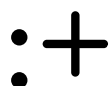


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Humanity? (Re-reading Arendt)

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## The Theatre of Public Life – a Crucible of our Humanity? (Re-reading Arendt)

Over twenty years ago, the works of Homi Bhabha introduced to the larger public the concept (and the cultural form) of hybridity. Today, thinking in terms of hybridity is nothing peculiar, and in the world we live in, the reality of hybridity will soon be more the rule than the exception. As I stand here, I am such a hybrid and a lot of what I am about to say is anchored in my experience: personal, political and intellectual. I am from here, from this country that was once occupied by fanatics who were driven by the messianic fantasy of a purified world, a country that – for the much of the world – is known as the place where that plan for purity was meticulously carried out in the death camps of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Majdanek. So I come from one of the bloodlands, as historian Timothy Snyder would put it.

But now, though it still seems strange even for me, I seem to live most of my life in New York City, a place of diversity and plurality, populated by arrivals from all over the world. I come from a university in New York, and more precisely from a particular division of it that was established as the University in Exile – established as a rebuke to the very politics and culture of Nazi Germany that would launch the Second World War and facilitate the eventual design and enactment of the Final Solution, also on this very land.

The University in Exile, which in 1933 welcomed German-Jewish refugee scholars to the New School, was founded on principles diametrically opposed to Hitler's. At its core was a respect for reason, pluralism, rigorous self-criticism, democratic ambiguities and negotiable differences. While armed forces could defeat Germany's war-making machine, Nazism, with its rigid certainties, had to be confronted by ideas, and eventually by the International Tribunal in Nuremberg.

One of the things I remember most vividly from my early childhood in Poland, and something that comes back to me again and again, is a radio programme that began with the following announcement: 'This is a Red Cross box in search of families'. That programme must have been broadcast daily, as I still hear the voice of the announcer, and the long and tedious – for a child – list of names. I remember seeing in my mind a large wooden box, much bigger than the small black Tesla radio we had in our kitchen, a box with a red cross painted over it, which I imagined being opened loudly at the beginning of every programme, and then being closed forcefully when the litany of names read on a given day was over. There had to be hundreds of thousands of names read over the years. There was a rhythm associated with the reading, and a kind of unfamiliar melody, having to do with the way the unique names and places sounded to me. And there was one word in particular that I remember hearing, a difficult word for me to pronounce then, and one that I came to understand only much, much later. The word was *repatrianci* (re-patriots, re-patriating). And then one day the box was no more. The reading stopped. It had to have been much later that this voracious young radio listener asked her mom what happened to that *skrzynka*, that box? Well,

said my mother, it is almost fifteen years after the war; perhaps all the missing family members have been found.

The dispersal and disappearance of people during protracted wars, whether as a result of forced removal or flight from danger, is always tied to the hope that those one hasn't heard from may still be alive, that there might be someone who spotted them somewhere, that they escaped through the barbed wire, that they were picked up from the sea, and the reason we don't hear from them must be that they cannot write, that their cell-phones cannot be re-charged, or their phone card is empty... And this hope is deeply invested in the existence of solidarity: we hope that those close to us have been rescued by someone out there, and they, of course, also hope that they will be rescued by someone.

In 1931, two years before Hitler came to power and eight years before the war broke out, Walter Benjamin, perhaps one of the most perceptive, brilliant cultural critics of that time, a person who had invested himself in an erudite doctoral study called 'Origins of the German Tragedy', wrote a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem, and I'd like us to try to see the image behind these words from his letter:

Like one who keeps afloat on a shipwreck by climbing to the top of a mast that is already crumbling. But from there he has a chance to give a signal leading to his rescue.<sup>1</sup>

Do we see this? Do we hear the optimism in Benjamin's words, and the confidence in the signal that would bring about the rescue? Do those signals matter today? Who gets them? Who sees these signals? With his 'hope grafted onto tragedy', does she or he have a chance?<sup>2</sup>

Did Benjamin have a chance when, nine years later in 1940 – as a refugee from the Third Reich and then from Vichy France – he tried to cross the French-Spanish border to get to the ship in Portugal that was to take him to America? We know that on the very day that he, along with others, arrived at the border, Spain closed it, and that during that night Benjamin, exhausted and ill, took his own life.

