

# [Differences of the private and the public realm](https://assignbuster.com/differences-of-the-private-and-the-public-realm/)

The bulk of the Human Condition by Hannah Arendt revolves around as previously discussed: Labor, Work and Action. These are the three fundamental categories which she divided human activity into, and these occur in the spaces of the public and the private. Labor and work occur privately while political action occurs publicly. She later on presents the differences and the importance of the said spaces: the public and the private realm-the political space and the personal.

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. “.. but it is merely like a performance because it takes place in a public arena and must be witnessed by others” (Canovan 124).

There were several points of departure when Hannah Arendt was being discussed in class. The rise of the social for example, was regarded as the rise of the idion or one’s own: Rousseau’s idea of the general will of the man in the state of nature. For Arendt, people had to move into the public space. Two or more people should engage and gather in speech-that which is normal speech and that is consensus building and not otherwise. The kind of speech that should be available should not be that which transformed into a whole new technical, jargoned language, just like the flight of the speech as discussed by Arendt in Human Condition. It should not be the same language in facebook or twitter because political speech should promote a space where promise-keeping can thrive and facebook, etc. are spaces that do not promote this. It has also been talked about in class that the space of action (which is public) is a painful, bruising kind of space. Therefore, there is a need for a private realm; a necessitated idion because we know from experience that we are public beings. We need a space that will help us recuperate or recover from all the energies that we have lost since the public space is bruising, energy intensive and self-involving or implicating. Nonetheless though, we have to engage in vita activa or the active life despite the reality of the public realm’s self-implicating, energy exhaustive nature.

Why action does exist in the public space? Margaret Canovan and Dana Villa argue that action is a ‘ type of performance’ that differs from labor because it takes place, as mentioned, in public and does not focus on socio-economic considerations or the administration of household or work tasks but reveals persons in their distinctive character (Canovan 128). Activity paves way for some kind of involvement and change or motion that is not necessarily brought about by the social question of providing and sustenance, etc. Arendt believes that labor in Classical Grecian society was an activity that occurs in the constraints of the private space. In the privacy of the household, the labor that was indispensable in sustaining life was kept hidden from public view. Arendt asserts that for the Greeks, to be within this space like a servant or slave was to be deprived from the public space or public life and the private realm was a space of deprivation-a realm of denial. Because the activity of the household was private, one could not distinguish oneself there (Fry 51). Moreover, the household was not subjected to the same politics in the public realm and according to the equality of its members but it was run based on paterfamilias or by the head of the family. So the household excluded freedom and equality and the persons within it were enslaved by the necessity of labor (Arendt 32).

However, Fry continues by presenting the arguments of Hannah Arendt about the private realm. This personal space nonetheless presented positive aspects, specifically in providing a space of protection to shield one from the glare of the public world, but this privacy of the household was decisively different from the political realm. The public realm is a space that relates and separates people and does not exclude freedom, equality and distinction through words and deeds. The public realm is open to the view of others and encourages the view of others and encourages public deliberation, discussion and contestation. Conversely, the private realm is the space where freedom may be prevented and may not be open to the views of people that are part of this sphere. Also, it is a space where, at the end of the day in the public sphere, you can recover from the strains of the public. For Arendt however, maintaining the separateness of these spheres preserves the integrity of each realm and makes a flourishing kind of politics achievable. The separation of these spaces provides a private area for security and protection from the public world, as well as a public space for contestation and acting with others.

Arendt is one of the major critics of modernity and she asserts that the modern age has compromised the separateness of the public and private space which is due to the emergence of the social. In the modern age, the creation of the nation-state paved way for totalitarianism which is the darkest potential of modernity according to Hannah Arendt. This rise of the nation state contributed to the problem on the blurring of the distinction since it based politics on the model of the family who is taken care of by the administrative bookkeeping of the state, rather than recognizing politics as a realm of freedom and distinction where issues of public concern are discussed (Fry 52, Arendt 28).

Arendt criticizes Marx who claimed and disliked the distinction of the public and private space, whereas Hannah Arendt wants to preserve the a section of the public space for the private space such as class structure whose destruction Marx puts forward in order to produce a universal category of man.

The emergence of society discourages the probability of political action because the distinction and difference that is so essential in the world of politics gets transferred into the private realm and occurs through intimacy in private relationships (Arendt 41). “ Society, a strange mix of both public and private characteristics, is guided by conformity, rather than the distinction of political actors. In addition, society tends to promote a community of laborers and job holders, whose primary concern involves the need to sustain human life, rather than focusing on free political activities.” (Arendt 46) Instead of a sensible vita activa and political engagements, the Social Question then becomes a threat to the distinction of the spaces. The need to sustain one’s life poses a threat to the political participation because the primary concern becomes food on the table.

