

Plurality, Party, Politics

Joel Olson

Plurality

Politics, as Arendt notes, rests on the human condition of plurality. “Politics is based on the fact of human plurality. God created *man*, but *men* are a human, earthly product” (*Promise of Politics*, 93). Plurality means more than racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and sexual diversity. It means the utter uniqueness of each human being in every way. As Arendt argues, plurality has a “twofold character of equality and distinction” (*Human Condition*, 175). All humans are the same, but we are the same in our utter distinctiveness.

Politics rests on this twofold character of sameness and distinction. It is the practice by which unique human beings come together to speak and act in ways that preserve their equality and plurality. The end of politics is freedom, which does not mean a set of rights so much as participation in the public sphere. Such participation presumes conflict among participants but also a spirit of friendship through which individuals are articulated into a community. The challenge of politics is to engage unique human beings with each other in a common space where, with a “fiercely agonal spirit” (*Promise of Politics*, 41), they can conduct their shared business.

Yet there is a peculiar, overly individualistic character to Arendt’s notion of politics. For her, the participant in politics is a hero. He acts with others but he is ultimately an individual who enters the public sphere unencumbered by group ties. The advantage of this heroic notion of participation is that it understands politics as courageous and vigorous participation, welcomes dissent, and encourages individuality and spontaneity. The disadvantage is that it sees politics as the act of an unencumbered individual. This “male heroic epic performance” of the unencumbered individual can ultimately undermine political participation, since each act by the hero seeks to be the last word rather than to invite further deliberation (Coles 2008, 115).

But political action is ultimately collective, not individual, as Wolin points out (Wolin 1983: “Hannah Arendt: Dem and the Political,” 4). In focusing on the unencumbered male hero as the model of participation, Arendt’s theory of politics fails to take into account struggles between collectivities (classes, races, nations, etc.) as an essential aspect of politics. Her categories do not permit recognition that humans are organized in socially constructed groups that may reproduce relations of domination and privilege. (She perceptively analyzes totalitarian domination and the domination of the social, but these affect everyone in basically the same way.) Nor do they recognize the basic insight of Marx in “On the Jewish Question”: while all states claim to rule in the interests of all, they actually rule in the primary interest of a part. (Even ancient Greek politics was centrally concerned with civil war between parts of the polis—the rich and the poor—as Thucydides shows us.) To ignore struggles among groups is to accept the state’s own mythology that it represents the entire population.

Arendt argues that a politics concerned with the interests of a particular group rather than the entire public sphere will ultimately destroy the latter. (The French and Russian Revolutions are her key examples of this.) Yet politics is necessarily

concerned with conflict among groups and the structures of power related to them. This was a concern for Pericles' age no less than our own. Arendt's theory ignores this central role of parties in politics. Her notion of politics thus needs to be revised to account for the inevitably partisan nature of politics.

Party

A party is simply a group that deliberately acts on its behalf. It includes political parties, of course, but also interest groups, civic associations, nonprofits, mobs, social movements, and any other collectivity that acts in its interests. A party may act to protect gun rights, lower taxes, eliminate trade barriers, worship in its own way, sell cookies, feed the homeless, protest injustice, assert one's right to express one's sexuality, or fight for its rights (including the right to party). A party is not just acted upon but *acts*. For example, subordinated groups are not a party by virtue of being oppressed but by collectively resisting that oppression. Slaves become a party when they resist the masters. Queers become a party not by virtue of their structural location of oppression in a heteronormative power structure but when acting against it. A class-in-itself is not a party but a class-for-itself is. Collective action and struggle are thus built into the concept of party.

The word "party" comes from the Latin *partitus*, which means "divided into parts," as well as the Old French *partie*, meaning part of a larger unit (OAD, OED). The word is in the same family as part, partial, partition, partisan, partake, and participation. The word "participate" comes from the Latin *part* (part) + *capere* (take), literally, to take part in an action or a condition, as in "She was a party to the whole sordid affair" or "He partakes in the Maoist practice of criticism/self-criticism."

