

# H-Net Reviews

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Dana R. Villa. *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. xv + 329 pp. \$30.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-04400-2; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-04401-9.

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## In Search of the Political

The end of modernity and rise of postmodernism has spawned an array of thinkers from Habermasians, communitarians, and participatory democrats to Foucauldians, feminists, and neo-Gramscians. Amidst their choruses is a singular theme: all are highly critical of liberalism and its conceptions of individuality, constitutionalism, and politics. As Benjamin Barber perhaps representatively asserted, the liberal self is little more than *homo economicus*, an efficient yet arid and even debased political being. On the modern and postmodern fronts, *homo faber* and *animal laborans* diligently outflanked *homo politicus*. While postmodern critics have put forth engaging and insightful analyses of this development, readers in search of conceptually systematic postmodern scholarship on the distinctiveness of the public and private realms will be disappointed. Perusing postmodern literature leaves the impression that the only available options are to personalize the political or to politicize the personal. Consequently a book that claims to trace the philosophical and political ills of modernity and postmodernity and at the same time locate what is distinct about the public realm must be given consideration.

Dana R. Villa's book about Hannah Arendt's theory of political action and its relation to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger is an attempt to reassess the place of politics in a postmodern age. Villa locates modern and postmodern political pathologies through key figures in the Western tradition such as Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Habermas. Even though the title suggests Heidegger has equal billing with Arendt, prospective readers should be aware that his place in this book is secondary. Heidegger's works are assessed independently, but even then it is done to accentuate Arendt's virtues. Villa sustains a general case for Arendt's originality as a political thinker through her "performance" or "aesthetic" model of action. Indeed, he wants to establish Arendt as the paradigmatic postmodern thinker, one who with energy and erudition located the origins

of modern political pathologies and attempted to restore dignity to the political realm.

Arendt's theory of action conceptually reformulates politics in terms of civic involvement. This reformulation entails more than an exhortation to vote or a request that individuals and groups momentarily consider the public good. The principal objective is to challenge firmly held liberal preconceptions about the nature of politics. For Villa, the "pressing problem is not to recover ancient concepts and categories, or to restore tradition in some form, but rather to deconstruct and overcome the reifications of a dead tradition" (pp. 8-9). Villa argues that Arendt's uniqueness and significance as a political philosopher arises from her commitment to human plurality, her defence of the public realm, and the manner in which her works illuminate a range of wider issues including (but not limited to) "the nature of political action, the positive ontological role of the public realm, the nature of political judgment, and the conditions for an anti-authoritarian, antifoundational democratic politics" (p. 13). Broadly speaking, Arendt erects a "postauthoritarian" understanding of the political.

The book is comprised of three sections held together by one consistent claim: the instrumentalization of political activity engulfing our age had its seeds implanted long before the maligned Machiavelli and the irascible Hobbes provided for its philosophical and popular legitimacy. With dire consequences for the integrity of the political realm, the hegemonic means-end framework of the Western teleological account of action necessarily forged instrumental theories of action. The first section, entitled "Arendt's Theory of Political Action" (chapters 1-3), begins to trace this development by highlighting the Greek difference between the public (the realm of freedom) and the private (the realm of necessity). There would be nothing novel in reminding readers that Greek thinkers largely rejected political activity as principally concerned with protecting life (Hobbes), preserv-

ing property (Locke), or promoting the general welfare (Bentham, Mill). Villa utilizes Arendt to demonstrate how Greek thinkers distinguished praxis (spontaneous action) and poiesis (productive activity). The result of this distinction was an elevation of the contemplative life over all other forms in order to save the appearance of order and stability amidst the flux and irregularity that, alas, is constitutive of everyday life.

What is instructive about Villa's analysis to this point is the easily overlooked continuity between ancient Greek and modern conceptions of action. While the steady and systematic conflation of all forms of action as productive in nature marks the origin of modernity, the formative figures of this development—Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes, and Locke amongst others—were all far too steeped in Scholastic ways of thinking to comprehend fully the manner in which this development would affect the public realm. Modern thinkers conflated action and productive activity, thereby exacerbating—not originating—the dilution of “the epistemological ground for distinguishing between the public and the private, freedom and necessity, plurality and univocity” (p. 24). Villa maintains that only by identifying the irreducible differences between types of activity can we begin to restore “dignity to politics, integrity to the public realm, and value to human plurality” (p. 20). With a sense of urgency he asserts that such a recovery “is essential to delimiting a public realm distinct from the state and the economy, and to preserving a space for freedom and the expression of plurality” (p. 25).

