



# Defending a Common World: Hannah Arendt on the State, the Nation and Political Education

Peter Lilja<sup>1</sup>

Published online: 11 July 2018  
© The Author(s) 2018

## Abstract

For a long time, one of the most important tasks for education in liberal democracies has been to foster the next generation in core democratic values in order to prepare them for future political responsibilities. In spite of this, general trust in the liberal democratic system is in rapid decline. In this paper, the tension between the ambitions of liberal-democratic educational systems and contemporary challenges to central democratic ideas is approached by reconsidering Hannah Arendt's critique of political education. This will be done informed by her analysis of the tension between the concepts of state and nation. By showing how education, depending on its role as a tool of the state or the nation, may be a fundamental requirement for the establishment of a common world or the most effective tool for its destruction, the paper argues for the need to understand Arendt's educational thinking in light of her wider political analysis. Rather than downplaying the provocative aspects of her critique, the paper argues for the need to use it as a starting point for thinking again how education may become an emancipatory undertaking capable of disarming contemporary threats to human plurality and freedom.

**Keywords** Arendt · Education · Freedom · Nation · Politics · State

Education can play no part in politics, because in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated.

the word “education” has an evil sound in politics; there is a pretense of education, when the real purpose is coercion without the use of force.

Hannah Arendt

---

✉ Peter Lilja  
peter.lilja@mau.se

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education and Society, Malmö University, 205 06 Malmö, Sweden

## Introduction

We live in politically troubled times. After a few decades of discussions on the declining importance and significance of nation-states in light of increasing globalization and economic interdependence, nationalist sentiments seem to be back with a vengeance. The “America first”-rhetoric of the Trump presidency, the increasingly authoritarian governments of Russia, Turkey and Hungary, the growing influence of right-wing populist parties in countries such as the Netherlands and France, and the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union, clearly indicates that nationalism has returned as a significant force in domestic as well as international politics. At the same time, as is highlighted by Peters (2017, 563), “[t]he Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 is *post-truth* defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’”. Mistrust in political and economic elites are growing in many countries (Foa and Mounk 2017). Faced with the complexities and uncertainties of our time, people seem to long for conformity, for simplicity and the already familiar. As the challenges of a plural world comes closer to home, our ability to ‘bear with strangers’ seems harder to uphold, and the “easy solutions” of populist nationalist movements, with their black-and-white view of the world, suddenly appears as an appealing strategy for keeping things the way they have always been.

What is interesting about the tendencies described above is that they do not occur only in countries lacking a strong democratic tradition, but within the heartlands of western liberal democracy as well. Since the end of the Second World War, one of the most important tasks for education in liberal democracies has been to foster the next generation in line with the foundational values of democracy in order to prepare them to resume responsibility for our political future. Even so, today, an increasing number of people are questioning the benefits and values of a liberal democratic system (Foa and Mounk 2017). In light of this contradiction between the ambitions of education in liberal democracies and contemporary political developments, one of Hannah Arendt’s most controversial educational arguments becomes interesting to revisit, her insistence upon keeping education separated from politics. In doing so, she rejects a tradition within western educational and political thought dating back to Rousseau within which she argued that “education became an instrument of politics, and [within which] political activity itself was conceived of as a form of education” (Arendt 2006a, b, 172). The idea that political problems may be solved through the education of children results, for Arendt, in that they are denied their own future role as political agents, and indicates, above all, the inability or unwillingness of adults to take responsibility for the world into which they have brought their children. This is, however, an argument that has met severe criticism, not least from within the field of philosophy of education (e.g. Schutz and Sandy 2015; Biesta 2010). Arguing that the ideas set forth in her essay “The Crisis in Education” concerning the separation of education and politics are contradicted in other parts of her writings, critics often focus on what they conceive to be the untenable educational objective of keeping children sheltered from “the merciless glare of the public realm” (Arendt 2006a, b, 183). Biesta (2010), for example, accuses Arendt of being a “developmentalist” and that she, in her analysis, relies too much on “an unquestioned distinction between ‘child’ and ‘adult’” (567). Referring to Arendt’s thinking on freedom and plurality, he argues that education should not be thought of as a way of learning to exist politically (after education), but should instead be focused on how children, as well as adults, may learn from the fact that they all, already, exists politically. Schutz and Sandy (2015) claim that Arendt’s insistence on keeping education and schools

out of the public sphere may be problematized in light of other texts in which Arendt seems to indicate a less sharp distinction between the private and public spheres of human activities. While children should not be exposed prematurely to the conflictual “public stage”, they argue that the “arena of deliberative friendship”, may provide a limited public space where children may be exposed to and prepare for acquiring the skills required for public engagement already in schools. Against Arendt, they argue that this is vital “so that children will be better prepared to act on the public stage, to emerge from relatively safe spaces for dialogic collaboration into ‘the bright light’ of the realm beyond those spaces, for this is where some of the most significant struggles in our society take place” (Schutz and Sandy 2015, 38).

For the most part, critics of Arendt’s ideas concerning the relationship between politics and education focus on her clear separation between the public and the private sphere of human activities, set forth and elaborated on in her seminal work *The Human Condition* (1998), published more or less at the same time as her essays on education. Education, for Arendt, becomes somewhat problematic because it does not fit easily into either the public or the private. In her own words, it is an “institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all” (Arendt 2006a, b: 185). As such, education aims towards the public world but must be conducted in line with the governing logic of the private. It is by criticizing the sharp division between the public and the private, and as a consequence, between adults and children, that Arendt’s critics argue for the unsustainability of her insistence on keeping education separated from politics.

