It seems that everything has already been said about Hannah Arendt’s understanding of power. Why, then, seek to publish another piece on the subject? My answer is twofold. First, because the critical potential of Arendt’s thinking lies hidden in her discussion of the concept of power. Currently, this potential – and the relevance thereof – remains unrecognized in the analysis of our modern political order. The fact that the critical potential of Arendt’s thinking has been largely ignored – and this is the second component of my answer – undoubtedly is related to the limited reception that the Arendtian conception of power has received. The widespread characterizations of Arendt’s notion of power, which can be found in countless manuals, handbooks, introductions, and overviews on Arendt as “absolutely positive”, “emancipatory”, or as “intrinsically normatively positive” may lead one to conclude that Arendt has little to contribute to the social-philosophical tradition of the “critique of pow-
er.” Thus, the question is: To what extent does Arendt’s conception of power come together with the “critique of power,” as such?

The “critique of power” refers to those analyses within social philosophy that concern the “negativity of, or discord between, the individual and social orders.” From the point of view of critical theorists in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, however, Hannah Arendt’s conception of power is unsuited for such a critical enterprise. Critical theorists typically maintain that Hannah Arendt’s understanding of power stems from her “image...of the Greek polis” as the stylized and ultimate “essence of politics as such” and “ancient Republicanism.” Critical theorists concede that Arendt, while embracing the ancient Greek legacy, takes an ostensibly critical perspective on all modern forms of the state, society, and politics: Arendt is in the position, therefore, to criticize both the loss of a dynamic political tradition as well as the modern inability to engage in significant “political action.” However, to the extent that Arendt makes an affirmative move backwards to Ancient Greece’s “structures of an unimpaired intersubjectivity” and, to the extent that “collective and concerted action” become central to her conception of power – and she, with this move, “removes politics from its relations to the economic and social environment in which it is embedded” — critical theorists argue that Arendt is no longer able to grapple fully with power’s repressive aspects. Arendt becomes the “victim of a concept of politics that is inapplicable to modern conditions” that have no grasp on the ambivalences of power, or

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11 Strecker (in n. 9), p. 46.
13 Strecker (in n. 9), p. 46.
15 Strecker (in n. 9), p. 49.
16 Habermas (1977, in n. 9), p. 15.
the “dialectics of power,”18 or its “double-faced nature”19. Arendt’s critics conclude that a critique of social and political order that emerges out of the current times – that is, a critique of power – is not possible with Arendt.

This is a conclusion with which I would fundamentally disagree. The thesis of my paper is that Arendt’s consideration of power is, in its broadest sense, actually a critical enterprise. Arendt’s thinking on power is critical, both in the sense that it allows one to criticize identifiable constellations of power and processes of power formation, but also, in its understanding of specific, normatively positive, and substantial constellations of power as a means through which to criticize existing social and political orders. In order to explain this thesis, I will work through Arendt’s critique of power in the dimensions of her work on political participation (II); socio-economic issues (III); political-institution-and-critical-ideologies (IV); and her considerations of ethics (V).

First, however, Arendt’s discussion of the concept of power must be reconstructed (I). In order to do so, I begin by elaborating on my fundamental criticism of the common reception of Arendt’s understanding of power. Taking on this fundamental criticism in the first part of my essay is not an end in itself; rather, I do so in order to reclaim a critical notion of Arendt’s conception of power. The possibility for locating a critical conception of power within Arendt, which takes into account power’s ambivalences, guides my later explorations of her work, and also can be seen as a contribution to a critical theory of the political.20 At the end of this first section, a new perspective on Arendt’s understanding of the concept of power, and a new way in which to view Arendt’s understanding of power will emerge – one, which has little in common with the current viewpoints.

For sure, and in contrast to Weber, Arendt’s approach to discuss the concept of power is not merely analytical-definitional but has a normative dimension insofar as each power constellation prescribes a specific form of relating to ourselves and others – a form of relating that has to be critically ased and evaluated.21 However, it is absolutely crucial to see that for Arendt different power constellations can be possible and that, therefore, the conventional notions that commonly place Arendt within

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19 Saar (n. 8), p. 571.
21 At first sight, Göhler, therefore, seems to be right to argue that Arendt’s understanding of power is “radical normative” (Göhler (in n. 3), p. 32). However, it becomes clear from his remarks that by the phrase ‘radical normative’ Göhler actually means radical positive. See particularly his remarks on Arendt’s concept of power as “the decisive antipole to our basic understanding of power over” (Göhler (in n. 3), p. 32) – an account which is simply not right.
the tradition of constitutive thinking about power,22 and which assume her conception of power to be *per se*, *per definitionem* absolutely or normatively positive, emancipatory, non-repressive or characterized by the goal of “overcoming violence,”23 are misleading.24

1. **POWER ACCORDING TO ARENDT – A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS**

Arendt’s understanding of power is typically characterized by the following three attributes, which one finds in a variety of authors’ assessments and interpretations of her work:

- for Arendt, power is *per se* normatively positive;
- for Arendt, power is *per se* not repressive;
- Arendt’s distinction between power and violence is a moralistic one that is indicative of the utopian-pacifistic nature of her thought.

I argue that a portrait of Arendt’s understanding of power that simply reproduces one, two, or all three of the foregoing characteristic would be misleading, however. Such a portrait would ignore certain conceptual finesses and nuances that are central to her discussion of the concept of power, and thereby would also fail to take into account the true complexity of the concept of power.

1. **No moral condemnation of violence.**

In attempting to reassess Arendt’s concept of power, and in order to demonstrate my fundamental disagreement with prior interpretations of this concept, I begin by considering Arendt’s alleged moral condemnation of violence.25 Starting with Arendt’s alleged moral condemnation of violence is crucial, as her distinction between power and violence has nothing to do with her possessing a so-called “utopian vision,”26 nor does it reflect a “clear(ly) normative intention”27 on overcoming violence. The concept of violence is ambivalent in Arendt’s thinking. Alongside her discussion of the “danger of vio-

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22 See Strecker (in n. 9), p. 17; see also Sörensen (in n. 20), p. 170.
23 Strecker (in n. 9), p. 48; see also Anter (in n. 3), p. 98.
27 Strecker (in n. 9), p. 46.
lence” – meaning, “the introduction of the practice of violence into the whole body politic”

Arendt also speaks of a known “rationality of violence.” Furthermore, she remarks that violence can be necessary and even justified as a means of drawing attention to intolerable political, social, or economic conditions. Arendt is anything but a pacifist. While her thesis, first and foremost, is that “no government exclusively based on the means of violence has ever existed.” What this observation most clearly illustrates is her perspective on the phenomenon of revolution. While admitting that no State can survive solely on the basis of violence, Arendt nevertheless understands that power – as distinct from violence – lurks behind every State’s capacity for violence. As she tells us, it is in the moment when the “instruments of authority” fail and the commands of authority are ignored that “everything depends on the power behind the violence.” Accordingly, Arendt’s critique of the Western philosophical tradition’s view of politics, which stemmed partly from Plato’s fateful substitution of work – with its connotations of rule, mastery, command and, ultimately, violence – for action and which continues up to Weber and Marx, is not made in moral terms. What she objects is that against the backdrop of the ontological premise of plurality this substitution and identification of politics with violence and domination ignores the essence of social coexistence and the requirements of a durable political order – and, thus, the Western philosophical tradition’s view of politics posed the wrong questions.

