
Giuseppe Aprile. Ph.D candidate in Political Philosophy at Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna (Pisa). He has a background in biomedicine, law, and political philosophy, holding degrees in philosophy of law from the University of Florence, Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne, and Cardozo School of Law, and in political philosophy from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. His research interests include the thought of Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault, especially in their relation to feminist and queer philosophies.

Contact: giuseppe.aprile@santannapisa.it

FREEDOM AS SELF-RISK AND HAPPINESS IN NARRATION: A FEMINIST QUEST FOR NON- SOVEREIGN HORIZONS IN DEMOCRATIC THEORY¹

Giuseppe Aprile

Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna (Pisa)

Abstract

In spite of the nuances and different traditions in political theory, the idea of democracy seems to be consistently associated with very specific concepts like *popular sovereignty*, *freedom*, *self-government* and *deliberation* in a way which not always critically problematize this semantics. Although some thinkers have been avowedly aware of possible tensions, it seems nonetheless that their attempts at dealing with them have unearthed even more paradoxes in the process. This seems to be the case, for example, of Hannah Arendt who, when critically discussing the problematic relationship between *freedom* and *sovereignty*, highlights the potential of *action* to move towards a non-sovereign conception of freedom, while at the same time being arguably unable to fully abandon the tradition that she sets herself against. However, we argue, if we refer to feminist readings of Arendt's theory of action, we might be able to envisage non-sovereign paradigms for a theory of democracy grounded on *vulnerability* and to elaborate notions such as *freedom as self-risk* and *happiness in narration* that can radically change

1. Reception date: 19th February 2022; acceptance date: 26th March 2022. The essay is the issue of a research carried out within the Dipartimento di Medicina, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna (Pisa).

our democratic semantics. This would be helpful first of all to disrupt the ‘horizon of expectation’ of the citizens of a democratic polity, and, in a second moment, to envisage alternatives to liberal deliberative models of democracy in favor of the setting of a *Caring Democracy*, as designed by Joan Tronto. A major change in paradigm that seems actually confirmed by the features of a ‘populist atmosphere’ that arguably signals its distress towards the features of liberal democracies.

Keywords

Hannah Arendt; Sovereignty; Self-Risk; Public Happiness; Vulnerability.

Resumen

A pesar de los matices y de las diferentes tradiciones en la teoría política, la idea de democracia parece estar asociada consistentemente con conceptos muy específicos como *soberanía popular*, *libertad*, *autogobierno* y *deliberación* de una manera que no siempre problematiza críticamente con esta semántica. Aunque algunos pensadores hayan sido conscientes de las tensiones detrás de estos conceptos, parece que sus intentos de abordarlos hayan desenterrado aún más paradojas en el proceso. Este parece ser el caso, por ejemplo, de Hannah Arendt, quien, al discutir críticamente la relación problemática entre libertad y soberanía, resalta el potencial de la *acción* para avanzar hacia una concepción no soberana de la libertad, mientras que al mismo tiempo se muestra probablemente incapaz de abandonar por completo la tradición a la que se opone. Sin embargo, argumentamos que, si nos referimos a las lecturas feministas de la teoría de la acción de Arendt, podríamos vislumbrar paradigmas no soberanos para una teoría de la democracia basada en la vulnerabilidad, y elaborar nociones como la de *libertad como auto-riesgo* y de *felicidad en la narración*, que pueden cambiar radicalmente nuestra semántica democrática. Esto sería útil, en primer lugar, para mudar el “horizonte de expectativas” de los ciudadanos de una comunidad democrática y, en segundo lugar, para vislumbrar alternativas a los modelos liberales deliberativos de democracia a favor del escenario de una *Caring Democracy*, como diseñada por Joan Tronto. Un cambio importante de paradigma que parece en realidad impulsado y confirmado por las características de una “atmósfera populista” que señala su angustia hacia las características de las democracias liberales.

Palabras clave

Hannah Arendt; Soberanía; Auto-Riesgo; Felicidad Pública; Vulnerabilidad.

Introduction²

The choice of grounding democracy on *popular sovereignty*, which seems almost a natural reflex for political theorists, has arguably further implications which seemingly go often overlooked. One of them, for example, is that citizens of a democratic polity are likely to set their ‘horizon of expectation’ on a very specific experience and practice of *freedom* (because and insofar as they are *sovereign*) in the form of *self-government*, an understanding that seems to shine axiomatically across different traditions of political theory.

This seems to be the case, on the one hand, for liberal theories of deliberative democracy³, that, as Chantal Mouffe remarks, “propose a reformulation in communicative terms of the classical [...] concept of *popular sovereignty*” and address the problem of “how the articulation of the common good can be made compatible with the *sovereignty of the people*”⁴ (Mouffe, 1999, p. 745), exactly in order to guarantee an experience of *freedom as self-government*. Considering that the legitimacy of democratic institutions should be based on processes of public deliberation, governed by neutral procedures and happening in “ideal conditions of discourse” (Mouffe, 1999, p. 749) –where “rational debate [is] the very form of political communication” (Habermas, 1992, p. 448)⁵– these theories assume, considering an overarching definition, that those who are potentially affected by the obligatory decisions of institutions are required to agree on the grounds of their legitimation in order for the decisions taken by these same institutions to be validly enforceable⁶: the people are then *free* only if they are *sovereign*, in the meaning that they experience *freedom* in the process of legitimation which realizes (even indirectly) their *self-government*.

But the same tendency to think about democratic *freedom in sovereignty*, seems to also characterize more critical strands of political theory. For example, in *Undoing the*

2. Citations from works which are not presented in English must be considered the result of the free translation of the author of this article, unless otherwise stated.

