

Between Modern and Postmodern:
A Reading of Arendt's Political Theory in the 1990's

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The past decade witnessed a booming industry of Hannah Arendt study. Dozens of books and numerous articles were devoted to various aspects of her intellectual heritage, ranging from her views on totalitarianism to feminism, from political action to environmental protection, and from Jewish identity to the affair with Heidegger. It is not surprising that we therefore have assorted readings of Hannah Arendt: Arendt as the analyst of totalitarian terror, as the champion of civic republicanism, as the critic of liberal democracy, as the ambiguous forerunner of feminism, as the reluctant defender of modernism, and so forth.¹ None of the readings claims that it is the only correct interpretation of Arendt's political thought, excluding or denying the legitimacy of other interpretations. Usually some of them even admit their compatibility with other views. Their difference, then, is only a matter of the choice of different perspectives, rather than opposite or conflicting understandings. However, there are also some interpretations which are mutually exclusive. Their differences lie not so much in distinct perspectives as in contrary assumptions or perceptions of Arendt's work. The debate between those who regard Arendt as a modernist and those who regard her as a postmodernist is a good example of the second situation.

In this paper I will explore the modernist/postmodernist debate with the view to illuminate certain important aspects of Arendt's political theory. There are two reasons for my project. First, the "modern vs. postmodern" debate has by now become the most comprehensive, most energetic intellectual contest, involving not only those who consider it a problem of the first order, but those who were reluctant to talk about it before. A discussion of how Arendt is to be placed in the controversy will help us understand her relevance for today's political philosophy. Second, the recent dispute of modernism vs. postmodernism has successfully clarified our perception of how Western philosophy evolved during the past century. With the vantage of retrospective glance, we may be able to clarify some ambiguities in Arendt's theory, or find a solution for some of her difficulties. Therefore I will begin my analysis with a short

¹ For a detailed bibliography of Arendtian scholarship, see Villa, 2000: 294-99.

introduction of the intellectual controversy. Next I will turn to how the modernist and the postmodernist readings of Hannah Arendt develop in the past decade. Habermas and Benhabib on the one hand, and Dana Villa on the other hand, will be the major points of reference in the exploration. Then, I will make my judgment of the competing interpretations and extend the horizon of exegesis to relate Arendt to yet another contemporary philosopher, Richard Rorty. It is my contention that Rorty's idea of "liberal ironist" could be the key to attenuate the otherwise untenable demand of political action implicit in Arendt's republicanism, but Arendt could also repay with something that Rorty's postmodernism ignores. At the end of the article, I would like to reflect on how Arendt's political theory can help Taiwanese people to readdress their concern in the controversy of national identity.

The Modernism vs. Postmodernism Debate

The intellectual confrontation between the modernist and the postmodernist is basically engaged by Habermas and his followers on the one hand, and the French deconstructionist (such as Foucault and Derrida) and some other philosophers who share with their view, on the other (Poster, 1989: 12). On the Habermasian side, we have the modernists who more or less confirm the intention and effort of Enlightenment project to seek for a universal foundation upon which a reasonable social order can be established. On the opposite side, we have the postmodernists who regard the modernist project as a hopeless struggle to retain an outdated universal criterion for an actually highly decentered and differentiated world. To this "impossible" dream the postmodernists oppose a picture in which both universal truth and moral norm would yield to the proliferation of the beautiful.

Habermas's view is pretty much representative of the modernist's uneasiness with the rebelling force of postmodernism. According to Habermas, our modern world is characterized by the separation of traditional rationality into three autonomous spheres: science, morality and art. Correspondent to the establishment of the three distinctive fields are three specific structures of rationality: cognitive-instrumental,

moral-practical, and aesthetic-expressive. "The project of modernity" initiated by the Enlightenment philosophers has tried to enrich objective science, universal morality, and autonomous art according to their inner logic; and admittedly has had some achievement in the first area. Yet the relative success in science ironically hinders the development of the rest, and fails the project's original expectation to "utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life" (Habermas, 1981: 8-11). Although the project of Enlightenment is temporarily obstructed, Habermas believes that the basic orientation of the project -- that is, to search for a universal rationality to integrate the respectively developed domains of validity and use it as a means to relink modern culture with our everyday praxis -- is correct, and that, instead of giving up modernity, we should continue the project which "has not yet been fulfilled" (ibid. 12). In his attempt to revive the modernist project, Habermas finds there stands a powerful enemy who threatens to ravage the unfinished project: the "Young Conservatives."

The *Young Conservatives* recapitulate the basic experience of aesthetic modernity. They claim as their own the revelations of a decentered subjectivity, emancipated from the imperatives of work and usefulness, and with this experience they step outside the modern world. On the basis of modernistic attitude, they justify an irreconcilable anti-modernism. . . . To instrumental reason, they juxtapose in Manichean fashion a principle only accessible through evocation, be it the will to power or sovereignty, Being or the Dionysian force of the poetical. In France this line leads from Bataille via Foucault to Derrida (ibid. 13).

