

Dissertation: The Politics of Otherness and Distinctness. Rethinking Democratic Agency

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Abstract:

My project is concerned with the crisis of democracy as a crisis of the category of the political sphere at large. I argue that the current crisis of democracy is to be understood with Arendt's notion of the crisis of the political, understood as a loss of the public sphere as the site of political action due to its marketisation. Arendt's thought allows for an analysis of the antipolitical moments that brought about and perpetuate the decline of a vibrant public sphere. However, such a vibrant public constitutes the necessary bulwark against authoritarian threats. My aim is twofold; first, drawing on an analysis of antipolitical moments inherent in political positions from right to left, I construct a conceptual matrix to assess political positions along two axes. To a horizontal dimension of inclusion and exclusion, I add a vertical axis based on two categories laid out in Arendt's *The Human Condition*: distinctness and otherness. These account for the difference between an understanding of political subjects' identities as politically enacted and dynamic (distinctness) or as a natural fact and hence fixed (otherness). This matrix is a tool for assessing different conceptions and positions based on their political and antipolitical features. Second, I argue that notions of politics based on implicitly or explicitly antipolitical premises (otherness or exclusion) are unfit to yield democratic agency. Thus, I make a normative case for a politics avoiding those pitfalls; a politics of inclusion and of distinctness. It entails inclusion as liberation from otherness on the one hand and enables people to freely engage in political action as distinct persons rather than bearers of collective identity on the other. Liberation and freedom are to be regarded as cornerstones of democratic politics. In order to defend this notion of politics on normative grounds, however, it is necessary to read Arendt against Arendt. My reading turns against her ontological commitment to strictly separating the public and the private and to essentialising otherness, which prevent her from acknowledging liberation as a political matter. Since otherness breeds exclusion and vice versa, only a politics rejecting exclusion as well as otherness is safe from sliding back into authoritarianism. The antipolitical aspects of exclusion and otherness come to the fore on the level of individuals as well as in society at large. To properly address the crisis, it must be recognised as one of democratic agency; to counter it demands repoliticising the unduly privatised and enabling passive customers to become active citizens.