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Hannah Arendt in Conversation with Black Lives Matter: Is Human Plurality in Critical Condition?

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**Hannah Arendt in Conversation with Black Lives Matter:
Is Human Plurality in Critical Condition?**

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
Of Bard College

By

Cleveland Lovett

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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For Naeemah Bey-Lovett and Bernice “Bunny” Lovett

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Table of Contents

Note on Abbreviations

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Human Plurality	6
I. The Social.....	7
II. The Public and Private Distinctions.....	12
III. The Political.....	22
Chapter Two: Black Lives Matter and Social Media	24
I. A Comparative Analysis of Black Lives Matter and The Civil Rights Movement.....	26
II. Black Lives Matter’s Social Media Activity.....	29
III. Traditional Political Activity in the Media.....	34
Chapter Three: The Rise of the Social	39
I. Social Reconstruction.....	41
II. Political Implications of Black Lives Matter and Social Media.....	42
III. Modern Technology and Appearance.....	45
IV. Understanding and Politics.....	49
Bibliography	56

Note On Abbreviations to Historical Texts

The works cited in this project are by authors whose texts are cited with the date of publication listed in the bibliography and are referred to using the following abbreviations:

BLM	<i>Black Lives Matter</i>
CRM	<i>Civil Rights Movement</i>
DA	<i>Democracy in America</i>
EM	<i>Einführung in die Metaphysik</i>
HC	<i>The Human Condition</i>
IM	<i>Introduction to Metaphysics</i>
LM	<i>Life of the Mind</i>
OR	<i>On Revolution</i>
OV	<i>On Violence</i>
TC	<i>Threat of Conformism</i>
UP	<i>Understanding and Politics</i>
WF	<i>What is Freedom</i>

Introduction

In the prologue to *The Human Condition* (first published 1958), Hannah Arendt warned that “[i]f it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good . . . then we would indeed become thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible” (HC, 3). Arendt was referring to the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik 1, the first satellite to begin the space age. “In 1957,” she explained, “an earth-born object made by man was launched into the universe . . . the first ‘step toward escape from men’s imprisonment to the earth’” (HC, 1).¹ Arendt wrote *The Human Condition* partly as an exploration of how human activity and human consciousness had been affected by modern technology and science. But her question of “whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction” is not a scientific one. She says that “it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians” (HC, 3). Arendt worried about whether “human plurality,” the necessary condition for the functions of speech and action involved in political activity, could survive technical advancements, and bureaucratic government, survive what she calls the “rise of the social.”

Organizing nearly four decades after Arendt’s death, Black Lives Matter’s (BLM) political development through social media arrives as a modern conception of the social, which poses a serious problem for Arendt’s socio-political theory—particularly the conflict between the private and the political. Arendt warned that human plurality was threatened by the rise of social. She describes this modern age of the social as the activities of citizens and society, which finds its political form in the nation-state. This, she says, is the reason that “the old borderline

¹ Arendt quoted a reporter who covered the Sputnik 1 story.

between private and political,” had become blurred to the extent that the meaning of “the two terms and their significance for the life of the individual and the citizen [had been] changed almost beyond recognition” (HC, 38). Since Arendt’s renowned socio-political theory on human plurality stands at a crossroad within the context of BLM’s use of social media to oppose nation-state power, her rise of the social problem has become more problematized.

Arendt thought that Western notions of individuality in the nineteenth century threatened human plurality. Because of this, she wanted to revitalize the conception of human plurality and develop it to become a fundamental and refined principle of Western thought. So perhaps Arendt would have been skeptical of BLM’s use of social media for political engagements, because ultimately she would have considered it as being damaging to political life. She might have thought that social media was absent of the action element required for political life to exist. But social media’s virtual world does in fact create a space for people to share political ideas that lead to public action in the real world for the purpose of opposing nation-state power. Not only was Arendt also against nation-state power, she also thought that political actors needed to maintain a world they shared in common. Said differently, BLM’s use of social media, with the political objective to bring political actors together in opposition to nation-state power, sits parallel to Arendt’s idea that suggests that acting in the world, in public and in concert with others, is how we are able to recognize freedom. It is within this view of Arendt’s socio-political theory where we begin to see the rise of social concept conflicting with BLM’s use of social media to oppose the nation-state.

In light of BLM’s social media presence and its influence on political activity, Arendt’s concept of the rise of the social and the problem it indicates requires revisiting. According to Arendt, the brutal and bruising nature of public life signifies the importance of the private being

distinct from the public, because her rationale is that the change in the juxtaposition of the private and public spheres hinders the ability of people to bring something new to the public through first engaging in contemplation in private. She thought that the idea of the private and public being separate and distinct entities was a crucial political necessity.

But the modern idea of the private and public contrast can be characterized simply by the notification bell ringing on individuals' private social media devices, alerting perhaps millions with the hashtag, "Black Lives Matter," sparking outrage in national public spaces. This is indicative of the private home transitioning into a public stage for debate—a political storm occurring on Facebook and Twitter. Although we would need to speculate to determine what Arendt would have said about social media as a means for political activity, I will argue that BLM's use of social media to form a Black social justice movement that opposes nation-state power creates a dichotomy within Arendt's socio-political theory—namely her human plurality theory. This will allow us to see how social media as a political instrument stands diametrically opposed to Arendt's socio-political theory on human plurality, yet BLM's use of social media to oppose nation-state power supports the part of her theory on human plurality that suggests that groups instituting political opposition requires action in the public space in order for political activity to be valid. The way in which I characterize this as a dichotomy within Arendt's theory lies in the idea that BLM's social media use for politics Arendt would not agree with, yet, she would agree with BLM's opposition to nation-state power. These two positions—the idea of Arendt disagreeing with BLM on one the one hand, and agreeing on the other—are represented as separate ideas being opposed to one another under one theory of human plurality, which has the markings of both ideas. What makes this such a problem is the fact that what Arendt does

agree on—BLM's opposition to nation-state power—happens on the medium she would disagree with—social media.

The Chapters

The three chapters in this project engage Arendt's concerns about the problem of the social from three standpoints: (1) Arendt's view on human plurality; (2); Black Lives Matter and social media; and (3) the political implications of the rise of the social Arendt warned about relative to BLM's socio-political organization.

In chapter one, I introduce the essential components of Arendt's theory on human plurality. In three sections, I interpret the pertinent parts relevant to Arendt's socio-political theory: 1) the social; 2) the private and public distinctions; and 3) the political. I bring these sections together to show their relevance to human plurality. With an understanding of these theoretical concepts we recognize a clear connection to the problem BLM creates for Arendt's theory. I maintain human plurality's presence throughout the project because it encompasses Arendt's socio-political theory and helps explain the social problem. I argue that Arendt's socio-political theory on action demonstrates the problem human plurality indicates for BLM's social media political activity. In the final assessment of the problem, after a careful reading of Arendt, I contrast Arendt's thoughts on human plurality with BLM's history and political form to determine whether her socio-political theory on human plurality and the rise of social account for BLM's socio-political establishment and activity.

In chapter two, I compare the 1960s Civil Rights Movement's social development to Black Lives Matter's social development. By contrasting the two movements, we get a better view of where exactly Arendt's ideas on human plurality and the rise of the social conflicts with BLM's socio-political activity. I argue that the contrasts between the 1960s Civil Rights

Movement and BLM reveals that Arendt's concept of human plurality and the rise of the social presents a dichotomy, namely in terms of the effectiveness of what constitutes political activity for BLM.

Chapter three examines the rise of the social to illustrate the political implications of BLM's social media political presence. I show how the rise of the social represents a source of power the nation-state attempts to use to strip human plurality of its agency, which has been a problem for Arendt, and remains an issue for BLM. This becomes evident when we review Arendt's explanation on how understanding works when politics are confronted with something new. I compare her thinking concerning totalitarianism with the oppressive conditions the nation-state has created for the Black community, which warranted the subsequent formation of BLM. I argue that, given that Arendt has theorized on the oppressive nature of totalitarianism, BLM seriously calls into question whether Arendt's socio-political theory accounts for BLM's use of social media to oppose nation-state power.

Human Plurality

Introduction

Arendt's political and philosophical ideas are centered around the concept of human plurality. Her theory on human plurality is grounded in the idea that “[a]ction, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (HC, 7). Human plurality is simply the agency formed between the individual and mankind as a whole. But Arendt was not interested in creating a means to resolve the differences between the individual and society as a whole. In fact, she was clear on the idea that the individual does not have a position in society as an individual. Neither does society form its concepts for the sake of the individual. And although Arendt views human plurality as a concept, she also thinks it is a basic condition of human existence (HC, 7, 8). For Arendt, the idea of appearing in the world and speaking on matters important to society is what makes people actually human.

According to Arendt, individuality, as it pertains to private interest, serves no purpose but to tarnish the character of political activity, because political activity requires a collective body striving for common political goals. Human plurality is comprised of each individual asserting their separate ideas into the public realm through “words and deeds” (HC, 178). And because maintaining the public realm is necessary for politics to take place, speech and action turn out to be our most essential political qualities as human beings. The individual cannot solely perform these functions—the public realm must be established through individuals working together. In order to understand the connection I draw between human plurality and BLM, it is important to first explore the three common factors between the two. Both human

plurality and BLM have in common: 1) the social; 2) public and private distinctions; and 3) the political.