The Philippines and its citizens prioritize the Social Question as evidenced by the levels of the participation and implication of the Filipino people in the political arena. Although there are a good number of well represented sectors of society that pushes for the Social Question, the kind of political participation they put forward may achieve its optimal potential if a clearer separateness exists between the need for sustenance and involvement in the public realm. Participation becomes more and more limited because of the need to satiate one’s needs. Arendt believes that there is a mass phenomenon of lonesomeness and estrangement that exists as a result from the loss of the public sphere. Exposure and immersion to other people’s opinion becomes inadequate in a sense as well. This limited exposure to others prevents persons from having an objective relation to reality because a contact with other perspectives that are necessary to confirm the objectivity of the world is lost (Arendt 58).

Arendt discusses this feature of the social as the emergence of the idiot due to the reality that it concerns a detached self that is only troubled by his or her own necessities. As an illustration, we can primarily tackle the issue of the working class in developing countries. Some have very low wages and therefore, one of their main preoccupations is to look for either a new job or a second job and thus, they have rarely the luxury of time and effort to be “ wasted” or utilized in particular political issues that are open for discussion. It can be compared to a particular metaphor wherein one who’s hungry cannot perform at his or her best in an academic examination because he or she feels that beckoning of the insides to look for something to eat.

There usually becomes a tradeoff where one’s effort and time are channeled into new or better priorities and thus less or no time at all for political participation. Nevertheless, there is a significant experience nowadays that becomes a compromise of what Arendt’s proposition regarding that point of departure of the private and the public. Although a large number can be said to be ‘ politically apathetic’ due to the social question, there are incidences where the social question is brought in the political arena. Political action is caused by that particular call of necessity. This is not bad as it is not entirely good or great because summoning for political action, participation and contestation is brought about by the empty stomachs and the bare tables of people.

Various groups are lurid in the public space as they call for their socio-economic necessities. However, Arendt may recognize this as that particular overlap where the blurring becomes so enormous that the intimacy for private relationships is gone as well. The social realm for Hannah Arendt involves this blurring of the public and the private realm and also concerns the overlap between the categories of labor and work and at the expense of action which is for Arendt the most important activity. Labor and work as previously discussed are effects of the private, personal space and action is of the public realm. However, the social realm transforms as a culprit and blurs this distinction.

Fry discusses how Arendt explains that while the loss of the public realm of action and distinction of the individual is convincingly problematic for Arendt, a further concern with this emergence of the social is that politics become reduced and focused on personal necessities rather than public good and the sense of what is best for the entire community is lost turning private matters into an area for public concern, as mentioned, the bringing of personal concerns in the realm of politics.

Political questions begin to involve and evolve into what is the best technique or approach to advance one’s interests, or the private interests of specific groups in order to gain more and more wealth (Fry 53). What is lost is the genuine concern for the whole, as well as the expression of a diversity of perspectives need to make a decision as a whole (Ibid). With the compromised private and public realms, politics is reduced to the level of individual gain of persons rather than of the public good. This means that generally, as expressed by Fry, the powerful and the wealthy get their needs addressed while the impact and the effects of these decisions to the broader community is some what ignored. (Ibid)

Moreover, the private realm becomes a diminished space because it lost its sacred, valued character of providing a location of safety and protection for people after being exhausted in the public realm and becomes more open to the view of the public as concerns that were previously deemed personal or private are now more and more openly discussed. Removing the public space for the exchange of opinions (according to On Revolution) alters politics and government begins to operate like an administrator of various tasks, rather than an institution that secures the public discussion of opinions. (Fry 60, Arendt 240)

There are so many things about the modern age that troubles Arendt. She discusses in the Human Condition about how we have lost the hold of our own language and its flight was caused by the rise of technology among others and this world of science and technology overrides the importance of speech and has rendered all other values meaningless. For example, nuclear technology becomes troubling for Arendt and sees this as an invention of man to destroy himself. Furthermore, Arendt depicts the product of fabrication or work becomes more like objects of labor since they are easily used up, thrown away and replaced automatically. We have learned in class that labor or the toil by the animal laborans results to perishable goods. Meanwhile the homo faber’s efforts results to fabrication or articles that is present of the workmanship. Their point of intersection becomes that toil or effort that is introduced or utilized and the point of departure is the end result and for Arendt this inability of fabrication to provide for a stable environment against nature is due to the rise of consumerism. The valuable workmanship by those who fabricate is diminished as evidenced by the growing practice of society to consume and dispose of these products as though they would easily spoil like the products of laboring (Arendt 126).

The effects of this rise of consumerism caused the elevation of labor and animal laborans to the highest position in the active life thus replacing the emphasis on the homo faber. Work, as noted, becomes more and more like laboring because its demands become cyclical and the products that it makes develop into perishable, in passing goods. As an illustration, it is apparent that in this contemporary age that we are in, where technology caused the world to transform into minute things and made time collapse, obsolescence is as quick as a flash. Many products of technological fabrication are being replaced automatically. One day N series of Nokia phones enter and fill consumers with awe and then just a few months later, E series are the new thing. Then blackberries and iPhones destroy the right of people to delay or postpone reading their flooded electronic mails.

