Elements of a Radical Democracy. Kierkegaardian Sources to Hannah Arendt's Political Theory

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Abstract: This paper delves into the enduring influence of Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy on early 20th-century German thought, particularly into its political reading by Hannah Arendt. The investigation seeks to grasp the political potentials inherent in Kierkegaardian theological concepts, namely the construction of the single political subject in its engagement with the universal, and the deriving interplay between consensus and dissensus. Consequently, a Kierkegaardian political theology is outlined. The formal structure of the Kierkegaardian selfhood, as defined by its relationship with an unbounded entity, captivated the minds of various German philosophers in the first half of the 20th century (section 1). Arendt employs Kierkegaardian ideas to explore deeper the relationship between the political actor and the historical net of spontaneities (sections 2 and 3). Building upon this framework, the article examines how Arendt applies these ideas in her discussions of consensus and dissensus (section 4). Lastly, the article suggests how a Kierkegaardian political theology, as enriched through Arendtian insights, can actually strengthen the operation of a radical form of democracy in contemporary societies.

Keywords: dissensus, Hannah Arendt, origin, radical democracy, Søren Kierkegaard.

I. Introduction: A Kierkegaardian Political Theology

This study investigates the political use of the Kierkegaardian notions of selfhood, singularity, and exception. The research aims to use these closely related notions to study the political potentialities of the Kierkegaardian singular in its relation to the historical process, as well as the political relation between consensus and dissensus. Hannah Arendt's appropriations of these Kierkegaardian concepts are the cornerstones of this work. This pivotal figure of the 20th century denied any belonging to a specific school – even to existentialism or phenomenology, despite her familiarity with these currents. Nonetheless, this article aims to show how the Kierkegaardian notion of selfhood underlies Arendt's theoretical positions and how, in her writings, it is transformed into a concept out of which a notion of democratic dissent can be derived.

Kierkegaard's work is indeed a neglected yet tangible source for Arendt's reflections. Arendt 'translated' some Kierkegaardian religiously charged notions to transpose their unique forms into an existential and political philosophy. It is a bold operation, justified by the appropriation of traditional philosophical

concepts whose potential Arendt herself did not overlook. As Karlsen shows, Kierkegaard often claimed a distance to political and social matters (Karlsen 2019, 375; see also Assiter et al. 2012, 1), despite the careful annotations in his diaries on contemporary political issues. However, opposing the Danish philosophers' theory and his practical (dis)engagement, Karlsen states that two political readings of Kierkegaard are possible: one that "focuses primarily on Kierkegaard's conception of politics, while the other focuses on the potential of Kierkegaard's thought." (Karlsen 2019, 377)[1] This paper explores the latter path by framing Kierkegaard's reception in Germany in the early 20th century, as well as the main elements of the Kierkegaardian contributions to a political theory (section 2). From there on, the article focuses on Arendt's readings (section 3) of crucial Kierkegaardian themes, especially on the formal structure of selfhood-*qua*-singularity in its relationship with politics and the historical process. Indeed, Arendt seems to use Kierkegaardian themes to conceive these two poles of political action. In conclusion, this contribution employs these political interpretations of singularity and exception to elaborate on the vital relation between consensus and dissensus (section 4).

At this point, the meaning of the formula 'political theology' demands an explanation. Sketching a Kierkegaardian political theology does not mean to advocate for an alliance between the Church and the State, which Kierkegaard targeted in the Danish panorama of his time (Wood 2012, 9), nor does it allude to the political engagement in the world with the weaponry of theological concepts (Assiter 2012, 1). On the contrary, this paper analyzes how Kierkegaardian theological insights – and especially the theorization of the individual – were translated politically by Hannah Arendt. Thereby, 'political theology' is employed in Carl Schmitt's sense (Schmitt 1922, 41-55) as the secularization of theological concepts – even if this paper does not claim that every political concept is theological (Schmitt 1922, 44). The theological origin of ideas such as the 'leap,' the 'origin,' the 'miracle,' and a corresponding notion of 'freedom' will be examined and traced back to Kierkegaard.

Beyond a philological inquiry, these Kierkegaardian concepts reveal invaluable potentialities to think the political, especially through an unbounded force of determination – which Kierkegaard termed as 'faith' – with which an individual engages in collective action, and where 'anarchic' incidences enrich a democratic framework, by bringing an unexpected novelty into the world. Faith substantiates also the salvific potential of action, despite the dangers and destruction it could entail.

[1] See also Smith (2005). According to Smith, Kierkegaard's conservative attitude does not derive from *ad hoc* considerations about his contemporaries. Instead, Kierkegaard radically criticized his contemporaries from a religious perspective (Assiter et al. 2012, 2-6). Especially, Kierkegaard rejected the political forgetfulness of the spiritual dimension of social life.

