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"Just go back to your place!" Women and the Politics of Contested Public Spaces in the Italian *Resistenza*

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Women have been part of political struggles and revolutions all throughout history. Yet who these women were, what brought them to actively engage in a political struggle, with whom and how, is not easily found in recorded history. Considering how far we have come in researching specifically the underside, or other sides, of history, that the exploration of women as political actors and agents of change remains limited should give us pause. When learning about major historical events that brought about change, such as, for example, the French, the American or the Russian revolution, it will take some searching before finding specific stories about women's participation, and very often the few stories we find are vague, lacking detail and depth, their characters resembling ghosts more than real people, leaving us to wonder whether such individuals actually lived. We may find articles, books and other documents on specific individual women who played a major role, but these works are few and far in between, they stand apart and leave the impression of having come out of nowhere. How they fit in the main historical narrative is not clear and even less evident is how they have impacted it, if at all. In short, in considering historical accounts of major events through the lenses of main historical narratives, one would have to conclude that women have been almost entirely absent from the political scene.

However, this is a rather narrow and superficial view. We know in fact that women took part in the French Revolution, as well as in the Paris Commune in 1871; women fought in the Spanish Civil War, they participated in the Resistance across Europe during WWII, they were very active in the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s in the U.S., and, more recently, in the various uprisings of the Arab Spring in 2011 across countries in Africa, just to mention a few concrete examples. This does not take into consideration the women's suffrage movement, or the various waves of feminism throughout the 20th century all the way to the present day with the MeToo movement. Not absence, but rather assiduous presence characterizes women's participation throughout history. Women have played and continue to play a crucial part in political change, yet the significance and the value of their political engagement is lost to history.

In this paper, I examine what I call the "political visibility-invisibility" of women, the paradoxical phenomenon of being political actors and yet not enjoying full citizenship. Despite women's participation in political struggles, their political citizenship falls short and suffers from some form of deficiency or lack – invisibility? Theoretically, women enjoy the same rights as any other person, but practically, the degree to which they are able to fully exercise their political status varies depending on factors that are not only

beyond their control, but often very difficult to name. Women's political participation in momentous events, for however significant while it happens, tends to evaporate into thin air once such events are past. Women may have become political citizens as a result of such events, but they are so as split subjects; they are autonomous and independent insofar as they are citizens, but as women, they continue to be subjected to various forms of control that politically diminishes their ability to speak and act, and when they do, their voice is often hardly heard, their actions mostly unseen.

What is the relationship between acting politically and political citizenship? Or to put it differently, to what extent does political action lead to political recognition and citizenship? And in the instances that it does lead to political citizenship, (as in the case of women having been granted the right to vote), to what degree does political citizenship correspond to full recognition of a status that allows them to act and speak freely, their words and deeds acknowledged? Judging from the historical examples mentioned above, we would have to say that political involvement in events that have led to significant political change does not automatically lead to political citizenship – the French Revolution and their proclaimed slogan, *liberté, fraternité, égalité* did not extend to women – and that gaining political citizenship does not necessarily mean full recognition of political status, since as we know, women have had to fight for the recognition of autonomy and freedom over their own body, a struggle that is far from being over. In short, there seems to be a gap between acting politically and political citizenship.[1]

I come to these questions by way of the Italian *Resistenza,* specifically by considering it through the experience of women who took part in it. The *Resistenza* (1943-1945) has functioned as a foundational event for the new Italian Republic, one that saw the participation of many, men and women, but which resulted in a narrative that did not shed much light on women's involvement. It is only in more recent studies that the extent of their participation has started to emerge, and its significance considered.[2] By examining women's actions during the *Resistenza* and by considering them in light of Arendt's political thought, I contend that women's participation is politically significant, despite it having not been seen as such. It is politically significant in at least two respects: first, women's actions, reveal the public space as a space of contestation; second, women's actions inevitably alter the meaning and the reality of what is generally understood as "political space."