However, it is the aim of this essay to argue that Arendt’s position on education may be better understood from the perspective of her wider political analysis. Following her thinking on politics and freedom in relation to the tension she underlined between the ideas of the state and the nation, this essay aims to show how education may comprise a fundamental cornerstone for the existence of a common world, or one of the most effective tools for its destruction. Accepting the challenge of Arendt’s provocation to our present day understanding of political education, this essay argues against attempts to dismiss her position as conservative or outdated based on its views on the hierarchical relationship between children and adults. Instead, it argues that, in light of Arendt’s political analysis, schools—institutional/legal frameworks that “house” education—play a significant role in the overall structure necessary to secure the existence of a common world. This requires, however, that schools, and the educational activities that they entail, are sheltered from the public world of politics in order to be able to safeguard a space of plurality where new generations can be introduced to the world *as it is* and not as some ideology or political movement would want it to be. Only in such an environment can children be offered the chance to develop the understanding and judgment necessary for becoming free political actors capable of taking responsibility for the future of our common world.

### **The Walls of the City: Politics, Freedom and the State in Arendt’s Political Thinking**

Arendt never developed a clear-cut theory of the State. According to Waldron (2000), many associate her political thinking with something rather antagonistic to the kind of formal politics normally envisioned in discussions of the role and function of a state apparatus. He argues that “commentators notice that in her darker moments, Arendt put all her faith in what some might call irregular or extra-political action—the spontaneous councils of citizens that spring up at moments of crisis or revolt—and that she doubted whether even

the most promising constitutions could contain the human impulse to freedom” (Waldron 2000, 202). However, at the same time, Arendt’s ideas of politics seem to be dependent upon some kind of structure that guarantees a public space where political action may take place. As is argued by Waldron (2000), Arendtian politics is in need of “housing”, of some kind of artificial structures that “are more rigid and durable than the actions they accommodate, and which exist as features of a world that men have made for themselves” (Waldron 2000, 203).

The political, as Arendt understands it, may, in general terms, be described as “a human activity, that has plurality as its condition, in which actors interact to create, shape and change the shared world” (Topolski 2015, 32). Schaap (2007, 65–66) summarizes Arendt’s ideas of politics and the political as follows:

According to Arendt, then, politics is public. It is possible only where there is a public space within which men and women can appear before each other. Politics is also free. It is only by acting and speaking together politically that men and women actualize their freedom to initiate something new. Moreover, politics is intersubjective. Only when men and women are equally free to interact with each other can an intersubjective reality be constituted from the plurality of perspectives that each individual brings to bear on the world that they share in common. If politics arises out of the plurality of perspectives that individuals bring to bear on the world, the political refers to the disclosure of this world as common to them.

Politics, in other words, is fundamentally about the possibility for men and women to appear in speech and action in order to construct a common world. For this to be possible at all, the public sphere must be defined by equality. However, such equality, which is by no means a “natural” thing, is not to be understood as sameness. Having access to speech, for Arendt, is to live “as a distinct and unique being among equals” (Arendt 1998, 178). However, as Topolski (2015, 58) claims, “one of the ‘requirements’ of engaging with others in the public sphere is that one treats all others, and not just those with whom one agrees, as equals, although in reality, and beyond the *polis*, there is no such equality.” If the political is based on the human condition of plurality, which is all about difference, it necessitates the institutionalization of a kind of artificial equality in the political realm in order to “create a place and space where we appear to each other as a ‘who’ and not as a ‘what’” (Topolski 2015, 59). In Arendt’s (1994, 301) words, “we are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights”. The public sphere, as well as the human condition of plurality from which it rises, is thus characterized by the paradox of equality and distinctiveness. As argued by Canovan (1983, 294–95), “what Arendt has in mind is a gathering of distinct and unique individuals moving about freely in the public space which they share [...], united by their mutual commitment to the institutions that contain and set limits to such public action, but with the opportunity to differ and to develop their own points of view.” However, if we are to be able to appear in this plurality, we need the framework provided by the fragile world of the human civilization. Arendt underlines this point in her reinterpretation of the *polis* as “[...] a space that is created between individuals, a space bounded and supported by the law, which is symbolized by the walls of the city” (Topolski 2015, 60). As Volk (2015, 252) elaborates:

For Arendt, the law is not the substance of the will to rule, but rather the formal-juristic description of relationships of consent. This makes it possible for her to differentiate forms of consent and support, and that means forms of speaking and acting

– and thus of power – according to whether they help to establish a space in which political ‘acting with one another’ is possible and human plurality can be expressed and experienced politically – or not.

This line of reasoning is taken up by Roy Tsao (2004, 106) who argues that Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “[...] attaches paramount importance to the modern state’s dual function of integrating its diverse populations into a single body politic and upholding the rule of law for all.” The second aspect, concerning the role of the state as a guarantor of a rights-based legal order, taps into the argument by Waldron (2000) above, that Arendt’s vision of politics is in need of some kind of “housing,” able to function as “the walls of the city” behind which men and women may have the opportunity to appear in public. In relation to this, Volk (2015) argues that Arendt may indeed be considered as a thinker of political order, despite the fact that she never developed her own systematic theory of the state. For him, Arendt’s “thoughts highlight the importance of a durable, stable and free political order in and through which political struggle, debate and ‘acting with one another’ can happen, appear and be experienced”. Following from this it may be claimed that, for Arendt, the primary role of the state becomes that of guaranteeing, what Volk calls, an order of freedom. He goes on to argue that such political freedom, in Arendt’s view, is not about working against or beyond such an order, but about creating a situation where men may have the opportunity of making the experience of “having the power to act politically”. In order to be able to perpetuate such an experience of freedom, a corresponding institutionalized political order is required.