I wonder about the loneliness of Benjamin, and now the painful loneliness and humiliation of today's refugees fleeing danger in their own respective bloodlands. Arendt spoke about the 'loneliness of those living under totalitarianism' – about the anxiety arising from 'loneliness and alienation from the world'.<sup>3</sup> Many generations of Poles throughout the 19th and 20th centuries have been very familiar with that condition, and they still are. What Arendt did not delve into is that to be a refugee from an oppressive nation-state, or from a war, and to find oneself in a condition of involuntary diaspora, which is a combination of statelessness and rightlessness, dramatically heightens that sense of loneliness.

To find oneself in such a situation is something nobody would want. We ourselves – I mean we Poles – know very well the conditions that nurture and sustain an authoritarian context that in turn renders people inconsequential and their lives apparently worthless. Yet today, an

1 Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1989).

2 Furet in his letter to Paul Ricoeur (XXIV).

3 See Corey's review on Arendt, *The Trials of Hannah Arendt*, <http://www.thenation.com/article/trials-hannah-arendt/>.

openness to receiving the signal and the impulse to organize a rescue mission hardly enjoy unanimous support. As refugees arrive on the shores of Europe, I worry that we can hardly share Benjamin's optimism of 1931. It seems that today we live in precarious times resembling rather Kristalnacht, and one asks oneself the question, How can this be happening?

I will always remember the moment on 22 July 1980, when Edward Gierek, First Secretary of the Communist Party and the ultimate leader in this country, delivered his obligatory address on the anniversary of the establishment of the Soviet-backed provisional government in 1945, honoring Poland's 'National Day of Rebirth'. In this anniversary speech (the thirty-fifth!) that customarily praised its achievements as defined by the Communist party-state, when it came to proclaiming the regime's recent accomplishments, the only success our leader could come up with at a time of political, moral and economic crisis was that socialist Poland was now ethnically pure at last, a country without minorities, inhabited happily only by 'real' Poles. Purity was the prize delivered by the Communist regime. His glorification of a Communist state as a bounded biopolitical space – dangerously echoing the Nazi ideal – went somehow unnoticed then, as just two weeks later the watershed August strikes in the Gdańsk shipyards and the emergence of the Solidarity movement launched a long-running rights revolution throughout the region.

At the core of this struggle was the right to open and maintain an initially defiant public square in which people could meet each other, a theatre of public life where loneliness would be broken, where speaking in public on things shared in common could take place, where a sense of both equality and dignity would be palpable. The symbolic setting under the national flag was to offer protection and emphasize the unity of the people against an autocratic regime. Nobody worried then that such a setting might eventually provide nourishment for the biopolitical exclusion of an alien, or foreigner, or for the questioning of any other kind of other whenever politically advantageous... as with today's refugees.

Despite all the monumental changes that have taken place in Poland as a result of the negotiated revolution that began as an act of solidarity with the shipyard workers, it seems as though some things have not changed. Alright, it is true that in the world we live in, a person has to be territorially anchored to have a home and to have rights. And now the Poles – by virtue of having a double anchor in their still young democratic nation-state and in the European Union, with its institutions and protections – actually have rights, a whole family of rights having to do with political citizenship. Yet solidarity with the dispossessed – something that ought to have a familiar ring – and a recognition of the universal human rights of refugees and forced migrants – seem largely absent, or at best controversial.

So the question is, How come? I wondered what Arendt, with her passionate gift for engaged reflection about our times and a thinker I consider my guide and illuminating spirit, would say about all this. How would she help me if she were still with us today? As she was a professor at the university I come from, I have listened to her students and colleagues and learned that, with all her mastery of theoretical distinctions, she steered students away from theories, and instead made them read and appreciate memoirs, plays and poetry, tales and stories.