One of the central difficulties in trying to capture Arendt’s concept of power fully, is that it is comprised of two separate parts. Waltraud Meints-Stender, therefore appropriately speaks of the “double determination of power” in discussing Arendt’s work. According to Arendt, one form of power is created when people come together as a political group or organization, or otherwise. One can describe this aspect of power as the (collective) power of actors. Here, power can be understood as “power to” or “empowerment.” In a corresponding and frequently cited position on power that emphasizes precisely this perspective, Arendt argues that one person never occupies power alone, but rather, power is created


\[29\] Arendt writes: „Violence, being instrumental by nature, is rational to the extent that it is effective in reaching the end that must justify it.” (Arendt (n. 28), p. 79. In this context see also Hansen, Philip (1993) Hannah Arendt. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 125.

\[30\] See Arendt (n. 28), p. 79.


\[32\] Arendt (in n. 28), p. 50.

\[33\] Ibid. p. 49.

Arendt observes the second ‘determination’ of power to exist in the political order. This aspect of power refers to the degree to which people living under a political and constitutional order agree to abide by the rules and regulations set therein. This form of power may be understood as a “tacit consensus” based on a specific “whole way of life,” or as a form of “consensus universalis,” as Arendt puts it in Tocqueville’s words. Hence, a determinate power potential arises from within political community itself, which is composed of a variety of political groups, parties, organizations and citizens, both politically organized and not. Here, the potential for power extends theoretically from the capacity of all citizens to consent to the political order to the capacity to reject the political order. In this second conception, power is a “capacity” to be realized in a state of emergency or crisis, or can no longer be realized. It is this aspect of power that Arendt refers to when she speaks of “power” as “the essence of all government.” This component of power is what she speaks of when she says that every State and political community is actually comprised of “organized and institutionalized power;” when she writes about the “power structures of states;” or when she speaks about the fact that “all political institutions are manifestations and materializations of power” And it is precisely this “materialized power” – in contrast to living power – that disintegrates in times of revolution.

Arendt’s separate understandings of power have to be taken in turn in order to make sense of her overall distinction between power and violence. Power always exists behind State-organized violence, in that the very ability of the State to exercise violence – to employ a police force, or a military, for example – requires, at least to a certain extent, the agreement and support of the persons serving in the armed forces. (Even a totalitarian system, wherein the central means of social and political control are through concentration camps and police terror, “needs a power basis – the secret police and its net of informers.”)

36 Arendt (n. 28), p. 140.
40 Arendt (in n. 28), p. 51.
41 Ibid.
42 Arendt (n. 28), p. 140.
43 Arendt (in n. 28), p. 49, where Arendt writes, “Everything depends on the power behind the violence.”
44 Ibid. p. 50. Here we find one of the classic contradictions in Arendt’s work, which can never be resolved with a conceptual-definitional approach to her work. On the one hand, Arendt claims on page 51 of On Violence that total domination too requires a basis in power. Only four pages later (or also in her work The Origins of Totalitarianism), she explains that with the terror of total domination, “power disappears entirely” (ibid. p. 55). In this last quote, what she means is that in a system of totalitarian rule, there is no power other than the repressive power of the ruling elites. The terror generated by the concentration camps and police terror, “needs a power basis – the secret police and its net of informers.”
Christian Volk

Principally, one can see that the introduction of violence for political purposes can destroy the power of those groups against which violence is directed. What the overall consequence is, of using violence to protect the power of the political community, cannot be said without reference to the concrete context. For Arendt, these consequences depend on many things – the nature of the political community, its constellation of actors, public opinion within that political community etc. To illustrate the important contrast between “living power” and “materialized power” as well as its connection the question of violence, let us take the example of a rightwing extremist “terror cell” within a political community: The fact that, within a political community, political groups and organizations exist that practice violence against other people and the existing political order is, on one level, indicative of the fact that there are people who have ended their support for the constitutional order. In this sense, rightwing extremism is an indication that a process of social disintegration and radicalization has begun, and that the legal and political order no longer has full support from the public, i.e. the materialized power of the political order has decreased. On the other hand, the fact that rightwing extremist groups need to employ violence to achieve their goals can be seen as evidence of the fact that their political positions enjoy little public support overall. In other words: they have only little living power. This is the quintessence that informs Arendt’s observation that a political group’s use of violence to achieve political ends can also demonstrate the powerlessness of that group – particularly in comparison to the level of support that a political order is accorded. The deployment of the police authority, in turn, contributes to the restoration of a political order that enjoys proportionally high consent – a powerful political order, so to speak. Behind the introduction of violent means by the police, therefore, stands the power of the majority. Here, Arendt remarks that

(...): in domestic affairs, violence functions as the last resort of power against criminals or rebels – that is, against single individuals who, as it were, refuse to be overpowered by the consensus of the majority.

Violently dismantling rightwing extremist groups and imprisoning their members is an expression of the “power of many.” If, for whatever reason, the police are unable or unwilling to use violence against such groups – that is, against “the power of a few” – and if those groups are allowed to continue their campaign of violence, the “majority’s” faith in and support for the political order would be massively undermined and the materialized power would decrease. In this sense, power can also

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46 Arendt (in n. 28), p. 51.
47 Arendt (n. 35), p. 200.
48 Ibid.
mean that State-backed violence (for example, against a political group that poses a terrorist threat to the public) will receive approval by the majority at the moment it is exercised. This may also mean that such State-supported violence against a terrorist group will also enjoy ‘future’ support – meaning that the State’s ability to respond to terrorist threats remains extant. Thus, we can see that Arendt is in fact far removed from a principled – that is to say, an absolute – rejection of violence.