3. These models, according to Chantal Mouffe “view reason and rational argumentation, instead of interest and aggregation of preferences, as the central issue of politics” (Mouffe, 1999, p. 745).

4. Emphasis added.

5. The words by Habermas are quoted as such in Mouffe (1999, p. 748).

6. We made reference to Mouffe –although she is critical of such a model– because her alternative between Deliberative Democracy and Agonistic Pluralism is our analytical framework for Arendt’s thought. But even supporters of the model of deliberative democracy seem to agree with such a definition. As Jon Elster remarks, for example, in spite of the different notion of ‘deliberative democracy’ that one might have, “all agree [...] that the notion includes *collective decision-making* with the participation of *all who will be affected by the decision* or their representatives: this is the democratic part. Also, all agree that it includes *decision making* by means of arguments offered *by* and *to* participants who are committed to the values of *rationality* and *impartiality*: this is the deliberative part” (Elster, 1998, p.8) Emphasis added.

Demos, when discussing the dangers of neoliberalism for the well-being of democracy, Wendy Brown seems worried about the circumstance that, by vanquishing a “freedom conceived minimally as a *self-rule* and more robustly as *participation in the rule by the demos*”⁷ (Brown, 2015, p. 109), through the spread of a “market-instrumental rationality [...] organizing and constraining the life of the neoliberal subject” (Brown, 2015, p. 108), *homo oeconomicus* has crashed *homo politicus*. Thus, also Brown seemingly takes for granted that democracy means popular sovereignty, which both requires and secures individual sovereignty⁸, in order to support her thesis that if neoliberalism endangers democracy, it is because it endangers our possibility –as democratic citizens– of being *free in sovereignty*, i.e., of enjoying an experience of *freedom as self-government*. It is crucial, then, she seems to conclude, that we fight to preserve the possibility for *homo politicus* to experience a form of freedom as self-government⁹ if we want to preserve democracy against the “stealth revolution”¹⁰ of neoliberalism.

If this idea of *freedom in sovereignty* as a synonym for *freedom as self-government* is already problematic because the equation between *sovereignty* and *government* has been argued to be historically and semantically inaccurate (Tuck, 2016), it is nonetheless interesting to remark that in the panorama of political theory there are thinkers who have observed that the relationship between *sovereignty* and *freedom* (although not directly at the level of democratic theory) is not at all as unproblematic as it may seem: this is, for example, the case of Hannah Arendt.

This paper will then start with an analysis of the Arendtian notions of *action* and *political freedom*, highlighting some possible inconsistencies and difficulties in their joint reading that Arendt herself was aware of. As a matter of fact, we will try to argue that while, given the unpredictability and the irreversibility of *action*, we would expect Arendt to lean towards *non-sovereign* horizons for practices of freedom, to the contrary, her concept of *political freedom* is so much related to the idea of *self-government* that –as we will see– she is eventually and avowedly unable to gainsay the tradition of *freedom in sovereignty* she sets herself against.

Following the Arendtian insight that the reason why of the conundrum might lie in the reconciliation of *action* and *political freedom* with *sovereignty*, we will then try to explore a ‘change in paradigm’, in order to still exploit the potentialities harbored by the

7. Emphasis added.

8. In Brown’s words it is “the fundamental liberal democratic promise since Locke, that popular and individual sovereignty secure one another” (Brown, 2015, p. 109).

9. Brown explicitly refers to “Kantian autonomy” (Brown, 2015, p. 109).

10. The reference is to the subtitle of Brown’s work.

Arendtian concept of *action* while resorting to the feminist literature on the non-sovereign notion of *vulnerability*. This change is meant to suggest the value of a shift from practices of freedom as *self-government* to practices of freedom as *self-risk* for a democratic understanding of politics. In this sense, while the former consist in a *sovereign* kind of freedom in the form of self-government, deliberation, and participation to decision-making processes, the latter is a *non-sovereign* kind of freedom, where risk is not however envisaged in the Schmittian meaning of an existential life-threat pushing towards the friend-enemy distinction¹¹, but rather in the Arendtian meaning –as ‘corrected’ by feminists insights– of “risking oneself and one’s own identity” (Gambetti, 2016), of being allowed to step into the public sphere with one’s own life and social needs.

Section I problematizes the Arendtian conceptualization of *action*, *the political* and of *freedom* in order to show how paradoxically Arendt herself can be read as endorsing a *sovereign* conception of *freedom as self-government*, via the idea of what we will call *public happiness in deliberation*. Section II argues that, however, it is reading Arendt *contra* Arendt, via the feminist conceptualization of *vulnerability in action*, that we can elaborate a notion of *freedom as self-risk* and envisage an alternative possibility of what we will call *public happiness in narration*. Section III eventually tries to argue that, if we adopt the framework of a *Caring Democracy* described by Joan Tronto, it might be possible to reconcile the experience of *happiness in narration* with the experience of *happiness in deliberation* in order to even retrieve a *non-sovereign* form of freedom as self-government. Section IV concludes highlighting that such a reconciliation might be beneficial for a renewal of democratic theory, especially if we consider the distress towards liberal democracies that populist movements seem to be symptomatic of.

Disentangling the Arendtian conundrum: the shadow of sovereignty behind *Freedom as Self-Government* and *Happiness in Deliberation*

The analysis of the Arendtian notion of *the political* seems to represent a challenge for those who want to understand her political theory. As a matter of fact, if we keep as our theoretical framework Mouffe’s alternative between *deliberative democracy* and

11. The classical antinomy is formulated by Carl Schmitt (Schmitt, 1932/2007, p. 26).

*agonistic pluralism*¹², Arendt's thought arguably harbors elements going in both directions.