I use the expression "acting politically" in the way Hannah Arendt understands it. Considered broadly, acting politically refers to taking part together with others in initiatives that are about the living together of people, often bringing change to their living together. Arendt deems the act of foundation of any political community to be particularly significant as it establishes how people live together as well as how they

1 To avoid any misunderstanding, it is not just women to be affected in this way; rather this is a phenomenon that affects and continues to affect many who, throughout history, due to race, language, religion, class, sexual orientation, undocumented status, and so on, are considered less, treated as less and their political citizenship impaired.

2 See, for example, Mirella Alloisio, Giuliana Gadola Beltrami, *Volontarie della Libertá*, (Milano: Lampi di Stampa, 2003); Anna Maria Bruzzone, Rachele Farina, *La Resistenza Taciuta: Dodici vite di partigiane piemontesi*, (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003); Anna Gasco, a cura di, *La Guerra alla guerra: Storie di donne a Torino e in Piemonte tra il 1940 e il 1945*, (Torino: Edizioni SEB27, 2007).

continue to participate actively in the life of that community. However, she also points out that there are at least two stages in revolutions or major significant political uprisings, the first is one of "liberation" and the second is one of "foundation of freedom," the latter being politically far more significant, even though the former has often been the focus privileged by historians. She goes as far as stating that the stage of constitution-making has often resulted in a constitution imposed by reactionary forces rather than in the actual "foundation of freedom." Arendt writes: "The basic misunderstanding lies in the failure to distinguish between liberation and freedom; there is nothing more futile than rebellion and liberation unless they are followed by the constitution of the newly won freedom."[3] Expressed here is the notion that the act of liberation does not necessarily lead to the foundation of freedom and we would need to understand what Arendt means by it, to be able to determine whether it sheds light on women's political visibility-invisibility. It is fair to say that "acting politically" can be used to refer to both the act of political foundation as well as to the act of political participation in the political life of a community or a nation; while the two are not the same, they are nonetheless related, in that active political participation renews the political life of a community and, within certain limits, even renews the act of foundation. Given this important relationship, the act of foundation appears to be key in establishing the conditions for the exercise of freedom.

Arendt's notion of political action[4] is central to my examination of women participating in the *Resistenza*, and in addressing the questions I am raising here. Acting politically means appearing before others through words and deeds, and such "public appearance" is tantamount to political visibility. "Publicness," being seen and being heard by others, confers tangibility to the most fragile human activities, namely words and actions, which are bound to disappear, unless they are heard, seen, and remembered. By taking part in political actions, by acting and speaking together with others, as Arendt writes, women have appeared and have acquired visibility. The paradox – the contradictory phenomenon? – lies in this: women act and speak in the public and political sphere, which gives them visibility, yet their actions are not seen, and their words are not heard. How to make sense of women's invisible visibility?

The Italian *Resistenza* refers to the period between September 1943 and April 1945, a period of twenty months during which the population at large finds itself at the mercy of different forces trying to assert their control amid a political vacuum. After the Fascist regime was deposed, Italy signed an armistice with the Allied forces, German troops moved in and occupied the central and northern regions of Italy, while the southern regions saw the landing of the allied forces. Mussolini, who had been put imprisoned after being removed from office, was freed by special German troops, and was placed at the head of a puppet Fascist Regime, the Republic of Saló, that purportedly "governed" the northern regions now occupied by the Germans. Following the armistice, Italy was no longer at war, but a war exploded within its borders between the Nazi-Fascist troops and

3 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), 142.
4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), Chapter V, "Action," 175-247.

those who opposed them. This was a time of intestine fighting – some call it a "civil war"[5] – and a "total war," since there was no way of escaping it, the war was everywhere and spared no one.