2. Repressive constellations of power

Arendt’s conceptual distinction between power and violence, therefore, is not formulated from a “clearly normative intention.” There are cases in which Arendt justifies the introduction of violence into a society, but not without pointing out the ambivalent consequences of this use of violence. What also speaks against such an interpretation is that she recognizes the many instances in which power itself can be repressive. Here too, we see the (conceptual) flaws in the second most common characterization of Arendt’s concept of power – the assumption that her conception of power is \textit{per se not} repressive. She writes in \textit{On Violence},

\begin{quote}
A legally unrestricted majority rule, that is, a democracy without a constitution (based only upon power; C.V.), can be very formidable in the suppression of the rights of minorities and very effective in the suffocation of dissent without any use of violence. But that does not mean that violence and power are the same.
\end{quote}

Here, Arendt sketches an understanding of power which neither “lacks the moment of coercion, manipulation, and of conflict,”\textsuperscript{51} nor can be termed an (absolutely) “positive”\textsuperscript{52} description of power. Along with many other passages in her work,\textsuperscript{53} this quote illustrates that Arendt never seeks to ignore the repressive dimension of power.\textsuperscript{54} Her discussion of power does not rely on “unconstrained discussion”, “free and undistorted communication”\textsuperscript{55} or on “intact structures of intersubjectivity”. Nor is it correct to state that power and political freedom always coincide, as Waltraud Meints-Stender alleges.\textsuperscript{56}
It is no longer tenable to speak about Arendt’s understanding of power as being wholly non-repressive against the backdrop of quotes and passages from her work. Individuals who come together in a group, party, movement, or organization generate power in manifesting the possibility to “act in a certain way.” Citizens whose interests are separate from those of the organized group or movement, however, may perceive this sort of organized action as coercive, repressive, or oppressive. In such a case, power can – and must – be described as “power over.” Therefore, it is simply incorrect to understand Arendt’s concept of power, *per se,* as “the decisive antipole to our basic understanding of power over” – as Gerhard Göhler suggests. It is more precise to characterize Arendt’s concept of power a capacity/incapacity-arrangement, which evolved out of and evolves through action and human interaction, and which enables certain deeds and relationships while preventing others.

3. Non-normatively and normatively positive constellations of power in Arendt’s thinking.

Consensus forms the basis for an arrangement of capacity/incapacity arrangements. For Arendt, however, and in contrast to Habermas, consensus is neither primarily and necessarily rational, fundamentally normatively positive, or something that is generated only through “nondistorted communication.” In Arendt’s eyes, the word consensus does not reflect anything more than “the recognition that no man can act alone, that men if they wish to achieve something in the world must act in concert.”

Given that, in the realm of politics, every consensus emerges out of the combination of human speech and action, we see that the normative quality of power constellations depends not so much on the fact of acting and the fact of speaking, in and of themselves; but rather, on the manners and ways in which action and speech are conducted. Accordingly, Arendt distinguishes between distinct forms of action in *The Human Condition* and speaks of “perverted form(s) of ‘acting together’.” She contrasts acting-with-one-another with acting-for-one-another and acting-against-one-another when she writes that the “revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them (Italics; C.V.)” While all three modes of action lead to the development of power, they involve key differences in terms of their normative content.

If political power emerged out of acting-for-one-another, then individuals would be willing to give up their personal interests and devote themselves fully to the group or community. By identifying with the principle of “for one another,” the space between individuals dissolves, and a diversity of

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57 Göhler (in n. 3), p. 32. See also Haugaard (in n. 3), p. 242.
58 Habermas (1977, in n. 9), p. 9.
60 Arendt (n. 35), p. 203.
opinion is sacrificed to the principle of unity.\textsuperscript{62} In political action modeled after acting-against-one-another, the concept of ‘we’ is constituted in opposition to – and through a political battle against – the individual who is construed as ‘other.’ In such a scenario, even possibly legitimate objections and suggestions of the political opponents are not taken into consideration. In acting-against-one-another, “self-disclosure at the expense of all other factors.”\textsuperscript{63} This self-revelation and self-disclosure, however, is only ever strategic and negative in the sense that it becomes a means to distinguish oneself from the political opponent. When bound by this form of action, one cannot risk to fully “disclose himself in deed or word”\textsuperscript{64} in positive terms. Hence, “this concept of action” also foregoes the actual goals of action and is “highly individualistic.”\textsuperscript{65}

For Arendt, power is neither \textit{per se} absolutely or normatively positive nor emancipatory as it is so commonly claimed to be. For Arendt, there is only one \textit{form of political action} – namely, acting-with-one-another – that can lead to the development of a full-bodied normatively positive and emancipatory constellation of power. When power is generated in the mode of acting-with-one-another, people come together freely and meet face-to-face to stand for their viewpoints on a particular issue. They have the right to discuss their perspectives openly and to open themselves up to others’ perspectives and be challenged by them. Acting-with-one-another allows for the possibility to be open to other perspectives and to respond to and disagree with them. Acting-with-one-another does not mean solely undertaking “rational” action after a reasonable consensus has been reached. Rather, acting-with-one-another is about the ability to hear and to be heard and about the ability to consider significant political alternatives with others. It is about the ability to engage, both expressively and responsively, in an honest discourse and a sharp debate between conflicting – and possibly even incompatible – views. Acting-with-one-another refers to the process by which different positions come together in shaping political judgment and opinion, with the goal of strengthening the power of political judgment of all involved. Through contributing to an open and public discourse, such a mode of acting could build single “islands of conviction.”\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{62} Arendt explains how, during the Tennis Court Oath and the French Revolution, agreement was manifested via exclamation, whistling, and inarticulate bawling through “uplifting feeling” and “thunderous applause.” (Arendt, Hannah (2000) \textit{Über die Revolution}. München: Piper, p. 154) In her work, Arendt gives countless examples of the ways in which constellations of power are generated through the form of acting-for-another and acting-against-another. Instances that come to mind include the anti-democratic, pan-German, nationalistic movements of the Weimar Republic, Jacobin domination, the Black Panther Movement and the ideological German student movement.

\textsuperscript{63} Arendt (n. 35), p. 194.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid. p. 180.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid. p. 194; for detailed examinations of these differences see Volk, Christian (2010) \textit{Die Ordnung der Freiheit. Recht und Politik im Denken Hannah Arendts}. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlag, pp. 219–223.

Acting-with-one-another means recognizing controversial political questions and understanding that agreement is neither probable nor anticipated as the normatively-desirable goal of a political debate. Understanding others’ opinions and views can also mean “agreeing to disagree” – because, in essence, “political understanding” focuses not so much on the other (his or her personality, wishes, history etc.), “but rather, on the whole world, as it appears to the other.”

67 In brief, to act-with-one-another means to act on the basis of political judgment. In her *Denktagebuch* (Intellectual Journal), Arendt spoke about an “ethics of power developed on the basis of the power of judgement.”

68 Concretely, Arendt’s “ethics of power developed on the basis of the power of judgement” means that the “methodical procedure” of the power of judgment is realized in the course of acting and speaking with one another. Due to this “methodical procedure” necessary for the formation of judgment, political action is able to arrive at a specific political rationality. What this political rationality – this “rationality of the power of judgment” – makes fully normatively positive is that it seeks to realize both political freedom as well as the “individuality of the individual.”