Thus, although, as Zeynep Gambetti remarks, "Arendt's particular take on individuation or on processes of political identity formation cannot be said to follow the risk-free paths that characterize the deliberative model of democracy" (Gambetti, 2016, p. 33), Arendt's conception of *the political* envisages the former as concerning "only those matters that can properly be *debated*; about which we can form and test our *opinions*; matters that require *judgement*; and about which it is correct to say that we seek to persuade each other through public *argumentation*"¹³ (Bernstein, 1986, p. 112), in a way that sometimes seems to draw close to that model of deliberative democracy that a thinker according to whom, "it is not rational principles –be they argumentative, communicative, transcendental– who govern the sphere of common affairs of men" (Dal Lago, 2016, p. XXIII), should be striving to distance herself from.

And in fact, although in *On Revolution* Arendt elaborates her concept of *political freedom* in terms of an experience of *public happiness*, the contours of such an experience – historically embodied in the American Revolution – are nonetheless clear: it "consisted, for citizens, in the right to access the public sphere, to partake in the exercise of power" (Cavarero, 2019, p. 57) so that they could "enjoy *discussion, deliberation* and *decision-making*"¹⁴ (p. 59). In this way, Arendt's idea of participation and of entry into the public sphere, seems to be molded after practices of *freedom as self-government* opening to an experience of *happiness in deliberation*, something which is not only indirectly illustrated by her concrete preference for the political experience of councils (Bianchi, 2015) but which also explicitly emerges through her claim that the fortunes of the American Revolution depended on that it happened in a country with a long-standing experience of self-government (Cavarero, 2019, p. 45) as well as –as Alessandro Dal Lago remarks– through her choice for a form of "active citizenship" (Dal Lago, 2016, p. XXII).

At the same time, however, as always Dal Lago remarks, Arendt regrets that "the disappearance of the ancient *politeia* –the *political* existence lived as play and full enjoyment of communication, 'the utterance of great words among others'– had been translated into the democratic formalism of modernity, where *animal laborans* is triumphant" (Dal Lago, 2020, p. 174). And such a model of 'political communication as

12. In discussing these issues, we make reference to the theoretical alternative suggested by Mouffe (1999).

13. Emphasis added.

14. Emphasis added.

play, seems possibly situated to the exact opposite of the Habermasian idea of “rational debate as the main form of political communication” (Mouffe, 1999, p. 749), so that it is difficult to completely reconcile Arendt with the features of a deliberative model of democracy.

This difficulty seems to lie in that –besides being linked to the practice of *self-government*– Arendt’s notion of *political freedom* is tightly dependent on another concept, i.e., the capacity for *action*, which has very different features, going rather in the direction of *agonism*. Having as her model the courage of “disclosing and exposing one’s self [...] without which action and speech and therefore, according to the Greeks, *freedom*, would not be possible at all” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 186), Arendt praises in fact *action* (in plurality¹⁵) because “in acting and speaking men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities” (Arendt, 1958/1998 p. 180) in a way which seems to highlight a much more performative than practical function for communication¹⁶, as –to the contrary– the deliberative model of democracy would require. Coherently with these features, Arendt highlights in fact how *action* is *atelos*¹⁷ (arguably, then, a ‘non-rational’ activity¹⁸), for it is characterized by the “irreversibility” and the “unpredictability” of its outcome¹⁹, which are “the price human beings pay for *freedom*”²⁰ (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 244).

How to possibly reconcile the Arendtian idea of political freedom/public happiness as discussion, deliberation, decision-making –which we assume inevitably implies rational thinking and formal procedures even in the less regulated of the assemblies– with the always Arendtian conception of political freedom implying the unpredictability and irreversibility of action as a moment of revealing of the “who” of the actors in plurality?

Arguably, a promising way to disentangle the conundrum, is to look at the way Arendt herself problematizes the features of *action*, namely with regard to the concept of *sovereignty*.

15. Arendt remarks how “this revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them— that is, in sheer human togetherness” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 180).

16. This would explain why, for example, Habermas accuses Arendt of “losing the possibility of finding a cognitive foundation for common beliefs grounding power” as well as of a “rational constitution of will” (Henry, 2020, p. 549). My translation.

17. “It is this insistence on the living deed and the spoken word as the greatest achievements of which human beings are capable that was conceptualized in Aristotle’s notion of *energeia* (“actuality”), with which he designated all activities that do not pursue an end (are *ateleis*) and leave no work behind (no *par autas ergo*), but exhaust their full meaning in the performance itself” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 206).

18. By ‘non-rational’, we mean that it lacks of instrumental rationality, insofar as it is *atelos*.

19. Arendt devotes section 33 and 34 of *The Human Condition*, respectively, to the analysis of these features.

20. Emphasis added.

As a matter of fact, Arendt dwells critically on “that identification of *sovereignty* with *freedom* which has always been taken for granted by political as well as philosophic thought”²¹ and which she does not hesitate to consider a “basic error” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 234). This idea derives from the observation that, according to her, to the contrary of the theoretical coupling of freedom with *sovereignty*, in reality we witness “the simultaneous presence of freedom and *non-sovereignty*, of being able to begin something new and of not being able to control or even to foretell its consequences”, with the result that “if we look upon freedom with the eyes of the tradition”, while keeping an eye on reality, “we are almost forced to the conclusion that human existence is absurd” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 235).