That the *Resistenza* is a war within a larger war is the primary narrative that has emerged out of this period, and it remains predominant in history books. In taking this view, however, a lot is obscured. This is not to deny that the *Resistenza* entailed armed fighting; after all, it was a fight against the occupation of foreign armed forces and against an imposed regime that had no legitimacy. Still, the narrative of the *Resistenza* as being primarily if not exclusively a military affair, has artificially separated it from the lived context to which it is tied in far reaching ways. It has literally plucked it out from a lifeworld and made it into its own thing, as if it could be reduced to the opposition of Nazi-Fascists troops on one side and partisan bands on the other. But these sides, while real, did not exist in isolation, and by not seeing how they were tied to and dependent on the local population leaves out the political dimension of this experience.[6] The *Resistenza* was fought in ways other than with arms, and not only by male partisans.[7] It saw the participation of many people of all ages, from different social groups, and among them, many women. If we consider that, after the armistice, the population was subjected to frequent aerial bombings, intensification of checkpoints, displacements, roundups, indiscriminate arrests of people, imprisoned, tortured, and killed or sent to Germany's camps, it is not difficult to imagine that many must have felt the need to do something. The population was literally under siege. Taking up arms and fighting back was what many did, especially ex-soldiers, after the Italian army had been disbanded, and to avoid the risk of being taken and deported to Germany. Women were explicitly and implicitly excluded from armed fighting, and while some women did fight with weapons anyway, many women fought in other ways.

It is in considering the *Resistenza* as experienced and narrated by women that a much more complex picture emerges. For one, we can talk about it as an "experience," something far more encompassing than mere military operations. Furthermore, as an experience, it reveals dimensions of the human condition that may not be readily seen under normal circumstances, but which offer insights into how people interact with each other when their world has crumbled and there is no clear pathway as to what to do. Arendt writes that acting politically is acting together with others *spontaneously* and by this she means "anew," not according to pre-given formulas or modalities; acting politically also entails leaving the private sphere and come into the light of the public. Nowhere is this transition more visible than through what women do, since in

5 One of the most authoritative and comprehensive studies on the Italian Resistance is by Claudio Pavone, *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance*, (London, New York: Verso, 2013), originally published in Italian as *Guerra Civile*, (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1991).

6 Let's just mention the enormous political fight carried out by workers in factories across the Northern regions, through strikes and other means, where women played a significant part as well.

7 See, among others, Anna Bravo, "Armed and Unarmed: Struggles without weapons in Europe and in Italy," in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 10(4) 2005: 468-484; Anna Bravo, Anna Maria Bruzzone, *In guerra senza armi: Storie di donne 1940-1945*, (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2000); Anna Bravo, a cura di, *Donne e Uomini nelle guerre mondiali*, (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008); Jacques Semelin, *Unarmed Against Hitler: Civilian Resistance in Europe, 1939-1943*, transl. by Suzan Husserl-Kapit, (Westport, CT-London: Praeger, 1993).

participating in the *Resistenza*, they move out of the domestic sphere into the public by interacting with others in ways traditionally precluded to them.

Most studies on the *Resistenza* which focus on women's participation emphasize the transformative impact such an experience has had on their sense of self and their understanding of the world, something undoubtedly very significant and extremely valuable. They do not talk as much about the political significance of women's actions, which is what I am specifically interested in. Along with expanding their sense of self and their sense of the world, women's actions expand, even transmute, the political sphere as such. I mean this in a literal and historical sense, in that in 1943, Italian women have yet to gain the right to vote, but this does not prevent them from taking part in the political struggle for liberation, in which they see themselves fully implicated. They are political actors without being political citizens. By engaging in the political struggle of the *Resistenza*, they literally expand the political sphere. However, I want to argue that the political significance of women's actions extends beyond the literal sense itself. It transmutes the political sphere in more profound ways.

My insistence on examining the *Resistenza*, through the experience of women may seem facetious, especially if considered from an Arendtian perspective who is no feminist thinker and has always looked with suspicion at any attempt of making race, sex, or other physical trait to be central to politics. Nevertheless, I believe my approach to be consistent with Arendt's political thought. Women's actions are not considered because women in a "biological" sense, carry them out. I consider women insofar as through their interactions, they reveal what is and what is not political, precisely because they are political actors without being fully admitted to the political sphere. Thus, it is the political interaction as such to be at stake, not their being women in an abstract and reductive way – biological or otherwise. This is what for Arendt politics is all about, the "*infra*," what lies "in-between," the web or relationships, which emerge more clearly when women's actions with others are considered.