II. On the Influence of Kierkegaard over German Philosophers of the 20th Century

Kierkegaard's work can be seen as one of the most powerful influences on the early German philosophy of the 20th century. Clear Kierkegaardian themes and cogitations appear in the works of thinkers that would define an era – Jaspers, Schmitt, Heidegger, Adorno, Lukàcs, Benjamin – and reaches another generation through the work of Hannah Arendt.[2] And yet, the reception of his books did not make the headlines of cultural journals of the time, and their discussion was not publicly acknowledged (Mustard 2016, 83). Kierkegaard's work was mostly absorbed through critical appropriations and specific readings,[3] so his writings functioned mostly as an undisclosed source in an undercurrent that linked together philosophical inquiries with theological topics, much in the way of what Benjamin described as a relation with an uncomfortable component "which as everyone knows is small and ugly and must be kept out of sight." (Benjamin 1991, GS I 693)[4]

Yet, even if not publicly debated, it is not difficult to see why Kierkegaard became such an alluring source for thought. After all, his notion of selfhood mobilizes conceptual structures that find their way through the doctrines of Hegel and Kant. Against Hegel, Kierkegaard posits the particular, i.e. the exception and the subject, as forms of the real without which the universal is unthinkable (Kierkegaard 1983, 227). Against Kant, the subject does not become a mere

[2] This is very clear in the scholarship surrounding Kierkegaard, but it is still quite vague in the academic commentaries that accompany most of these authors. Carl Schmitt, for instance, refers to Kierkegaard in his *Political Theology* as the "Protestant theologian who demonstrated the vital intensity possible in theological reflection," (Schmitt 1922, 15) therefore acknowledging this influence in a tangential way. But against all evidence, an article in German from 2016 stubbornly and very much arbitrarily still locates Schmitt's model for his political theology 'in the Catholic Counter-Reformation.' (Baratella and Rücker 2016, 181) In Benjamin's case, all mentions to any form of theology are almost automatically directed to Jewish sources, despite clear evidence on Benjamin's heavy reliance on Christian sources (a clear argument in this line in Agamben 2011). In Arendt's case, despite the fact that Arendt herself acknowledged Kierkegaard as an early and important influence in the development of her thought, this has been seldom analyzed, and Marcio Gimenes de Paula regrets that the latest *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* skips any connection in this direction (de Paula 2011, 39).

[3] One of the first books in which Kierkegaard was discussed in Germany was Jaspers' *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* from 1919. Heidegger engages indirectly with Kierkegaard already in his lectures on religion from 1920-1, which were published later as his *Phenomenology of Religious Life*. Adorno's book on Kierkegaard – *Kierkegaard. Konstruktion des Ästhetischen* – was published in 1933. In his work *My Life in Germany before and after 1933* (1986), Karl Löwith provides an excellent radiography of the intellectual atmosphere of this time, pointing out that his generation was deeply influenced by the reading of two books produced in the period: The *Decline of the West* by Spengler (1918) and the *Letter to the Romans* by Karl Barth (1919). This last one was also traversed by Kierkegaardian interpretations.

[4] Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* will be cited in the text by the abbreviation GS, followed by the volume in Roman numerals and page number.

rational being, a self that is autarkic and tailored towards liberalism.[5] Instead, Kierkegaard reintroduces into philosophy the force of the irrational (faith), the affective (angst, fear, sin, weakness), and the concrete substrate of the factually human as a telluric force that mobilizes the theological as an immanent reality. Kierkegaard's theology has an explicit Christian content, but his philosophy can be certainly formalized to develop non-dogmatic approaches.[6] This can be clearly exemplified with Heidegger's appropriation of Kierkegaard,[7] but also through an analysis of his concepts from a formal standpoint (see Come 1995; Bousquet 1999; Toscano 2013). It is arguably this capacity of his thinking that made it fit for different approaches which were looking to understand the extent of human possibilities from a different vantage point.

Kierkegaard developed thoroughly some themes in his work, among which we find the constitution of the subject, the value of the exception, the importance of decision (or rather, non-decision), the link between the spiritual and the religious as a tangential form of the political, or the possibilities brought up by the constitution of the new, to name a few. By weaving precise interrelations between these, Kierkegaard argues that, rather than through a set of ideas and pre-conceptions, our primary access to reality is through our involved action. The way things show up for a detached thinker is a partial and distorted version of the way things show up to a committed individual. In this track, his relational definition of the self plays a key role. In his book *The Sickness unto Death*, he writes "The self is a relation that relates itself to itself, or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but the relation's relating itself to itself." (Kierkegaard 1980b, 13) For Kierkegaard, the self is not a thing, but an experience of existence in relation. This turns the self beyond the physical and the psychical, as a spiritual being in a specific relationality: an embodied form of life becoming aware of its own interconnected existence.

But this relation is not a given, each self has as its task to find the quality and reach of that relation, through faith, or through the meaning of the original sin,

[5] The core of Kierkegaard's book *Fear and Tremble* is that we should live in the awareness that we exist before a higher power and are responsible to it. That existential attitude, which derives in a specific humbleness of everything existent, can be compared to this passage from Kant: "If God should really speak to man, man could still never know that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for man to apprehend the infinite by his senses, distinguish it from sensible beings, and recognize it as such. But in some cases man can be sure the voice he hears is not God's. For if the voice commands him to do something contrary to moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion." (1992, 155)

[6] Kierkegaard's topics can be read as concepts being mobilized through narrative devices to engage with problems that are inaccessible through other means, such as the reality of existential and/or everyday anxiety, the confrontation with everyday patterns and deep-entrenched habits, or the experience with basic forms of injustice and wrongdoings in the world.