Habermas calls the French philosophers "conservatives" because he thinks the Enlightenment project represents a positive, progressive movement, and since the French philosophers hold an antimodern attitude, they are "reactive" and "conservative." In Habermas's eyes, the fundamental mistake of the anti-modernists is that they cannot escape the "performative contradiction" involved in using the tools of reason to criticize reason. As long as they continue the critique of ideological

domination and structural violence, they cannot possibly avoid appealing to certain universal rationality which they mean to repudiate (McCarthy, 1990: xv).

A similar argument against the postmodernism of French philosophers is made by Richard Wolin. Like Habermas, Wolin basically thinks the legacy of the Enlightenment is a valuable source from which we receive more advantages than disadvantages. And like Habermas, he notices that the heritage of modernity has fallen victim to a vigorous assault from all quarters, particularly by the "post-modernists" who celebrate Nietzsche as their spiritual godfather (Wolin, 1984/85: 10). Yet, while Habermas's concern is about the threatened concept of universal rationality, Wolin's is focused on the "ahistorical, anti-humanist mentality" that postmodernism displays. In the doctrines of the French poststructuralists, Wolin contends, "two of the essential results of the Enlightenment legacy, historicism and a sense of the infinite worth of the individual human person, are glibly brushed aside as temporary historical fictions." Historicity is repudiated because the postmodernists argue that "thinking in terms of continuity" contains "overt identitarian biases which prove inimical to the proliferation of difference." And humanism is challenged because they think the concept of a centered, autonomous individuality exists "only at the expense of the 'other' which it suppresses." By affirming discontinuity and decenteredness instead of identity and subjectivity, the postmodern school therefore represents a Nietzschean aspiration for "an age of sheer illusion." Wolin laments the disastrous turn taken by the new philosophy, and summons the Western intellectuals to combat the "impending barbarism" so that human dignity and civilization can be secured (ibid. 25-27).

Against the proponents of modernity are the philosophers of postmodernism. Indeed it is presumptuous to cover what the French poststructuralists and many other thinkers contend with a sweeping term like "postmodernism." Yet, if we restrict ourselves in a highlighted comparison between the project of modernity and postmodernism, it is not altogether impossible to draw a picture which includes figures with different discipline backgrounds such as Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida. The minimum common ground shared by the postmodernists, according to Lyotard's

now popular definition, is their "incredulity toward metanarratives." Lyotard calls a project "modern" if it legitimates itself by appealing to some grand metanarrative like "the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth." Postmodernism, by contrast, denies that there is any legitimating foundation through which the whole can become determinable and the parts commensurable. There are many different, heterogeneous "language games." Any attempt to find a universal standard or consensus among the discourses will only do violence to the diversity of language games. Postmodernism, as Lyotard says, is a tenet which "refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable" (Lyotard, 1984: xiii-xiv).

Lyotard's delineation of postmodernism underscores two important elements of the new philosophical trend: anti-foundationalism and aestheticism. The postmodern philosophers are antifoundational not only in the sense that they oppose to any universal, necessary, a priori statement about truth and morality, but also in the sense that they refuse to criticize the Western tradition in the name of another, and truer, foundation. Unlike those critics of the Western heritage before them, the postmodernists are "non-foundational" and "anti-foundational" through and through (Vattimo, 1988: 2-3, 167). The awareness that there is no longer a foundation gives rise to a new thinking about truth and error: The so-called "truth" is but an illusory invention of those who cannot bear the reality of life, which is composed by the roaming and wandering of "the tissue of erring." And since it is impossible to resort to a transcendental criterion for the distinction of "truth" and "error," the only way of "proving" a thesis is to appeal to the experiences themselves. The living attitude of a postmodern man is to confirm his existence, joyfully, in the contingent and the incommensurably heterogeneous (ibid. 169-70, 177).

Another important ingredient of postmodernism -- aestheticism -- can be traced back to Nietzsche's idea that philosophy should be rhetorically constructed. With Nietzsche's emphasis on the rhetorical, rather than the logical, function of language, the postmodernists seek to undercut the traditional boundary between philosophy and

literature, or to put it in Thomas McCarthy's word, to dissolve opposition between "logos and mythos, logic and rhetoric, literal and figurative, concept and metaphor, argument and narrative, and the like" (McCarthy, 1990: ix-x). Again, one of the consequences of the amalgamation is that truth is no longer interpreted on the model of scientific knowledge, but "on the basis of either an experience of art or the model of rhetoric instead" (Vattimo, 1988: 12). The postmodern age is an age of the festival of aesthetic.

In addition to the above two elements, the "rejection of historicity" is also a common practice among the postmodernists which Wolin keenly observes but which Lyotard does not fairly include in his definition. The dissolution of history, as Gianni Vattimo interprets, means primarily "the breakdown of its unity." In the eyes of the postmodernists, the continuity and wholeness of history makes sense only when one looks at it from the perspective of the victors or the dominators. The victors monopolize the writing of history, making the past look like a unitary one which is rational and consequential. The defeated and the vanquished, on the contrary, cannot have a voice in the construction of history because their struggles have been effaced from the memory of the posterity. Postmodernists try to mitigate (if not reverse) the hegemonic temper of historiography by dissolving the unity of history, by dissecting a "universal history" into numerous "stories" or "narratives," so to speak. It is only in the immediacy and particularity of a single story, they argue, that we can find a more concrete point of reference for human existence. The temporal mode of postmodernism, therefore, is a living condition of non-historicity (ibid. 6-10).