The remaining chapters in the first part of the book set the stage for Arendt's explication and defence of the public realm. Villa suggests that a critical deployment of Aristotelian praxis through an Arendtian lens releases from their instrumentalist moorings concepts such as freedom, authority, autonomy, sovereignty, and power. A proper account of action would assess actions not on the familiar basis of individual motives (e.g., a good will wills good acts) or the consequences that result (e.g., rewards or punishments, approbation or disapprobation) but rather from the greatness actors achieve. A different standard thus emerges, one distinct from the maximization of wants and desires, the efficient allocation of natural (and of late “human”) resources, the reification of History and the Homeland, the demands of social justice, or individual autonomy. Villa's insights on greatness were, however, weakened by a lack of clarity regarding the relationship between greatness and arete or excellence. Given the recent neo-Aristotelian revival of “excellence” (consider Alasdair MacIntyre's “goods of excellence” and “goods of efficiency”), a more systematic

comparison of these two (different? similar?) categories would have assisted readers intrigued by Villa's otherwise lucid analysis.

To affirm Arendt's commitment to plurality and “publicly oriented individualism,” Villa employs her “performance model” of action to counter the hostility to pluralism in the Western tradition of philosophy and political theory. Arendt, fully aware of the effects of Nietzsche's obliteration of publicly defensible standards for conduct, incorporated an idiosyncratic aspect of Kantian philosophy within her performance model of action. In place of the historicism of Nietzschean politics, Arendt retains the Kantian imperative of “disinterestedness” found in his theory of aesthetic judgment, one which respects the faculty of judgment yet avoids a drastic Platonic distinction between “mere” opinion and Truth. When political judgment is viewed as a kind of taste judgment rather than a winner-take-all contest between truth claims, it circumscribes the political “by reintroducing the connection between plurality and deliberation, by showing how the activity of judgment can, potentially, reveal to an audience what they have in common in the process of articulating their differences ... The Kantian conception of taste judgment reopens the deliberative space threatened by agonistic action, in a way that makes consensus, not the assumed telos of political debate, but at best, a kind of regulative ideal” (pp. 106-107).

The second section of the book, entitled “Arendt and Heidegger” (chapters 4-6), allows readers to appreciate the gap that separates Arendt not only from Aristotle and Kant, but from Nietzsche as well. Arendt appropriated Heidegger's existential-ontological approach but divested herself of his residual subjectivism in order to do justice to the phenomena of political freedom, action, and judgment. Here Arendt exploited insights derived from Heidegger's emphasis upon finitude, contingency, and worldliness as structural components of human freedom; his conception of human existence as disclosedness or unconcealment; and the distinction between authentic and inauthentic disclosedness. These themes are discussed in this part of the book with Arendt's hierarchy of human activities, her conceptions of political freedom and action, and her ontology of the public realm. The most significant Heideggerean contribution—or at least that which receives the most attention by Villa—is the distinction between authentic and inauthentic activities.

The central question for Arendt “is whether the world built by *homo faber* provides a stage for authentically disclosive (revelatory) action, or remains simply the site of

productive comportment” (p. 139). Arendt adamantly maintains that political action can be a true “space of disclosure” if we overcome the “imperative of usefulness” characteristic of the public realm. Yet while Heidegger’s distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity structured Arendt’s thought, she also transformed the distinction. Her political theory rethinks actions and judgment in light of the collapse of the closure of metaphysics (the “death of God”) and thus is “antifoundational” or without grounds in the metaphysical sense. For Arendt, this is the only “authentic” manner by which to respond to the collapse of modernity and the concomitant crises of authority and judgment.

Villa spices his analysis with many pertinent examples from Arendt’s works to underscore these crises. Yet the one most appropriate (and perhaps most familiar) is her discussion of Eichmann and his role in the Nazi regime. How could a disarming and dense individual such as Eichmann partake in Nazi atrocities? Villa examines Arendt’s and Heidegger’s antimodernism in order to explain how our age, which began with such a promising outburst of human activity, may in fact end “in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known” (p. 173). It is not instrumentality as such that is responsible for the degradation of the world and the devaluation of humanity. The problem lies more specifically “in the generalization of the fabrication experience in which usefulness and utility are established as the ultimate standards for life and the world of men” (p. 199).