Freedom, for Arendt, is intimately connected to man’s ability to act. In her essay “What is Freedom?” she writes: “Men are free [...] as long as they act, neither before, nor after; for to be free and to act are the same” (Arendt 2006a, 151). In making this statement, Arendt departs from a tradition of understanding human freedom as dependent upon notions of free will. For Arendt, “something fundamental to the political realm is lost when freedom and free will, a Christian-inspired notion of freedom, are used interchangeably” (Topolski 2015, 61). Arendt highlights the close relationship between freedom and the ability to act by referring to the work of Machiavelli and his concept of *virtu*. With this, he underlined the public aspects of politics and of freedom as virtuosity, “where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it” (Arendt 2006a, 151). The virtuous relationship between freedom, action and politics is further underlined in the following quote from *What is freedom?*

Political institutions, no matter how well or badly designed, depend for continued existence upon acting men; their conservation is achieved by the same means that brought them into being. Independent existence marks the work of art as a product of making; utter dependence upon further acts to keep it in existence marks the state as a product of action (Arendt 2006a, 152).

Consequently, freedom, for Arendt, is not an internal quality in people or something connected to individual will but something that exists in “the space between human beings, which can arise only when distinct individuals come together, and can continue to exist only as long as they remain together”. For her, “[f]reedom has a space, and whoever is admitted into it is free; whoever is excluded is not free” (Arendt 2005, 170). By emphasizing the collective nature of freedom, the fact that it can never appear in human solitude, Arendt also distances herself from a contemporary liberal idea of freedom as being, above all, about “the absence of an authoritarian or tutorial state that tells us how to live and

what to believe” (Villa 2008, 2). Instead, she argues for a kind of positive freedom where to be free is to be released from the necessities of the life-process in order to appear in public through speech and action in the presence and company of one’s peers and thereby to contribute to the disclosure of a common world. In other words, freedom, in this sense, is not about being freed from politics, but to be given the opportunity to be included within a political framework, to be allowed a space and a place inside the walls of the city. In Volk’s (2015) reading of Arendt, political action can only be considered legitimate when it is conducted in the mood of “acting with one another”, or, in other words, when it takes into account the fact that human coexistence is defined by plurality. From this, Volk (2015) concludes that, for Arendt, the state’s primary function becomes to provide a legal order capable of ensuring and to perpetuating such rules in the execution of political opinion and decision-making. Political freedom, thereby, cannot exist outside such an order because it can only flourish where the ability to act is guaranteed by others. The law is a central medium by which to express such a guarantee and to stabilize man’s ability to act. The role of the state, thus, is to establish a law-governed space in which political “acting with one another” is possible and human plurality can be secured, expressed and experienced. The space of appearance made possible within such an order of freedom is, for Arendt, what enables the disclosure of a common world.

However, according to Volk (2015), Arendt’s conclusion is that the modern state, as a form of political organization, is unsuitable and incapable of realizing this order of freedom. This is because the ideas of the nation and national sovereignty, so prominent in the general understanding of statehood since the advent of the modern nation-state, in Arendt’s view, exclude the very idea of political freedom based on human plurality.

### **The Conquest of the State by the Nation: The Threat of the General Will**

In line with the discussion above, Tsao (2004, 125) has argued that for Arendt, “the rights conferred with membership in a formally organized political community are themselves indispensable for living a fully human existence, so much so that to lack them is to be deprived the very basis for human dignity”. In this, the fundamental role of the state becomes to safeguard the existence of a law-governed space where men and women may appear in public as political actors. Within the idea of the modern nation-state, however, a tension arises between two conflicting principles. The state, on the one hand, as has been argued, derives its legitimacy from being the supreme legal institution for the protection of all inhabitants of its territory, members and non-members alike. A nation, on the other hand, denotes an exclusive community composed of only those who belong by right of origin and fact of birth. Within a political community characterized by these conflicting principles, there is a constant risk for what Arendt (1994, 230) called “the conquest of the state by the nation”. With this, she warned about the risks of allowing national interests and sentiments to overshadow the state’s responsibility to secure the rights of every person within its territory. This threat is at the very heart of Arendt’s claim that the European nation-states of her time were unable to realize the institutional order required to secure political freedom. What happened in Europe, according to Arendt, was that the will of the nation became superior to the rule of law and that, therefore, the nation-state lost its legitimacy as a system of rule and turned into an “instrument of the nation” (Volk 2015, 133), since it no longer represented all those present on its territory. Consequently, within the order of the nation-state, the rights of man transformed into the rights of (national) citizens, resulting in the exclusion of everyone not included within a nationally defined community. As

a result, the excluded, or stateless, peoples of Europe lost not only their citizenship, but also their human rights and became what Arendt referred to as rightsless. For Arendt, to be rightsless is to be denied the most basic human right, that is, the right to have rights at all, and to belong to an organized political community (Tsao 2004; Gündođdu 2014). In other words, the failure of the nation-states to secure the rights of all those living within their territories resulted in a situation where large numbers of people were in fact denied a distinct place in the world as they were deprived of the possibility of participating in the disclosure of a common world constituted through human action. They were denied, so to speak, a place within the walls of the city. In a somewhat dramatic fashion, Arendt claimed that this meant that they were also expelled from humanity itself, as “a life without speech and without action has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (Arendt 1998, 176).