I *The Social*

Since the time of Plato and Socrates, the private space prepared individuals for public life, in which Arendt recognized how this later developed into politics being dependent on society (HC, 33). She viewed the social as a modern rendition of the older tribes, kinships, and community, which essentially establishes a means to effectuate political power. This created the possibility for both the private and public realms to grow less distinct than how they previously existed. Arendt thought that these developments emerged as the modern age and was characterized as the rise of the social, “which found its political form in the nation-state” (HC, 28). This means that the same ways in which families gather in mass to form society, the collection of social groups also form and grow into an “absorption [of] one society” to make up what Arendt calls “mass society” (41). The resulting outcome is the public realm becoming paralyzed by mass society, repositioning the previous public and private distinctions into a collective of public concerns merging with “private matters of the individual” (HC, 41). This translates into the nation-state instituting policies that direct heads of households responsibilities toward those of the nation-state. These policies are reflective of the nation-state’s agenda to invest its resources into a political economy.

Arendt points to Karl Marx’s adoption of Adam Smith’s theory of a political economy, which provides that “action, speech, and thought are primarily superstructures upon social interest” (HC, 33), which she considers to be a “communistic fiction.” Arendt theorizes:

Since the rise of society, since the admission of household and housekeeping activities to the public realm, an irresistible tendency to grow, to devour the older realms of the political and private as well as the more recently established sphere

of intimacy, has been one of the outstanding characteristics of the new realm.
(HC, 45)

With the rise of society came the management duties of heads of households being not only converted into the responsibilities found in the public realm but also being the primary objective of the nation-state . This conversion has amounted to the political and private realms being overcome by dynamic social behaviors that became unique to the new form of society. This new form of society has smothered the previous distinctions between the public and private, which means that the nation-state's modern form of politics has become socialized in nature. In other words, the activities citizens would typically allocate toward private interests has shifted in the direction to meet political objectives in a way that places new hegemonic conditions upon society.

Arendt was concerned that this new form of society would create an atmosphere of individuals with shared interests forming together under the guise of a political group. This means the social, being absent of distinctions, eliminates the freedom and equality attributes of the *polis*, because the *polis* thrives on people equally being free to discuss their differences. These concerns are relevant to the online communities BLM creates, and the political groups that result from its social media activities, primarily because, according to Arendt, the action element of human plurality that is necessary for political activity to be meaningful requires appearance in the public space. And if we are to adopt this view of what constitutes meaningful political activity, BLM's social media political image fails at achieving Arendt's standard of appearance. For Arendt, appearance meant being accountable in the presence of others so that words and deeds could be confronted through potential political opposition. Social media posts and comments have an anonymous characteristic that Arendt would consider tantamount to not having courage to enter the public space to discuss matters of importance. Fitting into the

parameters of Arendt's concept of the rise of the social, it would seem that BLM is an invalid political entity, because its social media beginnings occurring in the private inspired social groups to be formed in the public space for political purposes. However, through a close reading of Arendt's idea on human plurality and the social problem, appearance, in its literal terms, might not need to be an essential early component of political activity. This is mainly because BLM has apparently made it so that appearance is not a necessary component in order for political activity, or a "new beginning," to occur in politics.

As the rise of society disrupted the public realm and as the family diminished, social groups modeled themselves after the family. Replicating the submissive nature of the Greek household, the social conforms to a society that "demands that its members act as though they were members of one enormous family which has only one opinion and one interest" (HC, 39). In this sense, society maintains being independent of man's rule, because "[t]he equality of the members of these groups, far from being an equality among peers, resembles nothing so much as the equality of household members before the despotic power of the household head" (HC, 40). But where a single idea needs to be instituted for the common good of society, "the natural strength of one common interest and one unanimous opinion is tremendously enforced by sheer number, actual rule exerted by one man, representing the common interest and the right opinion, [which] could eventually be dispensed with" (HC, 40). In this context, BLM beginning as a hashtag in the privacy of a social media user's home appears to follow Arendt's idea of "the natural strength of one common interest and one unanimous opinion [being] tremendously enforced by sheer number."

Arendt is quick to add that, with its strong opinionated members, along with its intentions to strengthen in economic prowess, society, "under certain circumstances, [can] even turn out to

be one of its crudest and most tyrannical versions” (HC, 40). Implementing hegemonic conditions that discourage the fundamental action element of the *polis*, society enforces “innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (HC, 40). The *polis* then becomes comprised of members who insist on displaying their distinct qualities in an effort to cast themselves as being superior. A stratified society divided into social classes threatens the ability of the public as a whole to achieve a supreme level of greatness. To highlight the idea of social status existing as a tool to undermine less regarded groups, Arendt asserts that “the meaningfulness of everyday relationships is disclosed not in everyday life but in rare deeds” (HC, 42). Accordingly, the societal goal toward higher levels of achievement works to distinguish some from less decorated “others,” which fosters the attitudes of society to be over-respective of nation-state officials merely because of them being politicians. Ultimately, the end goal is to achieve a political economy by any means possible, including the nation-state’s intrusion upon *private* affairs, making them *public* concerns, the new *social*, and the *political*, collectively.

The rise of mass society has turned “housekeeping and all matters pertaining formerly to the private sphere of the family” into a body of social groups that transitions economic activities to the social realm, governed by the nation-state and its bureaucratic institutions (HC, 33). The power of the nation-state in this regard shapes society into a situation where one either goes along or faces hegemonic consequences. Here is where we see the blurring of the public and private distinctions being materialized in the workings of the social, and how the nation-state makes the move toward the political.

As long as the nation-state can win at guiding and maintaining societal controls in the direction of a political economy, it would be successful at achieving the potential of public actors behaving in ways that mirror the Marxist idea of estrangement. Arendt furthers her argument on the moving parts of a political economy:

To gauge the extent of society's victory in the modern age, its early substitution of behavior for action and its eventual substitution of bureaucracy, the rule of nobody, for personal rulership, it may be well to recall that its initial science of economics, which substitutes patterns of behavior only in this rather limited field of human activity, was finally followed by the all-comprehensive pretention of the social sciences, which as “behavioral sciences,” aim to reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal. (HC, 45)

The modern age has an interest in studying societal behaviors to be sure to properly target markets and people from a social sciences perspective. By removing action from its previous position of being the primary function of political activity, and replacing it with controlled behaviors through policy making, the nation-state and its enforcing institutions benefit from keeping their distance from a controlled society—making sure that status achieving remains like the analogy of the carrot dangling from the end of a stick. As a result of status being the dividing factor needed to control societal outcomes, the social operates under a government body whose functions include projecting images of a constructed reality accepted by the consenting masses. To be sure, the nation-state’s interest in controlling societal outcomes speak less of society itself being controlled and more of the behaviors, or “the psychology of human beings,” undergoing a change under the control of government bodies (HC, 49).

As the social grew from labor’s ability to perform freely, the social realm has “made excellence anonymous, emphasized the progress of mankind rather than the achievements of men, and changed the content of the public realm beyond recognition” (HC, 49). Although the social sphere’s growth meant society arriving with a new identity, it has not “been able

altogether to annihilate the connection between public performance and excellence” (HC, 49).

The reason being is that any performance needs a stage and an audience for it to be recognized as excellent. Therefore, as Arendt cautions, “no activity can become excellent if the world does not provide a proper space for its exercise. Neither education nor ingenuity nor talent can replace the constituent elements of the public realm, which make it the proper place for human excellence” (HC, 49).

II *The Public and Private Distinctions*

Different from the social’s intention to mold society into an enormous but anonymous body of economic statistics, public life cannot hide its character. The public remains dependent on appearance, because “everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity” (HC, 50). For Arendt, without appearance happening in the public space, reality cannot exist. She thinks that reality is only possible when people are seen and heard. And “compared with reality from being seen and heard,” Arendt continues:

even the greatest forces of intimate life—the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. (HC, 50)

In this light, the very functions of our beings that inform us on how to understand the world is always questionable. The relationships we form with our closest friends and family, however intense the bond, is never really a true account of our experience, unless we convert what our ideas and feelings might be into a concept that has the notion of appearance in common with others in the public.

This means that public life’s diminishment amounts to “the intimacy of a fully developed private life” expanding, pushing to the limit “the whole scale of subjective emotions and private feelings . . . at the expense of the assurance of the reality of the world and men” (HC, 50). In

short, what we previously recognized to be dear to us in our private lives have been transformed into interests shared in public life among others—the only testament to the world of things, thoughts, and emotions being a reality rather than being imagined.

What Arendt is pointing out is the problems associated with the public and the private no longer remaining as distinct entities. She says there are a “great many things which cannot withstand the implacable, bright light of the constant presence of others on the public scene; there, only what is considered to be relevant, worthy of being seen or heard, can be tolerated, so that the irrelevant becomes automatically a private matter” (HC, 51). There needs to be a permanent space for public life to exist within. Because, “[i]f the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men” (HC, 55). Our past life needs to be actualized together with the future, because both are immersed in our shared present reality of public witnesses through appearances.

Historically, unlike the agonizing and demanding nature of the public, the private realm created a space for recovering and revitalizing ideas and opinions. Absent the freedom quality that was found through public life, in the private realm, individuals were confined to separate ideas and were unique to themselves, to the extent that each individual was only concerned with the necessities of life, “driven by their wants and needs” (HC, 30). But each individual also recognized that the necessities of life included living together and laboring to provide a means for survival.

The mastering of the necessities of life that made the household the essence of communal relationships was the blueprint for freedom in the political. As Arendt argued, the fact that

freedom did not exist in the private, the heads of households needed to have the power to “enter the political realm” in order to experience freedom (HC, 32).