I believe there is a close link between the often-defiant theatre of public life – something that people discovered and successfully practiced here – and Arendt's public realm. What I call here the theatre of public life is a phenomenon that is vital in any consideration of politics. The theatre of politics needs a public square, it needs an agora: a space where one can hear others speak, and where one can enter into deliberations. Re-reading Arendt's *Human Condition* today, obviously making some allowances as it was published almost seven decades ago, one could make the case that, in generating the conditions for both plurality and hospitality, theatre ought to be seen as the ultimate incubator and sustainer of public life. To be sure, I am not thinking here about theatre in terms of a popular sociological metaphor handy for explaining the workings of a society. This was how the father of social interactionism, Irving Goffman, argued, that in the theatre of everyday life people are cautious about the way they present themselves to others. But for me, theatre is not just a useful simile to observe things social and political. Theatre is life, is reality, and not an illusion brought on by the play of passions upon the imagination. Though not entirely free of emotion, it is above all a word, a speech-act, and a dialogue that allow a meaningful encounter – and a conversation – to take place. Conversation, like attendance at a theatre performance, is almost always voluntary, not necessary. First, we have to agree to talk, to listen to each others' stories, and through this to get to know each other. In the real theatre of public life, 'public life' means the expressive life of a polity, a process in which the private individual acts on behalf of the public good. In this sense, theatre here represents humanity writ large and becomes a crucible of our humanity.

What a responsibility! one might exclaim. And to avoid misunderstanding, I'd like to add that the public theatre I am talking about is not limited to a nation (not *ethnos*), nor to a nation-state, though the latter is indeed a powerful social imaginary, as it is characterized by a combination of the private and the public, which – as Arendt would say – is concerned with a kind of 'collective housekeeping'. For the same reason, the theatre of public life is nothing natural, not a super-family, in any case not an extension of the family, nor a collection of groups or groupings. There is nothing organic about it.

Rather it is something man-made, an artifact, a socially constructed, fabricated site, indeed a crucible – an infrastructure that supports critical relationships between persons in public. And for me, in a time of democratic Lent and multiple crises in various parts of the world, it is a site of hope. Again, the theatre I have in mind is constituted by two key elements: a publicly spoken word, and a public space where this word can appear, the Arendtian 'space of appearance' in which those who come together consider each other equals. Along with the rules of conduct, this vaguely corresponds to de Saussure's *la langue* – an infrastructure, a set of arrangements that makes encounters, exchanges, discussions and conversations possible. An infrastructure for hope: the opposite of orchestrated public rallies, or spaces that encourage the kind of conspiratorial group performance that can lead to a Thermidor or genocide.

Every act of speech taking place in the theatre of public life is an act in-between, and that in-between-ness makes it ultimately an act of sharing which, while relating individuals to each other, also allows one to continue being a distinct actor, that is, the separate, discrete author of a unique speech act entering into dialogue with the other. Without

the theatre of public life, without its man-made infrastructure, democracy cannot be really experienced. And in saying that, I am completely aware how vulnerable to a positivist critique my argument is and how naive it may sound to some. Nevertheless, I strongly believe that, as with the procedural dimension of democracy, this socio-infrastructural dimension of the theatre of public life is of key importance to all of us. It provides an enabling setting both for the dissolving of loneliness and for an unleashing of the democratic imagination, and thus also for a relishing of civic life. It is a domain where words are actually listened to and exchanged, a domain of disclosures shared between individuals, of meaningful insights, negotiated differences and newly gained knowledge; or, perhaps better, of dynamically imparted knowledge, something that cannot be acquired just by reading books, but is absorbed by our being in dialogue with the other whom we do not yet actually know.

Arendt, in the last interview she ever gave, brought up the issue of happiness. 'When individuals take part in public life', she said, 'they open up for themselves a dimension of human experience that otherwise remains closed to them, and that in some way constitutes a part of complete happiness.'<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I would add, action-oriented speech arises from real plurality and not from the bi-polar concept of a world of politics based on the Schmittian logic of the friend-versus-enemy binary. Although in a performative creation of the world a clear-cut friend-enemy distinction is hard to sustain, nothing here is predetermined. The theatre of public life is actually an agonistic place, a crucible for tensions and disagreements. The exchanges do not come easily. Life in the public square does not presume consensus; quite to the contrary, it is a site of agon. Dialogue on the public square is often contentious, and though it is not driven by conflict, at its heart it is – more frequently than not – a dissensus rather than a consensus, as Rancière would argue. I would say – as someone who long ago caught the virus of hope spread by Poland's Father Tischner – that although critical passion does not always come with a passion for understanding, a dialogically articulated dissensus opens up the potential for understanding, and for establishing a measure of trust, even if it means not embracing the position of the other.

