

The Offensiveness of the Freedom to Begin.

Feminist Critique – Feminism Critique

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I.

In Hannah Arendt's political thinking, being able to begin is the very essence of the human and the political. Being newcomers and beginners is what makes people human and capable of action. To act is being able to begin.¹

What makes man a political being is his faculty of action; it enables him to get together with his peers, to act in concert, and to reach out for goals and enterprises that would never enter his mind, let alone the desires of his heart had he not been given this gift – to embark on something new.²

Freedom to begin is the possibility of newcomers³ to “call something into being (...) which did not exist before”⁴, the initiative with which people intervene in the world is like “a second birth in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance.”⁵ Each new beginning is something unique, not predictable, not calculable – like a miracle, at which human beings are gifted. “And this (...) is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world, which is given with the fact of birth, it is as if God's act of creation is repeated once again in every human being.”⁶

The beginning must be visible in the public sphere. Only here can freedom have an impact⁷ and a real, tangible and shared world emerge. Action manifests itself in political communities constituted in the spirit of equality,⁸ i.e., with a desire to create, secure and maintain freedom. One driving force is the “happiness of the public sphere”, which Arendt describes in words that characterize the dynamic nature of the political. We are talking about the energetic *joy* that accompanies all things new, the irresistible pleasure in the ability to make a fresh start⁹, to appear, to speak, to be seen, exposed, heard, to be compared and distinguished, to let the extraordinary shine.¹⁰ Those who take *the risk of the public realm* are “a gift to mankind”¹¹, they begin a new series, they have to overcome mistrust, reveal themselves to others, prove themselves to others, stand up for their own opinions.

1 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago 1958, Ch. V. Action.

2 Hannah Arendt: *On Violence*, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich 1969, 82.

3 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., pp. 156s., 165s. Hannah Arendt: *The Crisis in Education*, in: *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Classics 2006, 171.

4 Hannah Arendt: *What is Freedom?* In: *Between Past and Future*, op. cit., 150

5 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., 157.

6 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., 158.

7 Hannah Arendt: *What is Freedom?* In: *Between Past and Future*, op. cit., 162.

8 Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, Willing, Harcourt, Brace & Company 1971, 203.

9 Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, Penguin Books 2006, 214.

10 Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, op. cit., 59f.

11 Hannah Arendt: *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt, Brace & Company 1968, 74.

New political beginnings were often linked to the status of homelessness and uncertainty, to the deeds and suffering of strangers¹² who wanted to create and secure a place for themselves in the world, and to those who remained invisible, “to whose injured lives history had added the insult of oblivion”.¹³ To the men of the American independence movement, the humiliation of living unseen and disappearing without trace seemed less bearable than poverty.¹⁴ Arendt's concept of the public sphere proceeds from republican premises that give primacy and autonomy to the political over biopolitics and the violence of material interests. Beginning presupposes a kind of freedom that is independent of hardship and destitution. The criterion and touchstone for voluntary action is the decision to want it.¹⁵ Beginning is thus more than the realization of something that is historically “ripe” and already there in a state of potentiality.¹⁶ Using this conception of new beginning, Arendt challenges the view of history that degrades beginners to mere executors of historical necessities and regularities, thereby stripping action of its imponderability and spontaneity, i.e., its freedom.

II.

Today seems to be a bad time to think about beginning. The search of the homeless for a home assumes that uncontrolled places that welcome the beginnings of the placeless still exist. The status of homelessness seems to be documented in the very fact that the homeless are granted new beginnings only at the expense of joining the ranks of those who have long been at home, at the expense of assimilation – a home withering of the world that pares beginning down to a brief burst of hope. It is too late – one might think – the project impossible, the world choked, planned, derailed, wasted. What we once thought was a beginning and a new path was swallowed up by the violence of a norm that feminism has labelled patriarchal. Feminism seems to be failing as a result of a prefabricated world and consequently of the actors themselves, who are both its product and its mirror. Instead of setting something new in motion, beginners were repeatedly forced to stay in line or become its tendrils. Ingeborg Bachmann spoke of beginning as entering existing games and footsteps. All of us are born into given frames, preconceived ideas, materialized ideologies, traditional languages – into a manufactured world that is not a wasteland, that would still be suitable for the creation of a new world. Even the child makes no new attempt, it falls into the trap, imitates, hops on board. It does nothing for its new beginning:

I raged against myself because I had forced my son into this world and did nothing to free him. I owed it to him, I had to act, to leave with him, to move with him to an island. But where is this island from which a new man can found a new world? I was trapped with the child and condemned from the start to go along with the old world. That is why I dropped the child. I let it fall out of my love. This child was capable of everything, but not of leaving, of breaking the vicious circle.¹⁷

12 Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, op. cit., 206.