II. ARENDT’S CRITIQUE OF POWER – THE POLITICALLY PARTICIPATORY DIMENSION

In reflecting on the relationship between power and action in Arendt’s work, the first dimension of her critique of power becomes immediately apparent. One can describe this dimension as the politically participatory dimension of the critique of power. By breaking down the concepts of power and action, we are able to arrive at a point through which we can take a critical position in regards to the creation, form and content of political groups and movements. In so doing, we can use Arendt to understand which groups, movements or units of political action endanger democratic political discussion and tend towards “Ultra-Politics” and radicalization, in terms of two factors: the characteristics of a) their interactions with political opponents, and b) their intra-group political identity formation processes. In this way, politically informed milestones can be identified, which can direct us on the path towards establishing an order of freedom: that is, a materialization of power that allows political freedom to be experienced.

When interactions with political opponents follow the mode and logic of acting-against-another in-

68 Ibid. p. 818. The original German text says: „Die Frage ist: Lässt sich eine Ethik der Macht aus der Urteilskraft entwickeln“.
69 Vollrath, Ernst (1987) *Grundlegung einer philosophischen Theorie des Politischen*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, p. 271; for more detailed exploration see Volk (n. 65), pp. 230–250; also see Meints-Stender’s knowledgeable work (in n. 20).
70 Ibid. p. 253.
71 Meints-Stender (in n. 5), p. 120.
stead of an honest exchange with the plurality of conflicting political opinions, these movements, groups, or parties are acting only to repeatedly confirm their own worldviews. When political action takes the form of acting against another, it serves only to reify static collective identities and to further fuel and sharpen underlying conflict. Moreover, such a manner of political action fails to engage with the conflict-ridden plurality of political opinion. If the formation of intra-group political identity takes place in the mode of acting-for-another, the individual abdicates his own interests and views and gives himself fully to the group, movement, or community of which he is a part. An all-encompassing goal takes the place of the plurality of opinions as the “supreme direction” to which individual action is subordinated, so that, eventually, the many may act as ‘one.’ The relationship of this mode of action to “complete externalization” explains, at least in part, the pressure towards conformity, which often dominates political groups and constrains their members – especially in cases of radicalization.

III. ARENDT’S CRITIQUE OF POWER – THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSION

“Under conditions of social subjugation, the best right to political freedom remains ideology.” This sentence marks not only the core of the Habermasian critique of Arendt’s book On Revolution, but also is exemplary of the hostile attitude – or at least the profound skepticism – of critical theorists towards Arendtian thinking. From a Habermasian perspective, critical theorists could even acknowledge that they have interpreted Arendt’s concept of power too ‘flatly’ and perhaps ignored her internal differentiations. Nevertheless, however, they would maintain that the Arendtian view of politics – and the world more broadly – is not truly ‘critical’ in a comprehensive sense of the term. Scholars critical of Arendt’s work argue that exalting the ideal of political freedom is merely ‘ideology’ under conditions of social and economic exploitation, subjugation and structures of domination. Therefore, those repressive moments of power, which are described in the tradition of thinking about power as “structural power,” must be investigated and interrogated further. According to these critics, however, doing so with the Arendtian concepts is “categorically impossible.” Albrecht Wellmer summarises this view pithily when he claims, supposedly in contrast to Arendt, “that the problems Marx confronted are still our – political – problems.”

This kind of critique of Arendt begins by taking on her explanation of the social problems in the American and French Revolutions and also addresses some of her commentary at a conference in

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74 Ibid.
76 Strecker (in n. 9), p. 50.
Since then, it has become commonplace to accuse Arendt of drawing an unsustainable difference between the political and the social, which not only disregards the political dimension of social processes and emancipation-movements, but which also renders her thinking totally inapplicable to the analysis of the modern social and political order. Such a critique of Arendt is justified insofar as one gets the impression that social justice can only be delivered technocratically, that is, via experts, administrators, and managers – an impression which would clearly contradict Arendt’s own reflections on the nature of political acting under conditions of plurality. Here, for sure, one has to argue with Arendt against Arendt. Furthermore, her remarks in *The Human Condition* – but also from her critique of the workers’ councils towards the end of *On Revolution* – seems to suggest that for Arendt the economic realm, in sharp contrast to the political realm, is not a sphere of freedom and not a sphere where citizens can have political aspirations. One important consequence of this sharp division between the economic and the political is the ruling out of calls for economic or workplace democracy and democratization, a long-standing theme for socially-concerned critical theorists.

However, this common and to some extent well put criticism needs to be careful not to condemn Arendt’s approach to social questions so radically that it fails to grasp the political and political-theoretical dimensions of Arendt’s socioeconomic considerations. What Arendt wants to show is that, out of the fundamental socio-economic relations of domination, exclusively repressive and exclusionary constellations of power can be formed. Arendt’s discussion of social questions, therefore, must also be read as a political-theoretic critique of power. The core of her consideration precisely recognizes that, under conditions of social and economic exploitation, there can be no constellation of power that enables the political experience of freedom. In order to clarify this point, I need to spend a few words on Arendt’s work *On Revolution*.

Arendt’s critique of power in her considerations on the French Revolution is aimed in two directions and functions on two levels. It is first a critique of the manner in which the creation of power, in the course of the emergence of social questions, would become organized under Jacobin domination. In that moment during the French Revolution when the interests of the “wretched masses” became the public’s interest – and it became clear that, without this large swath of the population, there would be no State to create out of the destruction of the monarchy – this population’s interests immediately became the public’s interest – and it became clear that, without this large swath of the population, there would be no State to create out of the destruction of the monarchy – this population’s interests immediately be-

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came the guiding interests of the coming society. It was out of the *acting-with-one-another* in the discursive democratic institutions (political sections and popular societies) in the early phases of the Revolution – the French Revolution’s “supposedly positive beginning”81 – that *acting-for-one-another* emerged. The principle of acting-for-another was based on relief from misery and plight. This relief would become the highest aim of the new State, and would thus come to be understood as a national interest. This is the “practical”82 background that revolutionary institutions adopted from the traditional continental European ‘State-building.’ The French Revolution overtook the hierarchical constructions of the State to form a State of “absolutist administration, because it corresponded well technically to the new needs for the calculability of State action and for uniform control of mass behavior.”83 The consequences are well known: the dissolution of all discursive democratic spaces, the establishment of a sovereignty-based political understanding in the tradition of an absolutist *potestas legibus soluta*, and the domination of terror and the failure of the revolution to establish freedom.84

This way of reading the Arendtian critique – that the pressure of need and misery changed the mode of political action that ran through the process of establishing power during the French Revolution – is, however, only the first component of Arendt’s critique. Looking merely at this component of Arendt’s work in attempting to understand her full critique of power would be incomplete. Arendt’s critique of power in her considerations of the French Revolution is, second, a critique of the (mistaken)
idea that discursive-democratic experiences could have led to a political order of freedom out of fundamental conditions of social and economic domination and exploitation, at all. Against the backdrop of poverty and wretched conditions, the social groups, councils and others settings in which to experience political freedom are in extreme ways elite, exclusive, and exclusionary – and to these groups, the adhering pleas for an open and rational debate degenerates into ideology.