[7] It has been thoroughly discussed how the first major books by Heidegger were definitely influenced by a secular reading of Kierkegaard (i.a. Carlisle 2013; Thonhauser 2016).

in order to discover how selfhood is dependent upon another power (God, the neighbor), and ultimately co-constituted by it. That means that who I am depends on the stand I take on being a self. Moreover, how I interpret myself is not a question of what I think but of what I do. I have to take up what is the given or factual part of my self and, by acting on it, define (and decide) who I am. I understand myself as being a set of roles (a writer, a mother, a lover…), but all of these are contingent to my understanding of the relation, which precedes them all, and takes place in an instant – a moment of danger where my true self might slide away forever if I do not decide to become one with myself. Thus, the self defines itself by taking up its past through present actions that make sense in terms of its future. For Kierkegaard, then, the self can be understood as a temporal structure, where every point in time reveals a connection between the experiencing self and the world which goes beyond language, the social world, and even the limitations of the physical realm.

Furthermore, from the relation of the self or single individual (*den enkelte*, as Kierkegaard names it) to God (as the universal totality, *det almene*) one can derive fundamental political aspects. For this relation raises questions of how we can have a relation with God, know of God, have faith and communicate with the absolute being. This clearly expands into two different approaches in political theory. On the one hand, the issue of how to characterize the individual who has political agency and rights, and why the individuality of that self is important in politics. On the other, the issue of the relation between the single individual and the state, or the political world as a whole. The individual as a particular can be contrasted with the universal nature of the political sphere and of civil laws, and from there on, with the absolute nature of sovereignty, wherever we think sovereignty resides (on the people, the ruler, the state, etc.). In that sense, the nature of that subjectivity, that moral agency, raises issues about political liberty, which has a history of its own in both Christian and Liberal traditions. As Stocker comments on the Kierkegaardian venture:

> The subjective nature of the individual, its capacity for self-relation and relation with the absolute, within itself and externally, is why the individual has value. The individual is faced a cost of individualism, the loss of antique unities of self, state, family, and religion, in which it can find a place. Individualism taken seriously leaves the individual without a place because of those absolute aspects of individual subjectivity. So politics must become the best possible attempt to reconcile the absolute value of the individual with political and social structures. Politics can be seen as itself stretched between those opposing poles and requiring individuals to find some strength from inside; or as only justly stemming from the basic form of human community in individual love for all other individuals. (2014, 128-9)

A political theory structured over the notion of the love of others can be developed over this reading (Žižek, Santner and Reinhard 2005; Chartier 2023). And yet, the relation between the individual and the absolute also opens up another field when the self is mobilized as a figure of exception. In his work

Repetition, Kierkegaard describes the exception of a young man as a "dialectical battle in which the exception arises in the midst of the universal." (1983, 226) The exception "affirms himself as justified," for an unjustified exception would be "recognized precisely by his wanting to bypass the universal." (Kierkegaard 1983, 226) The universal and the exception are presented as standing on opposite sides. The universal is full of 'rage and impatience' due to the 'disturbance the exception causes'; the exception itself is characterized by 'insubordination and defiance' as well as 'weakness and infirmity.' (Kierkegaard 1983, 226) Although in conflict with the universal, the exception still is 'an offshoot of it,' i.e. it is and is not part of the universal; consequently, the exception "thinks the universal" in that it thinks itself through (Kierkegaard 1983, 227). In the end, over the course of their conflict, the exception explains the universal as it explains itself.

This form of approaching the exception was key for Schmitt's understanding of the political.[8] Furthermore, the undecidability that it brings with itself (after all, the exception refuses to subsume to the universal) deeply influenced both Heidegger and Benjamin, who engaged with it by building up different conceptual structures.[9] And ultimately, because of the new possibilities that it opens in the midst of the universal, the exception bears a transformative potential, a fact that was not overlooked by Arendt. In what follows, we will explore how some of these influences were actually developed in different directions, producing conceptual assemblages of a great depth, specifically in the case of Arendt.

III. Hannah Arendt: Action, Plurality, History

In *What is Existential Philosophy?* (1947) Arendt recognizes Kierkegaard and Schelling as the fathers of Existentialism (Arendt 1994b, 163; de Paula 2011, 33).[10]

[8] For Schmitt, an exception is required for cases that are not regulated by the given law, that disrupt or endanger it. But against Kierkegaard, it is precisely the sovereign (the universal) who decides what constitutes an exception and gains its power over that decision. (For a comparison between Kierkegaard and Schmitt in this regard, see Löschenkohl (2019). For a different reading of the relation between sovereignty and exception see C. Galli (2015). According to Galli, Schmitt distinguishes universality and sovereignty, as the latter emerges from an exception and structures it.)

[9] In Heidegger's case, it is at the base of his category of *Entschlossenheit* (Heidegger 1967, 296-7; see also Henschen 2010, 169ff). In Benjamin, the undecidability is transferred to a skill of the materialist historian, namely her ability to bring together past memories with present events in the unresolved tension of a 'dialectical standstill,' as Benjamin implies in his notion of a 'dialectical image.' (Benjamin 1991, GS V, 587, 595; see also Buck-Morss 1989, 219)

[10] See de Paula 2011, 31-33; Young-Bruhel 1982, 36-41. Even in her narrative on the birth of Existentialism, Arendt echoes some Kierkegaardian themes: following Kierkegaard, Arendt defines Kant as the first philosopher who recognized the gap between reality and thought (Arendt 1994b, 177; Kierkegaard 1980a, 11). Additionally, she mirrors the Kierkegaardian disdain for the idealistic longing for "accounting for its own beginning," (O'Neill Burns 2012,

For the existentialist tradition – which is Arendt's own background – existence is pivotal: "the term existence denotes simply the Being (*Sein*) of man, independent of the qualities and capabilities that an individual may possess and that are accessible to psychological investigation." (Arendt 1994b, 163) Indeed, Arendt underlines that Kierkegaard employed the subjectivity of existence as a tool against the objectivity and tyranny of Hegelian science (Arendt 1994b, 168; see also Sartre 2008). Therefore, Arendt's reflection on existence derives directly from Kierkegaard's insights, even if through the mediation of Heidegger and Jaspers (de Paula 2011, 31).