The differences between the political and private life were clearly evident. While the necessities of life in the private called for distinct roles among individuals under the rule of the head of household, political life fostered a commonality among individuals. “The *polis*,” Arendt contends, “was distinguished from the household in that it knew only ‘equals,’ whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality” (HC, 32). The *polis* sharply contrasted the private in that the *polis* was where freedom prospered, in which freedom was “exclusively located in the political realm” (HC, 31). When one recognized freedom, it meant not being subject to the command of another.

What should be understood about the necessities of life, relative to BLM’s use of social media for political activity, is that gaining freedom meant abandoning laboring for necessities, and not being ruled, nor ruling others. BLM’s struggle for being free from discrimination, police violence, and inequality is an attack against nation-state power, in which “[e]quality, . . . far from being connected with justice, as in modern times, was the very essence of freedom” (HC, 32, 3). For, “to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed” (HC, 33). The idea of BLM appealing to ancient attempts of exercising the right “to be free from inequality,” while at the same time protesting against injustice in opposition to nation-state power, is that, as Arendt points out, “[e]quality . . . [is] far from being connected with justice, as in modern times” (HC, 33). To complicate this idea more, as the nation-state uses the social to impose power upon social groups such as the Black community, for example, BLM uses social media, a contemporary of the social, to oppose the power of the nation-state.

One of the most significant distinctions between the public and the private is the fact that “the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised” (HC, 57). The private is devoid of common reality, just as the social has no component that attaches it to the real world of reality. As Arendt puts it, “The subjectivity of privacy can be prolonged and multiplied in a family, it can even become so strong that its weight is felt in the public realm” (HC, 56). The idea that the influence of “the subjectivity of privacy” might be “felt in the public realm” only means that what people experience in private life they have in common with others sharing similar experiences. The overall point Arendt is getting at in this line of reasoning is that “[o]nly where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear” (HC, 57). In other words, people have being human in common, yet the fact that we each have distinct ideas and opinions is what makes us equal.

The ideas Arendt has on public and private life in relation to social behavior can be traced back to Plato. As Canovan notes in his essay, “Differences Of The Private And The Public Realm,” published in *UKEssays*:

In the most fundamental sense of the public realm as understood in the times of Socrates and Plato, it is the space where one can express his doxa or opinion. Arendt believes that action or praxis particularly political action is the activity that is most specifically human (Fry 44). Moreover, action requires the participation of other people who make sense of it and it must occur in the public space for it to have any relevance. “. . . [B]ut it is merely like a performance because it takes place in a public arena and must be witnessed by others.” (Canovan, 124)

The public realm of antiquity was where people came together to discuss matters which were meaningful. Through speech and action, a person was only then deemed to be fully human.

These are the qualifications Arendt thinks of as political activity, which needs to be among a society of people in the public for it to have any value. The public realm in this sense makes up a group of people with differences and yet equalities in that they have being human in common. This is the premise from which she develops her idea of human plurality.

Arendt does not describe human plurality as the number of votes casted by a majority for a political candidate within a democracy, nor as a group of people gathering for a common cause. Rather, Arendt views human plurality as a fundamental human condition of speech and action, which is designated by two basic distinctions: equality and difference. She argues that individuals are equal in that they are human, yet different to the extent that each individual has distinct characteristics. "Human Plurality," Arendt reasons, "the basic condition of both speech and action, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them" (HC,175). The parallels between what makes individuals distinct and different is reflective of the kind of distinctions made in the ancient descriptions of the private and public realms. The emergence of the social realm has altered those distinctions which previously existed between the public and private realms. But before we can fully see how the public and private distinctions fit into how BLM influenced an unpredictable social and political atmosphere, we must first touch on Arendt's thoughts on the "rise of the social."

In expressing her concerns that the social realm threatens to eliminate the political realm, Arendt points out the distinctions between the private family and the activities commonly associated with public life. She worries that what once were private affairs dealt with in the home have become a national approach to administer "housekeeping." With the rise of the social

realm, the merging of citizens, markets and overall society come together as a new political form. This transitions the social realm into the nation-state, which finds its main interest in a political economy. “The distinction between a private and a public sphere of life,” Arendt says,

corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state; but the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state. (HC, 28)

While private life consists of family functions which are managed by heads of households, public life involves free and equal citizens coming together to discuss what is important to society’s interests. Both the private and public realms historically were distinguishable from one another within the ancient city-state. But the development of the new social realm lacks clear distinctions between private and public characteristics, which makes the modern age a new political form within the nation-state.

Central to the argument of *The Human Condition* is the concept that humans are essentially conditioned, active beings. Arendt adds: “With the term *vita activa*, I propose to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man” (HC, 7). The previous role of families was to occupy the private space in the midst of performing the necessary activities which would sustain life, and maintain the functions of the home. The public realm involved people with a common interest in communicating ideas which were essential elements for life. According to Arendt, the speech required in the coming together of people constitutes action. She further describes the term *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life) as relatively being the quiet space of the mind, which has been succeeded by the *vita activa* (active life). She argues that traditional concepts of human activity that defined

the relationship and differences between labor, work and action, have been distorted by human contemplation. She writes:

My contention is simply that the enormous weight of contemplation in the traditional hierarchy has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself and that, appearance notwithstanding, this condition has not been changed essentially by the break with the tradition and the eventual reversal of its hierarchical order in Marx and Nietzsche. (HC, 17)

The modern distinctions between labor, work and action deviate from the traditional ideas of what thought and action previously meant for humans. The separation of labor from thought and action over time is synonymous to the needs and wants of humans being satisfied through activity rather than labor. In other words, how humans historically lived and built upon the world collectively was characterized by the separate meanings Arendt gives for labor, work and action. But the thing about modernity that Arendt was more concerned about is that politics had taken a new form, in that labor had been overcome by action.

Putting this in the context of BLM's political activity, BLM was established and characterized by the coming together of people through social media activity, which was political in nature. The reason this is so problematic for Arendt's ideas about the *vita activa*, or the life of action, is that social media and action, clash sharply within Arendt's socio-political theory.

Although it appears that BLM originated within the private realm and can be said to have been developed within the confines of the *vita contemplativa*, it does so in a manner Arendt does not, nor could discuss within her socio-political theory. She explains human contemplation without being able to foresee the influence the private use of social media might have on the social realm and political activity.

For Arendt, the quietness of humans contemplating on what one must do to interact in the world among things and individuals, among labor, work and action, warrants the implementation

of human activity. This is what she theorizes as being man's desire to escape from the bondage of earth, which extends from contemplation over the potential to further existing conditions. The moving away from the bondage of labor through the work of building from earth's resources in order to achieve meaningfulness is a deviation from the natural human condition. To be free from labor in the quest to reach a higher form of meaningful existence, according to Arendt, is the difference between human nature in a society of conditioned beings and the developed conditions of human activity (HC,5). The drive toward freedom by escaping labor has been the goal of technology in the modern age. It meant people were less concerned about the immediate tasks of the home and more involved in acting under the conditions of political and economic systems. More, the skills typically found in home and private care taking has been converted into societal and public "housekeeping."

This is where we see the application of Arendt's ideas being codified in what is happening in BLM. In short, BLM is attempting to escape the bondage of oppression through technology, indeed, but its origins have the markings of traditional and contemporary concepts of human contemplation and human activity combined. Human activity and the implications work, labor, and action have on the human condition never achieve the ultimate conclusion of defining human existence—the question of who we are. Nevertheless, humans are dedicated to living plural lives and to the politics of becoming free from the bondage to earth, by way of collective activity. Therefore, one contemplating on what ought to be done via social media, for example, immediately becomes human activity the moment thousands, and possibly millions, of people respond to a single social media post on a political topic such as BLM's protests against police violence and social inequality, declaring that Black Lives Matter.

Notwithstanding BLM's redefining of the social realm through its use of social media for politics, the social realm and its new political form eliminated the private and public distinctions, removing from them the values and conditions which previously made up the home and the political. These recent developments threaten the ability of individuals to resign to the private space of their homes and become shielded from the exposure to public life. Arendt considers this invasion of privacy not only a problem for the private realm but also detrimental to political life. For her, because the social realm's intrusion on private life disrupts the functionality of the home, and because humans adapt to the common conformities of social norms, the human will to survive becomes a means for humanity to be threatened by its own drive toward the new social sphere, the new concept of caring for family. Arendt further explains why the emergence of the modern age is worrisome:

What concerns us in this context is the extraordinary difficulty with which we, because of this development, understand the decisive division between the public and private realms, between the sphere of the *polis* and the sphere of household and family, and, finally, between activities related to a common world and those related to the maintenance of life, a division upon which all ancient political thought rested as self-evident and axiomatic. In our understanding, the dividing line is entirely blurred, because we see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping. (HC, 28)

Here, the issues surrounding the social realm problem corresponds to the loss between the labor, work, and action distinctions. The distinctions between the public and private realms generally mean the differences between the life of the workers and laborers and those who take action through speech and assemble among others to discuss issues of concern. The certainty ancient political actors had about politics and their thinking lied in the fact that the distinctions between the public and private realms were clear. The new age snapshot of family and those who make up public society are hardly distinguishable. That is, the interest of the nation-state is not to

build private families, but to establish a political economy in the public space that is modeled *after* the family.