One of the problems Arendt identified with the nation-states of her time, then, had to do with their inability to handle the “minority problem” caused by the redrawing of national boundaries after the fall of the European Empires defeated during the First World War. One of the reasons for this inability, or perhaps, unwillingness, Arendt attributes to the dominant idea of national sovereignty as the very foundation of the modern nation-state. For her, sovereignty is the very antithesis to plurality. In her analysis of the American Revolution and the foundation of the American republic in *On Revolution* (2006b, 144) she emphasizes this claim by stating “[...] that in the realm of human affairs sovereignty and tyranny are the same”. Arato and Cohen (2010, 138) claim that for Arendt, “the discourse of sovereignty is deeply antipolitical” as “[i]ts unifying logic involves the attempt to conjure away the ineluctable contingency and plurality of political action and the public sphere”. Sovereignty, instead, is about rule and depends upon command and obedience, “it is an institution of rulership and political hierarchy, not equality” (Arato and Cohen 2010, 140). According to Arendt, sovereignty is the fulfillment of the freedom of the will, and, as such, it is always monological and based in a single representative political instance, be it the king or the people. One of the main problems with the idea of national sovereignty, for Arendt, is that it transcends the boundaries of the law, as it is often given as the very source of the law itself. According to Arato and Cohen (2010, 140), “[i]t makes no difference whether sovereignty is asserted by the king, by a parliament, or in the name of the people. In every case, this discourse unleashes the attempt to appropriate it by a single ‘representative’ instance and thus leads to tyranny and the abolition of politics and the rule of law”. Therefore, sovereignty does not only erase plurality, it is also incompatible with Arendt’s notion of freedom as participation in a political community. In *What is Freedom?* she writes:

Under human conditions, which are determined by the fact that not man but men live on the earth, freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they cannot even exist simultaneously. When men wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organized groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will, be this the individual will with which I force myself, or the “general will” of an organized group. If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce (Arendt 2006a, 163).

At the heart of Arendt’s objections to national sovereignty, thus, lies the fact that, for her, it is detrimental to the idea of human plurality as its goal is the creation of social conformity. As such, it depends upon a radically different idea of how men and women may be enabled to live together in freedom, most clearly expressed by Rousseau’s idea of a “General will”. For Rousseau, freedom means to be able to rule oneself. However, in order to make it possible for individuals to live together, and still be free in this sense, they must be

made to share a single will in order to rule themselves collectively. Rousseau argued that, when men and women “join together in the social compact they acquire a new collective personality, a ‘moi commun’, [...], and his most celebrated device for turning a multitude into one is the claim that this collective personality can have a single will” (Canovan 1983, 290). This is not to deny that individuals maintain a personal will of their own, but that, as citizens, they consider themselves as part of the entire political association in the sense that their individual wills need to be aligned with that of the larger collective. As a result, “the general will is always ‘right’ in principle, [...] because the citizens by definition desire what is in their interest, but it does not follow that they are always properly informed about that interest” (Scott 2012, XLII). Consequently, the people, in order to be able to fulfill its role, as a united sovereign political body under a general will, must be educated in public spirit and public morality. For Rousseau, the public coming-together of citizens is vital for the possibility of expressing such general will. Above all, it is in public assemblies that individuals, after close self-interrogation, and by casting their vote may assess the consistency of their individual will with the general will of the people. Villa (2017, 44) describes the logic behind this process as follows:

The goal of this self-examination is a critical awareness of where his private interest lies and where the public interest does. Indeed, it is only by summoning up, in the interior domain of conscience, the opposition between the citizen’s public and private interest that a sincere opinion on the conformity of a given law with the general will can be given at all. Should the majority vote no where I and several of my peers have voted yes, then it is clear that we, the minority, have made some mistake in the process of our self-interrogation. We acknowledge gladly the correction of our error supplied by the majority verdict.

The function of public assemblies, for Rousseau, is very different from the value ascribed to them by Arendt. For him, rather than being about people coming together to debate and exchange their different opinions and perspectives on various issues, they perform, in Canovan’s words (1983, 292), “a purely ritual function” with the supreme task of aligning individuals with the majority opinion, or, if you will, the general will of the people. From all of this it may be claimed that Rousseau in fact argued for a kind of un-political politics, at least in an Arendtian sense. As Canovan (1983, 291) describes it, for Rousseau “[o]nly the people are sovereign; only the General Will is the source of law [...]. But if the General Will is, in fact, a rational deduction of the implications of a single common interest, then there must be a right answer, and popular deliberations may not be the best guide to it”. From this, it may be argued, as does Canovan (1983, 292), that in this line of thinking, it is not the people who are sovereign, but the General Will itself, and that “[...] it will coincide with the views of individuals if and only if they are completely united”. In other words, the sovereignty of the General Will risks resulting in the abolition of what, for Arendt, constitutes the very foundation for politics and freedom; human plurality.