The medium of technology with its “limitless instrumentalization of everything that exists” is a concern shared by both Arendt and Heidegger. Modernity’s *homo faber* was superseded by postmodernity’s *animal laborans*. The technological automaton undergirding (or superimposing upon?) the “labouring” as distinct from the “fabricating” man promotes the mass behaviour of the “worldless” *animal laborans*. The modern Cartesian subjectification of the real combined with the technological instrumentalization of politics made possible a historically specific form of estrangement which is “supremely problematic.” As Villa ominously notes, “[w]here the instrumentalist considerations of *homo faber* or the needs of life dominate, the serious play of politics devolves into administration, coercion, or violence” (p. 204).

The third section of the book (chapters 7-8) addresses the implications for political theory of the Heideggerean view of the public realm as the domain of inauthenticity and subjectivity. This final section will be of great interest to those animated by the debate surrounding the role and place of the “political” in Heidegger’s philoso-

phy. From an Arendtian perspective, Heidegger’s avoidance of a political theory of action is indicative of his unpolitical approach to activity; from the perspective of Arendt-inspired critics of Heidegger such as Habermas, the suppression of praxis is the product of Heidegger’s antipolitical impulse. Heidegger thus appears either “as an irrationalist voluntarist whose existentialism leads to a politics of will, or...as a kind of ascetic priest who denies the efficacy of human action” (p. 212). Villa examines this exegetical debate to demonstrate how Heidegger’s thought can be helpful in our rethinking of the political.

Villa brackets the conclusion that fundamental ontology necessarily entails a repudiation of the public sphere in order to focus on the consequences for political speech and action that flow from Heidegger’s devaluation of communicative action. The pressing issues that emerge are, for example, the role of politics in the early Heidegger given his relegation of all Being-with-others as a “sphere of inauthentic dealings;” how politics might contribute to the realization of a more authentic form of community life; and the kind of speech that will facilitate this end. Heidegger’s adoption of a poetic model of disclosure, Villa maintains, ultimately distorts his conception of the political and contributes to the oblivion of praxis. It does so by perpetuating an organic (and Platonic) notion of community, one which follows from conceiving the state as harmonious or authentic artwork. Such a community or state simply is devoid of genuine plurality, for the poetic model restricts authentic political action to founding and preserving the state. As with all great works of art, we can attempt to restore the damage done by centuries of neglect, but we can never refashion or recreate such works.

The key to a better understanding of Heidegger, Villa argues, is to resist altogether the temptation to characterize his philosophy as “apolitical” (with Arendt) or “antipolitical” (with Habermas). Such prejudgments block access to whatever resources Heidegger may hold for the recovery of praxis in a post-Nietzschean, technological age. As Villa explains, Heidegger’s “linkage of the technical sense of action to the productionist ontological prejudices of Plato and Aristotle enables us to see the problem of action in its full depth for the first time. Heidegger’s history of metaphysics reveals a teleocratic paradigm for action that stretches from Aristotle to the present. Once the implications of this continuity are absorbed, it is no longer possible to simply juxtapose action with technique, or communicative with strategic rationality. With Heidegger, it is the philosophical delimitation of politics that becomes the problem” (pp. 245-46). It is precisely Heidegger’s abandonment of the project of “authentic ac-

tion” and his preference for rethinking poiesis and action as “poetic revealing” which represents his greatest contribution to the oblivion of praxis. Ironically, Arendt enables us to see the political implications of this development through her radicalization of the praxis/poiesis distinction.

Arendt’s theory of nonsovereign, agonistic action fully breaks free of the effects of first principles in political philosophy by liberating action from the rule of grounding principles and pre-given ends. In its place she develops a phenomenology of action and a narrative approach to the closure of the public realm, an approach designed to keep the memory of an agonistic public sphere alive. Here Villa praises Arendt for recognizing how “a new appreciation of spaces and practices not typically viewed as political becomes possible. Moreover, the Arendtian liberation of action throws the antipolitical, not to say the inhuman, consequences of the [Western] tradition’s conflation of artistic and political categories into sharp relief” (p. 247).