Through analyzing Arendt's account of "the rise of the social," it is easy and perhaps accurate to understand the social and the power it gives the nation-state as a threat to the private and public. But, in assessing BLM's recent interactions within the private and public spaces, we can see that the development of BLM has caused the private and public spheres to also become intertwined with the social. The reason for this is that, while the political sphere is public, social activities on personal technological devices are generally private. To be sure, and although Arendt might not agree, both the private and the public can now be viewed as social entities because, 1) the autonomous aspects of individuals of the private are at liberty to assemble on social media, or not; and 2) the public have become reliant on the presence of others across social media platforms, among various social groups. Within the private space, an individual is independent of public affairs, but as a whole, an individual exists within the same likeness as others. As individuals, people exist with distinctions among other humans, yet without being different from others in a sense that all have being human in common. However, there are two issues that raise questions concerning Arendt's ideas on the social and nation-state: 1) Arendt viewed the social and the nation-state as two aspects of the problem from which the political suffers; and 2) BLM's social media activity in opposition to the nation-state are two aspects of which Arendt would be on the fence. It is a question of whether Arendt would undermine the fact of how she would disagree with social media as an effective means for political activity in the sense of action, for the sake of how she would agree with the outcomes social media produces in BLM's opposition to nation-state power.

III *The Political*

So that we can make sense of how the political is grounded in human qualities, we need to identify the elements that separate the political from the social. The foundation of the social and its functions cannot be paralleled with the political, whose essence is absent of the elements of tribe and kinship. Arendt writes, “It was not just an opinion or theory of Aristotle but a simple historical fact that the foundation of the *polis* was preceded by the destruction of all organized units resting on kinship, such as the *phratria* [brotherhood] and the *phyle* [tribe]” (HC, 24). Although the social had an identity in ancient Greek philosophy, it was limited to the qualities human life shares with animal life. The political, contrarily, has as its roots human qualities. Human beings (*bios politikos*) have the potential to form political organizations, which is a characteristic missing from the experience one faces in private life.

Detached from worldliness, the social does not have a defined space in which it exists. It remains tangibly obscure as its effects, nonetheless, are ever present in society. And because of the obscure nature of the social, there is no accountability society members are held to due to a lack of appearance before other human beings. While the social might reflect as people socializing in public, there is in fact only an ideological concept of the social consisting of the private folding into the public. The social has taken what we knew of as life necessities within the private and forged them into a setting open to the world. That being as it may, nations are sure to spend a great deal of resources tailoring markets to feed the immediate consumption habits of people, in sacrifice of the previous relationship people had to intimate and private objects.

Arendt conceptualizes political action as a new beginning that allows the principle of freedom to enter into the public space of the world. This is one of the distinctive qualities of the

public that make the need for the public to be separate from the private so critical for Arendt. And because the public and private distinctions are blurred by the social, it leads to the further empowerment of the nation-state and its agenda to institute a political economy. Arendt has a problem with the nation-state having this sort of power. She feels that such power interferes with private life and prior ideas of political activity (public life).

But Arendt does not explicitly consider the potential for other possibilities that could result from the lines of the public and private distinctions being blurred by the social. Specifically, BLM's use of social media to engage in political activity, which results in being furthered in the public space, are examples of unintended consequences of the public and private intersecting to make up the social. Further, not only does BLM not offer the nation-state any sense of power through its social order, it also attempts to restrict the nation-state from having the power and authority to arbitrarily and constructively deprive the Black community of equal treatment and equal rights.

Black Lives Matter and Social Media

“What are you following me for?”—Trevon Martin, February 26, 2012; “Why did you shoot me?”—Kendrec McDade, March 24, 2012; “Please don’t let me die.”—Kimani Gray, March 9, 2013; “I can’t breathe.”—Eric Gardner, July 17, 2014; “I don’t have a gun. Stop shooting.”—Michael Brown, August 9, 2014; I didn’t do anything.”—Natasha McKenna, February 3, 2015; “They tasing me.”—Walter Scott, April 4, 2015; “I can’t breathe.”—Freddie Grey, April 12, 2015; “I don’t wanna die young.”—Christian Taylor, August 7, 2015; “I didn’t even do anything.”—Samuel DuBose, July 19, 2015; “I wasn’t reaching for it.” Philando Castile, July 6, 2016; “Duck, get down.”—Jordan Edwards, April 29, 2017; “I can’t breathe.”—George Floyd, May 25, 2020

Introduction

In Chapter 1, we have seen how human plurality has three factors that are common to BLM, which rests on three claims:

- (1) **The social:** Like the social, BLM’s lack of appearance in in the public to initiate political activity disrupts human plurality.
- (2) **The public and private distinctions:** Through the use of social media, BLM begins in the private realm to effectuate valid political activity in the public space.
- (3) **The political:** BLM uses social media to spawn political debates as a new beginning in the public space to influence sought after political outcomes.

These three claims penetrate deeply into Arendt’s socio-political theory, which challenges and stretches human plurality to its limits. For one, Arendt thinks that an important function of action is that it develops into something new and preserves the political so that history can be remembered (HC, 9). And if action requires that actors appear in the public space for it to be authentically “the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter” (HC, 7), then how do we define the speech and action that goes on within the context of BLM’s social media political discourse, and its ability to significantly influence

politics? This is a problem we can explore through understanding how social justice movements like BLM utilize political resources to challenge oppressive social conditions.

The goal of this chapter is to examine Black Lives Matter's social development next to the 1960s Civil Rights Movement's social development to better help us understand the human plurality problem. We will look at where the two movements might be fundamentally different in their organizing strategies to perform political activity. Chapter three will allow us to see whether the problem of BLM's socio-political development can be reconciled with Arendt's theory on human plurality. This chapter will focus on showing how the human plurality problem is more specific to BLM rather than to the CRM. This will give us a premise to work from to determine the merits of a possible solution to the Arendt and BLM socio-political problem.

In the first section, I start with a comparative analysis of BLM and the CRM, which will provide the clearest understanding of the organizational structure of each. A comparative analysis highlights the areas BLM deviates from conventional approaches to social justice movements, and how this deviation confronts Arendt's ideas on the social. We will engage with other writers who have attempted to wrestle with the tension BLM creates in the political space.

In the second section, I lay out how BLM's use of social media immediately institutes political activity that produces unexpected outcomes. I argue that, although the unexpected political outcomes that BLM's social media activity represents might not fit Arendt's idea of politics, it does, however, serve to revolutionize what Arendt says human plurality means for political activity. Framing the argument in this way focuses our attention on how human plurality might be defined in the context of BLM's ability to utilize social media to oppose the nation-state's use of the social realm to execute power.

I conclude this chapter with a narrative on the traditional uses of media in the midst of political activity to draw a contrast to the final chapter, which interrogates Arendt's critique of the rise of the social relative to the political implications of BLM's use of social media. This will allow us to see if Arendt accounts for BLM's social media activity as a valid socio-political justice movement.

I *A Comparative Analysis of Black Lives Matter and the Civil Rights Movement*

The Black Lives Matter movement can be defined by the names of the Black people whose last words were suffering pleas for mercy while being assassinated by their killers. 17 year old Travon Martin was walking from a store in a Florida neighborhood with candy and a soft drink when he was hunted and gunned down by a vigilante. The murder was a reminder that society has not rid itself of people like those who thought beating and killing a 14 year old Emmet Till satisfied their interest in white supremacy. In both cases, social justice movement efforts demanded political change.

The common elements in both killings, happening nearly 60 years apart, were that both teenagers were rightfully in communities where they were killed, and both of their killers were acquitted of murder. Both cases resulted in the Black community responding with social justice movements, which rewards a critique of Arendt's socio-political theory. To properly put into context how Arendt might view the problem of the social in light of BLM, I first give a side-by-side account of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter. With this comparative approach, we will better understand how Arendt thought about the social and political problem, and how it relates to BLM. I argue that, although Arendt would not agree with BLM's use of social media to effectuate political activity, since it contributes to blurring the lines between the public and private, she would be supportive of BLM's resulting opposition to nation-state

power. But Arendt would think that the use of social media for political activity in opposition to nation-state power are incompatible, given that the blurring of the line between the public and the private inevitably increase nation-state power. A comparison of the relevant points at which BLM and CRM intersect will allow us to see the political implications of BLM's use of social media for political activity.

To begin, in 1968, the U.S. population was 199 million. The crime rate was 3,370.2 per 100,000 people. In 2020, the U.S. population was 327 million. The crime rate was 2,580.1 per 100,000 people.² In 1968, the crime factor created a law and order narrative that appealed to both Blacks and whites. For Blacks, the law and order narrative around 1968 was that law enforcement over policed Black communities, leading to mass incarceration. For whites, it meant that the incarceration of Blacks was justified, because the media controlled the narratives to which the public had access. More, the dog whistles and race coded language that politicians used to promote "tough on crime" bills in the media provided no effective way of being scrutinized by the public.

But over two decades of a decrease in the crime rate, the crime factor used to justify mass incarceration was non-existent. This made it possible for new, radical ideas to be introduced to the discourse surrounding criminal justice reform that was not available in 1968. More white elites, especially in the democratic party, are now calling for significant police reform and the defunding of the police, which is significantly different from the time of the 1960s CRM. In the 1960s, there were white democratic leaders involved in the criminal justice system, including in police departments, who were afraid of police reform. They viewed criminal justice reform as a threat to their own power and validity.

² Source: U.S. Crime Rates 1960-2019, Disaster Center

During the 1960s CRM, the absence of documentation allowed mostly right wing political elites to institute dog whistling and race coded language to make excuses for the police brutality of which Blacks were constantly victims. But it is difficult to make excuses for police brutality when you are seeing on social media a white police officer kneeling on a Black man's neck until he dies. The moral compass of human beings is challenged and spirits changed when seeing a firsthand account of death happening based on racial hatred. This means that the ways in which social media allows political ideas to be communicated to the public makes possible an increased ambition toward freedom in ways technology did not allow during the CRM. Journalist began to cover the differences between the CRM era and that of BLM to point out the opportunities for the social media to revitalize civil rights protests.