It is, thus, obvious that the existence or development of such a General Will “is possible only among men whose unity is not threatened by any serious source of diversity” (Canovan 1983, 290), and that “only those who identify with the general will and take it as the ‘supreme direction’ can belong to the citizenry” (Volk 2015, 49). Arendt’s analysis of the influence of Rousseau’s thinking upon the development of the French revolution led her to the conclusion that, since then, the idea of the nation is closely associated with a demand for homogeneity. One of the most severe consequences of this development, for Arendt, was that it resulted in an internalization of the political (Volk 2015, 140). As the quote by Villa above suggest, a prerequisite for being a citizen, in this sense, is that one submits to



‘the patriotism of the heart’, that is, that one’s own individual will is subdued to the general will of the nation. In Volk’s (2015, 140) reading of Arendt’s analysis of the French revolution, one important result of this is that Rousseau’s general will is “revealed as an emotional will”. As such, the general will, for Arendt, becomes impossible as a foundation for an autonomous legal sphere. Because “[a] law that has its origin in the national will is [...] neither reliable nor verifiable. Under the rule of the general will, the law thus becomes irrational” (Volk 2015, 140). For Rousseau, this was not a problem because he identified laws with the public interest, which was, by definition, always good. However, as argued by Volk (2015, 143), for Arendt, making the public interest, or the sovereign general will into a *potestas legibus soluta*—a power subject to no laws—meant that “the law [became] the plaything of political interests, and [that] the idea of justice [degenerated] into the mere command of the sovereign” (Volk 2015, 143).

The conquest of the state by the nation, through the establishment of national sovereignty as the ideal principle of rule, thus resulted not only in the weakening of the role of the state as a supreme legal institution, but also in the necessary abolishment of human plurality as the very precondition for politics and political action. For Arendt, this had catastrophic consequences, as it destroyed the space for men and women to appear as distinctive political actors engaged in the disclosure of the world that separates and relates us to each other. In other words, for Arendt, the sovereignty of the general will of the nation ruined the possibility for an order of freedom, required for the upholding of a common world.

### Education for a Common World: a Double Edged Sword

It is important to note that, as Levinson (2002, 202) claims, “‘The Crisis in Education’ makes it clear that education is an inherently political undertaking, although Arendt understands this to mean something quite specific”. As has already been stated in the introduction, Arendt depicts education as “the institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all” (Arendt 2006a, 185). Furthermore, she goes on to argue that “attendance there is required not by the family but by the state, that is by the public world, and so, in relation to the child, school in a sense represents the world, although it is not yet actually the world” (Arendt, 2006a, 185). In other words, the education of children is of outmost political importance; however, the educational activity in itself must be shielded from the true public realm for a number of reasons (Topolski 2008, 26). In this sense, what takes place within the context of education is not, and should not be, political, because it is not taking place within the realm of ‘the public’, and the educational activities themselves are not, and should not be, characterized by the kind of equality that Arendt finds necessary for true politics to be possible. Even so, education is an important tool for the state in preparing the new generation for political participation. However, as will be argued in what follows, this task must be handled with care, in order for education to be truly emancipatory and not a tool for conformity and political passivity.

In the very first pages of her essay on the crisis in education, Arendt tackles what she sees as the role of political education “in all political utopias from ancient times onward”, the fact that in order to bring about a new social order, one has to start with “those who are by birth and nature new” (Arendt 2006a, 173). In this sense, education, in whatever form or for whatever purpose, is only possible in relation to children. For Arendt, it is not possible to educate adults, as one of the very definitions of being an adult is that one is educated.

This is also one of her fundamental statements concerning the fact that education and politics should be kept apart. She writes:

Education can play no part in politics, because in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated. Whoever wants to educate adults really wants to act as their guardian and prevent them from political activity. Since one cannot educate adults, the word 'education' has an evil sound in politics; there is a pretense of education, when the real purpose is coercion without the use of force (Arendt 2006a, 173–174).

Education within the sphere of the political, in other words, is nothing more than a hidden strategy for depriving adult men and women of their political agency by someone who takes it upon him- or herself to exercise an interpretative prerogative in relation to the political debates or questions at hand. In this way, the public sphere becomes hierarchical and the equality necessary for enabling men and women to appear, speak and act within an order of freedom is undone. However, Arendt also warns about the dangers of educating children, if done in an effort to achieve an already decided political ideal. She states that “even the children one wishes to educate to be citizens of a utopian morrow are actually denied their own future role in the body politic, for, from the standpoint of the new ones, whatever new the adult world may propose is necessarily older than they themselves” (Arendt 2006a, 174).

One major reason for why Arendt claims that education must not be political then, has to do with the risk that a politicized education may turn into indoctrination and thereby jeopardizing not only human plurality, but also the promise of *nativity*, something that, for Arendt, constitutes the very essence of education (Arendt 2006a, 171). Nativity centers on the fact that humans are born into the world and it carries a very specific meaning within Arendt's political thinking. In her view, nativity is the central category of political thought since it contains the seed for action, by Arendt defined as the political activity par excellence. She writes, “...the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting” (Arendt 1998, 9). It is in order to protect the newness—this promise of unforeseen beginnings—of the rising generation that education must be shielded from the public sphere of politics. Consequently, to design education with the intention to teach children how they are to act in the future can only mean that “one wishes to strike from the newcomers' hands their own chance at the new” (Arendt 2006a, 174). Efforts to use education in order to provide new generations with pre-formulated ideas of an ideal future only succeeds, according to Arendt, in denying them their own future role as political actors. Therefore, it becomes a fundamental task for education to preserve this newness by protecting the child from the public world of politics until it is properly prepared, by way of education, to engage with it through speech and action in the context of human plurality and freedom.