13 Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, op. cit., 59.

14 Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, op. cit., 56.

15 Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, op. cit., 6, 25.

16 Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, op. cit., 30.

17 Ingeborg Bachmann: *Alles*. In: *Werke*, Vol. II, Munich 1982, 138-158, 147.

In view of such doubts about experience, Arendt's tirelessly similar statements on the freedom of beginning seem somewhat formal and of a general nature. From whose perspective then and by what standard is a beginning a beginning, from whose perspective the mere mass and variation of norms of injustice in a new guise? This is not just about the old conflict between necessity and freedom, but about power structures that repeatedly prevent, abort or corrupt beginnings. Revolutionary movements and newly constituted communities tended to be new beginnings solely for those who belonged to them. Blacks, for example, were excluded from the American independence movement, and women from the French Revolution, those lessons in new beginnings. Once women had begun to act publicly for their cause, an ideological machinery was immediately set in motion to thwart the beginning and justify the non-beginning.

For those whose beginnings failed, Arendt's positions have the semblance of provocations. Does beginning involve a narrowing of the gaze, lack of concern, and randomness¹⁸ that cannot be put down to the enthusiasm that keeps action awake and free of disturbance? It is precisely the beginners in their blinkered and oblivious state who drag traditions of power into the new. Beginning claims the right to forget, to omit, to sort, to unify. It craves the unambiguous assertion and setting, not a multi-dimensional view of things. It cannot tolerate plurality.

Feminist critique is in the process of approaching the burdens of power that pervaded its beginnings. This applies, for example, to the concept of "self-determination", insofar as the self of members of the dominant culture behaves in an egocentric and ethnocentric manner with little regard for the "relationship to the others". The idea of self-determination contains no such reference to this relationship. Neither is it a coincidence that Western and white feminism took the liberty of excluding the history of racism, colonialism, anti-Semitism from its own baggage. On seeing the gender scandal for the first time, the beginners' gaze made it an absolute and universal injustice, a fundamental and primordial injustice that renders every other injustice secondary or nullifies it. This gaze steered clear of all modes of domination that did not oppress the beginners themselves. It was not pure negligence, but indicates where the new beginning did *not* break the chain, where it became a systematic fictitious beginning. These observations, which not only apply to feminism, question the naivety of newcomers and the purity of beginning, testify to its burden of complicity with ruling ideologies and ruling oblivion.

Feminist critique of domination creates awareness about the "Who": who can begin? And it is far from easy to accept Arendt's position that freedom to begin is a talent not everyone has. The desire for public or political freedom "for its own sake" can "arise only where men are already free in the sense that they do not have a master."¹⁹ The rebellion of the belly is only open to soup logic.²⁰ The hatred in the oppressed is "politically essentially sterile" because it is incapable of even grasping, let alone realizing, the central idea of revolution, which is the foundation of freedom.²¹ With this position, however, feminism would be forced to drop the majority of women as potential beginners, as political

18 Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, op. cit., 198.

19 Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, op. cit., 116.

20 Hauke Brunkhorst: *Brot und Spiele? Hannah Arendts zweideutiger Begriff der Öffentlichkeit*. In: Ursula Kubes-Hofmann (ed.): *Sagen, was ist. Zur Aktualität Hannah Arendts*. Wien 1994, 153-167.

21 Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, op. cit., 116.

animals. For one thing, *hatred* of the mutilating effects of colonization and continued repression is a permanent condition for many, albeit a hatred that can add brightness to the mind, insofar as it comes from an understanding of the damage caused by patriarchal culture, from the unconditionality of a passion that embodies injustice awareness, in other words, a category of judgement. At the same time, it is well known that women worldwide are among those whose permanent impoverishment is broadly the result of material deprivation, of mass exclusion from money and goods, education and protection. They expect little from public visibility. If they are still driven to begin, it is probably due to a desire to be free of deprivation than to the “happiness of publicity”.²² Feminist critique has just begun to trace the hierarchizations inherent in the tradition of Eurocentric concepts of freedom, the defining gestures that seek to categorize and censor the actions of those who are “still” subject to a master and not yet ready for freedom, or to predetermine certain virtues and topics of public discourse. Arendt's concept of freedom and publicity, as the critique argues, sets standards for beginning that explicitly exclude those who have been weeded out and abandoned, those who are tired of experience and action,²³ from what is “actually” political, from the “actual” desire for freedom.