For example, Adam Serwer published a cover story in a 2020 issue of *The Atlantic* entitled, "The New Reconstruction." "In 1955," he writes, "the images of a mutilated Emmett Till helped spark the civil-rights movement. In 2013, the acquittal of Trevon Martin's killer inspired Alicia Garza to declare Black lives matter, giving form to a movement dedicated to finishing the work begun by its predecessors." Prior to the social movements that followed both tragic events, organizers recognized the need to conform to the technology available to them during their respective times in order to focus their goals, strategies, and rhetoric toward the media. For a 1960's civil rights organizer situated in the south, it meant first using a telephone to call a larger national civil rights organization long-distance, which required first speaking to an operator over a switchboard. BLM activists in 2013 needing to get news out simply first decided on which social media platform to use.

Activist Claybourne Carson of the Martin Luther King Junior research and education institute at Stanford University determined that, what took months for protest organizers to

develop in 1968 upon Martin Luther King's assassination, in terms of public gatherings, only took days to develop when George Floyd was murdered in 2020. In just one week, hundreds of thousands of people mobilized in all 50 states and around the world. A larger set of demonstrations than the march on Washington were being organized, mostly by young people.

Different from the CRM era, social media allows the possibility to scrutinize and challenge government decisions right away and research ways to be effective in gathering support in the process of developing political oppositions to such decisions. Furthermore, activists of BLM have the option to forego traditional media sources they might not trust, in favor of utilizing social media to regain agency and to control the narrative of political issues. Although both BLM and CRM represent the goal to identify and dismantle systematic racism, the focus for CRM was the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which led to the Voting Rights Act. BLM have focuses similar to CRM, but significant legislation has yet to be seen on the level of BLM.

Another difference is that there is the generational gap between BLM and CRM that means the difference between definite leaders during CRM and the lack of conventional leadership among BLM's wide spread, individual approaches to collective activism for which social media provide the means. It also means the difference between having a planned and strategic idea of how outcomes would be achieved. While CRM protesters had specific and organized roles to play in the movement, BLM provides a social media space that allows individuals to be free to decide what role would be best for them to play in the BLM movement.

II *Black Lives Matter's Social Media Activity*

In response to 17-year-old Trevon Martin's 2012 murder by George Zimmerman, Alicia Garza created a Facebook post, writing, "btw stop saying that we are not surprised. That's a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue

that. Stop giving up on black life. Black people, I will NEVER give up us.” The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter resulted from a response to her post. From there, BLM began to expand. Along with the expansion of BLM was the concept that individuals seen the viability of a movement giving hope to a centuries old problem—Black lives not mattering to those who bought into the myth of white supremacy. Protest ideas for BLM initially occurred in the private homes of individuals posting on social media, which eventually ventured into the public space.

At the height of Black Lives Matter’s protest against the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, in the nearly 11 years since Twitter had existed, the “BlackLivesMatter” hashtag and Ferguson” was used 1.7 million times.³ The expression Black Lives Matter grew to generate support in the Black community when it became the organizational tool and slogan of protests that swarmed through the country following the police killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri.⁴

Research shows that the social media dynamic has been instrumental in the BLM movement’s hashtag being flooded on Twitter and Facebook, becoming the source of conversations between activists and their supporters and adversaries.⁵ The BlackLivesMatter hashtag allowed the Black community to effectively have their political concerns arrive in front of political leaders, some of which made campaign promises to answer BLM’s grievances.

BLM does not cure the sought after solitude problem previously found in private life; it does not fix what distinguishes private from public life, nor does it remove the “blur” between the private and public caused by the rise of the social. In fact, it is not even reasonable to

³ Pew Research Center

⁴ Bonilla, Yarimar, and Rosa, Johnathan. 2015. "# Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States." *American Ethnologist* 42 (1): 4-17.

⁵ Cox, Jonathan M. 2017. “The Source of a Movement: Making the Case for Social Media as an Informational Source using Black Lives Matter.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40(11): 1847- 54.

consider the political realm a distant social realm removed from the private sphere. But BLM's social media activity did launch political action in the public space from the confines of private life. Individuals, within the contemplation of their own minds, and at the notion of social media communications, decided on whether to take action for a cause which results in appearing in the public sphere for the purpose of social and political change. But the idea of BLM did not start from social media on its own—it began from the sole private thought in an individual's mind, who insisted on bringing a political concern to the public *via* social media.

With social media being its primary means of assembling, BLM arguably reshaped political activity and the structure of politics altogether. BLM has spawned a social change within political institutions, resulting in the merging of the private, public and social realms in such a way, that it is difficult to determine whether BLM's use of social media to achieve the political goal of opposing nation-state power is justified in an Arendtian sense. Just as Arendt's Zionist activities in reaction to the Nazis was a social event that influenced her thinking, an exploration of how BLM penetrated social media as a new political form will help us to think about and better understand contemporary political activity. More, how we understand Arendt's ideas on the rise of the social helps determine whether the threat of human plurality includes the influence BLM's use of social media has on political activity.

Our ability to communicate ideas through social media allows for a politician like Mitt Romney to protest in the streets, advocating for Black Lives Matter. Whereas, in the 1960s, the communication means were limited to mainly television, radio and newspapers, and the public discourse surrounding civil rights issues was tailored to fit a certain narrative by the time it reached private homes. We do, however, see social media promoting the discourse surrounding the political protests of BLM to not only the Black community but also to marginalized groups

and political circles of white politicians. Arendt does not account for this technological and political social media resource, in which we see has an enormous impact on political life and has tremendous public consequences. With social media as a political instrument, we see the public, private and the social, in the context of which Arendt describes, being merged in a way that not only represents the blurring of the lines between the public and private distinctions, but also representing the social no longer being so distinct from neither the public nor private. Arendt says that “the social realm, which is neither private nor public,” has “found its political form in the nation-state” (HC, 28). Although this is an accurate account of the public, private, and social relationship of Arendt’s time, a contemporary idea of the public, private, and social relationship carries an evolved explanation: technological advancements have allowed the public, private, and social relationship to include the ability of social media to politicize private ideas within public spaces with immediacy. Therefore, just as the social has found its political form in the nation-state, BLM utilized social media to find its political form to oppose nation-state power.

BLM has emerged through social media and evolved as a significant movement for social and political change. Developing into a political change movement, BLM is designed to advocate for Black lives within Black communities. The ways in which BLM develops as a social and political movement does not have the markings as something that was intended. In the contemplation of the mind within the private home, a social media post declaring Black Lives Matter was in reaction to police violence, which sparked an unintended massive social and political movement. It is similar to what Arendt says about a new beginning occurring, which has unexpected consequences: “It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins” (HC, 303, 4). As in the case of

the social media activity that unexpectedly amounted to BLM beginning something new, it resulted in the outcome of overwhelming support from social groups that was not available and seemingly impossible during CRM. Arendt understood this phenomenon as something to be expected, given the human nature of action. She said that: “[t]he new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle” (HC, 178).

The action, or activities, of BLM begins on social media and eventually transitions into the public, in which both spheres have political implications that lead to social and political change. The unity and action of BLM consist of individuals with the common interest of coming together not only to discuss matters which are important, but to also gather with a sense of purpose, passion, and compassion for social and political change. Arendt thought that “solidarity is a principle that can inspire and guide action, compassion is one of the passions, and pity is a sentiment” (OR, 89). In this sense, the coming together to defend the Black community against racist violence is what motivates BLM to move toward political change in the fight against inequality.

To be clear, when it comes to social movements, and what continues to be the case, is the idea that people act and have an existence in the world which is unchangeable and is vulnerable to a shift in evolving societal conditions. This is what makes the social media activity of BLM possible. Arendt suggests that “[w]hile all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life” (HC, 7). This means that, the human condition of

plurality is not only what political life cannot survive without, but the condition that is responsible for political life to exist.

The unified approach in taking action is independent of the necessity for external things in order for politics to take place in the world. That is, acting in the world among others needs nothing except words and deeds in order for politics to occur in the public. The human condition is such that, plurality has as its condition speech and action, which guarantee man's permanent existence in the world. The relationship between politics and human plurality is the ability of man to reason and obtain the courage to enter into the public realm to voice concerns which are relevant to the human condition. Although as a condition human plurality is directly related to political activity by way of speech and action in the public space, with the modern age stripping the private and public realms of their previous distinctive qualities, the political realm remains open to social influences, such as social media being the catalyst for the political activity of BLM.

III *Traditional Political Activity in the Media*

One of the major differences in political activity covered in traditional media outlets and that which is covered in social media is that, with traditional media, readers of newspapers can read about opposing views to their own political ideas without much filtration, if at all. With social media, users experience a loss in opposing perspectives at times, given that content is often automatically filtered to fit the user's search capacity. Often times searches will be tailored to users' political ideas, leaving less room for learning from political views different from their own. However, the ultimate purpose of media, including social media, within a political context, is the idea of sharing content from one source for a massive number of people to witness almost simultaneously and immediately. The overall effects from the spreading of political content

through media, including social media, is that people have been conditioned to react to political information, take action, and assemble among social or political groups. This has been a traditional reality as well as a present one.