By presenting the debate between modernism and postmodernism in this simplified way I hope the major contrasts between them are visible now. The modernists inherit the legacy of Enlightenment, putting their trust in the human faculty of reason and the possibility of reaching a universal rationality which covers science, morality, and art. In their mind, the dignity of human beings lies in their being autonomous and responsible for their action. Through the continuous efforts of generations, they think, a better prospect for human life will emerge out of the

improved conditions. Postmodernism ridicules the project of modernism as hopeless naiveté. It is hopeless because there is no transcendental foundation for the assertion of universal truth and morality in the first place. What we have instead is incommensurable expressions of desire which are best characterized in aesthetic terms. Since unity and identity are purely philosophical inventions, the postmodernists say, the aspiration for historical progress will only result in the violent cancellation of the weak and the failed. An attentive reader should have noticed that many issues discussed here are reminiscent of Arendt's political theory. For example, the postmodernists' rejection of foundationalism, their affirmation of aesthetic expression and the particularity of unique stories, echo what Arendt calls for in her aesthetic politics. But on the other hand, the modernists' defense of humanism and their proposal for communication seem more congenial to Arendt's concern in these areas than postmodernists. In the next section, we will clarify and elaborate this impression by making more comparisons.

Arendt in the Modern/Postmodern Controversy

Arendt's role in the modernist/postmodernist debate is an ambiguous one. Some say she is a modernist; others contend the opposite. Before rendering my judgment, I would like to enumerate a couple of commentators to see how the contradictory estimation is possible.

Arendt is quoted as a companion of modernists first of all by the modernist Jürgen Habermas himself. In his controversial article on Arendt's political theory, Habermas interprets Arendt's concept of power as a communication-oriented, consensus-seeking category. He says: "Hannah Arendt disconnects the concept of power from the teleological model; power is built up in communicative action; it is a collective effect of speech in which reaching agreement is an end in itself for all those involved." Like Habermas himself, Arendt is said to believe in "unconstrained communication" and in a "rational validity that is immanent in speech" (Habermas,

1977: 6). To substantiate this proposition, Habermas even contends that Arendt resorts to "the contract theory of natural law" as the foundation of her otherwise vulnerable argument about promises.² The Arendt in Habermas's picture becomes not only a champion of Enlightenment rationality, but one who defends the great tradition of natural law!

Another modernist reading of Arendt is provided by David Ingram. Ingram holds that Arendt, like Habermas, can be classified as a modernist because she attempts "to circumvent the relativism of cultural fragmentation by appealing to a universal ideal of community" (Ingram, 1988: 51). What Ingram refers to here is Arendt's employment of the Kantian concept of *sensus communis* when she tries to procure a valid ground for judgment. Since Arendt does not want to fall into the dilemma of relativism which ensnares almost all postmodernists, Ingram argues, she is forced to appeal to something universal but not transcendental as the criterion for the comparison of tastes and judgments. It is the reason why Arendt chooses Kant's aesthetic judgment, rather than Aristotle's *phronesis*, as the model of her political judgment (ibid. 52, 67-69). Ingram's interpretation of the modernism of Arendt is certainly more faithful to Arendt's text and more convincing than Habermas's strange comments. But his acknowledgement of the fact that Arendt's "universal" is an "exemplary universal" rather than "scientific, deductive universal" seems to me to thwart his own attempt to classify her as a typical modernist who uses the universal only for the purpose of succumbing the particulars to an identitarian principle.

In the 1990's, Arendt continues to be interpreted as a modernist, or a theorist sympathetic with the basic tenets of modernism although critical of certain phenomena of modernity. Following Habermas' reading of Arendt, Seyla Benhabib tells us that Arendt is a "reluctant modernist." Arendt's presentation of the modern age,

² Habermas, 1977: 23-24. See also Habermas, 1980: 128-29: "I have learned from H. Arendt how to approach a theory of communicative action; what I cannot see, is that this approach should be in contradiction to a critical theory of society."

in terms of the decline of the public sphere and the rising of a social sphere of economic activity and bureaucratic domination, is one of the most severe criticisms that modernity have received from an antimodernist. But Benhabib thinks the story of modernity presented in *The Human Condition* should be balanced by Arendt's early works, such as *Rahel Varnhagen* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The alternative genealogy of modernity suggested by the early writings shows that, in Arendt's mind, "modernity cannot simply be identified with the spread of commodity exchange relations and the growth of a capitalist economy; nor can modernity be reduced to the spread of mass society alone." Rather, modernity "brings with it new forms of social interaction, patterns of association, habits, and mores." A careful reading of these works would help us understand that "Arendt was a political universalist, upholding egalitarian civil and political rights for all citizens while supporting nonconformism and the expression of pariahdom in social and cultural life" (Benhabib, 1996: xxvi, 29-30).