In her later work from 1953, *Søren Kierkegaard*, Arendt lauds Kierkegaard's adoption of the subjective viewpoint, a stance that challenged the philosophical status quo of Kierkegaard's time and made him decidedly vital for the 20th century afterwar philosophical scenario (Arendt 1994a; de Paula 2011, 33-35). After recording Kierkegaard's neglect in the German philosophical framework for fifty years after his death, Arendt claims:

> The far more important reason is that the intellectual and cultural climate in Germany was simply not hospitable to him. In the unbroken façade of self-assurance that each of the humanistic disciplines presented to the world, there was not the slightest breach through which Kierkegaard's unsettling message could have slipped and begun to undermine that complacency […]. [Kierkegaard's revolt against philosophy] meant the salvation of the individual's subjectivity. […] The point here is not the methodological innovation but the opening up of dimensions of the world and of human life that had previously remained invisible to philosophy or that had had only a derivative shadow existence for it. (1994a, 45)

Arendt makes full use of Kierkegaard's reflections on the single individual: in Kierkegaard's view, everyone becomes an individual when he or she enacts his or her freedom, when anxiety pulls him or her towards sin without coercion (Kierkegaard 1980a, 73, 97-98, 118). Furthermore, for the Danish philosopher, humans do not exist as members of a species, but precisely as singular entities. And it is precisely through the qualitative leap that everyone as such brings novelty into the world (Kierkegaard 1980a, 85), embodying the contradiction of a universal becoming a single individual (Kierkegaard 1980a, 78-79; Sartre 2008, 158). This abyssal origin of the individual, becoming one through his or her actions, can be also found in Kierkegaard's narrative of the ungrounded commencement of first sin (Kierkegaard 1980a, 29-35). In Kierkegaard's view, sin does not ground in a wicked disposition that human beings inherit from Adam's guilt, but from the individual leap, through a realization (un)grounded in and pulled by anxiety (Kierkegaard 1980a, 46-51).

A further exploration of the abyssal or ungrounded nature of the origin beckons. While delving into Arendt's historical and political notion of origin,

111; see Kierkegaard 1980b, 67-73) which is, for Arendt, the aboriginal philosophical *hybris* (Arendt 1994b, 177-178).

Roberto Esposito speculates that origin is the negative foundation of history, its void springs:

> Notwithstanding all historical attempts to transform it into genesis, origin always remains incomplete precisely because of its leap beyond itself, its continuous overcoming of itself, its *not* being fully what it is: an unoriginary origin, an *arché* that is constitutively non-archic. (2012, 22)[11]

Arendt picks the ungrounded origin's formal structure from Kierkegaard, to describe both the individual political action and history itself as a net of actions. In that sense, Kierkegaard's notion of selfhood and its structure influenced Arendt's depiction of the political actor and the flowing plurality within the historical process. We will now turn to describe the main three features of that development.

Firstly, Arendt enacts politically Kierkegaard's notion of existence to define the political actor. Existence, singularity, exception: these are for Arendt the qualities of the political subject – whom she describes as individual, beginner, and actor. One feature of Arendt's portrait of the political subject reveals Kierkegaard's influence clearly: for her, actors exhibit who they are while hiding themselves in the political space. The paradox of existence – being an individual before God (or death, or the other, or the public realm) and losing oneself in front of Him (or it, or them) – is one of the pearls that Arendt grasps from Kierkegaard's desperate search for Christianity in a secularized world (Kierkegaard 1980a, 46).[12] Indeed, deeds and speeches disclose publicly 'who' each actor is:

> speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua men*. This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative. (Arendt 1998, 176)

This text highlights plurality – which Arendt identifies as the condition of political action – as having 'the twofold character of equality and distinction.' (Arendt 1998, 175) In his inquiry into Kierkegaard's politics, Karlsen highlights the task of becoming oneself as the core of the political use of Kierkegaardian equality: "all human beings are equal in being tasked with becoming the single individual that each other is, but for this very reason all humans are also

[11] Esposito also overlaps the structure of ungrounded origin with Heidegger's abyssal grounding: *Abgrund* (Esposito 2017, 22-23). The Italian philosopher recognizes in Benjamin's distinction between 'origin' and 'source' from the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, published in 1928, the main reference for Arendt (2017, 21-23). However, Kierkegaardian temporality is an indirect source for Arendt's insights – through Heidegger and Benjamin's interpretations.