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville writes about the essential atmosphere surrounding American Democracy and the political condition people conform to in a balanced and equal society. He describes this politically balanced and equal phenomena as “equality of condition,” in which he says is “the enormous influence that this primary fact exerts on the course of society” (DA, 3). Specifically, in the section “On the Relation Between Associations and Newspapers,” Tocqueville focuses on how “equality of condition” extends to the customs of social and political life, resulting in society having the tendency to form associations and to read newspapers. Tocqueville elaborates:

When men are no longer bound among themselves in a solid and permanent manner, one cannot get many to act in common except by persuading each of them whose cooperation is necessary that his particular interest obliges him voluntarily to unite his efforts with efforts of all others. That can be done habitually and conveniently only with the aid of a newspaper; only a newspaper can come to deposit the same thought in a thousand minds at the same time. (DA, 493)

Tocqueville’s idea is that men are not always assembled on the same accord, which makes it difficult to arouse action out of the many. In order for one man to accomplish the goal of uniting men for one common cause, media campaigns are necessary, in this case newspaper campaigns. The parallel between traditional uses of news papers for political activity and social media lie in the fact that both resources are rooted in the goal of establishing the conditions and functions to effectuate political activity among the masses. This is merely just another way of looking at how political activity is related to action taking place through media and the relationship it has to human plurality and its conditions.

As human plurality has a never changing condition which centers on speech and action, the social realm has been altered by BLM in the presence of social and political change. The necessary condition which calls on speech and action to reshape politics is the fact of individuals having a passion for life and the courage to enter the public space to voice concerns before political entities and leaders. Such combinations of events are generated through the private, public, and social realms, in which have become combined within social media politics, as with BLM.

Arendt expounds on the behavioral role that heads of households take on in the modern social realm. She makes the distinction between behavior and action to note the difference in how the nation-state moved away from the historical idea of violence to speech, in order to achieve its agenda. By reducing man to the status of a well behaved, trained animal, the nation-state succeeds in merging the management capabilities found in the private realm to assist with the functions of the public realm. As Arendt explains:

Perhaps the clearest indication that society constitutes the public organization of the life process itself may be found in the fact that in a relatively short time the new social realm transformed all modern communities into societies of laborers and jobholders. (HC, 46)

The expectation of human behavior in the public realm of the past was to behave in a normalized manner by either consent or coercive tactics. The modern social realm consists of building upon society in a way that produces outcomes that are economically beneficial to the nation-state. Instead of the heads of households carrying their authoritative voices from the private to the public realm for political purposes, they instead bring their acts of labor to the public realm in effort to fulfill the consumptive desires of people. As such, laboring becomes not a natural process of establishing an intimate way of living but rather a process of productivity under the influence of political concerns, a modern characteristic of the social realm.

Labor as a public activity is held to a higher standard than what labor previously meant for the private. The requirements that social interaction demands hold laborers to the expectation of formality opposed to the casual performance to achieve life necessities found in the private. Therefore, the authoritative voice a head of household would have within family life has been replaced with the hegemonic conditions established by the nation-state, within the formal public space of society—the new social realm. Arendt describes this transition as a moving away from speech and action being the way to influence nature, in favor of moving toward social science instituted by the nation-state for the purpose of controlling society. Further, with the transition to the new social realm, the dynamics of private life, which includes emotions and thoughtfulness, are tailored to apply to the wider public audience for all to witness. As a result, a shared perceived reality emerges in public life, and with it comes an increase in how subjective feelings and thoughts of individuals become those of public interest. But this view of the public and private realms has evolved and takes another form when looking at the political developments surrounding BLM.

In light of BLM, to live a private life in its totality, as Arendt points out, is “to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life” (HC, 58). This means that true privacy consists of not appearing before others to be seen or heard. Although an individual initiated BLM as a movement from the private, the idea of social media launching the hashtag that formed BLM is the tangible element that created the possibility of a social movement that became absent of the deprivation of a meaningful human existence found in the private. The “otherness” as an “important aspect of plurality” which Arendt speaks of has been redefined via BLM, which appeals to a social need for inclusion that has plagued the Black community for centuries. It is what makes “otherness” still “the reason why all our definitions are distinctions, why we are

unable to say what anything is without distinguishing it from something else” (HC, 176). As far as describing what BLM means in relation to what might help define it and “distinguish it from something else,” we can point to other movements in recent history that have attempted to effectuate significant political outcomes. For example, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) was a 2011 social movement challenging economic inequality. Although there is no evidence that it had the kind of political change effects we see with BLM, the OWS movement stretched as far as Canada and beyond. Nonetheless, the goal of social movements, including BLM, is the hope for being free from injustice, from inequality.

In her essay “What is Freedom,” Arendt seeks to establish her belief that freedom is not synonymous with having a free will nor with being able to occupy one’s own thoughts. Rather, she sees political freedom as being able to appear in the public among people to discuss things that matter (WF, 145). If we were to take this view of people coming together to protest for “political freedom” to be BLM protesters as those who “appear in public to discuss what matters,” Arendt would have the difficult task of convincing us that BLM’s political activity does not fit into what she contemplated over to describe the kind of political matters of which she spoke. Therefore, the question of whether human plurality continues to be threatened is valid if we are to stay true to human plurality being the necessary condition for the functions of speech and action involved in political activity. This is primarily because the way BLM has assembled through social media in the engagement of political activity still cannot be defined through Arendt’s definition of human plurality.

The Rise of the Social

Introduction

Social media has been the ultimate political theme that BLM exemplifies within the scheme of the rise of the social. In chapter two, I argued that BLM's novel social media approach to reaching marginalized groups and other social and political groups need to be understood as a revolutionary way in which political activity occurs in public spaces. This recognition helps us designate the significance in how BLM's deviation from traditional media methods used to execute political activity redefines the meaning of human plurality. Further, the political activity that revolves around BLM's use of social media disrupts critical components of Arendt's ideas about what human plurality means for the kind of political engagements we should aim for. Arendt thought that political engagements and human activity in society should be the highest goals of human life—the life of action.

If we were to precisely follow Arendt's socio-political theory on what constitutes legitimate political activity, BLM's social media activity would not meet such requirements for political activity to be valid. In fact, Arendt thought that “our capacity for action and speech has lost much of its former quality since the rise of the social realm banished these into the sphere of the intimate and the private” (HC, 49). But the political discussions among early participants of BLM, which became the new beginning for BLM's political activity, began on private social media devices within the private spaces of individual users. The physical appearance function that is suppose to be so critical for the initiation of political activity in the public space was missing from BLM's early political assembly, when Alicia Garza declared “Black Lives Matter” on a social media device. This explication of social media challenges Arendt's idea of what

makes political activity so meaningful—action and appearance. Nonetheless, BLM’s political activism, having begun in private spaces on social media platforms, has resulted in BLM being successful at urging Democratic politicians to include in their campaigns policy proposals on issues that specify Black people’s concerns.

The first section of this chapter analyzes social reconstruction after the Civil War. I revisit how social justice movements evolved through the use of modern technology to point out social media’s impact on politics. The second section collaborates ideas from the first and second chapters to map out the political implications of BLM’s use of social media. I attempt to guide the tension between social media and political power toward an understanding of how BLM’s use of social media balances the prior disadvantages recognized within social and political spaces. I offer a revised definition of human plurality that accounts for the conditions social media creates within the context of BLM’s political activity. The third section gives an assessment of modern technology and whether Arendt’s idea of the crucial element of appearance, in its literal and political terms, is germane to the positive political outcomes BLM’s use of social media provides. The fourth and closing section connects BLM’s political beginnings to how Arendt thought about understanding’s relationship to politics during the totalitarianism regime. This will give us a detailed account of how a new beginning in politics is not always best understood during its time. I make a case for how, like totalitarianism, the nation-state’s implementation of the social, including social media and its use for political activity, might not be best understood in our present reality.

By combining the arguments in chapter one on human plurality with those in chapter two on BLM’s use of social media for political activity, we see the connection that nation-state power has to how totalitarianism is understood. Part of the reason understanding totalitarianism is

relevant to BLM's opposition to the nation-state's interest in creating hegemonic and oppressive conditions in the Black community is that social media allows BLM to effectively challenge the political oppression the nation-state institutes. For example, Wikipedia gives the following partial meaning for totalitarianism: "Totalitarianism is a form of government and a political system that prohibits all opposition parties, outlaws individual and group opposition to the state and its claims, and exercises an extremely high degree of control and regulation over public and private life." Although my argument is not that the U.S. exercises totalitarianism fully, however, I do posit that the coercive element in the nation-state's institution of hegemonic conditions among its citizens fits squarely into part of the meaning of totalitarianism. For instance, the nation-state has an agenda within its institution of a political economy to establish "a political system that . . . exercises an extremely high degree of control and regulation over public and private life." The new social realm Arendt warned us about follows this line of reasoning—she would know something about the institution of an oppressive government. More, policies that result in over policing the Black community, marginalization, and mass incarceration are indicative of the oppressive conditions the nation-state creates for the Black community. But before we venture further into the exploration of the theory Arendt embarks on concerning "understanding and politics," we will first briefly revisit BLM next to CRM to discuss the relationship both have to social reconstruction. This will allow us to see the significance of the "new beginning" BLM's social and political activity represents.

I *Social Reconstruction*

After the Civil War, the U.S. transitioned into the Reconstruction era, marking the end of slavery. During this period, Blacks continued to struggle with the pains of segregation and economic oppression. In the 1950s, Blacks began to resist social exclusion through social justice

movements. These movements centered on nonviolent protests, such as the 1955-56 Montgomery Bus Boycott inspired by Rosa Parks' social resistance.