It is difficult in this limited space to do justice to women's actions during the *Resistenza*. Not only are there many different ways by which women take part in the fight, but what they do is also so intricately intertwined with their everyday life without being merely domestic activities. In this essay, I rely on one story, Agnese's, as told by Renata Viganó in the book *L'Agnese va a morire* [*Agnese goes to die*].[8] Renata Viganó herself took part in the *Resistenza* and wrote that Agnese, the woman protagonist of the book, is the realistic portrayal of the many women she knew from the *Resistenza*. This particular story does not speak for all women, nor does it say everything about the experience of the *Resistenza*, but it does bring to light aspects that constantly recur in many of the stories women have shared. For the most part, women speak of their experience in the *Resistenza* in very positive terms. "Beautiful" is the adjective that is often used, along with "great" and "powerful." As women interact with others "publicly," they are empowered, they gain confidence in themselves as well as the trust of those around them. Yet such experience was anything but easy; their actions placed women in grave danger, with death

8 Renata Viganó, *L'Agnese va a morire*, was first published in 1949 and won the Viareggio Literary Prize. To my knowledge, the book has not been translated into English. Therefore, the translation of the passages cited in this essay is mine.

being not the worst. Agnese herself, does not come out alive from the *Resistenza* and in reading her story, we see how much she changes. Specifically, Agnese's story makes visible that, on one hand, what Agnese does is not just needed but indispensable to the *Resistenza*; on the other hand, what she does is also questioned and its value undermined. Women's actions, while necessary, are also transgressive, revealing that the public sphere, is not only a space of appearances, but also a space of contestation.

Agnese

Agnese is a woman who participates in the *Resistenza* after her husband, *Palita*, is taken away loaded on a train disappearing from her life. She knows right away that she will not see him again, that he will die —his health is too weak— and that her life will not be the same. She is in her fifties, not so young anymore, and she feels useless. Nevertheless, an intimation of impending profound changes in her life is expressed already in the early pages of the book: "The world seemed like another world, new, foreign, where she would not have worked any more: her old peasant strength was becoming useless to her." ["*Il mondo sembrava un altro, nuovo, estraneo, dove lei non avrebbe più lavorato: le diventava inutile la sua vecchia forza di contadina*."][9]

Approached by Palita's friends, Agnese starts to transport sensitive information and other things ["*roba*"] for the *partigiani* [partisans]. She goes on her bike, passing through checkpoints without hardly being noticed, a middle-aged peasant woman with her bag, sometimes carrying "stuff that explodes." The *partigiani* tell her that "there is a dangerous thing to do" ["*c'è una cosa pericolosa da fare*"][10] and she always does it, often turning red in her face; she is very shy.

Eventually, the *comandante* puts her in charge of all the provisions and the deliveries, a position of great responsibility, in fact he tells her: "You will be in charge of everything" ["*Sarai tu responsabile di tutto*"], and she nods with her head, while thinking that what she is being asked to do is very hard, and "with every word it was as if they were throwing a heavy weight on her back," ["*ma le pareva, ad ogni parola, che le buttassero sulle spalle un gran peso*."][11] "It was hard and complicated," with "great responsibility," she would be "in charge of many people" and she could not understand why the *comandante* was giving her this position. Nevertheless, she answers as she usually does: "If I'll be able to…" ["*Se saró buona…*"][12]

Agnese's life changes considerably as she fights with the partisans. In a relative brief period of time, yet so very intense and full of new activities, she comes to learn a lot about the world, and about "men's stuff," that it is possible to be killed for a beautiful idea. Now she understands what it means "to think for others" ["*pensare per gli altri*"],[13] not that she did not do that before, but now she consciously takes the responsibility to make decisions that are good for them, that is, the knowledge she has drawn from her life, what

9 Renata Viganó, *L'Agnese va a morire*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 20.
10 Renata Viganó, *L'Agnese va a morire*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 26.
11 Renata Viganó, *L'Agnese va a morire*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 114.
12 Renata Viganó, *L'Agnese va a morire*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 115.
13 Renata Viganó, *L'Agnese va a morire*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 218.

to do in every situation, now she knows how to use it for the good of those around her; now she is "in charge," she is, as they call her "*la responsabile*," the one responsible for everything.