[12] Due to Kierkegaard's leap from reason to faith, Arendt enumerates him among the 'Masters of Suspicion' with Marx and Nietzsche (Arendt 1994, 48-49; de Paula 2011, 35).

absolutely different." (Karlsen 2019, 380)[13] Arendt would completely agree with this claim; for her, the political actor does not unfold her authentic and inner self onto the public realm. Contrarily, she builds herself when acting before others, who relapse to 'who' she is by watching her act and narrating her history. Indeed, there is no 'authentic' self behind these manifestations, as for Arendt the inwardness of self-reflection is a trap for individuals and a ghost to the world (Arendt 1998, 70; Arendt 1961, 146, 156-165).[14] For Arendt, as for Kierkegaard, the self is a relation relating to itself (Kierkegaard 1980b, 13). Yet for Kierkegaard that articulation – or becoming – is only possible through divine mediation (Wood 2012, 11) while for Arendt it is accessible through the others in the public realm.

Secondly, Arendt draws fully from Kierkegaard's ungrounded origin of the single individual and human sin when she describes her historical methodology. On this point, Benjamin's appropriation of Kierkegaard patently influenced Arendt's historical employ of the notion of origin. For Arendt, the political realm entangles the plural and chaotic beginnings each human brings into the world, thereby deriving 'universal' history from the erratic contribution of acting individuals – i.e., from plurality as the cornerstone of politics. Indeed, political action means spontaneity, that is, in Kantian terms, to begin a new series of events, unpredictable from the previous status of reality. The political actor is a beginner, and history – i.e., past politics – is a net of origins. Nonetheless, the political subject does not create something new *ex nihilo*. Instead, the subject begins from what she finds in the world, and the latter already contains diverse intertwined

[13] See Arendt 1994b, 47; Toscano 2013, 30; Smith 2005, 38-41, 48. This notion is even at work in Arendt's reading of human rights: criticizing the abstract universalism of the Declarations of human rights, Arendt counters to their void subject the political actor. Becoming a man is a task enacted through political action, relations, and sharing a common world to exhibit herself (Arendt 1979, 268-302). Karlsen hypothesizes that precisely Kierkagaard's Christian notion of equality has a crucial political potential, agreeing with the idea that political equality is a secularization of the religious one, and especially of the 'love of the neighbor' – someone who is like me for being nothing before God, and to whom I only donate my vacuity. Despite its relevance, a discussion of this proposal surpasses the scope of this paper. However, it is noteworthy that Arendt's dissertation on Augustin discusses the relational and political relevance of the 'love of the neighbor.' In that work from 1929, Arendt denies that Christian love allows the believer to meet the other. For her, an encounter with the neighbor could happen only in the world and without mediation. On the other hand, the love of the neighbor reaches the other through God (Arendt 1996, 93-97; Karlsen 2019, 382; Smith 2005, 45-46; Assiter 2012, 46, 56), thereby obliterating the world. Also, for Arendt, as the other personifies a potential co-believer, Christian equality does not include everyone but potentially always excludes those who do not believe. For key readings of the issue, see Adorno (1939) and Žižek (2017). Significantly enough, Arendt claims that Kierkegaard's influence on contemporary Catholic and Lutheran thought derives from his standing alone before the world – not only before God – (Arendt 1994, 47), as the wondering City of God disappeared in a wholly secularized world.

[14] Arendt describes this paradox of expression and concealment (Taminaux 1989) of the self in the public realm through the figures of the Greek *daimon* (Arendt 1998, 179-180) and the Latin *persona* (Arendt 1990, 106; Kateb 2000, 138).

commencements. This limited possibility for action is the Arendtian 'existentialist' freedom (Arendt 1961, 151). According to Arendt:

> to act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein* – 'to begin,' 'to lead,' and eventually 'to rule'– indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*). Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action. *[Initium] ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit* (that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody), wrote Augustine in his political philosophy. This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world, it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. (1998, 177)[15]

In political action, each single individual performs and brings an exception into the world, contesting its entropic tendency. Thereby, Arendt's political individuality embodies the features of the Kierkegaardian selfhood.

While acting, political actors are simultaneously extraordinarily free and perfectly constrained, as everyone intervenes in each other's actions, annihilating any sovereignty over events. Contrarily to Schmitt, for Arendt the political subject as exception destroys sovereignty, thereby making politics possible. Indeed, according to Arendt, freedom is a fact of everyday life in the political realm, not an undecidable axiom of a philosophy of the mind. Nevertheless, in this domain, human beings suffer the highest constraint, as they are robbed –and relieved – from the necessity and violence of domination on themselves and others (Arendt 1998, 163-165).

The last point leads once more to Arendt's political appropriation of the notion of 'origin' – derived from Kierkegaard's inquiry into the first sin (Kierkegaard 1980a, 29-35, 73) and even Walter Benjamin's later interpretation. This term first appears in Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). While describing the 'method' of the book, Arendt uses Benjamin's[16] historical and epochal appropriation of the Kierkegaardian abyssal foundation: Arendt's book on totalitarianism analyzes this phenomenon as the chaotic net that imprisoned the crumbling pieces of the European tradition, trapping this civilization in its ruins (Arendt 1979, vii-viii). Arendt employs the notion of origin to counter

[15] See also Arendt (1979, 479). Arendt detects in Augustin the father of the idea of man as *initium*, as beginner. Yet, her insights about politically acting as becoming guilty, as giving up the extreme danger of innocence (Arendt 1979, 194, n. 49) narrowly binds beginning and guilt: to act means to become responsible of the most unpredictable and irreversible consequences of one's action (Arendt 1998, 181-188). Therefore, the Kierkegaardian claim that becoming a single individual starts with guilt (Kierkegaard 1980a, 60, 97-98, 108; Kierkegaard 1980b, 119) is also at work in this Arendtian idea.