The modern drive to bring together self-formation and self-production—to forge a community from ideals of justice or right—culminates in the totalitarian will to self-effectuation, the will to the self-creation of a people characterized by full actualization or complete self-presence. Villa replies that the “only community capable of achieving such self-presence is one from which plurality, difference, mediation, and alienation have been expunged: a community, in other words, that is not a political community at all” (p. 248). By suppressing the Heideggerean (and apparently Western) impulse to “artistically disclose,” Arendt keeps alive an appreciation of the spontaneous, plural, doxastic, and agonistic dimensions of politics.

While the strengths of this book assuredly outweigh any weaknesses, there are some claims by Villa that need addressing. He begins by noting what Arendt’s theory of action can accomplish: how her theory identifies freedom not with an individual’s life-style but with acting together for the sake of the community; how the “sharing of words and deeds” is the medium through which the self is defined; how a community—“a shared world, a common space of appearance”—is the fundamental condition for the achievement of selfhood; how only through political action is our sense of justice—of what we owe to our fellow beings and to those who come after us—both articulated and preserved. Villa argued that in the absence of a “community sense” justice becomes mere legality, and that Arendt’s theory of action would recover a realm of shared purposes central to the formation of a

political association.

The “shared purposes” outlined above were not clearly articulated, and the reason for this lack of clarity may result from the twofold way in which “agonistic” politics can be understood. On the one hand, it can mean a conception of politics wherein participants strive to defeat each other through argumentation. Here agonistic politics is akin to the great national game festivals of ancient Greece. While such a conception would facilitate the doxastic contest Arendt wishes to encourage, perhaps the emphasis on victory implied in conceiving politics as a contest may very well encourage the return of fierce battles over truth that Arendt wishes to avoid. On the other hand, agonistic politics may evoke images of ancient Greek drama and the conflict between principal characters. Politics conceived in this manner is still a struggle and a conflict, but perhaps this conception leaves more room for interplay between different and competing themes and players.

Setting aside the question whether there is any substantive difference between conceiving politics either as a game or as a drama, the agonistic conception of politics Villa wishes to retrieve presumes that political activity occurs on some kind of open and public stage. It is here where a few basic (but essential) concerns arise. We need to know whether agonistic politics requires all of its actors, as it were, simply to be on the same stage, or whether they must all read from the same script. Are the actors encouraged to improvise, or are they to follow a preselected script? Perhaps more importantly, who will direct and finance the play? Since these are the kinds of questions that “confused” Heidegger when he entered the public realm, some responses—however contentious—are required so that a reader is not left wondering whether Villa’s political prescriptions are not in the end more harmful than the disease.

There was another troubling aspect of Villa’s account revolving around his direct challenge to firmly held liberal preconceptions about the nature of politics. A reviewer naturally must guard against criticizing an author for failing to write the kind of book he or she desires to read. However, since most, if not all, postmodern scholarship is a response to liberal politics, it is now incumbent upon those who critique liberal individuality to engage recent scholarship on liberal values, purposes, and goods. From the revised understandings of nineteenth-century liberals such as J. S. Mill and T. H. Green to the insights of contemporary liberals such as Jack Crittenden, William Galston, and Stephen Macedo, many contemporary liberals have attempted to address the weaknesses

of liberalism exposed by postmodern critiques.

To this end, liberals have reassessed individuality in order to uphold critical self-directedness, to explain the ability to master languages, and to redefine the relationship between individuality and community. The reconstruction of the liberal self by contemporary liberals was occasioned by the dreadful picture drawn by many of liberalism's critics concerning the purportedly liberal conception of society in which the goal is to fulfil exclusively private ends on the basis of relationships considered to be purely instrumental, and whose characteristic is the possession of individual rights that have priority over societal needs. Clearly it remains an open question whether contemporary liberals have overcome the weaknesses exposed by postmodern critics—and this is hardly the place to make such an assessment—but we will never truly know so long as these recent developments in liberal scholarship are largely ignored.

These critical comments aside, Villa's interpretation of Arendt and Heidegger is a valuable contribution to the literature on the political effects of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's postmodernism—especially for those uneasy about the place of political action in our age. Anyone interested in effectively presenting to a wider audience the principal actors of and themes surrounding modernity and postmodernity will benefit by carefully considering Villa's case. Political scientists in particular should find this book invaluable insofar as it reaffirms the inherent integrity of politics as an activity and the distinctiveness of the field itself.

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