It so happens that in "thinking for others," in an unexpected turn of circumstances with no time to inform the *comandante*, she takes the sudden decision to move a few *partigiani* – on the run and in danger of being caught – to the place where she is staying, the only place where she thinks they can be safe. They are the few who have survived the attack by the Nazi-Fascist troops – most died – while trying to cross over to the other side of the front, the area under the control of the allied forces. She quickly assesses the situation, and without any hesitation, she decides what to do, promptly and firmly. She says: "We need to go away immediately," ["*Bisogna andar via subito*"], and in saying this "she found herself, all of a sudden, immensely grown, important, truly 'in charge' of incomprehensible actions and unforeseen decisions." ["*Si trovó ad un tratto immensamente cresciuta, importante, "responsabile" davvero di azioni incomprensibili ed imprevedute decisioni*."][14]

> When the *comandante* arrives and learns of her decision and of her action – thanks to which the partisans' lives are saved – he gets angry, and tells her that what she did was wrong, ["*Hai sbagliato mamma Agnese*"], adding a curse, in a nasty voice that was cold and sweet at the same time. Agnese, on her part, "had a guilty and astonished look, like that of a little girl." ["*aveva un aspetto colpevole, stupito, come una bambina*."][15]

This specific episode marks a turning point in the story, and it is particularly revealing. In many respects, Agnese is a very different woman at the end of the book than she is before taking part in the *Resistenza*; she now understands what is wrong with the world, which she did not understand before, and she also knows that there are people fighting to change it. In other respects, she is still the same humble, unassuming peasant woman who easily turns red whenever she speaks – and she speaks rarely – always ready to do whatever needs to be done, constantly wondering if she is doing enough; she is so unassuming that it is hard to notice her despite her large and heavy body. The undeniable change is not simply that she understands more of the world, but that the people she interacts with, including the *comandante*, respect and trust her, seek her out and ask for her advice. There is something commanding about her which has become visible to all and that makes her their equal, even though, in so many ways, she is not like them.

The scene in question shows Agnese's ability to lead – to be in command – concretely and unequivocally. Her readiness in taking tough decisions under difficult and unexpected circumstances shows that she knows exactly what to do and does not falter, she does what needs to be done at her own risk and peril. At the very moment when her knowledge is most clearly visible, most tangible, and therefore indisputable – and this knowledge is through and through political – it is at that the very moment that the *comandante* tears it down. This scene makes manifest that Agnese's leading competence, her political and commanding authority is valuable insofar as it is exercised within certain boundaries, namely the *comandante*'s orders. When she acts independently, and solely

14 Renata Viganó, *L'Agnese va a morire*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 218.
15 Renata Viganó, *L'Agnese va a morire*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1976), 222.

on her own initiative, exercising her "responsibility for everything," her proven authority is crashed. Seen from the *comandante*'s perspective, Agnese has trespassed a line not to be trespassed. Her actions threaten the *comandante*'s leading role, and he strikes out. By condemning her action and her decision, he pushes her back into "her place," namely the place pre-designed for her as a woman, where she is no longer Agnese who is responsible for many people and everything, but the woman who is treated like "a little girl." He re-affirms the "proper" relation between them, one where he is the one in charge, and she is the one who obeys. Let's be clear, it is not that the decision Agnese took was wrong, but rather that it was not "her place" to take such a decision. This scene shows that, after all, Agnese is no equal to the men she interacts with, even if, through her actions she has clearly shown to be on a par with them.