What speaks in favor of this reading is the fact that Arendt described the supposedly “promising start” of the French Revolution – the establishment of discursive-democratic institutions such as the social groups and sections – as a “mere fiction.” What she describes as a “mere fiction” is the idea that it would be possible, under such economic circumstances, to form opinions and reach decisions via free, all-inclusive, unbiased and open debates in democratic-discursive institutions that could generate the agreement, support and a power-base for the new political order. This notion is fictitious, because the “boundless suffering of the multitude in their sheer overwhelming numbers” actually excluded large parts of the population from establishing power in this way. Driven by the misery of everyday existence, these people’s thoughts and capacity were fully devoted to the struggles for survival. Arendt’s grappling with the social questions in France, therefore, actually problematized the post-revolutionary order. Her critique was that “the rift” in obviously very different life circumstances remained untouched, such that the revolution “did not change the relationship between rulers and ruled,” but stabilized it. Thus the “inescapable fact” became clear “that liberation from tyranny spelled freedom only for the few and was hardly felt by the many who remained loaded down by their misery.”

The common interpretation that for Arendt, the French Revolution was only interested in the establishment of political freedom in its early phases, but then came into the shallow waters of addressing the social question, is one-sided and facile. Such a reading overlooks the dual implication of Arendt’s critique of power. Arendt’s critique of power is both a critique of the excesses of a process for power-creation, which takes place in the mode of acting-for-another and the established freedom from plight and misery as the “highest goal”; but also, a critique of the notion that a free and discursive-democratic social order can be formed on the basis of social misery. The attempt to establish political freedom on the basis of social and economic conditions of oppression is, in her view, a “mere fiction.” A political elite that seeks to establish free institutions on the basis of social and economic oppression always stands in danger of merely reinstituting socio-economic exclusion on the political level.

Free political action, as well as the political experience of freedom and the establishment of a free political order, has socioeconomic preconditions. These experiences of political freedom do not
emerge out of these preconditions, but it would be foolish to imagine that we could separate fully our individual modes of understanding from politics, and our worldviews from our place in the world. Just as the power of political judgment cannot be acquired and flourish on the basis of social and economic conditions of oppression, neither can freedom be actualized on this basis. Accordingly, Arendt appreciates the Jacobin approach to establish a “society of small property owners” by means of the State. Such an approach must be seen as an attempt to bring “class society” to an end and to enable “actual equality,” which, through the emergence of class society, would have been “immediately undone in its concrete effects.”

Thus the experience of freedom would have been made impossible. “Actual equality,” meaning politically realized equality, can only exist where one is free of basic necessities, and where one can lead a life emancipated from the everyday demands of survival. In a posthumously published conference paper, Arendt explained:

So if we talk about equality, the question always is: how much have we to change the private lives of the poor? In other words, how much money do we have to give them to make them capable of enjoying public happiness? Education is very nice, but the real thing is money. Only when they can enjoy the public will they be willing and able to make sacrifices for the public good. To ask sacrifices of individuals who are not yet citizens is to ask them for an idealism which they do not have and cannot have in view of the urgency of the life process. Before we ask the poor for idealism, we must first make them citizens: and this involves so changing the circumstances of their private lives that they become capable of enjoying the public.

This is a clear rebuttal to those critics who reproach Arendt for separating social problems from her understanding of politics completely and for not being able to address structural forms of repression with her concept of power. With her thoughts on political equality and the necessary preconditions to political freedom, Arendt appears to be much closer to Marx, than Habermas, Wellmer, and other critical theorists, but also Arendt herself may like to admit.

IV. ARENDT’S CRITIQUE OF POWER – THE POLITICAL-INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION

In contrast to traditional critiques of power that principally locate power-formation socially and economically, Arendtian thinking allows one to engage in a genuine political-institutional critique of power. In this way, Arendt’s critique of power is aimed at the “problematization of the de-animation” of political institutions, as well as at the “concealment of moments of praxis” in political institutions,

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as formulated by Rahel Jaeggi. Both de-animation and concealment result in democratic institutions, which become increasingly foreign entities to the local population, seemingly confronting citizens as external restraints. Such institutions are no longer arenas of political self-determination, but instead become manifestations of perceived dominance. In short: a critique of power here refers to a demonstration of the “pathology of institutions.”

Concretely, I am going to explain this political-institutional critique of power – as well as its consequences – with reference to Arendt’s critique of modern, representative, parliamentary democracies. Her critique asserts that the structural and systematic establishment of modern democracies “farther removed the citizens ... from the sources of power” in a very specific way. It is in this separation and alienation that the dominating character of modern political institutions is exposed.

What does this mean, to separate the people from power in a specific way? In contrast to authoritarian or dictatorial societies, which refuse to grant citizens basic political rights, the specific way in which Arendt claims that citizens are kept separate and alienated from power in modern democratic institutions lies in the prevailing circumstances. In these circumstances, the “preliminary conditions for political action,” such as freedom of speech and association, “no longer open the channels for action, for the meaningful exercise of freedom.”

The idea that the preliminary conditions for political action in modern society no longer open the way for political action – Arendt talks about the “impotence of power” – is central to how the separation of the people from power manifests itself in modern democracies. How is one to understand this?

1. **The structure of the political order hides the “praxis moment.”**

   On the one hand, Arendt understands the structure of the political system itself to be responsible for distancing the people from power: political parties and their leaders monopolize the formation of political power in modern democracies, which are hierarchized in parliament and centralized in state ministries. In modern democracies, political power is primarily created and formed in the working sessions, committees, discussions, and negotiations attended by party members, ministers, and parliament. According to the Arendtian thesis, in these political processes of opinion-and decision-making, ordinary citizens are neither present nor represented. Arendt’s critique of political parties exemplifies this critique. In the course of rationalization, and as a result of the pressure for professionalization, the political party – originally an organization of representation – became an “organization of representatives.”

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92 Ibid. p. 544.
94 Arendt (in n. 28), p. 81.
95 Ibid. p. 86.
96 Arendt (n. 62), p. 318.
whose “approach to the people is from without and from above.”97 Thereafter, power manifested and materialized itself as a permanent form of subordination and super-ordination.