However, this inclusive, open-ended space with neither friends nor enemies, though not without antagonists and opponents, has the capacity to incorporate strangers, including – as I am trying among other things to suggest – migrants and refugees, whether from nearby or afar. For it is here in this theatre of public life that individuals have an opportunity to recognize their interdependence, to acquire solidarity – not just passive empathy, but an active solidarity – and to work together to create a shared world.

Of course, the theatre of dialogue in public life has not only a procedural *la langue* dimension, but also a substantive one, as it is also a parole, an event. As inclusive as the theatre of public life is, its performances are hardly universal. Being both inclusive and accessible this theatre is a forum – or better, an agora – in which individual paroles face each other, exchanging their respective experiences, insights, and local knowledge.

4 Hannah Arendt, *The Last Interview: And Other Conversations*, (New York: Melville House, 2013), pp. 71–72.

Again, what we are discussing here is a purposeful encounter of denizens, those who are living here and now. We saw it every night in Zuccotti Park during the heyday of Occupy Wall Street, on Tahrir Square and during negotiations with the regime within the Gdańsk Shipyard, vividly captured in the documentary film *Workers '80*. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his appreciation of that early infrastructure of American democracy, the New England town meeting, reports on an event dedicated to ways in which one could help Poles who, in their November Uprising of 1830, were challenging the rule of an oppressive Czarist empire.

Here is the voice of a clergyman speaking at that meeting:

Turn Lord, a favored eye upon the other hemisphere; pitifully look down upon that heroic nation, which is even now struggling as we did in the former time, and for the same rights which we defended with our blood.<sup>5</sup>

What impressed the Frenchman was how the religious establishments in America cherished both democratic and republican institutions, and how – as he put it – ‘clergy of all different sects hold the same language of democracy, their opinion being consonant to the laws’.<sup>6</sup>

Do we see this kind of accord today? Do we hear such sentiments today? And does it not sound both appalling because of what we see, and yet also uncannily familiar, when we hear about the refugees from distant war-torn places today.... victims from those worlds where the public square has been shut down?

For the theatre of public life to be a site of meaningful encounters is paramount. This is where plurality is expressed, where diversity is demonstrated, and this is where hospitality is tested. This is where we can try walking in the shoes of others. But somehow today not too many of us want to walk in someone else’s shoes. It seems as though we Poles have worn such shoes already, until quite recently, and were happy to discard them, along with that wooden box with the red cross painted over it.

And no matter how worldly, universal and indefinite this theatre appears to be, it is always place-based, and even if it is world-oriented, it is always a site of specific local encounters, reverberating with issues that are pertinent to those who live there. In this sense, it might be more appropriate to talk of theatres of public life, such as the Island (the Wyspa) in Gdańsk, the Grodzka Gate in Lublin, the Borderlands in Sejny, the European Solidarity Centre in Gdańsk, or more recently the Polski Theatre in Bydgoszcz. Though these are site-specific places that developed different genres and are dedicated to particular locally illuminated issues, these theatres nourish a sense of active – and in their most glorious moments – performative citizenship, continuously granting meaning to individual lives.

Needless to say, the theatre of public life is more like regular theatres: it is not a heaven, it does not have one universal location, but it is also not a given. And there is a danger that even if it is out there, it might be barely attended. People may think that since the infrastructure is

5 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Eduardo Nolla (Indianapolis: Liberty Found, 2010), p. 471.

6 Ibid.

there, it would be like a faucet: we turn the knob and the water flows. The point is that we need this water to flow continuously, or the theatre of public life, a precious human invention, could dry out. We have to defend the public square! Though it cannot directly solve problems like inequality or social injustice, the theatre of public life cannot be abandoned. Indeed, for the theatre of public life to exist, the right to enter and to perform in public has to be not only ensured but also constantly exercised. Without its parole dimension, emptied of concrete actors and individual voices, it could turn into a Potemkin village, set up to mislead both the locals and distant international public opinion. And it often does.

But the public square cannot solve all problems. When it works at its best, the theatre of public life – this potent social construct—provides, along with its creative, action-oriented performative capacities, a price-less epistemic terrain for generating new ways of seeing and knowing the world, and subsequently shaping or reshaping society's practices. When eradicated, when closed, or when turned into a Potemkin village, it silences the voices, and prevents, curbs or brings to a standstill what I call democratic performativity. Such silencing arrangements are closely linked to a regimented shrinking of the public realm in general, interfering in and limiting our comprehension of the world. And leading to violent conflicts, as I shall explain.

