined as a "love of distinction" so that the public life is characterized by a competition for that (Arendt, 2009, 1166). This



determination is in fact a key to reveal a latent primacy of 'equality' over 'diversity' in Arendt's thought. So, even though in *Vita activa* Arendt regards 'equality' and 'diversity' as equally essential to human action, diversity only can ground on a possibility of the realization of differences in relationality. What I want to emphasize is that difference and equality belong together within the 'political' concept of equality, that can take place only in the shared 'experience' of a world, which means factually that political 'equality' is always something eventful. Sameness is a given, but not political equality: It is not 'given' and not to be acquired through individual 'reasoning', it must take place in 'present' and be realized with 'others'. I have to encounter others and have a minimum common experience of the same world, so that we can talk about 'political' equality at all and not the shared experience of the 'sameness' of being a species.

What Badiou calls 'affirmation' and what Arendt calls 'common sense' thus belong together. For action can never be a mere negation; it is in its very essence affirmative, insofar as in action and speech we affirm that not 'man' but 'men in plural' inhabit the world and we also affirm that we can always make new beginnings with other fellow human beings.

In that sense, a mere, or 'weak' negation, that is just 'being against' may seem on first sight like a point which can be easily 'common to all', who gather around it, yet it cannot build a world. For the gathering of the individual 'egos' around what each of them are 'against', does not require any moment of real interaction, no common experience of the world and no effort of understanding and engaging in any action together. In just 'being against', each 'ego' could thereby remain worldless, without any encounter, as mere 'egos': nothing must force a person to go beyond this mere 'being-an-ego', to be in the presence of others. Mere negation, therefore, does not require 'action' nor can it 'initiate' an action, even though it may well 'imitate' an action.

Here again, we can comprehend the centrality of Arendt's remarks in *The Human Condition*: If we talk about political equality and not 'apolitical sameness', that is something like 'sameness before death', then only the "unequal can realize political equality" (Arendt 1998 [1958], 215-216). Only in this way can our differences become realized, because only others can confirm us as one "unexchangeable person" (Hannah Arendt 2017, 626). Yet, if the principle of actuality shifts to the 'impact of 'Me' [*Bewirken des Ich*], however different and unique this individual 'egos' may seem, they remain all in the category of apolitical sameness and, in fact each competing for ways to enjoy their impact on the world, there can appear nothing plural, except for a numeric one. For if I am concerned only with the uniqueness of being 'me', as Badiou expresses it with the cult of 'I am me', that is if 'I' becomes the highest category of the political, no 'diversity' can arise, even if this concept may be advertised in every institutional realm of capitalist liberal democracies as a self-evident component and thus has become a 'fetish' today.

In that regard, it is again Hegel, as he is who he is, having the last word summing up everything:

“When I say 'I' I *mean* to refer to myself as *this one* individual, excluding everyone else. But what I say (namely, 'I') is precisely each and every one” (Hegel 2010b, 53).

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