It could be argued that this scene occurs within a military setting, the *comandante* as the head of the partisan band acts in accordance with military hierarchy. The *comandante* is the one in charge, he gives orders and whoever is under him obeys and carries them out. Anyone who questions the hierarchy or does not follow orders is reprimanded, at the very least. What happens with Agnese in this scene is that she, a subordinate, acts on her own instead of acting under the *comandante*'s orders. It is not as simple as that, however. It is true, that the partisan bands operate under some form of military structure, but one that is somewhat fluid and that varies from band to band. Additionally, their "arm" extends out and includes individuals from the population who provide all kind of support to the partisans, and the partisans rely heavily on such network. It is not at all evident that the military hierarchical structure adopted, in some form or another, by the partisan bands extends as far as to include the support network of the people who are engaged in the fight with them, someone such as Agnese, for instance.

There is more to be considered. When women interact with men in a space that is not the domestic sphere, their relationships inevitably change. They are no longer just the sister, the wife, the girlfriend, the mother, or simply a generic woman. Who each of them is, appears clearly and undeniably; each acquires an irreducible individuality – "unique distinctness,"[16] Arendt calls it – that is as tangible as it is frail. The visibility makes their distinctness real, but it also must be acknowledged if it has to endure and in this lies its frailty. Unless the people they interact with do so, that is, they acknowledge their "unique distinctness," it quickly disappears. When individual women engage in the struggle for liberation, they are political actors in the full sense of the term: they take initiatives, take decisions, they bear full responsibility; in short, who they are becomes visible through their actions. When it is all over, their actions are seldom accounted for and with them the distinct individuality of their doers is also forgotten. In Agnese's case, I imagine that all she did, including the specific action that saved lives, was not recorded and if any recognition was given, who did it go to? To the *comandante*? To the partisans? To "Women" in general?[17]

16 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176.

17 As mentioned above, Renata Viganó, author of *L'Agnese va a morire*, was inspired by the women who fought in the *Resistenza*, alongside her. One cannot help but wonder about the symbolism of Agnese being killed in the end. That she does not live to tell her story can be interpreted as the silence that enwrapped women's actions after the *Resistenza*.

As we can see, women's actions expand and enrich our understanding of the experience of the *Resistenza*, by showing how men and women do act together, and by bringing into the picture how their living together impacts their actions. Specifically, their living together plays a part at least in two ways. One is a long-standing tradition – theological, philosophical, political, and historical – that has imbued all areas of knowledge and life, with the notion of woman as an "imperfect" man placing her under man's rulership, the cornerstone of a patriarchal society, upon which the living together of people has been organized for over two millennia. The patriarchal structure of living permeates every aspect of life and exerts its force to this very day, even after it has come under strong attacks. Existing laws – fundamental laws no less – having been crafted from within patriarchal systems of life, bear the fundamental disparity between man and woman at their core and tend to reproduce it, consciously or not.

It is also important to keep in mind that the *Resistenza*, arose out of twenty years of a fascist regime in Italy, and a strong tenet of fascism in general, and Italian fascism, is that women belong to the domestic sphere and are defined by their procreative function, nothing else. "Mothers" are exalted, while women are demolished as individual women, and male authority is asserted with force.[18] There is an undeniable connection between the violence that Fascism sees as regenerative of life and the violence used to subdue women. It would take me too far afield to explore this here but suffice it to say that all who participated in the *Resistenza,* grew under fascism, and even as they rejected it as a political ideology, it would be naïve to think that it had no influence over them, especially if one considers that it presented itself as a way of life. It is worth noting that women often mention the rejection of violence as one of the main motivating factors for fighting in the *Resistenza*, even among those fighting with weapons.