[16] Arendt and Benjamin's theoretical and personal connection is renowned. Benjamin was the cousin of Arendt's first husband, Günter Stern. Arendt was profoundly familiar with Benjamin's work. She also edited Benjamin's essays collection *Illuminations*, with her portrait of Benjamin as a preface.

determinism in history, every deduction of the historical process from a principle, and every schematism of ineluctable development or decline.

Arendt employed Benjamin's appropriation of the Kierkegaardian origin for her accounts on history and politics.[17] The origin/commencement frame implies the abyssal and continuous grounding of the political process, its negative foundation, the eventful creek intertwining new unforeseeable beginnings, whose end results cannot be foreseen. The groundless actor and the origin are the two (un)grounding axes of politics, marking the synchronizing freedom and dispossession, lack of sovereignty and contingency, singularity and plurality, which characterize this realm.

Before ending this section, Kierkegaard's disdain for the public sphere requires a comment. For the Danish philosopher, the single individual can emerge only by abandoning the chatter, leveling, and mob mentality where everyone drowns (Kierkegaard 1980b, 118; Willy 2013, 14; Battersby 2012, 27, 34-35). On this point, Arendt's viewpoint on what we call 'the social' seems ambivalent, as she sharply distinguishes it from the political. According to Arendt, the Danish philosopher overlooked politics, as he could only conceive of a 'non-worldly, inward-directed acting.' (Arendt 1998, 313, n. 76) Certainly, Kierkegaard's critiques of the mob resonate in Arendt's concerns over an unorganized society (Arendt 1979, 305-340) and the social (Arendt 1998, 68-73; Battersby 2012, 42). In this sense, it is clear that for her too, plurality decays into the mob and the social when it lacks political engagement and action. Nevertheless, for Arendt, the mob is not the inevitable fate of a group of humans; rather, the possibility for action redeems the people in the public realm. This is because, as we have hinted already, the single individual is powerless against a group of humans acting together – and this is implied in her description of how power is exerted through collective engagement in the public sphere. In the end, while Arendt entrusts the single individual with initiative, she nevertheless recognizes in plural action the main source of political power (Arendt 1980a, 200; Arendt 1972b, 143-145).

This brings clearly a tension between the individual and the collective. In the next section, the paper will discuss the political operativity of origin and singularity as stemming from that Kierkegaardian conceptual frame, through Arendt's discussion of civil disobedience and dissensus.

IV. Constitution and Civil Disobedience, Consensus and Dissensus: Enacting the Origins

This last section employs the political operativity of Kierkegaard's thought in Arendt to analyze the entangling individuals and collective under the forms of

[17] In his conference on Kierkegaard from 1964, Sartre attributes to Kierkegaard a similar thesis to Benjamin's conception: Kierkegaard would have rejected philosophy for it seeks for a 'first beginning.' (Sartre 2008, 152) Against the arrogance of this tradition, the Danish thinker posed instead 'a beginning that is lived,' (Sartre 2008, 153) 'a start that is in flux.' (Sartre 2008, 154)

dissensus and consensus in a democratic framework. On this point, Arendt's insights on the US Constitution and civil disobedience are crucial. For her, civil disobedience re-opened the space for the contribution of new beginnings to a public realm that the Founding Fathers closed for the sake of the durability of the Republic.

Indeed, Arendt does not simply employ concepts such as origin, freedom, and beginning to analyze politics theoretically. Contrarily, she examines some historical episodes – and precisely the birth of the United States as a republic in the 18th century, as well as the practice of civil disobedience during the 70s of the 20th century – as the enacting of singularity and origin, the entangling of multiple streams into the historical currents. Precisely in her book *On Revolution*, Arendt distinguishes principle and origin to show how the Founding Fathers overlapped these concepts:

> The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness is the principle which, together with it, makes its appearance in the world. The way the beginner starts whatever he intends to do lays down the law of action for those who have joined him in order to partake in the enterprise and to bring about its accomplishment. (1990, 212-213)[18]

However, according to Arendt, the Founding Fathers cared more about the durability and stability of the Republic than about the accessibility of the public realm where this achievement saw the light (Arendt 1990, 229-230). Therefore, for Arendt, the Founding Fathers tended to close down the public realm for direct political participation, in favor of creating some kind of laic 'eternal city' on Earth (Arendt 1990, 229). Thereby, the Republic turned into a representative democracy where:

> the old adage, *All power resides in the people*, is true only for the day of election. Government has degenerated into mere administration, the public realm has vanished; there is no space either for seeing and being seen in action, John Adams' *spectemur agendo*, or for discussion and decision, Jefferson's pride of being a participator in government; political matters are those that are dictated by

[18] According to Arendt, the foundation of the United States as a republic lies in the sacralization of the *Initium*, i.e., on the identification of principle and origin. Nonetheless, the historical narrative of the Founding Fathers expressed the effort to neutralize the violence and groundlessness of the new beginning. Indeed, Arendt notes that the United States' founders narrated the birth of the new federation as a new foundation of Rome, like the latter had thought of itself as a new foundation and redemption of Troy (Arendt 1990, 201-212; Esposito 2017, 30-31). Thereby, according to Arendt, the circularity between political action and the birth of the political body emerges – a virtuous circularity between constituting and constituted power – which she solves with a paradoxical anticipation of the past in the future (Lindal 2006, 901). The solution to the risks of commencing something new consisted in understanding it as an inception in the creek of actions begun by those who came before the present ones (Bernstein 2010, 123).