In response, Arendt demands that federal structures be expanded and civil society actors become more involved in politics. In her text *Civil Disobedience*, Arendt explains that civil society actors should “establish themselves as a power” that “is always present and to be reckoned with in the daily business of government”98. She remained unsure whether this would be successful. Whether the institutionalization and formation of civil society actors would be the all-encompassing solution, she left open as well. The structures of modern democracies demand professionalized political actors which result in this actor becoming bound to lobbyists and interested stakeholders. Not only does the discursive-democratic exchange, which the political actor once animated, suffer as a result of the political actor’s allegiance to interest groups; but also, the political goals of other, less well-organized interest groups become marginalized.

At the same time, however, the professionalization of the political actor seems to be the only way to cope with the immensely disappointing and frustrating potential of extra-parliamentary work. Arendt sees this potential for disappointment, as well as the hierarchical and centralized ways in which power is organized, as one of the main reasons that civil society actors are so infrequently able to achieve the same status as so-called “pressure groups.”99 The political formation of power remains in the center. Thus, the inherent tendency resides within these organizations of power to allow the other so-called “power sources”100 to run dry.

2. *From the “concealment of the praxis moment” to the Arendtian critique of ideology:*

Without doubt, there are some elitist claims in Arendt’s work, especially the numerous anti-egalitarian remarks made in the concluding pages of *On Revolution* where she seems to argue that there are people who are simply not interested in politics and have no taste for it, and who, therefore, can be disregarded for the “conduct of the business of the republic”101. Although one has to admit that Arendt formulates these thoughts against the contextual backdrop of the assumption that a non-hierarchical, domination-free political order would be in place, they are still difficult to reconcile with the comprehensive and normatively uncompromising status of Arendtian concepts such as political freedom, non-domination, equality and the experience of political acting.

However, besides her elitist approach to ‘explain’ political disengagement, which is not compatible with a critical theory of the political, we can also reveal another approach in her work which

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97 Arendt (n. 87), p. 251.
99 Ibid.
100 Arendt (n. 28), p. 182.
101 Arendt (n. 80), p. 279.
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highlights the structural depoliticizing effects of modern democracies. Here, Arendt attributes the fact that only a few people in society ultimately end up becoming politically active to the fact that the structure of modern democracy depoliticizes a large part of the population. Arendt seems to suggest that the organization of power manifests itself not only through the direct force of a group or structure, but is also reinforced through attitudes and opinions. In so far as these attitudes and views contribute to placing individuals within an un-free and non-participatory life, within which one is unable to seek self-determination, Arendt’s critique of power presents itself as a criticism of ideology, as well. To what extent does her critique of power display itself in a manner critical of ideology? For Arendt, materialized power produces a political mentality of citizens, which – to use David Strecker’s words – can “affect not only the perception of an interest on the practical levels of its implementation, but can also systematically distort its perception in its ‘upstream’ cognitive levels.”

Now, alongside Strecker, Rainer Forst assumes that Arendt creates no “conceptual instruments” with which to analyze the “ideological formations of power justifications,” and with which to understand the “repression, working and taking hold behind the backs of all actors.” Forst and Strecker err. Those conceptual instruments with which Arendt tracks down these ideological formations of political mentality can be detected in Arendt’s phrases regarding the “mystification of power,” or “speculations about power.” The problem that Arendt refers to with these phrases is that a large portion of the population has no idea how political power actually emerges. Many ordinary citizens understand political power as a ‘substance,’ which, similarly to money, can be used for distinct purposes. In accordance with such an understanding of power, many people are convinced – and take the normative standpoint – that in order to use power for the common good, it must always emerge and be deployed free of personal interest. Both consequences, in Arendt’s eyes, are central indicators of the people’s “alienation from power” “that, despite the democratization of political life, has formed in all continental states.” To be sure, a modern democracy need not wind up in a crisis because of such mentalities. A problem of legitimation, however – meaning, a problem of political approval from the citizens, i.e., a problem of power – is confronted everywhere. An alienation from power means not only a lack of experience with the phenomenon of political power, but also an alienation from the political process itself. In large parts of the population, individuals become convinced that their political opinions are not considered and that their voices will remain unheard. As a result, the exercise of political

102 See also Sörensen (in n. 20), p. 179.
103 Strecker (in n. 9), p. 114.
104 Forst (in n. 9), p. 207.
105 Strecker (in n. 9), p. 50.
106 Arendt (n. 93), p. 256.
107 Ibid. p. 252.
108 See also Disch (in n. 51), p. 47.
authority by the political elite loses its normative foundation and political approval. The lack of political participation – Arendt speaks about "'Praxisentzug', the suspension of action"\textsuperscript{110} and the loss of political experience – creates a situation, in which many confront the fragmented nature of political life, in general, and politicians, in particular with great mistrust. Many citizens view the practice of politics with suspicion and as a practice that lacks transparency; a process, in which politicians and other stakeholders exercise power in order to further their own ends. The consequence is apathy and mistrust regarding both politics and politicians. This loss of legitimacy is often accompanied by a decline in the capability of political elites, who still form the basis of a parliamentary democracy, to persuade and convince disaffected citizens of the significance, meaning, and interpretation of relevant political events. Rather, populism gains ground and “power-propaganda”\textsuperscript{111} becomes the specific political means inherent to it.

The analysis of this populist “power-propaganda” marks the climax of Arendt’s critique of ideology. What distinguishes this particular brand of populist power-propaganda, however, is that it purports to exercise political power in the interests of all, which has accrued to the movement by virtue of social support. In this way, populist rhetoric takes advantage of citizens’ inexperience with the conditions of political power and its origins. Arendt seeks to uncover this form of rhetoric in phrases and slogans such as: “stand far removed from the strife of parties and represent only a national purpose” or, stand “above the parties”, the appeal to “Men of all parties”\textsuperscript{112} Due to a lack of political experience, many citizens are unaware that these are empty phrases and slogans of populist rhetoric and only seek to conceal the speakers’ ultimate goal: “to promote one particular interest until it had devoured all others, and to make one particular group the master of the state machine.”\textsuperscript{113} of the people. On the other hand, Arendt points to the fact that the populist rhetoric always trades in phrases of absolutism and totality, which appeal to a mood of general agreement and a vague “sentiment of belonging.”\textsuperscript{114} In turn, this characteristic speaks to many citizens’ desire for political participation and for the experience of a common moment of political involvement. Nevertheless, for most this wish remains unfulfilled in the modern political order.

The negation of the praxis moment now leads to the development of a false political consciousness and gives rise to the formation of pathological political attitudes. Arendt leaves no doubt about the fact that populist rhetoric and populist promises constitute nothing more than “false happiness.”\textsuperscript{115} Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, we could say with Arendt that the populist leader allows the

\textsuperscript{110} Arendt (in n. 28), p. 81.
\textsuperscript{111} Arendt (n. 93), p. 540.
\textsuperscript{112} Arendt (n. 93), p. 250.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid. p. 256.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid. p. 260.
uprooted and isolated person on the street to express himself, which is the source of his (the populist leader’s) greatest popularity. At the same time, however, the populist leader does not allow the individual on the street his right to active political participation; nor is this person able to redeem the “promise of participation” in communal democratic life. In the populist movements as well, the individual and his opinion is not counted. Instead, all are brought under the umbrella of the lofty phrases of the populist leader, or are expected to act solely against the rhetoric of a highlighted political opponent, such as “the political establishment,” “the bankers,” or “the elites.” In short: power here is generated solely through acting for another or acting against the other.