Today, there are still numerous and diverse public sites and circumstances where one can meet others to hear, to talk, to discuss, to question and perhaps most importantly to switch – even temporarily – one's own lenses (or shoes) with those of others. It is here that one can get to know, by getting to know the other.

What is perhaps most astonishing – though fully consistent with Arendt's argument – and, as always with her, magnificently counter-intuitive, is that for Arendt the realm that I call knowing is not the realm of the political – that is, the public – as she understands it. For her, it was the thinking that she was primarily interested in, the kind of thought that does not depend on any of the external banisters for thinking – those unquestioned authorities such as God, or history, or grand theories.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the knowing that I am talking about, the knowing that is a condition for action, is not a solitary exercise; it urgently does need others, as it relies on a dialogue with them, and thus it needs the public square. The knowing generated there cannot be, and never is, absolute or predetermined, as it is locally produced and – in the course of encounters with the other – continuously open to adjustments, amendments and corrections.

The quest for knowing drives away ignorance, and I think Arendt, with her inclination to explore thinking, would have seen its interim appeal – as in that early essay on the subject when she refers to knowing as an inarticulate, preliminary understanding.<sup>8</sup> Alongside Hannah Arendt, the mastermind of distinctions, there is the Arendt who recognizes the cognitive value of popular understanding that is a preliminary

7 Hannah Arendt, *Thinking Without Banisters: Essays in Understanding, 1954–1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Random House, 2015).

8 Hannah Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics', *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1994), p. 311.



understanding, expressed in everyday language, one that thrives on theatre: the poetic, the imaginative and the unpredictable. I think she would agree that theatre is both an art and a social practice, with the power of imaginative insights that allow us to enter – Vico would call it *entrare* – the ideas and cultures of those who might be remote from us in time and space.

When the chips are down, as Arendt would have said, it is the public square that provides the vital sense of reality, and serves as society's touchstone. Otherwise, we believe we know but we do not. Without a public square, our actions may be based on what I call misknowing. In other words, I am arguing that it is not just in order to think and to act, but also in order to enter into the process of knowing – including an awareness of one's own limited knowledge – that one needs that kind of richly functioning public realm. It opens up for us the possibility for the interplay of inter-subjectivity and sociality.

The theatre of public life that we are talking about, then, is not just about actorship or spectatorship. In fact, it is only about actor-ship, when the speaking human, a citizen-actor, addresses another human being, and hears him or her out. There is somebody who listens, but this momentary spectator turns into an actor at the moment when he or she speaks. Spectatorship is actually also actor-ship, as there is no dialogue possible without the other side.

That kind of association through dialogue, through speech, is close to Simmelian sociability, where the 'solitariness of the individuals is resolved into togetherness', that is, union with others. That concept of an amicable and cordial 'interactive interdependence of individuals', however romanticized, has had its various manifestations in reality not just in the Greek polis, but closer to our own times in instances of performative democracy that I've already mentioned, whether in the Borderlands or during Occupy Wall Street.

Alas, in the first decades of the 21st century, when democracies – even if only formally such – are more frequent than not, misknowing is not lessened, and it is certainly not an exclusive feature or by-product of undemocratic or illiberal political regimes. Some versions of modern populism turned the agoras of our cities, along with their media surrogates, into monological garrisons, in which legitimate facts and solid pieces of knowledge are not admitted, or not accepted, by general opinion (the case of President Obama's birth certificate being the simplest example in the United States). The relatively new but quickly rising phenomenon of illiberal democracies, of the Putin, Chavez or Orban variety, is closely related to the restrictions introduced to the theatre of public life. The initial promise of the World Wide Web is today tarnished as the rights of netizens are violated, and its anonymity favours those who do not hesitate to use hate speech.

And yes, I do believe that social isolation as a by-product of the closing of the public square breeds ignorance and despair. I do not have to argue here, in front of this audience, that when the theatre of public life, the public square, turns into a state square – where even limited interactions are controlled, staged and directed, and where only one voice is heard, coming anonymously through loudspeakers – ignorance is rewarded through the bestowal of a comfortable kind of certainty, the sources of getting to know disappear, and knowing becomes misknowing. A

misknower believes that he or she knows, and certainty is a trademark of his or her knowing.