> necessity to be decided by experts, but not open to opinions and genuine choice. (Arendt 1990, 237)

Nonetheless, for Arendt, the durability of the new form of government clashes with the unpredictable novelty and unforeseeable spontaneity that each new human can bring into the world. Indeed, even though every risky beginning could result in destruction and death (Arendt 1972a, 78-79) – as it was the case with totalitarianism – each new beginning does not only convey the anguish for a looming threat (Tassin 1999, 136), but also for the hope of a miraculous salvation (Arendt 1998, 178).[19]

Against this background, Arendt's reflections on civil disobedience from 1970 are pivotal. Civil disobedience – which Arendt distinguished from the protests of conscious objectors, individual actions of dissent, and crimes (Arendt 1972a, 56-57) – is the public and political expression of dissent of an individual or a group of citizens countering a government that violates some written or unwritten principles, or that aims at changing a fundamental law.[20] For Arendt, civil disobedience is perfectly compatible with the United States' institutions (Arendt 1972a, 75) and with the spirit of their laws, despite its growing criminalization during the students' and workers' protests in the 60s and 70s of the 20th century (Arendt 1972a, 99).

Arendt seems to be longing for the paradoxical insertion of civil disobedience into the United States' Constitution. Indeed, from the perspective of the traditional social contract theory, to be born in a specific country means to tacitly consent to its laws and constitution (Arendt 1972a, 88). Nonetheless, in Arendt's view, consensus can survive only through dissensus (Arendt 1972a, 94), through the practice of voluntary associations enacting political participation and

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[19] According to Arendt, a miracle is a decided change towards salvation ("eine entscheidende Änderung zum Heil," Arendt 2017, 31). For her, the religious denotations of this word deprived it of its political potentiality, as miracles are not supernatural interventions in human life. Contrarily, for her, miracles are everyday happenings, as even life on Earth results from a combination of infinite improbability ('unendliche Unwahrscheinlichkeit,' Arendt 2017, 32). Every novelty has the potential to shutter the causality chain, resulting in something unexpected and inexplicable – in everyday miracles ("Immer, wenn etwas Neues geschieht, es sich unerwartet, unberechenbar und letztlich kausal unerklärbar, eben wie ein Wunder in den Zusammenhang berechenbarer Verläufe hineinereignet," Arendt 2017, 32; see also Arendt 1989, 236). Miracles counter scientific calculations and even social and economic sciences predictions, as these disciplines tend to reduce human action to regular and statistically predictable behaviors (Arendt 2017, 41-42).

[20] "Civil disobedience arises when a significant number of citizens have become convinced either that the normal channels of change no longer function, and grievances will not be heard or acted upon, or that, on the contrary, the government is about to change and has embarked upon and persists in modes of action whose legality and constitutionality are open to grave doubt. […] In other words, civil disobedience can be turned to necessary and desirable change or to necessary and desirable preservation or restoration of the *status quo*." (Arendt 1972a, 74-75) Curiously, Arendt's definition of civil disobedience excludes the perspective of Henry Thoreau, who first theorized it in his book from the early 19th Century (1848, 60).

the public good. Thereby, new generations can question the world into which they happen to be born, substantiating consensus through the possibility of dissensus (Arendt 1972a, 96). That is precisely the dangerous freedom that took place in democratic councils and townships: "consent as it is implied in the right to dissent […] spells out and articulates the tacit consent given in exchange for the community's tacit welcome of new arrivals." (Arendt 1972a, 88) For Arendt, civil disobedience reactivates the *initium* that the Founding Fathers relegated into the private sphere for the sake of the Republic's durability. New beginners could contribute to the public realm by revitalizing the unpredictable and dangerous springs of events. Arendt's accounts of civil disobedience perfectly exemplify how politics can survive only when unforeseeable and even dangerous springs converge in it, reopening the public realm.

Étienne Balibar convincingly intertwines Arendt's praise of disobedience with her contempt for the blind obedience to totalitarian regimes and any form of voluntary servitude (Balibar 2014, 86). Indeed, as Balibar puts it, "without the possibility of disobedience, there is no legitimate obedience." (2014, 175) The French philosopher describes this reciprocity of consensus and dissensus as a strange dialectic of opposites (Balibar 2014, 169), where:

> the negative proposition [i.e., dissensus] in reality announces the sole condition of possibility of the institution, and the content of the positive proposition is the idea of a negative dialectic inherent in the life of the law, which accompanies all its existence (to the point at which it is applied and is not limited to a founding insurrection of the juridical order as a whole or to the exercise of a constituent power destined to be effaced in the constitution it produces). (Balibar 2014, 178-179)

For Balibar, Arendt's praise of civil disobedience counters the political obedience's entropic and destructive consequences, while philosophical tradition elevated obedience to the dignity of political virtue *par excellence*. Indeed, In Arendt's view, the modern age crafted rule and obedience as the essential relations of the political realm, where human beings are bare means to accomplish the political scope of the prince or ruler (Arendt 1961, 139).