Benhabib is well aware that Arendt's existentialist impulses and her aesthetic inclination invite the temptation to read her as a "postmodern *avant la lettre*," pulling her toward a more Nietzschean and less Kantian bent. Yet this interpretation is distorted and misleading, says Benhabib. It is foul because it totally ignores the "anthropological universalism" implicit in Arendt's philosophy and the "narrative dimension" of her concept of political action. Arendt is nostalgic of the Greek philosophical ethos transmitted via Heidegger, but she is also concern with the human right of stateless people and the consensus that intersubjective communication strives to achieve. It is exactly this tension that makes her "a reluctant modernist" (Benhabib, 1996: 195-198).

Against Habermas, Ingram, and Benhabib's modernist interpretation, Dana Villa contends that Arendt's political theory actually shows more similarity to the proposition of postmodernism than that of modernism. After carefully distinguishing Arendt from Habermas, whose theory of legitimation and "ideal speech situation" are usually under attack from postmodernists, Villa maintains that Arendt's public realm

theory is of quite a different nature and should not be regarded as anything with universalist connotation. "Habermas is wrong to treat Arendt's definition of power ("the ability to act together, to act in concert") as implying a consensus-centered conception of the public realm. . . . The theory of political action presented in *The Human Condition* takes as its ideal an agonistic subjectivity that prizes the opportunity for individualizing action" (Villa, 1992: 712-717). As a matter of fact, Dana finds that despite some possible misunderstanding caused by Arendt's unique description of power, Arendt and Foucault are "linked" by "a concern to preserve forms and spaces of popular, spontaneous action . . . from encroaching bureaucratic structures." Moreover, since the separation of truth and politics is an important theme in Arendt's work, she cannot but denounce the Habermasian assumption that consensus (or ultimate agreement) should be the goal of dialogue. Arendt's theory, Villa reasons, "emphasizes action as an end in itself -- the *performance*, as opposed to the *product*, of praxis." The theorization of an agonistic subjectivity and the confirmation of incommensurable plurality is the bridge connecting Arendt and postmodernists such as Lyotard and Foucault (Villa, 1992: 718).

Like Benhabib, Villa acknowledges Arendt's uneasiness with the spectacle that modernity unfolds; yet unlike Benhabib, Villa thinks that Arendt is never an "antimodernist Grecophile theorist of the polis and of its lost glory." Arendt refuses to return to the premodern because she knows very well that "the structure of meaning, morality, and politics defining the premodern world are no longer possible" (Villa, 1996: 174). What Arendt looks after in all her works, according to Villa, is not an agonistic public realm modeled on the Greek polis life, but an agonistic, theatrical public sphere. It is true that most agonistic theorists tend to interpret Arendt's idea of political actor in the image of an expressive or existentialist agent who cares only the revelation of his or her personal characteristics. Villa himself in the early 1990's seems to have the same understanding. Nevertheless, he gradually comes to the conclusion that existential expressiveness is different from aesthetic performance. The former is primarily concerned with the expression of one's authenticity, while the

latter is concerned with the world which can only sustain as a result of people's displaying themselves via act and speech. "As a crucial dimension of worldliness, theatricality exceeds -- indeed, often stands in opposition to -- the yearning for community, for an unalienated existence" (Villa, 1997: 188).

Villa's new discovery leads him to belief that Arendt's political theory is once postmodern and beyond postmodern. In his 1992 essay, he concedes that there is an "insurmountable difference" between Arendt and postmodernism -- the difference in their attitudes towards "the de-worlding of the world." While Arendt laments the disappearance of certain ontological dimensions of human existence (public world, political activity, and the search for immortality), the postmodernists celebrate the momentous development and ridicule any attempt to recover the public realm as guilty nostalgia. Judged from this point of view, Villa might have said that Arendt's aesthetic politics is still one step short of what the postmodern requires of a full-fledged "affirmative nihilism" (Villa, 1992: 719). Now, after demarcating the subtle distinction between expressive agonism and theatrical agonism, Villa is ready to say that the care for the world implied in Arendt's political actors is something which most postmodernists unfortunately miss.

[Arendt's] agonism focuses on public-spiritness, independent judgment, and self-distance in addition to initiatory action. The limits and qualifications she attaches to the agonistic ethos remind us not only that politics has risks, but also that any humane politics has at its core a care for the world, a care for the public realm. Where such care is present, the world is indeed humanized by the "incessant and continual discourse" generated by a plurality of political opinions. Where such care is absent -- where the concerns of the self or the group dominate -- politics is simply conflict (Villa, 1999: 127).

Whether or not the world should be taken care of is not a question that concerns us here. What we need to know, instead, is how to locate Arendt's position in the modernist/postmodernist controversy. We now turn to it.

Arendt's Mixed Affinity with Modernism and Postmodernism

In spirit, Arendt obviously shares many concerns with the postmodernists. Her rejection of the role of philosophical truth in the political, her explicit opposition to Platonic two-world metaphysics, demonstrates that she is not a supporter of any transcendental philosophy that claims to possess the foundation of socio-political theory (BPF: 232-49, LM1: 19-40). Her advocacy of plurality, particularity, and contingency also tell us how far away she is from Habermas's universal pragmatics in which some kind of ultimate rationality is presupposed (HC: 175-81). Arendt's Nietzschean justification of the world and her Machiavellian interpretation of political action, both constructed in an unmistakably aesthetic mode, make her more likely to be listed among the postmodern aestheticists than among the modern rationalists (BPF: 151-154). And finally, her fierce criticism of the idea of historical progress, as well as her preference for story-narrative to universal historiography, serves as a powerful indication that she may agree with the theme of "the end of history" initiated by Heidegger and developed by the French poststructuralists (CR: 211, LK: 77). All this comparison reinforces our impression that Arendt could be classified as a postmodernist -- a postmodernist who, like her precursors Nietzsche and Heidegger, has never heard the term "postmodern," but who, like those who come after her, embraces all the major tenets of that new thinking.