This need to protect the newness of children is at the heart of another of Arendt's key arguments for claiming that education cannot be political, connected to her idea of education as a kind of transitional space between public and private. Schools are places where new generations are prepared for entering the world without having to leave the safety of the private sphere. While being directed towards the public, education takes place within the structure of the private sphere, characterized by authoritarian relationships between teachers and students or adults and children, fundamentally different from the equality characterizing Arendt's ideas of the free political world of the already educated. “Insofar as the child is not yet acquainted with the world, he must be gradually introduced to it;

insofar as he is new, care must be taken that this new thing comes to fruition in relation to the world as it is” (Arendt 2006a, 186). For Arendt, in education, we assume responsibility for both the life and development of the child and for the continuance of the world. Therefore, it is the role of educators to act as representatives of the world to the young and to assume responsibility for it although they did not themselves make it and may for different reasons wish it was other than it is. By taking up the task of standing as representatives of the world in relation to the new generation, teachers are placing themselves in a position of authority with the task of introducing the newcomer to the world. One of the most central parts of her critique of educational progressivism focuses on the “aspect of progressive education that is so eager to create the conditions of equality that it downplays the need for adult guidance” (Levinson 2002, 203). In an effort to create an equal society in the future, progressive educationalists argued for the need to turn schools into places defined by equality, between students as well as between students and teachers. In such a school, teacher authority became a threat to the overarching goal of social equality. However, for Arendt, equality between people is something that is a characteristic of the public sphere, where it must be artificially constructed and upheld through the establishment of institutions and laws. The private sphere, on the other hand, is defined by hierarchical relationships, not least between adults and children. In this sense, Arendt may very well be regarded as a “developmentalist” (Biesta 2010) in her refusal to regard children as political actors in the same manner as adults. Topolski (2008, 269) argues that, “children are not yet prepared to be actors; they must first learn to think and judge before they can begin to act” and, consequently, “the desire to begin to prepare children for the *polis* as soon as they have stepped into the classroom, while well motivated, has perhaps not been properly thought through”. However, if education consciously avoids authority as a defining feature of the relationship between children and adults, or teachers and students, children are exposed to another, and arguably more deceptive, authority, that of their own group. As Levinson (2002, 203) argues, “this ‘tyranny of the majority, pressures children to conform to the group. [...] Arendt regards action as that which breaks through conformity, and while there are always encouraging instances of children who manage to do this, the forces of normalization tend to prevail.” In other words, in an Arendtian sense, a non-hierarchical education, where children and adults are regarded as already equal political actors, runs a large risk of becoming detrimental to the very foundational educational task, that of preserving natality, or the future possibility of action that is dependent upon human plurality which is, by definition, the opposite of conformity. In Arendt’s view (2006a, b, 187), the result of her analysis in “Crisis” indicated that “authority has been discarded by the adults, and this can mean only one thing: that the adults refuse to assume responsibility for the world into which they have brought their children”.

As a response to progressive ideas of education as a political tool for creating a desired future, Arendt claims that “exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into an old world.” (Arendt 2006a, 189). For Levinson (2002, 203) this means that schools are truly educational only if they “manage to preserve newness while helping the young to understand the world that precedes and surrounds them”. From this, it becomes clear that for Arendt, education is about acquainting children with the world into which they have been born as newcomers. As expressed by Topolski (2008, 269), “educating thus aims to create stability, to be conservative, to tell (and hopefully in so doing inspire) the stories of the past and tradition”, so that children learn to know, as Arendt provocatively puts it, the world *as it is*. What she wants to highlight with this is, basically, an idea that teachers should focus their teaching on helping the students to get to know

the world in which they live, with its flaws and complexity. Once again, her criticism is directed towards progressive pedagogy that she claims was more focused on teaching children about how they wished the world would be, thereby underling the failure of adults to take responsibility for the world their children are to inherit. Arendt accuses the American school system of teaching children for life, instead of teaching them about the world. According to Levinson (2010, 479), what Arendt wished to emphasize is that:

An education in ‘the art of living’ is largely an education driven by necessity: young people will need to be prepared for the workforce, which means that they will need to learn to fit in [...]. The emphasis on conformity in schools work against the cultivation of the critical capacities that will be essential to prompting students to have the courage to go against the grain later in life.

In this way, for Arendt, schools become, above all, socializing institutions rather than educational ones, and this way of teaching children also indicate a loss of historical consciousness and a sign of a contemporary crisis in our attitudes toward the realm of the past (Levinson 2010). For Arendt, an education that aims to teach children about the world in which they live must be conservative and turned towards the past in order to emancipate them. The world, for Arendt, is constituted by the conditions of natality and plurality. It is a space that separates and relates us, and is both given to us and made by us, as we act in relation to it. “The conditions of the world *as it is* are given, but the world is also *as it is* made. As such, it is in need of constant care and upkeep. It is possible to turn one’s back on the world, but only at the expense of the world itself” (Levinson 2010, 476). Education must introduce the world, as it is given and as created by man, to children in order to give them access to “a wealth of knowledge that allows them to form ideas and understand the shared background that defines the public *ethos* in which they live” (Topolski 2008, 269). However, an education aimed at teaching children how to solve the problems of the future obliterates natality, just as an education aimed to socialize children to conform to demands made by the economy or some ideology destroys plurality. As these are, for Arendt, the fundamental conditions for a common world, an educational system that nullifies both natality and plurality also nullifies the possibility of such a world. Instead, education should help students come to grips with the world as it is and to “cultivate a particular attitude toward the world and a certain sense of agency in relation to the world” (Levinson 2010, 467). If this process is interrupted or high-jacked by politics, the necessary foundations for a common public world is at risk. As Arendt claims, because the world is inhabited by mortal men, it must, for its survival, be “constantly set right anew”. Through education, we may secure the possibility of such processes of setting right. However, as Arendt’s claims, “our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look” (Arendt 2006a, 189). In this sense, education may be a foundational requirement for the continuance of a common world, or one of the most effective tools for its destruction.