According to Arendt then, politics exists as long as every new beginner can contribute to the world, evaluate the past, and open up the future. In this sense, the single individual can certainly act exceptionally – blurring statistics on usual behaviors and breaking the mechanism of obedience. Nevertheless, for her, only the alliance among political actors results in political power, i.e. the "human ability not simply to act but to act in concert." (Arendt 1972b, 143) This means that each actor can only begin something, but not accomplish it on her own. Thereby, through disobedience and dissensus, waves of new alliances may unleash political

forces to bring about change. In the end, springs of individual actions may convey in great collective deeds that can redeem the world.[21]

Two abyssal foundations – individual initiative and the groundless net of events – overlap, resulting in historical unpredictability (Arendt 1998, 243-247). Historically, this entangling also implies a tension between the durability of the world built by the past generations and what the newcomers imagine. Each new generation tacitly consents to the world where it happens to be born, yet it cannot help changing it while diving to catch what it considers the most precious pearls of the past.[22] In Arendt's words: "change is constant, inherent to the human condition, but the velocity of change is not […]. Man's urge for change and his need for stability have always balanced and checked each other." (1972a, 78-79) Therefore, civil disobedience implies the constant re-founding of the republic (Bernstein 2010, 127).

Arendt's reflections on politics echo Kierkegaard's insights on the temporal structure of the subject. This fact confirms Arendt's debt toward the Danish philosopher's theorizations of the self as an abyssal grounding historically structuring herself. Against the background of this debt, Arendt's political philosophy could be described as a Kierkegaardian political theology: it secularizes theological notions such as individuality, freedom, miracle, spontaneity, guilt, and ungrounded origin. Arendt seems to translate in political terms the theological notion that birth means a possibility of redemption, and everyone could enact such salvation, thereby generating herself and the world. However, for Arendt, the miraculous action cannot help redefining the very notion of history: as the entangling of ungrounded and 'anarchic' origins, history eludes the schemes of development or decay. History is the scenery of ungrounded origins, where miracles are more usual than the religious denotation of the word allows.

Against technocracy and approaching human beings as statistically-average behaving subjects (Arendt 1998, 323; see also Rancière 2005, 54, who describes this configuration as the 'police'), Arendt engages her faith in political individual action, the subject's ability to involve others and generate renewed sources of

[21] According to Arendt, the Greek verb *archein* does not mean 'to command' or 'to rule,' nor *prattein* 'to obey,' as the common translations suggest (Arendt 1998, 189, 222-223). These translations hide a transposition of action into the military context. Contrarily, for Arendt, *archein* means 'to begin' and *prattein* 'to achieve.' For the ancient Greeks, the actor was only a leader, able to call the others to action through his deeds and speeches.

[22] Arendt's praise of civil disobedience does not lead to 'permanent revolution.' Contrarily, Arendt recognizes the relevance of worldly stability for every human activity and especially for political action – one needs only understand her claim that the law works like the wall (as implied in the Greek word *nomos*) protecting a political community from the risks of unbridled action (Arendt 1998, 63, 192-199). Nevertheless, the vitality of the public realm ineluctably changes the world by welcoming newcomers or foreigners – see Arendt's comments on the Roman term for law, *lex*, which means 'binding,' and 'building bridges' (*Brücke*) among individuals and peoples (Arendt 1998, 63; Arendt 2017, 113).

power. In this configuration, the political subject lacks sovereignty, yet he or she can unpredictably contribute to new courses of action through dissensus, withdrawing from a political space where evil is systematically perpetrated (Arendt 2006, 253-279), and enacting thus political initiatives.

V. Conclusion

Despite his rejection of partisan politics and even his conservative attitude, Kierkegaard's legacy on the field of political philosophical – albeit peripheral in his own work – has proven to be long-lasting, innovative, and resourceful. This article has aimed to show how some poignant concepts of a deeply-entrenched political theology from a Kierkegaardian lineage operate and are in fact needed to think the possibilities of a radical democracy – even if Arendt was quite suspicious about this term and preferred the word 'republic.' Nonetheless, her appeal to politics as a form of life, as the enactment of human plurality, resonates with a radical interpretation of democracy. Evidently, this route does not follow an open and direct thread to the Kierkegaardian writings, but must be unearthed through specific developments in Arendt's work. In that sense, these notions are part of the hidden undercurrent of the theological which is 'small and ugly,' and 'must be kept out of sight,' according to the Benjaminian warning.

This approach may appear to be demanding. Yet it must also be conceded that democracy operates indeed on a sort of operational 'faith': that each and every individual will count within the net of actions of a collective force, that this entangling net will counter destructive forces and bring salvation to the world. Evidently, for this approach to function, the individual must be acknowledged, safeguarded, strengthened. Consensus may yield an erasure of individual forces, even if, or precisely because, collective action is the source of power. In that sense, only dissensus can provide a lifeline to a radical form of democracy. Selfhood has a connection with dissent because it is the recognition of an exceptional relationality, of a singular experience of the world: an origin. And since it is embedded in relations, selfhood cannot become autarchy, nor isolation.

Moreover, the affirmation of selfhood implies the recognition of a vantage point that is unapproachable otherwise, and whose pertinence must be guarded at all costs: dissent is in itself the acknowledgment of a unique relatability to the world. Selfhood, the qualitative leap, the moment of danger, new beginnings: these are the theoretical tools through which Arendt builds a 'political theology' that accounts for the unpredictable novelty that radical democracy brings forth. The messianic, the miracle, the force of newcomers: such are the political translations of the Kierkegaardian political subject, interweaving endlessly in the anarchic net of actions within the sphere of human affairs.

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