Following the tradition of past social justice movements, BLM's early development consisted of marginalized groups that used clever tactics to outdo their more resourceful opponents. The global disruptions BLM created demanded that racial injustice protests will no longer go being ignored. The modern technological advancement of social media expanded not only BLM's possibilities, scope, and efficiency, but it also expanded its distance and speed. The times of the mimeograph, TV, radio, newspapers, and speeches, which were used to spread the word of Rosa Parks' arrest, are no more. Witnesses now record those committing violent assaults on cell phones, sometimes going live for content to be immediately accessible to news and social media outlets, with the potential of spreading outrage globally. Social media was and continues to be effective in assisting BLM with organizing and mobilizing supporters, and instantly conjuring up international protests. What remains to be clear is that the twentieth century Civil Rights Movement has evolved into the twenty-first century Black Lives Matter Movement, keeping alive the goal of opposing nation-state power through the use of social media.

II *Political Implications of Black Lives Matter and Social Media*

In an article published in *Scientific America*, entitled "From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter," Aldon Morris writes to describe how social justice movements progress over time. After the Civil Rights Act was passed by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964, sociologists began to create theories to explain the Civil Rights social movements. Around 1977, William Gamson, Charles Tilly, and Doug McAdam developed the "political process theory" to assess the ways in which change comes about through social justice movements, when other political resources are not available

to provide a change within oppressed communities. Political process theory, Morris writes, “argues that social movements are struggles for power—the power to change oppressive social conditions.”⁶ As formal political avenues are not available to marginalized groups that are excluded from the institutions where typical political affairs occur, they have no choice but to partake in movements that are grassroots in nature in order to have their interests heard on a public stage. These social movement groups almost always encounter violence with law enforcement in the name of social change. How effective the organization process is and how unique the strategies are to outsmart bureaucracies determine the success of the movement. Political process theory also argues that “external windows of opportunity, such as the 1954 Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools, must open for movements to succeed because they are too weak on their own.”⁷ BLM has been successful at gathering support of politicians in its effort to get the justice system to have police officers that commit unjustified violence against Black people indicted.

Only after BLM’s social media activity and following protests did politicians and judicial institutions hear and act on BLM’s serious racial justice campaign issues in ways that made a significant political difference. BLM needed to use social media to access a wide audience in order to take advantage of “external windows of opportunity.” Otherwise, BLM protesters would be “too weak on their own.” Arendt thought about the need for individuals to gather in attempt to act against political power structures:

Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength. While strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse. (HC, 200)

⁶ Morris, Aldon. *Scientific American*, “From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter,” 2021. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/from-civil-rights-to-black-lives-matter1/>

⁷ Ibid (This article is without page numbers)

Historically, movements have recognized the importance in assembling in public spaces to become more visible to political opposition and other groups. Visibility seems to be a powerful force when groups organize in large numbers on the same accord. BLM seemed to recognize the need to add another play to the social movement playbook that would produce more effective outcomes than its predecessors were able to achieve.

Although BLM was inspired by the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the 1980s feminist movement, the 1980s Pan African movement, the 1980s political hip-hop movement, the 2000s LGBT movement, and the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, BLM's use of social media to engage with thousands and later millions of like-minded people to institute a social justice movement deviates from the repressed, top-down movement methods consistent with previous examples of social movements. Unlike the 1960s CRM, BLM organized its efforts toward groups that were not mainstream activists during the 1960s Black social movements. BLM targeted “women, the working poor, the disabled, undocumented immigrants, atheist and agnostics, and those who identify as queer and transgender.”⁸ BLM organized these groups to become present and visible in public spaces and other media outlets in their continued protests and civil engagements. Thus, social media made it much easier for BLM to mobilize marginalized group—a resource not available to CRM activists.

In an online interview posted on YouTube called, “The impact social media activism had on the BLM movement,” Dr. Moya Bailey discussed the contents of a book she co-authored entitled, *#Hashtag Activism*. According to Bailey, digital platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are used to get political messages out through communication amongst regular users and politicians. She describes two methods that define the processes involved in social media

⁸ Ruffin, Herbert G. *Black Past*, “Black Lives Matter: The Growth of a New Social Justice Movement,” August 23, 2015

political activism: 1) “Hashtag Activism;” and 2) “Slacktivism.” Hashtag Activism, she says, is “the use of social media hashtags to unite internet activism and protests.” Slacktivism, she continues, is “supporting a political or social cause on social media, involving little effort or commitment.” These two contemporary terms are a part of the social media culture, which shows how even the language of social media plays a fundamental role in the activities, behaviors, and thinking of individuals of the modern world in which we live. But we are still left to determine how to reconcile the differences in how appearance matters between traditional political activity methods and those of the modern world.

III *Modern Technology and Appearance*

When Arendt was developing her socio-political ideas around the conflict modern technology created for the political, her theories were partly influenced by Martin Heidegger’s lectures first published under the title *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (1953) (Introduction to Metaphysics, [2000]).⁹ She was particularly interested in his thoughts on the “encounter between global technology and modern humanity” (EM, 152).¹⁰ Heidegger was concerned that Western society was “in the great pincers between Russia on the one side and America on the other,” and that both countries were in a race toward “the same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology” and the “rootless organization of the average man” (IM, 40). The race toward technological advancements were also a race toward mass technological production. This led to a mass society dependent on consumerism to feed the desire people have to be free from labor. What this means in the context of social media and BLM is that BLM forewent organizing through traditional methods of laborious political activism in exchange for conforming to social media

⁹ Introduction to Metaphysics (2000) is the English translation

¹⁰ Arendt highlighted this phrase in her copy of the text, found in her collection of books in the Stevenson Library at Bard College, Annandale On-Hudson.

strategies. The desire people have for the immediate results social media provides is another example of how BLM took advantage of modern age technology to organize and engage in political activity, which reached a massive array of social and political groups instantaneously.

Prior to writing *The Human Condition*, Arendt published an essay called “The Threat of Conformism,” in which she argued that the main problem in the modern age was “the political organization of mass societies” and “the political integration of technical power” (TC, 427). The nation-state’s ongoing objective to establish a political economy moved alongside of technological advancements, including social media. The idea is that, by focusing on the social as a political tool to coerce society into converting private functions and interests into those of the public, the nation-state controls not only the means of production from a Marxist perspective, but also controls the marketing means to supply the demands of consumers who consent to nation-state power. The more technology made it less necessary for human labor, the less necessary it was for people to appear in the public to accomplish activities. Amazon, Facebook, Twitter, etc., all fall in the context of appearance becoming less of a necessity for action to take place in the public space.

Arendt was not only concerned about technology just because of how Heidegger framed it as a problem. In an essay she wrote for the *American Political Science Association*, Arendt expressed that Heidegger’s ideas on the problems with history and technology merely served as a means to further philosophical assumptions that might assist with researching the modern age.¹¹ She felt that Heidegger was not, however, able to understand that his theory on “historicity” only showed how the development of technology and history lead to modernity. She further claimed that historicity does not focus on “the center of politics—man as an acting being” (TC, 453).

¹¹ “Concern with politics in recent European philosophical thought (2005).”

While the development of technology and the history of how it led to modernity is merely half the problem for Arendt, the fact that human activity became intertwined with technological advancements for private and political survival was her primary interest. The problem this indicates for Arendt is the fact that human plurality is compromised as it moves toward social media goals rather than traditional goals of political activity. This is how social media offers social groups such as BLM an avenue to undermine the appearance element as a goal toward achieving meaningful political activity.

Arendt was aware that human beings have the natural compulsion to self-display, as is evident in the contemporary use of social media where people tend to share themselves and their activities publicly. She seemed to be worried about technology moving in a direction that would eventually amount to older traditional attributes of political activity being replaced by technological ones. In her “Thinking” volume of *The Life of the Mind*, she explains: “To be alive means to be possessed by an urge toward self-display which answers the fact of one’s own appearances” (LM, 21). Arendt thought of appearance as a means to offer a perception of ourselves to one another in a shared experience as engaging, mortal beings. Our virtual selves merely allow our perception of each other to be limited to distant images, which some might argue lacks accountability.

Further, social media provides a forum for users to feed their urge to display private acts and ideas in competition for publicity. In her sociological work published on YouTube entitled *Cold Intimacies*, Eva Illouz describes how our competitive nature is enhanced when:

the act of posting a profile allows the Internet . . . to convert the private self into a public performance. More exactly, the Internet makes the private self visible and publicly displayed to an abstract anonymous audience, which however is not public . . . but rather an aggregation of private selves. On the Internet, the private psychological self becomes a public performance.

The instantaneous conversion of the private self to a public performance through the internet is a way for action to appear as a virtual image. This virtual image of action accomplishes the task of allowing the private self to achieve public visibility without the element of actual, in-person physicality. In other words, while the performance of the private self is seen by invisible seers on social media, the experience only arrives as a mental impression of the virtual performance, which is not the same as the effects of an in-person mental and physical impression. Further, the act of performing on social media satisfies the performer's urge for publicity at the expense of getting accustomed to sharing more personal details with more people. Simply put, Facebook and Twitter have made it possible for intimacy and privacy to transition into social norms.

In the case of politics, an argument can be made that sharing action through virtual images is not technically valid for political activity, given that, as Arendt argues, "action loses its specific character" when it is exiled into the private "and becomes [only] one form of achievement among others" (HC, 180). But this raises the question of whether more weight is given to how Arendt defines the importance of action in the context of political activity than is given to the reality of the importance in achieving meaningful political outcomes. For example, if BLM has the ultimate goal of achieving criminal justice reform through organizing massive protests through social media, and the result is legislative policy changes, then what constitutes human plurality from Arendt's point of view must be redefined.