Looking at the concepts of *happiness in deliberation* and of *freedom as self-government* through the doubts that Arendt nourished with regard to their *sovereign* features, may lead to the realization that the idea of a *political*²² existence featuring *public happiness* as the joy of collective discussion, deliberation and decision-making in plurality opens towards not only empirical but, first and foremost, theoretical criticisms. If, in fact –on the one hand– taking the model of the *polis* as her literal idea of *politics* has always raised objections about its actual feasibility in the contemporary world (Blatter, Marti & Saner, 2005), it remains that –on the other hand– even if we agree with Dal Lago suggesting that the *polis* is not her model for *politics* but rather for *the political*²³, the consequence of such a framework inevitably seems that of addressing the existential question of *the political* through the lens of *sovereignty*: if an authentic political free existence is based upon the possibility for everybody to take part into processes of discussion, deliberation and decision-making, i.e. is based on a conception of freedom consisting of self-government²⁴, then, a

21. Emphasis added.

22. Following Pierre Rosanvallon, we will distinguish throughout the paper between *die Politik* – *the political* in the meaning of “a political existence” from *das Politische* – *politics* in the meaning of “institutions”. (Dal Lago, 2020, p. 174) This distinction is somehow similar to the one Mouffe makes between *politics* as “the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence” and *the political*, as “the dimension of antagonism that is inherent to human societies”, where it emerges, however, that the feature of a *political existence* to Mouffe is, more specifically, conflict (Mouffe, 1999, p. 754).

23. Though we should not overlook, as we already saw, that Arendt did concretely envisage the practice of councils as her preferred democratic model.

24. The issue of whether *government* is a *political* activity for Arendt seems a quite complicated one. Cavarero suggests, in fact, that since the concept of political freedom that Arendt refers to is that of *isonomy*, characterized by an ‘absence of government’, Arendt would nourish a sort of idiosyncrasy towards the notion of government, which she associates to the negative meaning of “domination”, of *Herrschaft*. We still however employ what in this version would be an ‘improper’ idea of self-government not only because we consider it useful to understand how Arendt too risks addressing *the political* through the lens of *sovereignty*; but also, because we would not argue that, to Arendt, government is a *non-political* activity. At this regard, in fact, while – on the one hand – Cavarero refers to how Arendt emphasized that during the Revolutions there was “an absolute lack of interest for the forms of government”, Richard Bernstein –on the other hand and to the

truly democratic *political* enjoyment will still be pictured by the idea of *the sovereign people*²⁵.

In her attempt at retrieving a theoretical indistinction between rulers and ruled, and then a conception of freedom as *isonomy*, as a situation of ‘non-government’ (Cavarero, 2019, p. 15), then, not only Arendt seems inclined towards not distinguishing between the notions of *sovereignty* and *government*, but –we argue stretching the consequences of her thought in terms of democratic theory– she would also probably lean towards shoring up *popular sovereignty* as the expression of the ideal situation of *political freedom* where everybody govern themselves²⁶. Once more, such a result –which might seem *empirically* problematic considered the configuration of contemporary democracies– appears however first and foremost *theoretically* problematic on at least two levels.

First of all –as we already examined– at the level of the internal coherence of the Arendtian notion of political freedom: to the contrary of the ‘unpredictability’ and the ‘*non-rationality*’ of action –arguably going rather in the direction of *agonistic* models for democracy– such a form of *sovereign freedom* in *self-government* draws close to *deliberative* models of democracy where, as we have seen, the underlying concern is exactly that of ensuring that ‘the people’ be sovereign as to (even if indirectly) participate to their self-government in the form of *rational* discussion, deliberation and decision-making.

But –and this is the second level of criticism– according to that theoretical construction, if *political freedom* consists of the *public happiness* deriving from the participation to ‘government’, in this conceptual framework there are only two options: either everybody is at some point directly or indirectly involved in this experience, which (given its technical unfeasibility) only ushers in the *fictitious* proclamation of the *sovereign* people and then in the concept of freedom as the ideal of self-government, either

contrary– remarks that for Arendt not only one of the negative aspects of the entry of *the social* question in the French Revolution (that Arendt was critical about) is exactly the loss of that “interest for the forms of government” (an aspect which is summarized in the famous quote by Robespierre: “*La Monarchie? La République? Je ne connais que la question sociale* »), but that, furthermore, it is that very ‘interest for the forms of government’ that animated the American Revolutionaries (whom Arendt admired) in their *élan* towards the construction of a *new beginning*. Cavarero claims, then, that Arendt does not elaborate a political model “against government” but rather an “alternative idea of politics as one not concerned with government”. All these elements considered, and in the attempt at nuancing an alleged ‘anti-governmental’ Arendtian stance, we would then argue –according to the categories used in this essay– that Arendt only fears that government, which is a question of *politics* (*das Politische*), completely absorbs the dimension of *the political* (*die Politik*) and that her normative conclusion of a “political theory not dealing with the issue of government” could be read as the consequence of such a fear. See Bernstein (1986) and Cavarero (2019, p. 20).

25. And in fact, Arendt claims that while sovereignty “is always spurious when claimed by an isolated political entity [...] in the case of many men mutually bound by promises [...] the sovereignty of a body of people shows itself quite clearly in its unquestioned superiority over those who are completely free” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 245).

26. Although Arendt seems to consider that while sovereignty can be achieved only together, mastership is conceivable only in isolation (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 245).

there are inevitably some –those who are not even theoretically interested in concerning themselves with public affairs or those who empirically do not succeed into– who are theoretically and empirically deprived of an experience of political freedom *tout court*.