However, Arendt's affinity with postmodernism should not be exaggerated. For instance, postmodernism is skeptical of the cause of humanism, while Arendt is a champion of humanism. It is true that Arendt's understanding of humanism is quite different from that advocated by Enlightenment philosophers, which again is inextricable from the concept of "human nature" and "natural right." In Arendt, a human being acquires his dignity only when he, prompted by the fact of being alive, takes the initiative to act, to begin something unexpected. Yet, although the way she asserts the dignity of human being is different from that of Enlightenment philosophers, she never thinks that humanism should be regarded as a shameful cause. The postmodernist's denigration of subjectivity and individuality, seen from Arendt's eyes, must be an excessive reaction to the heritage of the Enlightenment.

Second, we also notice that, in spite of all the novelty-pursuing implications of Arendt's political theory, she is not as ready as the postmodernists to adopt the "endless roaming and wondering of erring" as our living condition. Indeed the proclivity of approaching everything with an aesthetic eye has become the motif of our current culture. But the dazzling spectacle of the proliferation of beauty has also constituted a challenge to the minimum stability that a human world needs. In an enigmatic paragraph in *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt writes:

The "pillars of the best known truths" [which in Lessing's time were shaken], today lie shattered. . . . Now in a certain sense this could be an advantage, promoting a new kind of thinking that needs no pillars and props, no standards and traditions to move freely without crutches over unfamiliar terrain. But with the world as it is, it is difficult to enjoy this advantage. For long ago it became apparent that the pillars of the truths have also been the pillars of the political order, and that the world (in contrast to the people who inhabit it and move freely about in it) needs such pillars in order to guarantee continuity and permanence, without which it cannot offer mortal men the relatively secure, relatively imperishable home that they need (MDT: 10-11).

By this Arendt seems to set a boundary to her otherwise boundless political action and freedom -- a certain amount of permanence and stability is necessary for our worldliness. Contrary to "the endless subversion of codes" in postmodern thinking, Arendt's belief in the reality of, and the minimum permanence of, the world sounds like a rare echo of what traditional philosophy has taken for granted.

Arendt's differences with postmodernism -- and for that reason, her affinity with modernism -- is also manifest in her argument about the necessity of communication. We have said that Habermas tremendously distorts Arendt's concept of power (and action) for he reads something alien to Arendt -- such as consensus in dialogue, or inherent universality in speech -- into her works. Nevertheless, it is true that Arendt's concept of human interaction is more "communicative" than Villa's interpretation would like to admit, although she does not assume that a final agreement will

necessarily be reached. Like the postmodernist, Arendt thinks that human dialogues are basically incommensurable language games. But unlike the postmodernist, she always insists that endless effort to communicate is worthwhile. Without communication, that is, without displaying who one is before others, man will become isolated, deprived, and impoverished. The postmodernists tend to think that since language game is full of structural violence and power relations, it is futile to expect undistorted communications. Arendt's reasoning is different. For her, the search for mutual understanding and reconciliation, no matter how difficult it is, is the very *human* way of living with others. Our modern world has witnessed too much self-expelling, too much premature withdrawing from the public realm.

Communication is the only way to reassert our concern for the world and for others. And there lies our hope to live on. I think Villa's interpretation of Arendt's agonism is more or less correct. But if that is the case, there would be no reason for him to reject Benhabib's emphasis on the significance of narrative and communication. The world that we share seems to be the common ground for intersubjective action, be it communicative or theatrical.

Arendt's mixed affinity with modernism and postmodernism should not surprise us for she is a person who lives exactly in the rift torn apart by the two philosophical trends. In the *Prologue to The Human Condition*, she writes: "[T]he modern age is not the same as the modern world. Scientifically, the modern age which began in the seventeenth century came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century; politically, the modern world, in which we live today, was born with the first atomic explosions" (HC: 6). She does not tell us what age it is after the modern age came to an end. The answer appears only after the term "postmodern" becomes as popular in philosophical discussion as in aesthetics. Arendt is a philosopher who lives "between the past and future," between the turn of modernity and postmodernity. The half-consciousness of her own historical situation makes her works full of postmodern concerns which can only be expressed in modern terminology. The "in-between" character fully explains why Arendt cannot be a full-fledged thinker of the new age.