## Concluding Discussion

How may the above description of the relationship between Arendt’s thoughts on politics, freedom, state and nation help us understand her stance on education? As was argued above, the most important role of the state, from an Arendtian perspective is to create and

uphold an institutionalized order of political freedom, capable of securing men's rights to a common world where they may appear in speech and action in a context of human plurality. For this to be possible, so Arendt claims, the state must protect the non-political character of education. In "What is Freedom", Arendt argues that the state is a product of acting men and that it is dependent upon the continuing actions of its members for its survival. The potentiality of action, of new beginnings, is manifested in the human condition of natality, which is the very essence of education, making education essential for the survival of the state on the one hand, and thereby for the existence and continuation of a common world on the other. However, if nationalistic sentiments, or other political ideologies, are allowed to transform education into an instrument for the implementation of an already decided utopia, the promise of natality, of the human capacity for new and unforeseen beginnings are at risk. If this is the case, political freedom and thereby the very idea of a common world based on human plurality is in danger. As Levinson (2010, 466) argues, according to Arendt, "totalitarian terror was able to take hold because most people were so caught up in the business of life that they had simply failed to pay attention to what was going on around them. When they did finally wake up to the various ways in which the world had been cordoned off from them, it was too late". As has already been mentioned, the world, for Arendt, is in constant need of renewal and upkeep by men and women who are actively engaging it and renewing it through participation in the public world. If people in general turn their backs on the world, it will diminish, as will its power to relate and separate us, leaving us in a state of fundamental loneliness, which, for Arendt, is the most vital condition for the development of totalitarian movements.

It becomes clear, from Arendt's writings, that the kind of world-alienation that made totalitarianism possible, is alive and well in the post-world war world as well. One of the most obvious reasons for this, for Arendt, is the challenge to both the private and public realms posed by "the emergence of a new sphere of life called the 'social' that emerges in response to [the] idea that 'life' is the highest good and which values conformity at the expense of human plurality" (Levinson 2010, 476). According to Topolski, the social realm "emerges with the rise of liberal capitalist culture as a hybrid zone between the rapidly diminishing spaces of private life and public life [...] it swallows up the functions, values, and distinctiveness of both privacy and publicity" (Topolski 2008, 273). Consumer society fosters a passive relationship towards the world as "consumerism accustoms us to thinking about the world as something to be used rather than collectively shaped" (Levinson 2010, 478). It also transforms the public sphere of politics. As individualism becomes dominant, the idea of politics as a collective enterprise, dependent upon the active engagement of all citizens changes into something for a few professional politicians. It becomes a matter of government and bureaucracy, which, in Arendt's view, is the rule of nobody (Levinson 2010, 480). For our purposes, then, the primary problem with the emergence of the social is that it contributes to world-alienation by professionalizing the public realm, by valuing labor above (political) action and, thereby, contributing to a lack of public participation that is a fundamental requirement for the existence of a truly common world. Topolski (2008, 279) describes the detrimental effects of the social for our understanding of the importance of political responsibility and its relation to the role of education, as follows:

By allowing the world that we create together to be reduced, we are in fact denying our responsibility to the world, most often based out of self interest, an argument that is acceptable in the private realm but certainly not in the *polis*, which is a relational space. In this way, Arendt relates the lack of public participation to the crisis of education based on the blurring of the boundaries between the private and public to the

disadvantage of both children and the world. Thus, if education has ‘a political purpose,’ it is to remind citizens of the importance of education in preserving the space that is being swallowed up by the social and that it is their responsibility, and not that of children, to maintain this bridge for the sake of the world they share.

Read against the backdrop of her political writings, Arendt highlights education as a central activity in upholding the preconditions for a common world. As has been argued, the state’s role is to provide a legal framework that facilitates a space of equality where men and women, in their plurality, may appear in speech and action in order to take joint responsibility for the disclosure of a common world. Education, for Arendt, caters to the safe nourishing of the seeds for such actions, the natality of the new generation. From an Arendtian point of view, it is for the sake of political freedom itself that the primary role of the state in relation to education must be to shield it from the world of politics and to maintain and protect its non-political character.

Even so, history tells us that education have more often been used for quite opposite purposes. In the hands of nationalistic movements, education was an important tool for the conquest of the state by the nation, by effectively contributing to ideological conformity. In the end, in Arendt’s analysis, this contributed to the emergence of totalitarianism. However, Arendt’s analysis highlights that politicized education occurs also in democratic environments, and often with the best of intentions. The post-world war progressive movement’s efforts to use education as a means to create a socially just and equal society is perhaps the best example. As Arendt so forcefully argues, the result is conformity at the expense of both natality and plurality, enforced today by the relentless force of the liberal individualism of our consumer society. The political results are starting to show; decreasing participation in public life, widespread mistrust in political elites and, once again, the rise of nationalistic movements ready to provide clear-cut and convenient answers to our feelings of loneliness and alienation. Faced with this, Arendt’s call for rethinking the relationship between education and politics, for the sake of our common world, may be worthy of renewed attention. As the values of liberal democracy seem to lose validity in many places today, the continuous drilling of their importance in schools may risk leading to increasing demands for conformity, thereby failing to achieve the emancipatory potential of education. Instead, the value of education may consist of its ability to enable children to have a relationship with the world in which they actually live, and which they will one day inherit.