Two months ago, in late September 2015, a mural, freshly painted on the wall of a Brooklyn apartment building, had become a site of major controversy in the neighbourhood, and had been vandalized, with white paint splattered over it. About eight meters tall, painted in different shades of grey, it represented the vertical half of a woman's face in a headscarf, with a tear in her eye, and without lips. When I saw a picture of it in the *New York Times*, the mural reminded me – though it was more realistic – of the Bread & Puppet Theater's *Gray Lady Cantata*, which I had seen many, many years ago in Poland. Some in the neighbourhood were outraged by the image, as they saw it as an expression of anti-Americanism that post 9/11 represented disrespect for the victims of the terror attack. In fact, the mural, painted by a South African artist, was an act of international solidarity to protest human-rights violations in Iran: more specifically, it was painted in support of an Iranian woman, the illustrator/artist Atena Farghadani, who had been sentenced to twelve years in prison for depicting certain Iranian politicians as animals. To be sure, there were also many defenders of the mural, described by the *New York Times* as 'slightly younger and newer arrivals to the neighborhood, who said they thought the criticism was motivated by xenophobia. When word spread that the owner of the building was planning to remove the mural, several neighbors urged her not to, writing in emails that it would be wrong to allow a protest over the silencing of an artist in Iran to be silenced in Brooklyn.'<sup>9</sup>

Indeed the automatic insertion of the unknown into what appears as the known, does not work; moreover, it may be divisive and disturbing. In Iran, the 'square' where exchanges could take place had been deactivated for many decades or – like the lips of the woman in the mural – was missing. In Brooklyn, there were infrastructures available for arranging such an encounter but they were not used. A neighbourhood discussion in advance about the proposed mural had not been undertaken. To use yet another language: the conditions for successful performativity were not in place, and so the mural became an example of an unhappy performative.

And now, it is Arendt's fundamental investment in the social and political aspect of thinking, that is, being able to think from the point of view of the other, that brings us back to the public square, and makes it possible to connect thinking, understanding and knowing to acting. The close association of language and knowing<sup>10</sup> and, on the other hand, the realization of the presence or absence of acts of disclosure through speech and action in the Arendtian theatre of politics, may actually help us to track down the grounds of misknowing. This is why the public square is so crucial for us: the reality experienced there and together with others makes it possible to examine the perilous problem of misknowing in relation to other distinctions crafted by Hannah Arendt.

9 Colin Moynihan, 'In Brooklyn, a Protest Mural Draws Its Own Protest', *New York Times*, 25 September 2015.

10 In talking about the close association of language and knowing, I refer especially to popular language and preliminary understanding; additionally, when dealing with languages, one should also take into account the critical problem of translation.

The public square, even if not the primary site for generating knowing, is a site of dialogue, where a citizenry of inquiry, if I may put it that way, can find a home. It is a stage where competitive discourses can be presented, confronted and examined. It is here that people experience each other, and in the company of others become aware of the limited nature of their own knowing, and therefore of their own ignorance, superstition or prejudice, and it is precisely for that reason that this is a place where trust can take root. Along with Arendt, I would like to think that this is a site of freedom, and of what she would call 'worldliness' – and let us emphasize here: 'a locally generated worldliness'.

The shutting of the public square creates a situation in which the theatre of public life is not possible anymore since, as Arendt says, 'no longer is a living space of freedom available [...]'. The shutting of the Public Square means the beginning of tyranny'.<sup>11</sup> In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she writes, 'The preparations have succeeded when people have lost contact with their fellow men, as well as the reality around them; for along with these contacts men lose the capacity for both experience and thought'.<sup>12</sup> And this emptying of civic space was something Arendt was concerned about, as it meant allowing an invasion by ideological thinking. And I believe that she would have agreed with me that this is where misknowing germinates. The denial of the public square by a ruling power is to prevent encounters with the other, to prevent experiencing the other through dialogue, and – above all – to prevent democratic action. It entails not only the closing down of the opportunity to experience reality but also the silencing of discourse, and a clearing of the ground for a takeover by ideology.