Arendt's model of an agonal public space is thus repeatedly rejected as an elitist project.²⁴ Its orientation towards the Greek polis ties it to the exclusion of the dependent – slaves, women, workers, inhabitants with no civil rights. Beginning is confined to the chosen few who present themselves in public: free men. Since its inception, feminism has struggled to expand the public sphere through invasion by the dependent. Not much could be expected from their beginnings, however, insofar as beginning would first and foremost seek public fame and competition. In any case, women need a motive other than the public pursuit of happiness if they do not want to abandon the public sphere as quickly as possible.

The history of the women's movement reflects this contradictory process between passionate beginnings and disappointed retreat. The initial impulses of both the first and the second women's movement were political, they testify to the dynamic will for public action, a “happiness” that no private occupation can ever provide, to the loss of authority of a mono-gendered world in which women are supposed to be indispensable in private, but superfluous politically. The impulse to “lighten the public sphere”, however, remained at best an initial push. As long as *liberation* is at stake, the public sphere remains a provocative field in which the undesirability of the newcomers' emergence is confirmation of the gap and the urgency of their entrance. The problem begins afterwards. Beginning usually ends *before* freedom. It seems that the “*abyss of freedom*”²⁵ was less open to women's movements because they had little access to the political opportunities and dangers of this experience. Achieving *freedom* was practically out of their hands.

Many small founding acts remained relegated to self-determined marginal places, where a stunting of the political often crept in. The political movement became a social one, the social became psychological. Turning to the social question made the movement

22 bell hooks: Longing, liberation struggle and cultural critique. In: Desire and Resistance. Kultur - Ethnie - Geschlecht. Berlin 1996, 28.

23 bell hooks: Postmodern Blackness. In: Desire and Resistance, op. cit., 46.

24 Seyla Benhabib: Models of 'Public Space'. In: Self in Context. Gender Studies. Frankfurt/M. 1995, 98.

25 Hannah Arendt: The Life of the Mind, op. cit., 207.

social work, turning to self-suffered discrimination made it therapeutic. The newly found concept of politics, which declared the private to be political, made it legitimate to shift problems to one's own project, one's own home or one's own heart and to treat the political on the scale of the private sphere: a *desire for unity and identity* – we are the same, we belong together; *hierarchy of values* – we are better than the others; *exclusion* – the others do not belong to us.

Feminist beginnings threatened to succumb to the kind of failure that removes the element of suspense from the consequences of its actions. Even if stories that chronicle the beginning continue to exist, their often dreary ending is still *part* of the story and little suited to triggering chain reactions in their successors.²⁶ Money also frustrates beginnings. After all, beginning is not only an interpersonal process, and “space” not merely a beautiful metaphor, but a material thing that costs money. Women's search for space was meant in concrete terms. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the state, which had previously financed many a start-up, withdrew its support from numerous places in the West. This led to a surge in the old victim arguments, in distancing from the public sphere, in the shifting of problems to sites of informal communication.²⁷ In the end, beginning falls prey to the crumbling of the public arena, whose triviality seems to appeal to certain mentalities only, or at least not to those who take the liberty to deviate from prevailing opinions. We have long been accustomed to despising the fame and fortune of the public sphere. Descriptions of public happiness today seem more like metaphors of vanity. The public sphere has long since been stripped of its naïve joy of appearance. It has lost its promise of happiness.

Not only because the public sphere has become a market where lies are bought and sold²⁸, or because it flattens things for intellectuals.²⁹ Publicity is turning more and more into a bad theatre of opportunism and individual self-exposure. Instead of serving dialogue and understanding, it prefers to showcase the novelty and sensationalism of individual actors, their enuretic outpourings or their wear and tear. And opinions are formed as prejudices to which audiences – as a result of their identification with public figures – are exposed without previous experience. Incidentally, the internet makes the almost total elimination of sensory experience possible, i.e., it leads to disembodied communication between people who reveal nothing about themselves. They can remain anonymous – protection for some, for others more training in how to lie. More importantly, however, the radiance of the word “beginning” perishes in the face of the weeding out that repeatedly followed beginnings; it remains closed to the disappointed and the inconsolable, who experience the futility of looking for a place and for public action. Even those who dismiss the implied objections as common and vulgar will have to admit that the vexation that speaks from the objections is not easy to dispel with Arendt.

²⁶ Hannah Arendt: *The Life of the Mind*, op. cit., 169.

²⁷ Sedef Gümen: Die sozialpolitische Konstruktion 'kultureller' Differenzen in der bundesdeutschen Frauen- und Migrationsforschung. In: *Beiträge zur feministischen Theorie und Praxis*, H. 42, 1996, 77-89.