Of course, this is not to overlook that Arendt herself was aware of the criticism behind such a theoretical construction, as she acknowledged that:

Not everyone wants to or has to concern himself with public affairs. In this fashion a self-selective process is possible that would draw together a true political elite in a country. Anyone who is not interested in public affairs will simply have to be satisfied with their being decided without them. But each person must be given the opportunity. (Arendt, 1972, p. 233)

Nonetheless, while –on the one hand– by asserting that “freedom [...] was given under the condition of non-sovereignty” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 244) and by stating that sovereignty is “contradictory to the very condition of plurality” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 234) (which is the *conditio sine qua non* of freedom), Arendt seems to try to distance herself from the ecumenic tradition of political thought identifying *sovereignty* with *freedom*, –on the other hand– once freedom coupled with *non-sovereignty*, Arendt cannot avoid remarking that this freedom in non-sovereignty has certain ‘disabilities’ that according to her can be remedied by the “contract” (which is in fact the very instrument of institution of the political *sovereign*²⁷) and the only hint she gives to solve them is “the capacity for *action* [...] that] harbor[s] within itself certain *potentialities* which enable it to survive the disabilities of non-sovereignty” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 236)

At this point, however, Arendt’s conceptual framework alone does not seem enough to search for and to exploit such ‘potentialities’. We argue, in fact, that a way out her conundrum on the relationship between *sovereignty* and *political freedom* requires envisaging *non-sovereign* configurations for political action, by resorting to alternative paradigms that she could not resort to. In this sense, we suggest that if we read Arendt *contra* Arendt through the lens of the feminist literature on *vulnerability*, we can envisage other possible *practices of political freedom* which do not require ‘the people’ to be *sovereign*, but which preliminarily assume that and actively encourage them to be *vulnerable*.

27. Arendt seems to contrast those “bodies politic that rely on *contracts* and treaties” with “those that rely on rule and *sovereignty*”, as the former “leave the unpredictability of human affairs and the unreliability of men as they are” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 244). But in so doing she seems to implicitly endorse the core of that very tradition of political thought starting with Hobbes, according to whom the *contract* always institutes *the sovereign*, be it democratic, aristocratic or monarchic.

The Feminist opportunity of *vulnerability in action: Freedom as Self-Risk and Happiness in Narration*

A *vulnerable, agonistic* practice of *freedom as self-risk* would in fact certainly be able to harbor the Arendtian conception of freedom as a desire to *act* and to ‘excel’ in the public sphere, the one which would consist of an experience of public happiness in the meaning of *discussion, deliberation, decision-making* and which would be charming to those who aspire to ‘concern themselves with public affairs’, i.e., to govern. But within a *vulnerable agonistic* idea of *freedom as self-risk*, there is also place for another kind of experience of *political* freedom, always implying *action*, but in the –even more appropriately Arendtian– meaning of stepping out in the public sphere to share one’s own life, one’s own identity, one’s own needs: in one word, one’s own *story*. As Arendt herself remarks in fact: “this unchangeable identity of the person, though disclosing itself intangibly in act and speech, becomes tangible only in the *story* of the actor’s and speaker’s life”²⁸ (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 218).

In the *agon*, in fact, not only it is possible to distinguish oneself in the attempt at ‘excelling’, as Arendt believed, but also, thanks to the feminist conceptualizations, “one produces an effect on the *res publica* or ‘public thing’ by becoming an ‘objective’ reality that must be reckoned with, or reacted against, or narrated in the form of a story” (Gambetti, 2016, p. 34). And this form of ‘*plurality*, not only can be said to imply the egalitarian distribution of the capacity to do and to suffer in such a way that each self tends toward *uniqueness*’ (Gambetti, 2016, p. 35), but it can indeed be considered a form of public *participation*. Even further, following Adriana Cavarero, it can be qualified as an experience of participative *democracy*.

One however, which is not of *vertical democracy* (i.e. of a political regime grounded on the idea of self-government), but of *horizontal democracy*, namely of a “certain spatial configuration, an horizontal disposition for the interaction of *equals*”²⁹, that is, “to say it with Arendt, a common space of reciprocal appearing where a *plurality* of unique beings are involved in concerted action” (Cavarero, 2019, p. 12), one that eventually allows for the retrieval of a social dimension of *the political* existence which is not featured by sovereignty, but fostered by *vulnerability*.

Cavarero theorizes in fact her *Spring Democracy* starting from the observation that the kind of *political* scene emerging from the reading of *The Human Condition* is one

28. Emphasis added.

29. Emphasis added.

of play, one where the public ‘event’ concerns the visible interaction of ‘actors’, and she is thus able to end up with an alternative notion of *public happiness* which is rather ‘performative’, not necessarily involving processes of discussion, deliberation and decision-making. In so doing, Cavarero explicitly aims at exploring the possibility of how to fit the concept of ‘plurality’³⁰ within the contemporary framework of ‘masses’ and ‘multitudes’ which quantitatively exceed (and are qualitatively distinct from) the Arendtian reference to the restricted assemblies of Ancient Greece (Cavarero, 2019, p. 76) exactly by building on the Butlerian possibility that “bodies and corporeal needs of life be in first line in spaces of resistance and protest” (p. 79). And worried, in fact, by the circumstance that “gatherings of bodies not always express the public happiness of a spring democracy which is qualitatively plural” (p. 93), Cavarero spends the last part of her book trying to outline the phonetic criteria which allow for the distinction between the voice of the ‘mass’ and that of the ‘plurality’, remarking that while both subjects can be spotted to act and speak *in unison* (Cavarero, 2019, p. 118), the latter is characterized by a “plurifonic bustle” (p. 133) which witnesses of individualities that have not been annihilated as it happens instead in the case of the mass.

We do share these insights by Cavarero concerning the potential of the emotional pleasure coming from “the enjoyment of a vocal and corporeal relationality in plurality” (Cavarero, 2019, p. 136) for revolutionary democratic experiences of *new beginnings* and for a renewal of political institutions coming from social movements, but in the awareness that these constitutional events of renewal cannot be an everyday experience, we would like to draw upon her framework to make hypothesis on the possible meaning of an everyday experience of *public happiness in narration*, of *action in plurality*.