At a particular time, a cellular phone or digital camera is so “ in” it is so expensive, and then just a few months later, prices are already amazingly low. These fabricated items and their obsolescence are a manifestation of what Hannah Arendt identifies as the easy displacement or replacement of work and its products and this particular replacement and disposal reduces fabricated products into the level of perishable goods. Moreover, Hannah Arendt identifies how free time is spent participating in private hobbies rather than political activities, resulting in the loss of freedom, reality of the world, durability and permanence (Arendt 118). “ Arendt also believes that the overemphasis of labor is anti-political since it does not involve togetherness or plurality, but stresses conformity and focuses on the sameness of humanity in terms of biological needs” (Fry 54, Arendt 212, 214).

For Hannah Arendt, it is essential to preserve the distinction between the private and the public and this is central to her work. The invasion of private interest into the realm of politics compromises the objectivity of politics compromises the objectivity of politics and its concern for the community as a whole. In addition, according to Fry’s reading of Arendt, it puts togetherness and plurality at risk, as persons no longer try hearing each other out or listening to one another’s reasoning, opinion and perspectives. Instead, private interests govern the political realm. This rise of the social and the assertion of the social question consequentially results to loneliness, alienation, consumerism and a lack of sense of belonging to this world (Fry 54).

Different political deeds allow humans to distinguish themselves and they are being deprived of this by not speaking with one another or witnessing each other participate politically (Ibid). Fry identifies that the most alarming problem is that with the rise of fabrication and technology, the capacity to destroy the world has emerged and politics is inclined towards totalitarianism, ‘ if history and nature are believed to be processes that can be controlled by the powerful’. Albeit the truth that Hannah Arendt holds that there is still a probability and potential for political action that remains the manifestation of freedom is declining and being disfigured. Thus, this may result to the most ‘ sterile passivity history has ever known’ (Fry 55, Arendt 322).

Due to Arendt’s concern with political plurality, she maintains the separateness of the public and private realms and is concerned about the rise of the social which produces conventionality rather than distinction. Arendt’s analysis of the social has received so much criticism and some of them will be discussed in the following paragraphs in a short while because some of her main assertions and arguments are regarded to be indefensible or unsustainable. If, according to the text, the separation between the public and the private realms is rigid and absolute, it seems doubtful that typical political actions would count as being political, since many of the questions revolve around what Arendt considers and construes as ‘ private’ issues. This rigidity and Arendt’s strictness about the separation becomes problematic for her major critics. One of the most common criticisms that are being heaved at Arendt’s work primarily concerns the viability of her public/private separation and distinction. The maintenance of the difference between the private and the public realms has been a consistent, thematic concern throughout her work. Her main assertion and preoccupation is that when there emerges a blurring of the difference or when the public or political realm is guided by private, personal issues, politics no longer concerns what is best for the entirety of the community but instead focuses on private, individual and economic interests. In addition, politics begins to operate like the administration of a household which does not concern equality and freedom, but merely manages day-to-day affairs and promotes what is conventional rather than what is distinctive or definite.

By laying down the clear-cut difference of the private and the public realm, it seems according to her critics that numerous issues that were ordinarily regarded as “ political” will be excluded from politics and would need to remain in the private realm. She considers socio-economic issues as “ pre-political” problems that should be solved before one can adequately enter the political realm. Case in point is the French Revolution that Hannah Arendt considers as a failure as a political issue because the hunger of the French masses concerns the social need rather than seeking to establish and institutionalize principles to form a new government for themselves that may promote freedom and equality for them. Although as aforementioned, hunger appears as though it is a ‘ pre-political’ problem, the widespread hunger, according to her critics seems like a political problem of the first order and that political action should be able to deal with something that is so instinctive and necessary for the community. And as Eli Zaretsky puts it: ‘ for any oppressed group in modern society, economic issues are fundamental’.

It is considerably conservative for Arendt according to her critics to be quite oblivious or at least apathetic of economic equality that exists as she appears to be against the welfare state because yet again, a confusion of the private issues with public concerns may emerge. In addition to the economic matters, other issues like those that concern the household and the family would be considered to be private and out of the Arendtian political question. Since she considers private matters to be personal concerns, issues like inequity between partners, sexism, racism, prejudice etc. remains within the constraints of the household rather than being sent out and subject to political debates unless if they pose detriment to necessary public institutions, etc.

Distinction between the political, the private and the social is presented by Arendt as though these separations are easily made available (Bernstein 250) and perhaps the very determination if a particular problem falls under one of the three facets may be according to Bernstein, the ultimate question that one should ought to deliberate upon, contest or discuss in the realm of politics. Moreover, Margaret Canovan a scholar who problematizes Arendt’s concept of the social argues that Arendt’s theorizing involves incompatible strands of meaning due to the fact that Hannah Arendt bases her assertions and her theory on the polis and the household of the Classic Grecian community and thus, the focus moves from political issues and into biological needs and necessities.