As this etymology suggests, *party is built into the nature of participation*. Participation is the practice of sharing in *part* of the whole. To "take part" in politics is thus always partial, even if its aspirations are universal. Consequently, participation inevitably raises the possibility of partisanship. Participation is not *necessarily* partisan, of course: one can form a party of beer drinkers that holds nothing at all against whiskey sippers. One may take part in a work party or a hunting party, which naturally presumes those who aren't working or hunting, but without necessarily being antagonistic to them. Nevertheless, participation always suggests at least the possibility of conflict among parties. When such conflict occurs, that is politics.

The essence of politics, then, is plurality, participation, and *party*. Politics is less an agonal contest among heroic individuals than a struggle among parties or factions to establish their perspective in a plural public sphere. In this mobilization a party seeks to make its perspective representative of the entire public realm; the part seeks to represent the whole. In this way, the universality of the public sphere derives from the conflicts and coexistences of parties.

Arendt must meet Madison—or Marx. To say that "history is the history of class struggle" and "every class struggle is a political struggle" (*Communist Manifesto*, 493) is simply a way of saying that history is the history of conflict among parties, and that such conflicts constitute politics. Arendt interprets Madison's notion of faction to mean plurality or a "multitude of voices," but this ignores his central point that factions imply

conflict and his central intention for the Constitution to regulate the potentially destructive effects of faction, especially between rich and poor (*On Revolution* 93; *Federalist* #10). Humans are distinct and plural but they also group into parties, and politics concerns the struggles among them.

Despite criticisms by Arendt, Honig, Brown, and others that Marx is anti-political, his premise that politics consists of a clash among parties is the agonal core of his political theory, a core that is potentially more radical and democratic than agonal models that, following Arendt or Nietzsche, assume conflict among heroic individuals rather than parties. The key distinction between Marx and Arendt is not Marx's tendency to turn politics into administration, as the above critics claim (and with some validity), but Arendt's distrust of politics as conflict among parties. By the criterion of party, Arendt looks less agonal, more Platonic, more liberal, and less *political* than she is usually considered to be.

Democratic politics

If politics is participation, plurality, and party, then democratic politics consists of the mobilization of party to achieve freedom and equality for all. (By freedom I mean direct participation in public affairs and the full development of our capacities through creative labor, while equality means the ability of all individuals to fully participate in public affairs.) Democracy aspires to rule for the good of all (Wolin calls this "the possibility of commonality," p. 18), yet historically democracies have also always served the interests of a particular party. As Ranciere notes, this is built into the very etymology of democracy: rule by the *demos* simultaneously means rule by the people and rule by the poor. This is the paradox of democracy: it seeks to achieve freedom and equality universally, but its practice is always only partial. Democratic participation involves the effort to install the interests and worldview of a particular group as the interests and worldview of everyone. (Perhaps this is why Arendt doesn't use the term democracy: she dislikes the fact that in democracies the public good is achieved by the mobilization of parties rather than by the speech and deeds of heroic individuals. Yet democracy has never been Periclean, even in the age of Pericles.)

Creating a polity that rules in the benefit of all rather than for a particular class or faction is the fundamental challenge of democracy today. This wasn't the Greeks' problem because they openly acknowledged that the state would serve the interests of some (citizens) but not others (slaves, women, foreign-born). It wasn't the early liberals' problem because they presumed that the state, in serving the interests of property owners, would end up serving the interests of all, in a trickle-down fashion. This challenge really emerges with Rousseau and Marx and the American Revolution. All of them were uniquely concerned with how to make the "possibility of commonality" a reality. How is the democratic community constructed? How can it be achieved? How can it create freedom and equality out of plural, unequal beings, while still respecting that diversity? What institutions does it require—the General Will, communes, council, federations? How will the community deliberate with each other—which is to say, how will members disagree with each other? How will various political communities relate to each other? These are the vital questions that Rousseau, Marx, and Americans sought

to work out, in their own ways. (Rousseau did so by trying to create participation without party, which makes his theory less relevant today. But Marx and the Americans accepted the relationship between party and democratic participation, though they theorized it in different ways.)