Again, what we in fact believe distinguishes the individuals within a mass, and we have seen can emerge through their actions and their voices, is their *stories*. This seems the object of the *political discourse* ‘the people’ want to have in the public realm, not one aiming necessarily at an experience of rational deliberation, but one that brings in their passions and their lives, one that is only possible accepting to be *exposed*, to be *vulnerable*, and that –at the same time– indeed is a form of participation to public affairs, a way of feeling the *political* emotion of *public happiness*, but in the form of *narration*, one which can help ‘the people’ resonate *in unison* with those sharing their same stories.

30. Cavarero suggests, in fact, that “the Arendtian notion of plurality is *qualitative*, rather than *quantitative*: the number of those present does not matter, as what is important is the political quality of their concerted action” (Cavarero, 2019, p. 92). However, this does not prevent Cavarero from confronting the issue of how to adapt the notion of a ‘qualitative plurality’ to quantitatively larger assemblies.

In this regard, we assume that one of the main tasks of *politics* indeed is then to envisage how to make this kind of *political experience* possible, to imagine and to create the infrastructural conditions for everyday occasions of *action in plurality* where ‘the people’ can *hear* and can *be heard*, where – *pace* Arendt – they can help *politics* fulfill one of its main goals: addressing their *social* needs. Contra Arendt, in fact, we suggest that accepting that *politics* is about solving *social* issues, does not in fact automatically mean gainsaying the possibility of an authentic *political* existence³¹.

As we will shortly see, there are in fact theoretical models of democracy which seem to partly translate Cavarero’s intuitions about *the political* into an institutional conceptualization of *politics*, and which can help overcome the tight distinction between *the social* and *the political* that seems to hinder the ‘potentialities’ of Arendtian action. This is, we argue, the case of a *Caring Democracy*.

Reconciling *deliberation* and *narration* in the framework of a *Caring Democracy*

The kernel of the theory of a *Caring Democracy* that Joan Tronto suggests, can be summarized as the attempt at bringing *care* into the public realm, i.e. of joining the dimensions of *the social* and *the political*. Tronto traces in fact the absence of a *political theory of care* back to the traditional public/private divide existing in Ancient Greece, which Arendt –with her concern for needs to be hidden in the private sphere³²– seems to shore up.

In reality, before concerning herself with issues of democratic theory, Tronto already starts her challenge to the social/political divide at the metaethical level, by adhering to the so-called “expressive-collaborative model” (Tronto, 2013, p. 54) suggested by Margaret Urban Walker. Urban Walker highlights in fact the criticisms of the so-called “theoretical-juridical” model –concerned “with elucidating clear moral principles following standard rules of philosophical practice” (Tronto, 2013, p. 53)– by contrasting it to the ‘expressive-collaborative’ model which “denies that any moral actor’s position, including the philosopher’s, is superior to others” and considers that “only through moral practices

31. Arendt’s struggle to distinguish between *the social* and *the political* has been extensively debated. As a reference, see, the already cited essay by Bernstein (1986).

32. The idea that life and the life process is to be hidden in the private sphere, represents one of the main thesis Arendt suggests in *The Human Condition*. See, for example, the last part of paragraph 9 “The Social and the Private” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 70).

–the expression, agreement, and collaboration about the meaning of morality in any community– does moral life take form” (Tronto, 2013, p. 53).

This possibility, which following Tronto “can only occur in a society in which real, everyday people have an opportunity to *express* themselves and to be *heard* by others” (Tronto, 2013, p. 56)³³ really seems to give a content to that experience of horizontal democracy that for Cavarero entails *action* in *plurality* as well as the confrontation of unique *voices* which do not melt into the voice of the mass but which can still be heard *in unison*. Furthermore, the way Tronto envisages this ‘continuous moral negotiation’ among people is interestingly something that “only a *democratic* political order” (Tronto, 2013, p. 56)³⁴ can guarantee, since “in any other political order, even one that is ‘*liberal*’ but not democratic, there is a claim of authority made on the part of some to trump the exchange of views in which all are able to participate” (Tronto, 2013, p. 54)³⁵. The portrait of these moral agents, thus, really seems to match the traits possibly disclosed by a feminist experience *vulnerable agonism*:

Moral agents, singly and cooperatively, *express* their sense of self, situation, community, and agency in the responsibilities they discover and/or claim as theirs. *Expressing* and claiming are no impersonal processes but the *actions of specifically identified, located deliberators*, trying to work out how to live well in the circumstances in which they find themselves; starting not from an unstructured, uncontaminated ‘original position’ but from the possibilities and constraints consequent upon the hand they have been dealt. (Tronto, 2013, p. 54)³⁶

And, in fact, the greatest merit of such a model is arguably that of leading towards a theoretical-practical reconciliation between those experiences of *public happiness* in ‘narration’ and in ‘deliberation’ that we identified as potentially distinct, since in this case the moment of *deliberation* (preliminary to the choice of moral principles) requires and necessarily follows *narration*: ‘the people’ are in fact encouraged to *participate* to a process of decision-making which however requires first of all them *sharing their own stories, their lives*. This is not only true at the (meta)*ethical* level, but also at the properly political moment of *democratic* decision-making that Tronto envisages: not the one

33. Emphasis added.

34. Emphasis added.

35. Emphasis added.

36. Emphasis added.

concerning the choice of the moral principles, but the one concerning the allocation of caring responsibilities (Tronto, 2013, p. xiii).