Be that as it may, the distinctiveness of Arendt's position in the modern/postmodern transition is something which should not escape our attention: Arendt is the only one who tries hard -- harder than either Heidegger and Foucault -- to figure out a political theory which might fit the new coming age without deconstructing politics itself. While the postmodernists tend to transform politics into a practice of decentered, local rebellion; Arendt's idea of the political is still very "grand" insofar as the scale of political engagement and commitment is concerned. To illuminate this point, we may introduce another postmodern philosopher to help understand Arendt's relevance for contemporary philosophy, a postmodernist whom we held back until now because of his prominent divergence with the French postmodernists -- Richard Rorty.

Arendt as a Republican Ironist

Unlike Foucault or Derrida, Rorty is the only major postmodernist who accepts the practice of western liberal democracy as it is, and argues that it is good enough to be waived of further philosophical examination. In his earlier writings, Rorty calls himself a postmodernist bourgeois liberal, and his philosophy, postmodernist bourgeois liberalism. It is "postmodernist" because, like his French counterpart, Rorty does not believe in any grand metanarrative. He denies a political practice requires a philosophical justification that is universal, ahistorical, or foundational in nature. It is "bourgeois liberal" because, unlike the French philosophers, he never feels guilty in acknowledging the superiority of "the institutions and practices of the rich North Atlantic democracies" to any other existing political practices (Rorty, 1991a: 198-199).

The corollary of Rorty's postmodernism is analogous to many of Arendt's positions. For instance, Rorty refers to any metaphysical transcendence as "ladders," and contends that we can "throw away a set of ladders which, though once indispensable, have now become encumbrances" (ibid, 12) -- an echo of Arendt's "thinking without a bannister" (Arendt, 1979: 336-37). For another example,

following the same Nietzschean tradition, Rorty argues, like Arendt, that "thinghood, identity, is itself description-relative," and the "reality-appearance distinction" is better forgotten (Rorty, 1991b: 4). In the issue of morality, he contends that one's moral consciousness consists *wholly* in the fact that one belongs to a specific community, tradition, or republic. "There is no 'ground' for such loyalties and convictions save the fact that the beliefs and desires and emotions which buttress them overlap those of lots of other members of the group with which we identify." When one appeals to morality, hencefore, one is appealing to "this overlapping, shared part" of oneself.³ This sounds like an elegant elaboration of Arendt's promotion of a common world and friendship, though the latter's emphasis on plurality and speech-act seems missing. Moreover, Rorty also admits that there is an element of aestheticism in his anti-metaphysic attitude. Like Arendt, he thinks the expansion of the aesthetic into the moral-political sphere is something positive and welcome. "[W]e should not assume that the aesthetic is always the enemy of the moral," says Rorty, "in the recent history of liberal societies, the willingness to view matters aesthetically -- to be content to indulge in what Schiller called 'play' and to discard what Nietzsche called 'the spirit of seriousness' -- has been an important vehicle of moral progress" (Rorty, 1991a: 193-194). The ambition to replace truth and morality with art as the criterion of human affairs, it seems to me, is as prevalent in Rorty as in Arendt or the French postmodernists.

In his later writings, Rorty abandons the label "postmodern bourgeois liberal," superseding it with the term "liberal ironist."⁴ But the message remains the same. What he continues to advocate is the contingency of language, of selfhood, and of a

³ Rorty, 1991a: 200. Also, "the intrinsic human dignity" lies in a person's having a group to identify himself with; the empty talk of "human rights" is politically as irrelevant as "the existence of God." Ibid., 200, 202. Cf: Arendt, OT: 298-299.

⁴ Rorty, 1989: xv. Eventually Rorty regrets that he used the term "postmodernism." He thinks the term "post-Nietzschean" will better characterize the philosophy of Heidegger and Derrida. See Rorty, 1991b: 1-2.

liberal democracy. Again, he argues that neither the world nor the human self has an "intrinsic nature" (or "essence"). Our life is composed of an "incomplete, yet sometimes heroic, reweaving" of a web which is full of "sophisticated idiosyncratic fantasy" (Rorty, 1989: 6, 8, 42-43, 189). Similarly, the liberal community we live in is nothing more than a contingent historical practice, of which no universal, rational foundation can be possibly found. Actually Rorty thinks a liberal democracy is "badly served" by any attempt "to supply it with 'philosophical foundation.'" Habermasian project -- the project of Enlightenment rationalism -- will only underwrite our human society with another "nonhuman authority" in its substituting the old, religious foundation with a new, scientific one (ibid, 44-46, 52-55). Against this rationalist vision of a liberal society, Rorty opposes an aesthetic one in which "strong poets" and "revolutionaries" will be the role model because they "bravely" accept the contingency of their language, morality, and political practice (ibid, 60-61).

By describing himself as a "liberal ironist" Rorty wants to distinguish his view from that of Habermas and Foucault. A liberal ironist is one who regards cruelty (and the institution which produces it) as the worst thing, and one who despises the talk of transcendental, universal foundations (ibid, 15). In other words, he is a person who believes in the value of liberal democracy and is at the same time "historicist and nominalist" enough to reject any attempt to justify the practice philosophically. According to this definition, Foucault is "an ironist who is unwilling to be a liberal," whereas Habermas is "a liberal who is unwilling to be an ironist." Both are great in pointing out one significant dimension of our existence -- i.e., autonomy and solidarity, respectively. But neither is sufficiently inclusive to think that an accommodation of the two aspects is possible and desirable (Rorty, 1989: 61-69; 1991b: 174-75). By upholding the banner of "liberal ironist," Rorty creates a new possibility for postmodernism, a possibility we may call the American version of postmodernism.