As a first step, Arendt’s political-institutional critique of power focuses on the ossification of political institutions and the fact that political institutions have grown apart from the citizens and are no longer under their control or accountable to them. This is where Arendt’s critique of power as a critique of political domination takes the structural and institutional components of modern democracies into account. Here, Arendt argues that citizens remain distanced from political experience and from experiencing institutions as committed to them and as enabling a politically self-determining way of life. Citizens remain alienated from political experience because the road to political action is long, it requires a high capacity for adaptation and professionalization, and it is accompanied by a corresponding amount of structurally related potential for disappointment. As a result, this specific structural separation grows and hardens into a mentality— and this is the second part of Arendt’s political-institutional critique of power – that reduces citizens’ motivation for political action in existing institutions. Such a mentality also perpetuates a lack of political experience and therefore strengthens the emergence of antidemocratic political opinions. In this way, Arendt’s critique of power becomes a politically inspired critique of ideology, in which she works out the genesis of freedom-negating political beliefs, justifications, and acts of approval.

3. Resistance and the political productivity of power

Arendt’s discussions on the subject of power provide rich fodder for analysis: Political decision-makers’ power stems not only from the fact that there is support from within relevant organizations and institutions (such as parties, factions, parliament, ministries, etc.), but also frequently from the public. The structural and (mental) de-politicization of the public is a form of generating political power, as well as a strategy of domination – albeit, a double-edged sword. This de-politicization is a means of generating power, in so far as the structure of the political system itself creates a mentality in which citizens tacitly accept political action and ultimately confront the political system with apathy. In a way, this view on power is similar to Arendt’s view that obedience under domination is, in fact, a demonstra-

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117 See also Jaeggi (n. 91), p. 543.
tion of tacit agreement and approval. (This was also true, in her considerations of Adolf Eichmann.) Nevertheless, there is another side to this mechanism of power generation. While a political system that triggers apathy rather than participation can alienate citizens from the political order and the public-political life, and can also sow a feeling of general cynicism towards the established forms of political power as well as the political elites, it can have other consequences as well. To wit: depoliticization can generate political resistance.

Arendt gives examples of how such a political mentality, exploited by populists, can give rise to anti-democratic, oppressive, and radicalized movements and groups. These groups can become powerful, but their process of power-formation has nothing to do with acting-with-one-another and an “ethics of power out of the power of judgment.” (Some of the examples in Arendt's work that come to mind are the radicalization of movements and groups in the Weimar Republic, the Jacobin movement during the French Revolution, and the radical ideology of the German student movement in the 1960s and 1970s). Nevertheless, there are, of course, also places in Arendt’s work where she speaks about freedom-seeking forms of political resistance and opposition, which themselves grew out particularly of repressive circumstances. For example, the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the American student movement of the 1960s, the actions of anti-Soviet dissidents in Eastern Europe, the Hungarian Revolution, and other creative forms of civil disobedience and political resistance.

There is no absolute answer as to why and how, in one case, it is possible for an un-free and repressive political environment to lead to liberal and democratic forms of resistance, while engendering further repressive and anti-democratic forms of resistance in another. In Arendt’s view, the answer depends on myriad factors: a country’s political traditions, values, political experiences, cultural forms, micro-political practices (for example the Samizdat), philosophical and intellectual-historical beliefs, socio-economic conditions, etc. What can be said, however, is that wherever power materializes in a way that burdens political action and therefore perpetuates political domination and oppression, this power is always productive as well. That is to say, it generates political resistance, regardless of the form – free or un-free – that this resistance takes. In this way, we see that the power of a political order is always somewhat at stake; and, to the extent that every political order is dependent on power, we are able to understand that contingency and alternativity are what characterize our political existence.

V. ARENDT’S CRITIQUE OF POWER: THE “ETHICAL” DIMENSION

The Arendtian concept of power is an essential concept for analysis and critique with respect to the participatory, socio-economic and political-institutional dimension of a political order. In addition to this, however, the concept of power is also a central component of Arendt’s “ethical considera-

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118 See also Allen, Amy (n. 6), p. 142.
tions” in the broadest sense. In a way, Arendt’s considerations of a politics of human rights allows us to explore this ethical dimension of her work and link them back to her concept of power.

In *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, one of the central works in Arendt scholarship, Seyla Benhabib diagnosed what she called “a normative lacuna” in Arendt’s thinking. Arendt’s work lacks a philosophical foundation for how one can move from plurality as a human condition to the “the moral and political equality of human beings in a community of reciprocal recognition.” Arendt answers the question, on what basis and why should we care for one another, with a “factual-seeming description of the human condition.” The price that she pays for this, according to Benhabib, is a deficit in legitimacy.

In Arendt’s work, one looks in vain for modes of argumentation in the style of the foundational universalism of moral philosophy, in which the recognition of others derives from the language of reciprocity. In this respect, I agree with Benhabib’s observation. Nevertheless, what can certainly be found is a specific theorem that runs through all of Arendt’s work, and which “suggests” the acknowledgement of the other and of plurality – “justifies” is not quite the right word. A central role in this theorem is played precisely by the durability and stability of the political order, i.e. the power constellation. Or, put another way: general statements can be made about the “inevitable loss of power,” “the sudden dramatic breakdown of power” or “powerlessness.” This theorem – which I would like to call the “stability theorem” – refers to the following: exclusion leads to powerlessness, and powerlessness eventually and over a short or a long period of time leads to the breakdown of political order. Plurality is a “fact” and a stable constellation of power cannot avoid recognizing and working through this fact. This so-formulated political normativity, which is what the Arendt stability theorem stands in for, is constituted entirely differently than the Kantian quaestio juris of demanded moral justifications. This theorem is the starting point for Arendt’s consideration of historical-political questions, as well as the theoretical position from which Arendt approaches contemporary American social issues and foundational questions of intellectual history. What Arendt identifies and traces through all of these considerations and contexts are the negative consequences that follow, when a political order arises out of a politics of exclusion or non-recognition.