This is not to overlook that Tronto in reality expresses her skepticism about the circumstance that democratic political theory has “become increasingly concerned with *procedures* for democratic life, and with such matters as whether political life is better described as agonistic, deliberative, or communal” against which she purports to come back to the *substance* of “how citizens live their lives” (Tronto, 2013, p. 27). And in some sense, she seems to nurture some concerns about *deliberation*, when addressing Bruce Ackerman’s ‘nostalgic’ proposition of a *Deliberation Day* during which “everyone would receive pay from the government to attend a day-long discussion of important political topics” (p. 27). But it really seems that after changing the *substance* of democratic concern, Tronto’s model appears close to erasing the differences between procedures of deliberation and agonism. Not, of course, in the meaning that she devalues the importance of democratic decision-making (to the contrary, both the ethical and political parts of her model envisage the largest possible involvement of citizens in both choosing the moral principles stemming from practices of care and allocating responsibilities for such practices, thus in preliminary discussion and decision-making), but because by designing embodied, ‘storied’ subject as deliberators “of the process of evaluating how well society meets its caring responsibilities”, she does not end up with a “a one-time decision” model of *conclusive deliberation*, but she rather crafts a “reiterative process in which citizens will need to monitor and to revisit their decisions” (Tronto, 2013, p. 180) which indeed seems –we can say– a model of *agonistic deliberation* where experiences of public happiness in *narration* and *deliberation* get as close as to possibly even coincide.

Tronto is then arguably able to design a *democratic* model starting from the same concern as liberal deliberative models of democracy, one which is synthesized in “the Roman law dictum *Quod omnes tangit, ab omnibus approbetur*” (Tronto, 2013, p. 140), but ushering on completely different concepts (and concrete possibilities) of *agonistic participation* and *inclusion*, exactly because, rather than focusing on designing the procedures, she tackles what according to her is wrong about the features of the *actors* and of the *content* of those decision-making processes.

As Tronto remarks, only “caring in a democratic society is highly participatory” (Tronto, 2013, p. 140) so that if we want citizens to be really included and to really participate, we have to bring *care* into the public realm, i.e., we have to make care a subject matter of *politics*. And it is exactly this change envisaged by Tronto that, arguably, populism seems to be asking for.

Conclusion. The value of non-sovereign democratic paradigms to address the demands of populism

If we move from the theoretical level to empirical observations, the alternative democratic paradigms that a feminist reading of Arendt allows to conceptualize, seem particularly useful to address the very resentment that populism arguably nurtures towards liberal democracies.

Among the traits which seem more hideous to populism, in fact, a special place is represented exactly by the question of ‘deliberation’. Echoing the antagonism between ‘the people’ and *la clase discutidora*³⁷ already identified by Carl Schmitt (Schmitt, 1922/1985, p. 56), ‘the people’ of populism seem in fact to lament a radical dislike of the ideas of ‘equality in deliberation’ and of ‘rational debate as the main form of *political* communication’, which are the very theoretical premise of deliberative models of liberal democracy.

This aspect of a ‘neutral rational dialogue’ has been at the center of feminist and non-feminist critiques long since (Foucault, 1994/1997, p. 20)³⁸. If we retrieve the one by Chantal Mouffe, we can remark how, challenging the alleged neutrality of procedures, which according to Habermas are the key to ensure a rational ecumenic deliberation free of constraints, Mouffe observes *via* Wittgenstein, that “it is because they are inscribed in shared forms of life and agreements in judgements that procedures can be accepted and followed” and that the agreement one reaches in communication “is, an *Einstimmung* fusion of voices³⁹ made possible by a common form of life, not an *Einverstand* product of reason – like in Habermas” (Mouffe, 1999, p. 750). If, then, ‘the people’ of populism are anti-political, as Nadia Urbinati claims (Urbinati, 2019, p. 55)⁴⁰, it seems to be in the sense that they reject *politics*, insofar as it is imbued with a model of ‘rational deliberation’, but this does not mean that they would not nurture *political* ambitions or affections, were the form of *political* communication and their role in deliberation processes changed.

As always Urbinati claims, the aspiration of ‘the people’ of populism is that of functioning as an epistemic source for those who govern (Urbinati, 2019, p. 75), which

37. As Schmitt remarks, the expression is by Donoso Cortès.

38. In “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom”, Foucault explicitly criticizes the Habermasian “utopian” model of communication.

39. This conception echoes the one explored by Cavarero (2019) in her chapter 5 and 6.

40. In this sense, Urbinati seems to agree with Paul Taggart’s account that “populism has its roots in a primal anti-political reaction of the ruled against the rulers”.

seems to signal – we argue – that ‘the people’ of populism first and foremost want to be *heard*, that they want to utter the ‘great words’ of their lives among others, be them either those who risk themselves in engaging with governmental affairs or those who share their *stories acting in plurality*. Thus, the ‘short-termism’ Urbinati *via* Habermas imputes to populists (Urbinati, 2019, p. 75), their “impatience” (Urbinati, 2019, p. 11) and their tendency towards conflating the two moments constituting the “democratic diarchy” – i.e. the moment of the formation of the “opinion”⁴¹ and the moment of manifestation of “will” – by overcoming norms and procedures to directly transform “opinion” into “will”, are all elements which seem to be symptomatic of the urge of *expression*, of a genuine need to bring oneself among others, in search of a communication which is –again with Mouffe– not a rational *Einverstand*, but a common *Einstimmung*, a “fusion of voices” resonating with Cavarero’s insights.

As we have tried to argue in the previous section, the model which seemingly translates this need into democratic theory is the model of a *Caring Democracy*. This is why we suggest that a *Caring Democracy* may represent a useful starting point for the quest of non-sovereign democratic paradigms. As Fabienne Brugère remarks –arguably addressing the dangers of neoliberalism for democracy more accurately than Brown– “what neoliberalism fails to take into account is the possibility of an *equality of voices*”⁴² (Brugère, 2020, p. 148), against which she praises for “a caring democracy [where] relations are more *horizontal* than vertical”⁴³ (p. 154) and for the adoption –“as opposed to an impersonal social approach, unmindful of individuals and of their life journeys”– of care as the “type of support that allows individuals to restore a connection with themselves and with others by letting them reacquire self-esteem, a *desire to act* and to *be*”⁴⁴ (p. 155).