More importantly, women's actions are especially revelatory of the political as a space of interaction. The relationship between man and woman as structured in the domestic sphere, namely with the man as the head of the household who rules over its members, woman included, is strictly hierarchical. This hierarchy may be very rigid or flexible, but it is nonetheless the primary, if not exclusive model of relationships between men and women. When women leave the domestic sphere and take part in the *Resistenza*, it is not at all evident that they leave behind their "being women," that is "womanhood" as what has to be "ruled by man." This hierarchal model of relationship within the household, encapsulated in the relationship between man and woman, is not to be overlooked and politically speaking quite relevant. Arendt does not speak specifically of the relationship between man and woman, but implicitly she does,[19] when talking about the private as a separate sphere from the public. The private and the public spaces, differ in more than

18 It is worth pointing out that Agnese is called "*mamma Agnese*" by the partisans. This can be interpreted simply as being due to her age, considering which, she could easily be their mother. At the same time, it could be a remonstrance of respect, in which case, the influence of fascist ideology cannot be ruled out entirely. Interestingly, Agnese does not have children of her own.

19 It is interesting that in affirming the plurality of human beings, which is the condition of action, Arendt quotes the following biblical passage from the Genesis, "Male and female created He *them."* This indicates, at very minimum, that she is neither indifferent nor oblivious of the relationship between man and woman and even that she sees it deeply implicated in the mishandling of politics. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 8.

one respect, but there is a fundamental way in which they stand apart for Arendt, namely, in the public space, people come together as free and equal, while in the private sphere people are neither equal nor free, there is someone who rules over those who obey. According to Arendt, even though politics is about acting and speaking together with others in a public space, the model of politics that has become predominant in the Western world has its roots in the private sphere. It was Plato who, deeply concerned with the intractability of democracy – which condemned to death the wisest among Athenians – took the rulership of the household to be the fitting model for realm of human affairs.[20] Only by way of a ruler who is in charge over the many can some order be established in the political sphere. Never mind that the ruler had to be a philosopher, and that a woman could become a philosopher. The hierarchical order being extended to the public sphere of interaction meant that politics was not the space of interaction among equals and free individuals, but the space where one or a group rule over the many.[21]

What does this mean specifically, for women in the *Resistenza*? That women who act politically and publicly are caught between different spheres of life. As the story of Agnese shows, when women enter the public sphere of interaction, they act freely and on a par with their peers; at the same time, man's rulership over woman, overshadows their actions. Different dimensions overlap (intersect?) and become visible only through women's actions because they confound and blur such spheres. Women acting together with others in public, reveal the public space as a space of contestation; a space where the living together is contested as given and where political visibility demands that she who acts and speaks is acknowledged in her distinct uniqueness.

The invisible visibility of women's actions in the Italian Resistance

In this paper I have examined the perplexing yet recurring phenomenon of women's political engagement and their persisting political invisibility. I have considered the specific experience of women in the Italian *Resistenza* (1943-1945) in that, at this time in Italy, women are political actors without being political citizens, thus providing a particularly rich vantage point for examining the relationship between political involvement and political citizenship. Even though I focus on the experience of women during the *Resistenza*, this phenomenon is in no way limited to Italy, nor to this time only. Instead, it has recurred in history and continues to occur to this day. The commonly used expression "second class citizens" aptly captures the condition that minority groups experience daily in their life, the disconnect between being "citizens" with seemingly full

20 Hannah Arendt writes: "Plato was still quite aware that he proposed a revolutionary transformation of the polis when he applied to its administration the currently recognized maxims for a well-ordered household." And adds the contrary to the common interpretation that Plato "wanted to abolish the family and the household," he wanted "to extend this type of life until one family embraced every citizen." *The Human Condition*, 223.

21 In talking about the many forms of escape from politics by notable philosophers, starting with Plato, Arendt writes: "The hallmark of all such escapes is the concept of rule, that is, the notion that men can lawfully and politically live together only when some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey." Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 222.

rights, and yet falling short; being like everyone else and yet unlike them, something both real and particularly challenging to pin down, but undeniable nonetheless.