²⁸ Hannah Arendt: Bertolt Brecht, in: *Menschen in finsternen Zeiten*, Piper 1989, 243.

²⁹ Hannah Arendt: Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio, in: *Men in Dark Times*, op. cit., 74.

III.

Despite their plausibility, these objections miss the core of Arendt's thinking. This first comes to light when the concept of beginning is linked to her analysis of totalitarianism. Only against this background does Arendt's mistrust and confidence "in the humanity of all human beings" gain in significance. Beginning is making friends with a world that is destructible. Arendt's yes to the public sphere is a result of the trust in humanity that she insists on experiencing by talking to people, a trust that requires the presence of *others* and, at the same time, demands more than experience of the present. It also calls for that populated space of the past where pearls are to be found, something Arendt indicates constantly – a passing on in spatial juxtaposition, not merely in temporal succession. Justification for this trust is non-negotiable, it is beyond proof, it can only be communicated, visualized, remembered. In her eulogy for Karl Jaspers, Arendt said:

There is something fascinating about a man's being inviolable, untemptable, unswayable.³⁰

And this label also applies to herself. Arendt's confidence, which survived the experience of Nazi rule and all superficial consolation, is completely unsentimental and realistic, and does not follow the rules of political correctness. It is directed at people who become *political*, thinking, acting, beginning people, not at constructs of unity that political theory and practice have repeatedly elevated to the status of revolutionary subject, general victim or general perpetrator – *the people, the proletariat, the oppressed, the poor, the Blacks, the Jews, the white man, the woman*, etc. – a bunch of collective singulars that presupposes a totalizing view of things. They roll the categorized into *one*, treat them as *one*, and the latter behave as *one* and become *one* with themselves and their environment. Arendt demonstrated a concrete result in her Eichmann analysis. The singular renders the diversity of human beings and the human superfluous, and it is not only the rulers who are involved in this. Arendt's greatest mistrust was of the "mob that believes only in race" and hopes for profit, the alliance of mob and capital³¹ and mob and elite³² that was instrumental in the emergence of imperialist and totalitarian movements – an alliance in a worldview that measures the value of human beings by their price³³ and "divides humanity into master and slave races, into higher and lower breeds, into blacks and whites, into citizens and a force noire".³⁴

Using the example of the French Revolution, Arendt's critique is directed at the construction of *volonté générale*, which was supposed to activate compassion for *the people, the unfortunate*, but ultimately morphed into weapons; at single-number concepts such as *the overall interest, the individual interest*³⁵, *the self-will, the shifting of political problems to the internal enemy no. 1, hypocrisy*. Arendt demands more from beginners than beginning, namely, that they prevent the *depoliticization* of a new beginning that occurs when action sheds its interpersonal character and attempt at

30 Hannah Arendt: Karl Jaspers: A Laudatio, in: *Men in Dark Times*, op. cit., 76.

31 Hannah Arendt: Über den Imperialismus. In: *Die Wandlung*. Heft 8, 1945/46, 650-666.

32 Hannah Arendt: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Meridian book 1958, 326-340.

33 Hannah Arendt: Über den Imperialismus, op. cit., 656.

34 Hannah Arendt: Über den Imperialismus, op. cit., 653.

35 Hannah Arendt: *On Revolution*, op. cit., 68.

freedom, when action becomes violence, i.e., non-action, totalitarian thinking, i.e., ideology, one-dimensional thinking, i.e., non-thinking.

Arendt's mistrust of political communities and movements that refer to their members' selfsame identity or subsume individuals under totalizing identities corresponds to feminist theories that are labelled "post-modern" and see a totalitarian gender politics reflex in the construct of "woman"³⁶. The initial feminist assumption that women's oppression had a worldwide, universal and identical basis in the ubiquitous structure of patriarchy was linked to the attempt to forge *women* into a seamless category and include every single culture in the all-encompassing androcentric system. This is an act of appropriation that repeats the self-expanding gesture of androcentrism and, under the same pretext, colonizes cultures that might challenge this totalizing concept.³⁷ Thinking with Arendt does not lead away from a feminist critique of domination, but deepens it by breaking profoundly with the hegemonic concept of identity that destroys political space by destroying plurality.