Yet even as it strives to rule for the benefit of all, the partial and partisan nature of democratic politics means it is inevitably a system of winners and losers as well. Democratic citizens have an equal right to participate but not everyone wins the political contest. As Danielle Allen points out, democracy requires sacrifice. Those who lose a decision yet assent to it have in a way sacrificed, and “their sacrifice makes a collective democratic action possible” (29). Democratic losers can be a minority groaning under majority tyranny or a majority suppressed by elite domination. Democracy must acknowledge citizens’ sacrifice by finding ways to protect losers while rewarding winners. This reality is one reason why democratic theory is typically so pragmatic. A pragmatic viewpoint encourages moderation and discourages rigid ideological thinking, which enables citizens to see losing as occasional rather than built into the structure and functioning of democracy itself.

The problem is that losers in the history of American democracy have often been entrenched losers; that is, they lose so consistently that the rules of the game must be rigged against them. Such persons lose not occasionally but structurally. Sometimes this means consistently losing at the polls; sometimes it means not even being allowed to get to them. Either way, entrenched losers produce zealots.

The zealot and the paradox of party

The zealot in a democracy steps into a political climate that is partial and partisan, yet also pragmatic. Zealots reject pragmatism because they see themselves (or those they identify with) as entrenched losers who can no longer abide by losing. They thus act not only to defend their interests but also to challenge the rules of a rigged game. Zealots are willing to sacrifice—themselves and/or others—so that the group they represent will lose—and sacrifice—no more.

To do so, the zealot seeks to intensify the partisan and sweep away the pragmatic. This makes zealots appear anti-democratic, since pragmatism and democracy are so closely associated, particularly in the American political tradition. Yet to be anti-pragmatic is not necessarily to be anti-democratic.

The zealot stands at one end of party, while consensus stands at the other. The zealot seeks to turn the public sphere into a Manichean arena of combat between friends and enemies in a struggle for hegemony. Those who seek consensus believe that conflict is unnecessary, that we can all be friends, and that the task of politics is to make it so. These poles reveal the paradox at the heart of party.

The paradox of party is that parties are the essence of politics *and* threaten to destroy the body politic. For there is no politics without party, but unrestrained partisanship can lead to civil war. The challenge of democratic politics is to enable a struggle among partisans without turning them into mortal enemies.

The zealot disregards this paradox. Her task, as she sees it, is to crystallize the tension between parties into a zero-sum conflict between friends and enemies. This is

another reason she often seems anti-democratic, yet her reason for doing so is to destroy the rigged game and establish a just one, which is a potentially democratic move. This maneuvering is the risk of fanaticism that acts in the name of the people: it must crystallize parties into friends and enemies in order to overthrow an unjust ethico-political order that produces entrenched winners and losers, but doing so runs the risk of destroying the agonial tension between parties that is the crux of democratic politics.

The zealot's frustration

The zealot seeks to create a new hegemony. Her aim is to make her particular worldview universal, i.e., the new “common sense.” Her uncompromising nature requires that she demand the precise implementation of her principles, but the plural and partisan nature of politics, as well as the twists and turns of history, virtually guarantee that an exact implementation is impossible, short of sheer luck or terror. She is thus bound to be frustrated, even if she achieves her goals in large measure. Her unwillingness to compromise, if it leads to victory, must inevitably lead to a dissatisfying one. This is why zealotry tends to peter out (due to the zealots' exhaustion) rather than come to a deliberate end. Garrison is virtually the lone exception to this (but not Garrisonianism, which did peter out as Kelly and Phillips and the others lost direction after passage of the Thirteenth Amendment).

But while the zealot may inevitably fail on her terms, she can nevertheless be influential in shaping the ethico-political framework within which we act. Zealots almost never get what they want, but they can shape the very ways in which we think and act politically. It is for this reason that we must take zealotry—and its peculiar approach to politics and party—seriously.