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### **[Review of] Phenomenology of Plurality**

Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity. By Sophie Loidolt

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## Book Review

*Phenomenology of Plurality: Hannah Arendt on Political Intersubjectivity*. By Sophie Loidolt. New York and London: Routledge, 2018. xii + 290 pp. £92 hardback. ISBN: 978-1-138-63189-2.

Hannah Arendt's indebtedness to the phenomenological-existential tradition of political thought has often been seen to represent an unfortunate, if not ruinous, heritage that needs to be tamed if her work is to speak meaningfully to the concerns of modern politics. In this respect, Sophie Loidolt's *Phenomenology of Plurality* marks an innovative and timely contribution. The book purports to offer a "phenomenology of plurality," arguing that the nature and political implications of Arendt's concern for human plurality can only be properly understood in a phenomenological context (p. 2). On this reading, it is the "actualization of plurality in a space of appearance" that offers a unique insight into Arendt's conception of politics as a sphere of worldly togetherness and action-in-concert (p. 2, 10). The book not only provides a fresh understanding of Arendt's concepts of subjectivity, intersubjectivity and a political form of the "we," which escape the prevalent perspectives within contemporary political theory. It also shows how Arendt's phenomenology of plurality rethinks the main presuppositions of the phenomenological tradition itself, enriching it with a distinctly *political* perspective on intersubjectivity and action.

The book's argument is based on a thorough textual and contextual analysis, situating Arendt in the broader context of both traditional and contemporary phenomenological discourse. The first chapter spells out how Arendt's reflections on human plurality are framed

as a response to the (Kantian) perplexity of how to come to terms with the weight of reality and affirm human spontaneity on the grounds of an alien world without reducing it to “a function of being.” Chapters two and three explore how Arendt pluralizes and politicizes the main phenomenological concepts of appearance, experience, subjectivity and world, and develop Arendt’s notion of world as a dynamic intertwining of basic human conditions and their enacting activities. The fourth chapter examines how Arendt’s actualized plurality yields a specific form of political or worldly intersubjectivity. On this basis, chapters five and six theorize the contours of a “we” that arises in speaking, acting and judging “with” others, and outline a political ethics of plurality.

The prescient theoretical and practical relevance of *Phenomenology of Plurality* hinges on salvaging Arendt from the charges of “phenomenological essentialism,” which – as a desire to uncover the “originary” meanings of phenomena – is commonly held accountable for Arendt’s rigid separation between the social and political realms (p. 124–6). While Loidolt aims to unearth the phenomenological “deep structure” underlying Arendt’s thought, she also remains wary of congealing her exercises in political thinking into a “purely ‘transcendental’ or ‘ontological’ theory” of the “essence of the political” (p. 5, 266). In this way, the book attempts to uncover the underlying philosophical sources of Arendt’s plural accounts of action, speech and judgement, without however “dispensing with the activities and experiences themselves” (p. 266). Three points merit special attention.

First, one of the most original contributions of the book is to theorize Arendt’s notion of “who” in its worldly or intersubjective appearance. Arendt’s speaking, acting and judging subject corresponds to a “*worldly movement*” or an “inside-out-glove,” expressing a unique self *in a process* of intervening into the existing web of human relationships and responding to the given reality in the company of others (p. 89, 195). Loidolt aptly observes that this understanding of human worldly engagement goes beyond the predominant deliberative and

agonal models of political action, which depict the world of politics as a realm of consensus or struggle respectively. Yet the political implications of this shift towards a worldly “who” could be developed further. As it stands, the discussion emphasizes the performative dimension of Arendt’s action as self-actualization (pp. 194, 200, 212), while failing to adequately account for the challenge of responding to an untameable world that eludes our transparent grasp. As Patchen Markell has observed, Arendt’s account of action displaces the dichotomy between the self “as settled in advance” and the self “as in perpetual flux” (Markell 2006, 10–11). Rather, it draws attention to the *activity* of responding to a constellation of worldly events that has no end and that cannot be fully “actualized” – that is perhaps not even an “end in itself” – but manifests itself in the creation of new worlds as spaces for meaningful political engagement with others.

Second, by inquiring into the interplay between basic human activities, their conditional structures, and their spaces of meaning, the book importantly intervenes in debates about Arendt’s infamous social-political divide. Loidolt convincingly shows that Arendt’s distinction between private and public realms does not rest on an essential category of “*originally pre-institutionalized private* phenomena,” but refers to politically erected locations of the private “*within the appearing world*” (p. 137). Thus construed, Arendt’s concerns over the rise of the social constitute a politically productive opening for inquiring into the relation between the life process and human plurality, care for life and care for the world. While it is a fundamentally political issue to recognize and protect the vulnerability of individual life, Loidolt argues, the kindling of the common world as a frail realm of human togetherness is the best guarantee against reducing certain individuals or groups to the status of “bare life” (p. 245).

Third, the book’s argument for a political ethics of plurality helpfully responds to charges that Arendt’s account of politics lacks a sufficiently robust normative grounding. The ethics of plurality contains an inherent normative principle of “a *responsibility* for intersubjective interaction,” which endorses forms of relationship and community that foster

plurality, while rejecting those practices that diminish or destroy it (pp. 251–2). The emphasis lies on imagining a form of a “we” that does not obliterate individual standpoints under a pre-given organic whole, but is brought into being through public articulation of and debate between a plurality of perspectives. Here, the book offers an engaging discussion of the importance of trust in the world and in the others’ capacity to act with another – a crucial aspect of Arendt’s action that is not often foregrounded in the scholarship and that merits further exploration (pp. 240–1). Further, Loidolt stages a mutually enriching dialogue between Arendt’s responsibility for the world and Levinas’ responsibility for the other, supplementing (or challenging) a politics of plurality with “moments of (embodied) alterity” (p. 258). The discussion acknowledges that intersubjective spaces of appearance are embedded in hierarchies of social and political inequality. However, it sidesteps the crucial *political* questions of how Arendt’s ethics of plurality can help us disclose a “we” in conditions where trust in the world has been profoundly betrayed and build solidarity across the differences entrenched by systemic oppression. Arguably, Arendt’s grounding of freedom in worldly plurality allows us to understand how the loss of trust in the world in the wake of political violence may significantly obstruct or even destroy the human capacities for meaningful response. Yet, it also enjoins us to move beyond *ressentiment*, inciting an unending process of reconciling with past losses, disappointments and intersubjective vulnerabilities as inescapable horizons of beginning and promising anew. The challenge here lies not so much in recognizing, *pace* Levinas, the victimized or oppressed others in their radical alterity, which, from Arendt’s plural perspective, risks reifying others’ unique subjectivity into an “essence” and misappropriating their ability to act. Instead, Arendt’s plural “we” brings into focus a political form of solidarity that is based on acknowledging how the humanity of individuals or groups has been denied *in the world* and considering how worldly relationships can be reframed towards greater freedom and equality.

To conclude, while *Phenomenology of Plurality* aims to unearth the previously obscured philosophical potential of Arendt's thought, it bears an important reminder of the present political import of her abiding concern for human plurality.

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## References

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