By reading Arendt’s educational ideas in light of her wider political analysis, the importance of schools for taking on these challenges becomes evident. Being (at least often) a part of the state, schools could be considered, at least in part, as institutional and legal frameworks designed to erect a kind of ‘walls of the city’ within which the educational project that Arendt envisions can take place. Within these educational walls, however, relations between children and adults, or students and teachers, are characterized not by equality, but by the kind of authority necessary for education to succeed in its most important task, that of introducing the new generation to a world that precedes them. In Arendtian terms, that makes education fundamentally non-political, as it is not defined by equality or taking place within the realm of the public. Within the safety of these educational walls, children may be prepared for taking on the responsibility of political participation by developing their understanding of, and relationship to, the common world as well as their capacity for judgment in relation to it. All of which are necessary for being able to, in due course, entering, as equals, the public world of the *already* educated. This, however, also requires that schools be designed to safeguard

plurality within the educational system, and the fundamental right of every child to develop his or her individual relationship to the world. In other words, schools must be instruments of the state and not of the nation. In order to nourish the natality of children, schools must be institutions that stand apart from national projects or conformist ideas of common destinies or utopian futures, however defined. In a world where political nationalism is once again on the rise and where market-individualism is contributing to the transformation and erosion of general trust in our political systems, it becomes of vital importance to remember the lessons of history and of understanding the potential destructive power of politicized education. Read against the backdrop of her analysis of the failure of the European nation-states of the early twentieth century and the following rise of totalitarian movements, Arendt's critique of political education present us with an urgent challenge. If we wish to defend the existence of a common world of human plurality, education may be one of our most powerful political tools, but, paradoxically, only to the extent that we manage to shelter it from the public world of politics itself. Consequently, Arendt's arguments should not be evaluated according to how well they fit into our contemporary ideals of education, but precisely for the provocation they offer us, forcing us to stop and to reconsider what it is that we are doing. In doing so, the lessons of Arendt's political analysis of the processes leading up to the disastrous events of the twentieth century are as urgent today as they have ever been.

**Open Access** This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

## References

- Arendt, H. 1994. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Publishing.
- Arendt, H. 1998. *The Human Condition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, H. 2005. Introduction into Politics. In *The Promise of Politics*, ed. J. Kohn. New York: Schocken Books.
- Arendt, H. 2006a. *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. London: Penguin.
- Arendt, H. 2006b. *On Revolution*. London: Penguin.
- Arvato, A., and J.L. Cohen. 2010. Banishing the Sovereign? Internal and External Sovereignty in Arendt. In *Politics in Dark Times Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, ed. S. Benhabib, 137–171. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Biesta, G. 2010. How to Exist Politically and Learn from It: Hannah Arendt and the Problem of Democratic Education. *Teacher's College Record* 112(2): 556–575.
- Canovan, M. 1983. Arendt, Rousseau, and Human Plurality in Politics. *The Journal of Politics* 45(2): 286–302.
- Foa, R.S., and Y. Mounk. 2017. The Signs of Deconsolidation. *Journal of Democracy* 28(1): 5–15.
- Gündogdu, A. 2014. Statelessness and the Right to have Rights. In *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*, ed. P. Hayden, 108–123. London: Routledge.
- Levinson, N. 2002. "But Some People Will Not": Arendtian Interventions in Education. *Philosophy of Education* 2002: 200–208.
- Levinson, N. 2010. A "More General Crisis": Hannah Arendt, World-Alienation, and the Challenges of Teaching for the World As It Is. *Teaches College Record* 112(2): 464–487.
- Peters, M. 2017. Education in a Post-Truth World. *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49(6): 563–566.
- Schaap, A. 2007. Political Theory and the Agony of Politics. *Political Studies Review* 5: 56–74.
- Schutz, A., and M.G. Sandy. 2015. Friendship and the Public Stage: Revisiting Hannah Arendt's Resistance to "Political Education". *Educational Theory* 65(1): 21–38.

- Scott, J.T. 2012. Introduction. In *The Major Political Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, ed. J.T. Scott, XIII–XLIX. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Topolski, A. 2008. Creating Citizens in the Classroom: Hannah Arendt's Political Critique of Education. *Ethical Perspectives: Journal of the European Ethics Network* 15(2): 259–282.
- Topolski, A. 2015. *Arendt, Levinas and a Politics of Relationality*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Tsao, R. 2004. Arendt and the Modern State: Variations on Hegel in "The Origins of Totalitarianism". *The Review of Politics* 66(1): 105–136.
- Villa, D. 2008. *Public Freedom*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Villa, D. 2017. *Teachers of the People. Political Education in Rousseau, Hegel, Tocqueville, and Mill*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Volk, C. 2015. *Arendtian Constitutionalism: Law, Politics and the Order of Freedom*. Oxford: Bloomsbury.
- Waldron, J. 2000. Arendt's Constitutional Politics. In *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. D. Villa, 201–219. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Studies in Philosophy & Education is a copyright of Springer, 2018. All Rights Reserved.