In her writings on ideology, Arendt comes very close to what I understand as misknowing, associated with the eradication of the public square. Ideologies – says Arendt – 'pretend to know the mysteries of the historical process – the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future – because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas'.<sup>13</sup> In her early essay on understanding and politics, Arendt discusses indoctrination as a perversion not of knowledge but of understanding, a totalitarian perversion that – while fighting against understanding – introduces an element of violence into politics.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, misknowing occurs most frequently when ideology or creed replaces – or is taken for – knowledge. In critical reflection, ideology is understood as a particular deformation of thinking that acutely misrepresents reality, a phenomenon otherwise known from Marx's works as false consciousness, and one that is quite evident in our own US Congress these days.

The condition I call misknowing is characterized by never questioning one's knowing, by knowing uncritically and thus erroneously. Indeed misknowing starts with the absence of questioning one's own self-knowledge and one's own certainty. The very process of trying to find out, to process what appear to be facts, to pierce them, to interrogate them, to make connections between the past and the present, to recognize idioms and symbols, to appreciate metaphors, to start figuring out what the

11 Hannah Arendt, 'Ideology and Terror', in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), p. 474.

12 Ibid, p. 465.

13 Ibid, p. 469.

14 Hannah Arendt, pp. 308–309.

others' worlds are about... This process is not always fully successful... since knowing and misknowing are close cousins.

And this is where public theatre can come to the rescue, because knowing – or, rather, the way we get to know – unlike thinking, is not a private affair. Instead, it is socially produced, and we connect it to the reality we live in together. And when we go to the theatre as individuals, we are prepared to find ourselves inside of dramatic circumstances which often force us to walk – even if only until the evening is over – in somebody else's shoes. To live the life of others, making it our own life. The process I am describing has nothing to do with being completely absorbed or trapped by an illusion of reality; instead, with the gift of imaginative insight, we enter other places, mind-sets and cultures. We get to know them. I would like to suggest that some reflection on the circumstances that facilitate misknowing might help to illuminate some of the grounds of acute conflicts in today's world. These are often opaque worlds, even if they seem legible and transparent to outsiders like me. To go through the layers of what appears the same and to realize that it is really not comes about slowly, and requires real effort in the theatre of public life.

My attitude here is not quixotic (quick-SOT-tick) – and I do not think that if people got to know each other the world would immediately be a better place – but there is something to be said for trying to get to know other people, and perhaps even trying to walk in someone else's shoes. I believe that the key here is the very act of initiating a conversation about each others' worlds, a path leading to recognition of the merits of other lives, cultures and people residing among us.

It is in theatre that otherness has been explored best, from *The Persians* and *Trojan Women* to *Forefathers' Eve*, *The Dead Class*, *Apocalips cum Figuris* and *Angels in America*.

But it was also in the theatre of public life that Poles met people for the first time – and on a large scale – they thought were Russians, who very early in 1990 became street vendors in various places in Poland, peddling everything from new or old tools, scissors and irons... to caviar. It did not take long for Poles to learn that these 'Russians' were often Ukrainians or Belarusians. This is when they invited them into their homes; this is when they learned about their lives behind the Soviet border.

And, yes, it is writers who reveal the virtues of storytelling and dialogue, arranging for us circumstances for engaged conversation where norms of reciprocity and trust are enacted beyond blood relations and family. But literature, though potentially inspiring and a first step toward reducing mutual ignorance, is not a replacement for actual personal engagement, a get-together facilitated by the functioning public square. The power of exchanged stories as they set in motion a gradual abstraction from personal desires, aims, lenses and filters, leads to thinking together about the issues we have in common. Indeed, we shall not be able to co-exist if our respective cultures cannot comprehend – to some extent – each other's idioms, histories, terms.

This point was eloquently expressed by Poland's late, legendary national icon, Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, at the seventy-second anniversary observances of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 2015, five days before his death at 93. He had experienced both Auschwitz and the Warsaw Uprising, was named among the Righteous among the Nations

for his underground work saving Jews, was imprisoned as a young journalist by the Communists for ten years, joined Solidarity and was jailed again, and as Poland's foreign minister helped forge reconciliation with Germany. What Bartoszewski said last April was:

We need to keep our dignity and values, such as tolerance, friendship and the ability to make sacrifices across ethnic or religious boundaries. We can dream that one day this will become the norm for our children. Because future generations of Jews, future generations of Christians and future generations of Muslims — hopefully not extremists — will have to live together on this planet whether they want it today or not.<sup>15</sup>

Bartoszewski was a tough-minded idealist who acknowledged the potential snag in such dreams. But I have no doubt that in condemning the recent attacks in Paris he would have condemned with equal vigour the recourse to vengeful violence and above all the exploitation by politicians in both Europe and America of a mindless fear of the other.