Hannah Arendt's political thought is crucial in my analysis: it makes visible the political significance of women's actions which otherwise remains hidden. Arendt writes that when people come together and act with others, their deeds and words appear and become visible. This visibility, however, is short-lived unless such words and deeds become immortalized; in other words, unless they outlast the moment of being performed and spoken, and only if they are accounted for. When it comes to women fighting during the *Resistenza*, their words and deeds were undoubtedly heard and seen, but were not as readily accounted for and not turned into stories to be told. They did not become part of an enduring memory. Women's actions were seen, for the most part, not as central, not having merit in themselves, but only as assisting men's actions, something "accidental" and not substantial, something that, if it had not been there, the *Resistenza* would have been just the same. A lot is wrong with this picture, but most of all, that it erases women's actions from the *Resistenza*, as if they had never happened.

This is deeply problematic and in more than one way. Historically speaking, not only is this view partial at best, but a distortion at worst. It is both limited and limiting. By not considering women's actions as integral to the *Resistenza*, it also limits our understanding of it, thus reinforcing and furthering the odd disconnect between political participation and political citizenship. I called it a paradox, but when looked at it closely, it resembles more a vicious circle, women's actions, for the most part forgotten and left out of the story of the *Resistenza*, result and perpetuate the view that women are not political citizens to a full extent, and this, in turn, deprives them of the ability to participate fully in the political life and so on. But truly, what is at stake here is politics itself, politics understood and lived as a "rule," namely the notion that people can live together "only when some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey."[22]

Arendt writes that the act of liberation is not the same as the act of creating a space of freedom. The act of liberation undoes the rigid and constraining ways that limit the possibility for everyone to appear and to be. It transforms the living together into a space of contestation, makes visible the forms of dominance that keep some in a perennial condition of minority. The *Resistenza* is such an act of liberation, from foreign occupying forces, from the fascist ideology and from a regime that pressed people out of the public sphere; specifically for women, it is also an act of liberation from men's age-old dominance constraining and tying them to the domestic sphere, thus depriving them of the possibility to appear in their unique distinctness. If the act of liberation was successful as far as foreign occupation and a fascist regime were concerned, when it came to the liberation of women from an age-old form of male dominance, the outcome was spurious. The right to vote that sanctioned their being "citizens" on a par with men, also maintained woman under man's rulership in many areas of life, beginning with the household. Politics, as a space of interaction among equals and free individuals, continued to be entrammeled by relations of dominance. Therefore, it cannot be said that it led to the

22 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 222.

foundation of freedom. Without a space for the exercise of freedom, the act of foundation is spurious.

The foundation of freedom is not exhausted in the writing of a constitution, even though a constitution as the fundamental law that governs the living together of people, does play a part, framing the conditions that make possible for people to come together. Constitutions alone do not guarantee that spaces of interaction come into existence, even when they arise out of spaces where people came together as equal and free. The foundation of freedom lies in creating the possibility for the sharing of words and deeds, for the interaction of many who are different, for such a space to come into existence. But this is the challenging part, notwithstanding people living together and despite this space being "potentially" wherever people are together. Arendt writes that "action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its location almost any time and anywhere," adding that "this space does not always exist" and that "no man can live in it all the time," but that "to be deprived of it, means to be deprived of reality."[23] This space in-between wherein people act and speak together, while being on a par, making manifest who they are and the world they live in, is nothing less than what Arendt calls the foundation of freedom. It consists in a sort of interstice that breaks through, because actions "break through the commonly accepted and reach into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and sui generis."[24]

During the *Resistenza*, by acting and speaking in public with others, women break through the political as a space of dominance and exclusion, transmuting that space. The political sphere is not so much expanded, rather it is re-envisioned. It is created anew.

What happened during the Italian *Resistenza,* has happened before, and continues to happen. People come together through actions and words and in so doing a space arises between them, wherein they move as free and, on a par with one another. Wherever forms of dominance persist, such spaces of interaction are less likely to come into existence. Yet they burst open again and again. This is politically significant.

Let us look closely at moments in history and at political experiences such as the *Resistenza* "with eyes unencumbered by tradition" as Arendt urges us. In them are the seeds for living together, acting, and speaking, as a plurality of people, uniquely distinct, as equal and free, and not stranglehold by dominance.

23 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 198-199.
24 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 205.