Beginning is not a moral category in Arendt's thinking. It has its quality and meaning in beginning itself. Its value remains unknown. Arendt considers it disastrous when beginning is degraded with the warning reference to its *inevitable entanglements* in predestined webs of history and power, that is, with the verdict of being a pretence.³⁸ The disappointment that old realities of injustice are inherited in our beginnings exposes an ideology of cleanliness, a purism that expects "autonomous" and untainted, ultimately unrelated action from beginners and from the beginnings an ominously redeeming socio-hygienic effect. For Arendt, the limitedness of beginnings is also a mirror of their *limitedness through the power of plurality*³⁹, through the assembly of other beginnings, standpoints, manifestations of power already in the world. These are not simply cause for complaint, but challenge beginners to relate to each other and to create their own power. Enmeshments are the natural conditions of beginning. All beginnings become entangled when they weave a thread into an existing web of relationships. This metaphor, which understands "entanglement" not as faulty tangling but as acting into an existing web, has something comforting and dampening at the same time. What is done cannot be undone, not even by the giant powers of forgetfulness and confusion. The world made by human beings absorbs the unexpected, and it cannot be replaced.

Struggling with the fragilities of beginning exposes our attachment to modern notions of sovereignty: it confuses sovereignty and freedom, and it measures the value of beginning by its effectiveness and thus by the standard of making things. In Arendt's understanding, this is the "degradation of politics"⁴⁰ that harms action and makes a pretence of knowing the consequence of action in advance. "We never know what will

36 See Judith Butler: *Das Unbehagen der Geschlechter*. Frankfurt/M. 1991. Seyla Benhabib/Judith Butler/Drucilla Cornell/Nancy Fraser: *Der Streit um Differenz. Feminismus und Postmoderne in der Gegenwart*. Frankfurt/M. 1993. Christina Thürmer-Rohr: *Denken der Differenz. Feminismus und Postmoderne*. In: *Beiträge zur feministischen Theorie und Praxis*, H. 39, 1995, 87-97.

Sabine Hark: *Deviant Subjekte. Die paradoxe Politik der Identität*. Leverkusen 1996, 145-170.

37 Judith Butler: *Das Unbehagen der Geschlechter*, op. cit., 33-34.

38 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., 210-211.

39 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., 180.

40 Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition*, op. cit., 206.

come of it.”⁴¹ The uncertainty that follows from the incurable plurality⁴² of the world implies a rejection of domination. It is manifested in the argument against the production of shavings that fall in the course of all acts of production and distinguishes them from action, it abandons the intentionality of action and speech as being able to and wanting to by force. Perhaps it takes half a lifetime or a whole lifetime to understand, to want and to appreciate beginnings without a visible effect.

Arendt has little interest in the inner state of beginners. She does not ask what effect it has when they, whose impetus is unlikely to lie in knowing the transience of action, experience their beginning in its fragility rather than in solid regularity and the generation of power. Arendt is far more interested in action itself. Insofar as a totalitarian system has not eliminated it, action cannot be destroyed from the outside or from above, but only through the loss of action brought to bear by the beginners themselves, through loss of the political.

Power “springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.”⁴³

Beginning cannot fail unless it loses the interpersonal. It is not visible in the product or victory, but in a *realm of appearance* in which people show themselves by what they *do*. This is by no means a victim perspective. And anyone who tries to approach things from the victim perspective, victim identification and victim idealization will be at cross purposes with Arendt. She speaks from the perspective of potential actors, and they, because they act, are not victims.

Hannah Arendt does not provide a system of thought, but rather material for thought exercises, methods of rethinking, a passionate and emphatic attempt to understand and to communicate. Feminism that sees itself as a critique of domination and violence experiences shocks and jolts, and regains an impetus that it loses as soon as it becomes essentialist and turns into identity politics. Scouring Arendt's work for statements about “*the woman*” is somewhat unproductive, but it does suggest that she considered “gender” an extra-political fact that cannot be overlooked – a given, not made.⁴⁴ There is no reason to share this opinion with Arendt. Reflection that adopts her way of thinking revolves around quite different questions: the question of loss of action and the question of the use of freedom. Beginning and building power require a different kind of interest and a different interpersonality than is to be expected from the construct of “woman”. Beginning demands a non-familial, world-related interpersonality and thus a radical break with the continuum of colonization, of making people equal and superfluous.

41 Hannah Arendt: Fernsehgespräch mit Günter Gaus. In: Ich will verstehen. München 1996, 70.

42 Zygmunt Bauman: Moderne und Ambivalenz – Das Ende der Eindeutigkeit. Hamburg 1991, 126.

43 Hannah Arendt: The Human Condition, op. cit., 179.

44 For example, Hannah Arendt: The Human Condition, op. cit., 60-65. Hannah Arendt: On Revolution, op. cit., 49.