Finally, I would like to highlight again the special role of the arts, at least initially in framing and hosting such conversations. And above all I am thinking about the performing arts, the most social of all art forms, where two groups of people, actors and audience, meet face to face in one place. In the context of a dictatorship, when the public square has been silenced, the theatrical genre allows people to safely enter hypothetical worlds, to interact, to imagine, speculate, re-enact. In this part of Europe, it was a young theatre movement in the 1960s and 1970s that offered a dialogical intermission in an otherwise monological world, and thus created the conditions – even if initially limited – for the emergence of public discourse and the opening up of a public sphere.

It seems quite clear then that there is a close relationship between the absence of public space and what I have called misknowing. The condition that makes political activity possible – the existence of a fairly specific, topographically embodied public space, crucial for a political 'space of appearance' and for speech-based action – was removed under communist regimes, severely restricted in South Africa under apartheid and – perhaps for understandable reasons—curtailed even within various resistance movements. The emblematic square where the theatre of public life flourished briefly was Tahrir Square, only to be violently repressed and eradicated.

A discourse-less space is not a public space, not an epistemic space, and it nurtures neither a knowledgeable citizenry nor democracy. In one of her footnotes, Arendt expresses it more directly, giving unexpected credit to knowing:

The actual fight against totalitarianism needs no more than a steady flow of reliable information. If from these facts an appeal emerges, an appeal to Freedom and Justice, to mobilize people for the fight, then this appeal will not be a piece of abstract rhetoric.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed knowing is or at least has the potential of being skeptical, and therefore dialogical (as in Socrates' emblematic 'I do know that I know

15 Rick Lyman, 'Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, 93, Dies', *New York Times*, 27 April 2015.

16 Hannah Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics', p. 323.

nothing'), whereas misknowing is always monological (I know that I know). But what happens to a life outside of dialogue, when a life in certainty and monologue begins to appear more attractive, more desirable or even just convenient?

What I worry about is that the distance between the public square with its theatre of public life... and – when silenced and taken over by bloody wars, ethnic and religious conflicts – a square of violence, is really not so big. The eradication of the public square is the eradication of democratic politics,<sup>17</sup> enabling misknowing and ultimately making room for violence. And this is the situation we are witnessing today in various parts of the world. Hannah Arendt's well-known argument in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* makes a direct link between the destruction of the public realm of life and the survival of all tyrannies.<sup>18</sup> And though not directly, it analyses the ideas, policies, practices and modalities that remove voices, eliminate 'multi-voiced-ness', 'confiscate' questions, prohibit discussion and produce a strangely mute theatre of public life.

And what happens when the public square is not denied, not eradicated, not shut down? When it sits there but is neglected, forgotten, abandoned and atrophied? When the theatre of public life dries out... is not frequented... and the right to know is flaunted as a right not to know? When a life outside of dialogue, a life in certainty and monologue, appears more attractive, or more convenient, or more secure? Or when the dialogue is shouted out? And what if these abandoned squares quietly morphed overnight into arsenals in which only weapons, not words matter? What if the only squares we end up with are those of violence? Where will we find refuge? Why is it that we don't see this, or that we don't want to see it?

November 2015

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When I was writing this some weeks ago, this last question of mine was both rhetorical and theoretical. Less so now: I am afraid the news from Paris and Beirut but also from Wrocław immediately made me feel that I've been trying to spin an awfully delicate web of fragile concepts here, such as theatre of public life and misknowing. It has not only put this article into question, but my own work over the years... We seem to be turning the public square into a square of violence already. Entire populations are now being painted with a single brush, by both European and American politicians. As a stubborn optimist, I still believe in supporting the theatre of public life and openness to the other, which are needed now more than ever.

<sup>17</sup> In a most general way, my proposition is related to central debates in the social sciences, such as the structure versus agency debate; similarly it is linked to Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital and *habitus*.

<sup>18</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 475.

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