

## The Arendtian Social in Triumph over the Public and Private in Consumer Society

Deron Boyles

*Georgia State University*

I wish to pick up where Terri Wilson ends in an effort to further problematize Arendt's notions of the public, private, and social, particularly as those concepts relate to schools as sites for consumerism. Wilson's nuanced reading and thoughtful interpretation of Arendt will not be repeated here. Instead, and as a way to problematize Arendt's concepts, I wish to challenge and explore an early assertion in Wilson's essay.

Specifically, Wilson claims that community organizers and those who champion "parental engagement, decentralized decision-making, and community ownership" are interested in schools as "preeminently *public* spaces." I wonder whether there is a *non sequitor* here; one that assumes and ascribes organizers' and parents' interests as public in an Arendtian sense. It seems to me that the very organizers and parent participants noted could just as easily represent the Arendtian social realm. They are actors in a consumer society who arguably have, at root, economic interests that conflate the public and private — a conflation that is characteristic of Arendt's notion of the social. To wit, what are the motivations behind their actions? Are they interested in schools as places to better prepare their children for the work force? Are they concerned to ensure their children will get ahead of other children?

Writes Wilson: "As images of parents and students as *consumers* come to dominate educational discourse and reform, the idea of schools as distinctly public spheres has come to sound like a quaint idea, best reserved for visions of the homogenous one-room schoolhouse." "However," asks Wilson, "what would Arendt make of the growing groups of diverse, low-income parents...that have come to see their public schools as sites of neighborhood investment, local politics, and slow, steady social change?" The answer is that it depends. Are we asking the Arendt who thought schools were places where adult teachers guided students to see "the world as it is" without politics entering the discourse? Are we asking the Arendt who argued that action is that which breaks through conformity? Or are we asking the Arendt who articulated the social as a "curiously hybrid realm," where "private interests assume public significance?"<sup>1</sup>

Natasha Levinson writes that Arendt understood teaching as guiding "the young into a world that pre-exists them,"<sup>2</sup> and while Arendt stipulates that the way teachers guide is supposed to "preserve newness," the fact remains that the narrative of "the real world" is primary.<sup>3</sup> When that real world is one that values consumerism, careerism, competition, and the status quo, how do teachers avoid reinforcing the very reality students, on Arendt's view, are being protected from and, at the same time, being prepared to engage in and critique once they enter the "public" realm? Aaron Schutz puts it this way: (1) "If reality itself is only accessed through exposure...would not such a solution doom children to a kind of isolation that

resembles aspects of totalitarianism?"; and (2) "How will children learn to engage in public action as adults if they are not initiated into these practices through active engagement when they are young?"<sup>4</sup> If it is the case that the pre-existing world for students in 2005 is a consumerist, globalized, economic one, then how will teachers (and parents) inform and engage their students in both understanding it and challenging it?

Given Arendt's primary focus on adults in schools, if teachers are the adults and they are guides to "the way the world is," how is conformity avoided? Teachers, as a demographic, are 75 percent female, 86 percent white, 76 percent married, and middle class.<sup>5</sup> While Arendt's critique in "The Crisis in Education" was pointedly against progressive educational approaches that put student interests in the foreground, did she really think that teachers withstood what she called the "tyranny of the majority"?<sup>6</sup> Do not they tend to teach to the test because the status quo, social expectation is that a teacher's success is indicated in her students' test scores? When Wilson raises questions regarding Arendt's call for teachers to stand as "representatives of a world," she is getting to heart of the matter. Wilson asks, "What is that world? Whose world is represented? Who decides?" These are not rhetorical questions if we wish to take seriously Wilson's call to use Arendt's methodology to study issues of schooling and emancipation.

But I am skeptical. The parents to whom Wilson refers as an emerging Arendtian "public," may not be a "public" at all. As Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves interprets Arendt,

the interests of the world are not the interests of individuals: they are the interest of the public realm which we share as citizens and which we can pursue and enjoy only by going beyond our own self-interest. As citizens we share that public realm and participate in its interests: but the interests belong to the public realm, to the realm that we have in common "without owning it," to that realm which transcends our limited life-span and our limited private purposes.<sup>7</sup>

What parent is not acting out of limited private purposes informed by social expectations and the status quo when it comes to his or her child?

Wilson claims that there is an explosion of interest in schools as public spaces. She provides as her basis for this assertion a series of academics whose work — some of it grant supported — is largely in the areas of Latino/a studies, urban education, and school reform; including the typically conservative reform of "school choice." Wilson seems to think that academics and parents take an interest in children's schooling and are therefore carving out a "public." But, as Levinson notes, "the trouble is that political action properly understood — the kind that challenges — happens so rarely that we cannot presume that it is in any sense inevitable."<sup>8</sup> I am left to wonder whether Arendt's notion of the public is passé. That is, is it too late? Is the gig up? Has the social overtaken schools such that those who react to or attempt to reconstruct the status quo of consumerism are saddled with an Arendtian social that is divorced from an Arendtian public? Accordingly, how can the parents and activists to whom Wilson refers be cognizant of the Arendtian qualifications she makes regarding their actions? Is it conceivable that parents and teachers (and

students) do or will act in ways that are in opposition to an otherwise pervasive corporate hegemony? I happen to doubt it.

Following Seyla Benhabib, the problem is that “‘public space’ is defined [by Arendt] either as that space in which only a certain *type of activity*, namely action as opposed to work or labor, takes place, or it is delimited from other social spheres by reference to the *substantive content* of the public dialogue.”<sup>9</sup> Overcoming this problem means increasing engagement among students, teachers, and parents in ways that challenge the status quo assumptions those very groups carry around with them. We consider how to throw off the yolk of consumer materialism in order to construct anything akin to a democratic public. As Stanley Aronowitz notes, “What cannot be jettisoned is an urgent effort to reconstitute subaltern publics that will once again...discover their own historicity.”<sup>10</sup>

None of this is to say that Wilson’s project is not worthy of consideration. Quite the contrary is true. By attempting to identify Arendtian action on the part of academics, parents, and community organizers, we are challenged to inquire whether what is being demonstrated is Arendtian at all and, if so, how? We would do well to parse the distinctions of Arendt’s private, public, and social in order to gain a clearer understanding of the backdrop for possible action. While I remain skeptical that we are facing anything different than an Arendtian social in schools, I would like to believe the possibility does exist. In this regard, I am thankful to Terri Wilson for prodding us to reconsider Arendt’s ideas as they relate to schools.

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1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 35.
  2. Natasha Levinson, “‘But Some People Will Not’: Arendtian Interventions in Education,” *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002), 203.
  3. See also, Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
  4. Aaron Schutz, “Is Political Education Oxymoronic? Hannah Arendt’s Resistance to Public Spaces in Schools,” *Philosophy of Education 2000*, ed. Randall Curren (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 327.
  5. Joseph W. Newman, *America’s Teachers* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2002), 39.
  6. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968).
  7. Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves, “Public and Private in Hannah Arendt’s Conception of Citizenship,” in *Public and Private: Legal, Political, and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Ursula Vogel (New York: Routledge, 2000), 76.
  8. Natasha Levinson, “Hannah Arendt on the Relationship Between Education and Political Action,” *Philosophy of Education 2000*, ed. Curren, 335.
  9. Seyla Benhabib, “Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 79–80.
  10. Stanley Aronowitz, “Is Democracy Possible? The Decline of the Public in the American Debate,” in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 92.