

Saggio filosofico di Stefano Murru

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Traccia 2 - Ambito politico

La pluralità umana, condizione fondamentale sia del discorso sia dell'azione, ha il duplice carattere dell'uguaglianza e della distinzione. Se gli uomini non fossero uguali, non potrebbero né comprendersi fra loro, né comprendere i propri predecessori, né fare progetti per il futuro e prevedere le necessità dei loro successori. Se gli uomini non fossero diversi, e ogni essere umano distinto da ogni altro che è, fu o mai sarà, non avrebbero bisogno né del discorso né dell'azione per comprendersi a vicenda. Sarebbero soltanto sufficienti segni e suoni per comunicare desideri e necessità immediati e identici.

H, Arendt, *Vita activa. La condizione umana*, 1958.

What is mankind? At first glance, it might appear to be a stupid question, one that does not need to be answered, as it is clearly self-evident. We constitute a species, as much as giraffes or tigers do. In that sense, we are certainly unique and distinct from all other animals that inhabit the earth. However, this is only a scientific understanding of our nature; it lacks depth, as it disregards what truly makes us different from wild animals.

Namely, the political and cultural dimension, exclusive to us. In this essay, I will expand on Hannah Arendt's remarks on human plurality and what exactly are its consequences on political life.

Plurality, states Arendt, is the condition for there to be discourse and action.

Discourse is a uniquely human faculty. Scientifically speaking, it is made possible by the high IQ of humans, which is the highest in the animal realm. IQ, broadly speaking, explains our capability for logical reasoning; speech, given the nature of grammar, upon which discourse is based, is a logical faculty. Discourse permits us to communicate, whether that means expressing a fact, a situation, or asking a question. The latter is especially curious, because even if other animals present some rudimentary form of communication, it is generally limited to basic and instinctual responses to external events. For instance, it could be signaling incoming danger to the rest of the group, or it may be a response to pain as a way to receive assistance and help. Asking a question, however, involves internal thinking. Firstly, there is the awareness of a lack of information. Secondly, there is the acknowledgement that other members of one's tribe or group are different from oneself, and may know that information. The latter step implies that there is also an understanding of what it means to know something. For one to be able to ask a question, speech also has to be grammatically structured, mainly to distinguish it from a statement. The latter does not necessitate a response, while the former (which is still a kind of statement, as it states a fact, one's lack of knowledge) does require one. Asking questions is what differentiates simple, instinctive speech from rational discourse, and it acts as a request of communication, of the establishment of a mutual relationship. If all humans were the same, acted the same and knew the same things, there would not be a need for it, as everyone would have the same thoughts. However, if all humans were radically different from

each other, it would not be possible to even communicate, as for it to happen at least two human beings must share a logical framework; communication requires a common mean.

Action, meanwhile, is not restricted to the human dimension. All animals act to survive: some go hunting, others escape from the hunters. However, what is unique to the human species is that we are able to think in advance, hoarding resources that are not needed at the present moment but that may be of utility in the near or far future; squirrels apparently do the same thing when hoarding nuts, but they do so out of pure instinct, as it is the only thing that they do in advance. It is remarkable that oftentimes we make plans that extend far beyond our lifetime.

This is done because we recognize that our successors are a kind of continuation of ourselves, so even though an action seemingly does not personally benefit us, we proceed on doing it anyway; when working on these projects, we identify in a collective, and our individuality becomes inseparable from it. Under this vision, singular persons are intrinsic parts of the whole, and the whole almost gains its own conscience; it develops, acts and strives toward a goal as if it was a single being or person. When we act so in advance, we recognize that all humans are part of the same collectivity, and that is made possible by the fact that we are, in some sense, equal.

Therefore, humans are both different and equal at the same time. Arendt calls this "human plurality": mankind is neither a kind of homogenized, indistinct primordial soup nor a fragmented mass of totally different beings. But how does this relate to the political dimension?

Liberalism signified a rupture with the past; the concept of inalienable human rights, though certainly enormously beneficial to the development of society, has contributed to the atomization of society itself. Before its advent, the familial and collective well-being were prioritized over the individual's freedom; well-being was also identified with stability and the preservation of the current social order. Therefore, society was stratified, split into different classes based on their social standing and their role inside the collective. The peasants contributed to the production of food, the merchants to the circulation of money, the aristocracy to the defense of the country, the priesthood to spiritual cultivation and the upholding of religious rites. If there was a king, he acted as the unifying pole of all the social classes. Political rights were reserved to the nobility, the aristocracy, or both. Based on where one was in the social hierarchy, one had different duties and different privileges.