The purpose of introducing Rorty into our discussion, as I explained earlier, is to get a better understanding of Arendt's significance in contemporary political theory.

Now, it seems helpful if we try to employ Rorty's "liberal ironist" to assess Arendt's political thought. Borrowing Rorty's terminology, I think Arendt might be described as a "republican ironist." She is a "republican" because she cherishes public space and worldliness so much that she regards political participation as something almost inseparable from humanity, and she is an "ironist" because she realizes there is no more "first principle" that people can rely upon in the age to come. It is hard to say whether a "liberal ironist" position is preferable to a "republican ironist," but insofar as the question of political participation is concerned, the liberal view that everyone should be granted the right to decide how much he wants to devote to politics is definitely agreeable to the republican view that everyone should be politically active and cares the public more than his private interest. As many commenters point out, precisely because Arendt has too strong a concept of political action, her expectation of general participation founders as soon as it encounters the reality of political life. To avoid this tragedy, we suggested that some mitigation of her strong view of political participation would be helpful and necessary. Rorty's idea of a liberal ironist, together with his accommodation of autonomy and solidarity, provides us with a possible solution for Arendt's difficulty. Rorty writes:

The sort of autonomy which self-creating ironists like Nietzsche, Derrida, or Foucault seek is not the sort of thing that *could* ever be embodied in social institutions. Autonomy is not something which all human beings have within them and which society can release by ceasing to repress them. It is something which certain particular human beings hope to attain by self-creation, and which a few actually do. The desire to be autonomous is not relevant to the liberal's desire to avoid cruelty and pain (Rorty, 1989: 65).

With this understanding, Rorty goes on to propose that the yearning for self-creation and authenticity should "be reserved for private life." The privatization, as he reasons, would help prevent us from slipping into the political conviction that there is something higher than the abatement of cruelty, than the protection of liberal practice (ibid.).

Rorty's suggestion is helpful in situating Arendt in our context because what Arendt needs to modify is exactly this -- "to privatize action a little bit." Action is inextricable from the public sphere to the extent that politics demands expression, communication, and concerted effort. But not all dimensions of action are best served in the public domain. Self-revelation, realization of authenticity, theatrical virtuosity -- all these goals of action are not necessarily achievable in the public realm only. Sometimes it is easier to realize these ideals in art-creating, writing, or private conversation than in political participation. Since in Arendt's political theory a certain kind of liberalism is actually implied, it would only be more logical if Arendt could make a public recognition of it, and relocate some tasks of her political action to the newly opened private sphere. A modern republican ideal, it seems to me, must always be built upon the substructure of liberalism. Arendt's participatory politics is no exception.

For Rorty's helpful suggestion Arendt could have repaid in the following way. Rorty believes that liberal democracy is the best possible practice we can expect, and therefore declare that philosophers should waste no more time looking for other alternatives or criticizing democracy without a feasible alternative in mind. "The habit of endless, ever more sophisticated criticism of the 'ideology' of the surviving democracies," in Rorty's eyes, is only a sign of the problem that "the First World left has gotten overtheoretical, overphilosophical" (Rorty, 1987: 570). Philosophy should be content with its being "*in service of* democratic politics." It should not think of subjecting democracy to its jurisdiction any more (Rorty, 1989: 196). Rorty's adjustment of the role that philosophy could play in a liberal politics may be consistent with his general view, but he is obviously too dogmatic to claim that democracy needs no radical criticism any longer. He also commits a tremendous mistake when he thinks that, once a philosophical conclusion about the superiority of certain political practice is reached, posterity is waived of the burden to reexamine it with a fresh eye. Philosophy, if it is to have any meaning at all, must be a permanent practice of every generation, if not everyone. The old Socratic motto "A life without

examination is not worth living" remains not only the best guideline for our individual life, but the most powerful guarantee that a catastrophic ideological movement will not happen again. At this point, Arendt's insight is preferable to that of Rorty. Philosophizing, as she says, is like Penelope's web: it must undo every morning what it has finished the night before. Without this seemingly futile but significant practice, no civilization will be created or sustained in the world. The role of philosophy is definitely not the handmaiden of any political practice -- not even in an age in which postmodernism prevails.

Situating Arendt in the Context of Taiwan

Having discussed Arendt's possible position in the modern/postmodern debate and her significance for contemporary political theory, I think it is time to consider how Arendt is read and employed in a context other than the one in which she lived and wrote. In my case, that is the context of Taiwan.

Arendt has been fairly popular among the Chinese world since the late 1980's. At the beginning, she was introduced into Mainland China and Taiwan as the indispensable source of theoretical reflection upon totalitarianism. Chinese readers are eager to know what the chaos and suffering actually means when the Great Cultural Revolution initiated by Mao Zedong finally comes to an end, and the intellectuals in Taiwan also wants to realize why the majority of their people were seduced by the fatal attraction of Communism in the past civil war. Later, Arendt's concept of political action and public space is celebrated by the Taiwanese readers as an important spring of any political activism, including demonstration, resistance, and grass democracy. Some theorists regard her political philosophy as the model of progressive politics; others are fascinated with her idiosyncratic definition of power and seek to relate her to the theorists of radical democracy, such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. After the publication of Ettinger's *Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger*, however, Taiwanese students' interest in Arendt seem to shift from her analysis of totalitarianism and political action to the Heidegger affair and her

ambiguous implication for feminism.