The Stability Theorem is embedded in Arendt’s historical explanations of the events and occurrences of the twentieth century. For example: Arendt’s discussion of the European interwar period demonstrates that the refugee-and-minority policies of the European nation-states not only left the

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120 Benhabib (in n. 9), p. 193.
121 Ibid. p. 196.
122 Cf. Ibid.
123 Arendt (n. 35), p. 222.
124 Arendt (in n. 28), p. 49.
125 Arendt (n. 62), p. 113.
126 Arendt (n. 38), p. 9.
refugees themselves in precarious humanitarian conditions; but also, Arendt’s analysis shows us the ways in which the de-facto politics of exclusion also reflected back upon the political order of the European Nation-States. Arendt speaks of the “decline of the nation-state” or of the “collapse of the system of nation-state”. Here, what Arendt is referring to is the way in which the political measures undertaken to ensure state security massively undermined the legal and constitutional rule of democratic nation-states and poisoned international relations. The politics of exclusion negatively affects the constitutional order, contradicts fundamental and even essential norms and values of a legal-democratic political order, and leads to dangerous consequences in a globalized world. In short: Arendt’s political narrative concludes that the exclusion – and even destruction – of the other is a fact that the twentieth century documents unlike any other century has done before. Nevertheless, however, this exclusion and (attempted) annihilation of the other never led to a lasting and stable political order; but rather, to the collapse of the political order altogether. A lasting and stable political order can only be based upon the recognition of diversity and plurality.

In the realm of political philosophy, the stability theorem becomes obvious when Arendt reflects upon the political significance of plurality. The conceptual starting-point lies alongside what scholars such as Patchen Markell have identified as: “the existence of others – as yet unspecified, indeterminate others – [that; C.V.] make unpredictability and lack of mastery into unavoidable conditions of human agency.” What follows from this unpredictability and lack of mastery is that the structural or individual inability or unwillingness to take others’ political standpoints and opinions into account scatters “germs of its own destruction” within political coexistence. This decay materializes two-fold: First, in that this political denial of plurality creates a system of power that is based upon the structural exclusion of the others, rather than on their inclusion and consent. For Arendt, it is more than questionable whether this sort of political order will find even tacit approval from the marginalized. Whether quickly or over a longer period of time, the marginalized ‘others’ will create radical ways in which to resist the current political order. And, second, the political denial of plurality deprives everyone in a society of the opportunity to take the “reality of the world” into view. Such a system reinforces one’s own limited perspective on the world and corresponds solely to one’s own idiosyncrasies, rather than taking into account the multitude of standpoints and opinions that in fact constitute society. As a result, one fails to recognize the potential for conflict altogether, or until it is far too late.

128 Ibid. p. 22.
In terms intellectual history, Arendt locates the stability theorem in Montesquieu. According to Arendt’s reading, Montesquieu was convinced that only a small number of people would support tyranny as opposed to monarchy. According to Montesquieu, although tyranny is the most violent form of governing, it is also the most powerless one. At the close of her reading of Montesquieu, Arendt concludes that marginalization in politics “pave the way to an inevitable loss of power, even though the actual disaster may occur in a relatively distant future.”

So long as “robot soldiers” do not replace human beings, as is one of her objections, or the world does not find itself transformed into a concentration camp, a lasting and stable political order can only be founded upon the recognition of plurality.

The stability theorem is far from satisfactory in terms of the requirements of the Kantian quaestio juris and the moral-philosophical foundation for rights. (Moreover, it is very important to notice that Arendt’s reference points here are Montesquieu and Machiavelli – and not Kant).

The stability and “great durability” which she considers to be the “promise” of the republican form of government, are Arendt’s criteria for assessing a political order. In a society marked by the plurality of conflicting perspectives, only a constellation of power which emanates out of acting-with-one-another can unfold the “rationality of the power of judgment” and enable political freedom to be experienced. Only where power unfolds in this way, is there reason to hope that political stability and durability are sustainable.

These reflections do not formulate any claim to truth, as they quite obviously lack any “epistemic connotation.” At the same time, however, the foundational-theoretical lacuna in Arendt’s thinking can be seen to demonstrate that Arendt, in her political theory, chooses a distinct entry-point from those scholars, which follow the tradition of moral-philosophical foundationalism. What can be derived from this fact, is the insight that if the question of justice is the first question of political philosophy, then the question of freedom – and how to order and institutionalize that freedom – is the first question of political theory. In this sense, Arendt must be considered a political theorist.

VI. CONCLUSION

If one can leave behind the numerous ways in which Arendt’s conception of power is typically wrongly narrowed, the critical potential of her concept of power can start to come into focus. This critical potential rests on the question of whether a constellation of power has been formed on the basis of ‘acting-with-one-another’ and whether future political “acting-with-one-another” and the experience of political freedom is possible. At the same time, however, even such a constellation of power

132 Arendt (n. 35), p. 222.
133 Arendt (in n. 28), p. 50.
134 See Arendt (n. 62), p. 366.
135 Arendt (n. 80), p. 227.
cannot move beyond its released potential and limitations. Similar to action, power, for Arendt, is an aporetic undertaking. Just as – given the conditions of human plurality – a freedom-actualizing constellation of power will always remain a bit of an incapacity-arrangement, and therefore will never be able to fully avoid all of the repressive features of power. In this way, Arendt may also be regarded as a “melancholy thinker.” This melancholy is due in large part to Arendt’s political realism, which is ever cognizant of conflict and the ever present threat of non-identity between person and order as the condition of possibility of humans living together. Due to this political realism, a critical theory of the political gains its normative convictions from the perpetual working out of conflict, rather than the solving of conflict. Eradicating power would mean the eradication of politics, and with it, the eradication of the potential to experience political freedom.

Accordingly, an actualization of Arendt’s political-theoretical thinking in the sense of a critical theory of the political requires one to look less at the conditions that make political action possible, but worry far more about the conditions through which political action-with-one-another becomes a reality and can be experienced – or not. What emerge into focus, then, are the “soft qualities” of domination in modern political democracy: the bureaucratization, informalization, economization, and juridification of the political decision-making process; the management jargon and the necessity-and-functionality talk alongside presentations of political programs; a media landscape, which depicts and helps to produce citizens as consumers, who are monadic and fundamentally politically disinterested; and a political culture, which ignores not only the expressive and creative elements of political freedom, but also the public’s desire for these elements. These factors all contribute to the de-politicization of democracy, while also strengthening the impression that there is nothing contingent in the political process, and nothing that can be changed through democratic means. This type of de-politicization must be called exactly what it is: the manifestation and strategy of political domination. Only when the political decision-making process is experienced as something, wherein political action and the articulation of one’s opinion makes a difference – and this is the direction in which the actualization of Arendt’s critique of power takes us – can one build trust in the political order. And it is only as a result of this trust that you can develop a portion of immunity to political disappointment and the will to continue entering into the political debate via democratic means. Where trust in the democratic-political quality of an order is missing, political apathy or radicalization result. Both political apathy and radicalization remain far removed from truly democratic togetherness and the means by which to experience political freedom in a stable political order.