Aristocratic duties were considered to be more important or more noble, thus they were granted more privileges than the lower classes. As the aristocracy devolved with time, only the privileges remained, while none of the duties. They had power and riches but idly spent the day without contributing to society in any sensible way. The merchant class, which at this time, that is, around the 18th century, developed into the bourgeoisie, saw the aristocracy as nothing more than leeches and parasites. The bourgeoisie's values were radically different from aristocratic ones: they valued labor, productivity and enterprise. During this century, the philosophy of liberalism spread throughout the entirety of Europe like wildfire, and at the end of the century the French Revolution took place, which swept away all feudal privileges of the aristocracy. It was, as a matter of fact, a bourgeois revolution: revolutionaries affirmed the values of liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Freedom becomes the highest value, even superior to upholding the social order.

It is under this framework that we should see contemporary society, as liberalism is the dominant system, at least in the West. Human rights are strictly related to the inherent dignity of the individual. Society is thus seen as fundamentally being composed of individuals, not of social groups such as the family. The individual is paramount, and the preservation of its rights is the most important role that the State should have; in principle, the State is seen not as the unifier of a country, but rather merely as a

supervisor, which must not infringe on the freedom of the individual. The main issue with this is that it may fail to place enough of an importance on the collective dimension, instead favoring individualism and one's egoistic self-interest; a fundamental function of the State has been essentially rejected, because it was seen as illegitimate. This is especially problematic in modern liberalism and its connection to neoliberal globalism. Society is seen as a sum of persons; more specifically, it is composed of atomized individuals that simply live next to each other. Our system sees man as a cog; it is thus stripped of its dignity while at the same time formally affirming it. Likewise, consumerism is promoted as one's freedom to buy and to make use of whatever item one may desire, while instead reducing man to a consumer, a mere step in the economic production process. Consumerism generates a condition in which we establish an unhealthy relationship with objects; they become a fetish which is almost venerated, as it gives us pleasure or perceived happiness, even if temporary. However, we do not want this happiness or pleasure to end, so when an object is excessively old or it is obsolete, we are encouraged to throw it away, and instead spend more money to either buy the same thing or its newest, better form. This process of buying and throwing items away continuously establishes what I previously called an unhealthy relationship; it is unhealthy because it acts as a substitute for human relationships. When we feel like we are part of a collectivity, whether that is the family, the country or mankind itself, we recognize that we are not so different from everybody else. If, however, we can only see people as atoms and we favor rugged individualism, we inevitably erase most, if not all direct relationships between human beings. Thus, we either try to re-establish them through an indirect mean, such as a screen (we can see this taking place with social media, not to mention all of the parasocial relationships that people develop with celebrities that do not and will never know them) or we create new ones with unresponsive and inevitably unsatisfying objects. Regarding the latter, other than with consumerism, we can see a quite severe form of this with people who fall in love with AI chatbots; these act as pseudo-subjects rather than pure objects, as they may seem to actively engage in a true relationship with the user.

Relationships are what makes us acknowledge that humans are actually equal. They act as bridges between seemingly incompatible banks of a river. By emphasising the importance of the individual over everything else, we fail to comprehend this. This is why it seems that we cannot communicate with each other anymore; because as Arendt states, "if men were not equal, they could not understand each other, nor could they understand their predecessors, nor could they make projects for the future and predict their successors' necessities".

The fact that we tend to value immediate pleasure and needs over long-term planning and that we do not think about leaving a better situation for our successors as much as our predecessors did, is strictly correlated to our flawed view of the human being.

This viewpoint is not universally held; if it was, I could not point out concrete examples of its consequences on society. In particular, one may believe that if we admit that liberalism with its emphasis on human rights is, in some way, flawed, then the only logical conclusion is an unjust society or even a dictatorship. I believe that to be a compelling argument; however, we should not think that just because a system has worked well before and brought great development it will keep being like this forever. Society must progress to survive, and compromises need to be made. Nowhere is it written that if we want to overcome some aspects of liberalism we need to discard all of its good aspects. Human rights such as to life, property, housing, free speech and happiness are obviously essential to a civil society. Others may say that neoliberalism has brought enormous development to our society. While that is certainly true from an economic standpoint, is that really all that there is to quantify quality of life? The

problem that I attempted to describe is psychological and social more than economic. We cannot completely disregard that aspect of society, but holding it as the most important one is one of the reasons behind the issues described in the rest of the essay. Man is not a consumer, nor a cog in a machine; we are people, individuals that are still part of a group. One's family, one's town and one's country are all as important as one being a human, and thus part of mankind.

In conclusion, mankind is plural. It is both equal and diverse. However, today we put far too much emphasis on the latter part, to the point that we are disintegrating all of our human relationships.