With its reconciliation between a form of *happiness in narration* and *in deliberation*, a *Caring Democracy* is somehow still a form of deliberative democracy where –however– ‘the people’ are not *sovereign* but *vulnerable*, since they do not expect an involvement in deliberation processes on every issue (an unrealistic expectation which might engender discontent, disillusion and disinterest in the non-fulfilment thereof), but they

41. It is interesting to notice here that this desire for expression of ‘opinion’ and ‘judgement’ (without entering in the details of what the specific meaning of the notions of “judgment” in Arendt is) at least seems partly consistent with the Arendtian notion of “the political” as opposed to “the social”, since both these elements –together with ‘debate’ and ‘discussion’– had been mentioned by Arendt when she was questioned on the criteria necessary to distinguish between ‘the social’ and ‘the political’, as specifically characterizing only ‘the political’.

42. Emphasis added.

43. But this *horizontality* of democracy is also what emerges in Tronto and Cavarero. Emphasis added.

44. Emphasis added.

are first of all encouraged to step into the public realm as ‘situated narrators’ and, then, to choose on those matters they care about and they take care of as ‘situated deliberators’.

If, to say it with Mouffe, then, “the task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards the promotion of democratic designs” (Mouffe, 1999, p. 756), we believe that the paradigms we choose and craft to mobilize these passions are of crucial importance. This should lead us to envisage a change in the ‘horizon of expectation’ nurtured by members of a democratic polity, because, paraphrasing Davina Cooper, we might say that how citizens think about democracy constitutes part of what democracy is⁴⁵. Thus, probably, if we think about re-signifying key political concepts by encouraging ‘the people’ to be *vulnerable* rather than sovereign and to expect *freedom in self-risk* way before than in self-government, and if together with Tronto we frame an experience of *happiness in narration* preliminary to any experience of *happiness in deliberation*, we could be able to disclose the ‘potentialities’ of *action* that Arendt thought indispensable to frame an experience of *political freedom* in *non-sovereignty* and, thus, fully seize the opportunity of the “populist atmosphere” (Rosanvallon, 2020, p. 78) to radically, but feasibly, devise *non-sovereign democracies*.

References

- Arendt, H. (1958/1998). *The Human Condition*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, H. (1972). Thoughts on Politics and Revolution. A Commentary. In H. Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (pp. 199 – 233). Harcourt.
- Bernstein, R. J. (1986). Rethinking the Social and the Political. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 11 (1), 111 – 130.
- Bianchi, B. (2015). Hannah Arendt lettrice di Rosa Luxemburg. *DEP – Deportate, esuli, profughe. Rivista Telematica di studi sulla memoria femminile*, 28, 132 – 151.
- Blatter, S., Marti I. & Saner S. (2005). Rosa Luxemburg and Hannah Arendt: Against the Destruction of Political Spheres of Freedom. *Hypatia*, 20 (2), 88 – 101.
- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the Demos. Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*. Zone Books.
- Brugère, F. (2020). Caring Democracy as a solution against Neoliberalism and Populism. In P. Urban & L. Ward (Eds.), *Care Ethics, Democratic Citizenship and The State* (pp. 137 – 159). Oxford University Press.

45. Davina Cooper suggests that “how officials think about the state constitutes part of what the state is” (Cooper, 2013, p. 38).

- Cavarero, A. (2019). *Democrazia Sorgiva. Note sul Pensiero Politico di Hannah Arendt*. Raffaello Cortina.
- Cooper, D. (2013). *Everyday Utopias*. Duke University Press.
- Dal Lago, A. (2016). La città perduta – Introduzione. In H. Arendt, *Vita Activa. La Condizione Umana* (pp. VII - XXXIII). Bompiani.
- Dal Lago, A. (2020). Potere al Popolo?. In I. Possenti (a cura di), *Aut Aut* n° 386: Hannah Arendt e la questione sociale (pp. 169 – 184). Il Saggiatore.
- Elster, J. (1998). Introduction. In J. Elster (ed.), *Deliberative Democracy*, (pp. 1 – 18). Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1994/1997). The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom. In P. Rainbow (ed.), *Michel Foucault, Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (pp. 281 - 301). The New Press.
- Gambetti, Z. (2016). Risking Oneself and One's Own Identity: Agonism Revisited. In J. Butler, Z. Gambetti, L. Sabsay (Eds.), *Vulnerability in Resistance* (pp. 28 – 51). Duke University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1992). Further Reflections on the Public Sphere. In C. Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (pp. 421 – 461). The MIT Press.
- Henry, B. (2020). Habermas e Arendt a confronto con il paradigma oblativo del potere in Marco (Mc 10, 41 – 45). In L. Corchia, W. Privitera & A. Santambrogio, *Forme e spazi della teoria critica, Quaderni di Teoria Sociale*, 1 – 2, (pp. 543 – 557). Morlacchi editore.
- Mouffe, C. (1999). Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism? *Social Research*, 66 (3), 745 – 758.
- Rosanvallon, P. (2020). *Le siècle du populisme*. Seuil.
- Schmitt, C. (1922/1985). *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab. The University of Chicago Press.
- Schmitt, C. (1932/2007). *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab. The University of Chicago Press.
- Tronto, J. (2013) *Caring Democracy. Markets, Equality and Justice*. New York University Press.
- Tuck, R. (2016). *The Sleeping Sovereign*. Cambridge University Press.
- Urbinati, N. (2019). *Me, The People. How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Harvard University Press.