Arendt sees the political as a space for performance, freedom, and speech and action, in contrast to the private space of necessity, contemplation, and shame. Although social media guarantees images of performances that do not translate into actual skills, or the kind of performances consistent with "rare deeds" associated with the political, the persuasion element of the political is ever present in social media performances. The lack of in-person action in

social media performances seems to matter more for non-performative ideas of speech than what action means for the performative ideas of appearance. Said differently, through speech, the idea of banter and chatter can amount to mattering more than the actual perspective in-person action allows. For example, an unskilled teenaged social media blogger who has a million followers that support some political position can be more effective in achieving a political goal than a political science professional who holds daily town hall rallies and who only a few hundred people knows.

Here is where we see better the problem of BLM's uses of social media for initiating political activity more closely related to why Arendt would be opposed to the use of social media for politics. What still remains is the question of how to resolve the issue of where to place Arendt's social-political theory on what constitutes political activity in the context of BLM, human plurality, and nation-state power. To see if there is a viable solution to this problem, we need to turn to Arendt's thinking prior to her writing *The Human Condition*. What might have influenced Arendt to write a book on how "human activities should be and have been understood throughout Western history"¹² could provide us with an idea of how we need to think about and understand human plurality in the modern world. For Arendt, the modern age means the era of technical advancements marked by the development of atom bomb. By the modern world she means the world in which we live as actors in the midst of modern technological and social influences.

IV *Understanding and Politics*

In her essay, "Understanding and Politics," published in her book, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, Arendt examines the quality of thought, the

¹² Wikipedia - *The Human Condition*

standards of judgment and opinion, and the relationship these functions of the mind have with common sense, logic, and understanding. Using totalitarianism as a model, Arendt analyzes thinking by presenting two distinct standards—one based on the viewpoint of the public actor, the other on the viewpoint of the historian. In her analysis, she says that common sense is the unitary acceptance of living, which is customary to all humans, and that logic is an independent function, which achieves reason, minus the general human sensibility of people. According to Arendt, neither common sense nor logic is able to understand anything, though. If Arendt is right, the process of how a historian comes to understand past events is a phenomenon yet to be fully developed, because both present and past thinking involve drawing from historical events in order for anyone to assess reality.

Arendt suggests that trying to understand totalitarianism during its existence is a despairing feat. Her idea is that, reconciliation, or forgiving, is an element of understanding, but “forgiving has so little to do with understanding that it is neither its condition nor consequence” (UP, 308). Reaching a new beginning is what reconciliation and understanding have in common; and, for Arendt, the human act of forgiving creates the apparent notion that something done comes to an end, and something new begins. However, in the human living experience, understanding has no end and does not achieve final outcomes. “[E]very single person,” Arendt argues, “needs to be reconciled to a world into which he is born a stranger,” and therefore, “[u]nderstanding begins with birth and ends with death” (UP, 308). She makes this point to make another one—to understand totalitarianism is not to excuse it, but to make peace with the idea that we live in a world where such an occurrence is viable. More specifically, because totalitarianism is born new to the world and to the ideas of people, as far as Arendt is concerned,

neither common sense nor logic is equipped with the necessary historical data to accomplish the understanding of totalitarianism.

Arendt believes that, in a political sense, people usually approve of logical explanations when common sense cannot provide any “because the capacity for logical reasoning itself is also common to us all” (UP, 318). Only when the common thinking among all humans fails can reason offer results. However, results produced by reason do not amount to understanding the causes of totalitarianism. As Arendt points out, “understanding becomes hopeless” when people living under a totalitarian regime “are confronted with something which has destroyed [their] categories of thought and standards of judgment” (UP, 313). Her argument is that, understanding totalitarianism cannot happen during its lifetime, only after its death. Arendt’s reasoning is based on the fact that “who somebody *is*, we know only after he is dead” (UP, 309), and totalitarianism is a political and human institution; for, to understand political affairs is to understand people. Therefore, the common notions people have of what totalitarianism is during its lifetime are inadequate to understand it.

Before totalitarianism was commonly accepted as a word to describe political evil, the word was imperialism (UP, 311). Arendt makes a note of this change in words to draw attention to how “popular language . . . recognizes a new event by accepting a new word[, and] it uses such concepts as synonyms for others signifying old and familiar evils—aggression and lust for conquest in the case of imperialism, terror and lust for power in the case of totalitarianism” (UP, 312). Her contention is that people identify with the new word, the old events and conditions it is associated with, and the familiar “human sinfulness” that will determine their “political destinies” (UP, 312). Arendt furthers her argument by indicating that “[p]opular language . . . thus starts the process of true understanding” (UP, 312). In short, without the language to

describe something new, understanding is not possible—such is the case for totalitarianism in its time.

The political actor can put forth the ideologies of totalitarianism through words and deeds; and the historian can describe totalitarianism to put its past ideas in the minds of people. But totalitarianism is an ideology that arrives with a history of ideas that transforms the thinking of people. Those under the influence of totalitarianism adhere to a correlated, older imperial ideology, which deprives them of their independent thinking processes. Arendt explains: “And history is a story which has many beginnings but no end. The end in any strict and final sense of the word could only be the disappearance of man from the earth. For whatever the historian calls an end, the end of a period or tradition or whole civilization, is a new beginning for those who are alive” (UP, 320). From a political standpoint, this means, “a being whose essence is beginning may have enough of origin within himself to understand,” if his/her categories of thought and judgment have not been destroyed by something, such as totalitarianism (UP, 321). Understanding, Arendt adds, is on the “other side of action” (UP, 321), and it substantiates whatever general understanding our senses began with, “which always consciously or unconsciously is directly engaged in action” (UP, 322). Thus, the initial beginnings of totalitarianism and both the action and history of individuals have a continuous connection to memory. Totalitarianism, then, becomes a new memorable beginning, making understanding totalitarianism possible only after its time.

Arendt acknowledges that common sense and logic can give an account of the reasoning behind totalitarianism but does not provide the understanding of what it is (UP, 317). She insists that only imagination allows “us to see things in their proper perspective” (UP, 323). The imagination of the historian must be such that it allows him/her to “analyze and describe the new

structure which emerges after the event takes place as well as its elements and origins” (UP, 320 n. 17). It is under these circumstances that “the *nature* of totalitarianism is no longer a historical . . . undertaking; it is a question for political science which, if it understands itself, is the true guardian of the keys which open the doors to the problems and uncertainties of the philosophy of history” (UP, 17). Thus, a historian understands totalitarianism by pursuing philosophical theories of science to gain intuitive knowledge of the past events of totalitarianism.

Arendt was implying that, although a general understanding of totalitarianism can be sensed consciously or unconsciously, true understanding happens at the end of totalitarianism. She further suggested that understanding occurs through the imagination provided by memory, which is a new beginning of a historical event on the other side of the initial event, or action.

A new beginning is something that Arendt knew was critical to political activity. She also was aware that although we can rationalize with the purpose of a particular thing, but to understand something new can only happen after its lifetime. We can better understand Arendt’s thinking on human plurality by reaching into the depths of her thinking and understanding surrounding the reactions oppressed people had to totalitarianism, by which she was also affected. But those affected by totalitarianism was not able to understand what it was. Had social media been a tool to gather support from social and political groups to oppose totalitarianism, would Arendt have thought social media was a threat to human plurality? To get a better picture of how Arendt might have thought about human plurality in the framing of social media as a political resource, we can examine her thoughts on reason versus people living together in attempt to make sense of the world and reality through common sense. Arendt argues that:

The chief political distinction between common sense and logic is that common sense presupposes a common world into which we all fit, where we can live

together because we possess one sense which controls and adjusts all strictly particular sense data to those of all others; whereas logic and all self-evidence from which logical reasoning proceeds can claim a reliability altogether independent of the world and the existence of other people. (UP, 318)

Here, Arendt is drawing upon the notion that common sense limits the human experience to a common idea of the world that people share in common. The common experience of living and doing happens within a general concept people have of how to survive in the world—something our sense perceptions equips us with the ability to do. This is different from how logical assessments of reality is not reliant on empirical data nor engagements with others in order to understand the world.

The distinction between common sense and logic that Arendt describes within a political framework is a critical consideration when attempting to understand whether appearance is crucial to BLM's political activity, which is grounded in social media. Just as in how Arendt explained that totalitarianism was something new that could not be understood during its time, we might not be able to fully understand BLM's use of social media to begin something new. As a new beginning, BLM had unexpected consequences because its social media use for political activity was the Black community's response to centuries old oppression, in which we continue to fight against.

Through a comprehensive explanation of BLM's social media political activism, we have seen how oppression forces the oppressed to resort to their marginal places of the home and contemplate on what action one might take to bring change to an unbearable condition—inequality. For Arendt even understood that “[j]ust as in our personal lives our worst fears and best hopes will never adequately prepare us for what actually happens—because the moment even a foreseen event takes place, everything changes, and we can never be prepared” (UP, 320). BLM was launched because Black people continued to face the fear of being killed during police

encounters. The hashtag BlackLivesMatter grew out of the hope that social and political change would come.

What might help explain the case for BLM is how Arendt suggested that “each event in human history reveals an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities which together transcend the sum total of all willed intentions and the significance of all origins” (UP, 320). For BLM, the medium which initiated the functions of speech and action requirements for political activity came in the form of social media, with millions of individuals having access to a posted thought at the tips of their fingers within their private spaces. These isolated individuals became accessible to “otherness” immediately—meaning that, *the social* change initiated from *the private*, Black Lives Matter protesters poured into *the public* with the courage to take *action* in *the political*, in the fight for the right to be human.

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