Undoubtedly there may be numerous ways to talk about Arendt's significance for Taiwanese politics and society. But if we consider for a while what the Taiwanese most concern themselves about at the present moment, the question of nationalism and national identity would be a candidate that no list can afford missing. The problem of national identity has remained the island's most controversial issue over the past two decades. Some people maintain that Taiwan was part of China and should reunify with China in the future although she is now enjoying a *de facto* independent status. Others argue that Taiwan was an isolated entity in most of her history, and the people living on the island should have the right to self-determination. Still others are wavering between the unification/independence oppositions, appalled by the dread of communist rule after unification and suspicious of the chance of peaceful coexistence once Taiwan declares independence. The national identity of this island therefore remains divisive, uncertain, and explosive. Some political scientists even comment that whatever achievements Taiwan has been able to make so far, her future would be questionable if the issue of national identity cannot be dealt with adequately.

The difficulty of the problem resides in the fact that most proponents of their favored identity are making their case by appealing to a self-evident, inviolable concept of nation. For the unificationist, it is the Chinese nation that any discussion of Taiwan's future should keep in mind; for the independent, it is the Taiwanese nation that constitutes the foundation of autonomy, prosperity, and solidarity. There seems no way escaping the conflict of two nations, no matter whether they are defined in historical, ethnical, or political terms. For instance, the Taiwanese nationalists argue that Taiwan deserves the status of a sovereign state not only because her politico-economic system is different from that of China, but also because she is actually a distinct nation. The origins of Taiwanese are as much from the southern islands in the Pacific Ocean as they are from Mainland China. The culture, language, and religion of the aborigines are sufficient proof that Taiwan never belonged to China and shall never be part of China. On the other hand, the Chinese nationalists

maintain that all residents in Taiwan are offspring of the Yellow Emperor, the fictional ancestor of Chinese. They not only deny the description of Taiwan as a nation, but oppose any motion which would consolidate or enhance the political autonomy of Taiwanese. For example, they object to the plebiscite on Taiwan's future by saying that if Taiwanese want to vote on their future, the opinions of the Chinese on the Mainland should be counted, too. They also protest the establishment of research institute on Taiwanese literature or Taiwanese history in universities because they think Taiwan should not constitute a distinct subject of scholarship. In their mind, Taiwanese consciousness and Taiwanese identity are acceptable only if they are subordinate to Chinese consciousness and Chinese identity. They concede that China is now divided into two parts, but the two parts are not two political entities, much less two countries. The only right policy for Taiwan is to negotiate with the Communist China immediately in order to realize unification as soon as possible.

Stuck in the confrontation of two nationalisms, many Taiwanese do not know how to perceive their relation with the political community in which they live, or figure out what to do with the political sphere which is now full of antagonistic, partisan rhetoric. As a matter of fact, some people withdraw from any involvement of the public affairs as a result of the endless and hopeless quarrels over the identity problem. It is a sad development, but it is not inescapable if we can approach the issue with some theoretical insight of Hannah Arendt.

Arendt encourages her readers to engage with public affairs so that their personal characteristic can be revealed and the opportunity of concerted action can be enhanced. Political actors may pursue their goals out of principles such as justice, friendship, glory, or even national independence; but they must do it with a view to the maintenance of a plural, peaceful world. It is true that Arendt once said "When one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew." Yet she is never a nationalist in the sense that the individual should yield to the cause of a nation or that national boundary is something men and women cannot easily cross. She believes the world (or the public space) is the very location or arena that political actors should

cherish and defend with their unfailing commitment of expressive and communicative speech-act. Judged from this point of view, we may argue that Arendt is an opponent to any narrow nationalism which bases itself upon criteria such as ethnic genealogy, religion, language, myth, or customs, for they constitute an obstacle for people to search for a reasonable public space.

In other words, if the Taiwanese obsessed with nationalist doctrine can listen to Arendt's teaching about the meaning of political action, they would realize how foolish it is to waste time defending a parochial nationalism and criticizing each other on the very same ground upon which they build their own fictitious imagined political community. As a "republican ironist," Arendt's political thought can help us in at least two ways. First, her republican disposition can help making the distinction between "*res publica*" and "nationality," addressing our attention to the freedom and equality that a body politic requires, rather than the fictitious unity and solidarity a nation demands. Second, her ironist attitude also deconstructs the complex framework that nationalists erect around their deity, be it called "the offspring of the Yellow Emperor" or "the Brave Formosans." By doing this, Arendt may bring back Taiwanese people's confidence in political participation and overcome the apathy that has haunted ordinary citizens for a long time. They may re-experience the public happiness that political action promises, and recover the world of appearance that virtuosity generates. By no means is it a minor contribution that Arendt's theory can make for the people she never knows.

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