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# Reviving Democracies by Reconnecting with Reality, Meaning and Plurality

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## Reviving Democracies by Reconnecting with Reality, Meaning and Plurality

### *Why Arendt suggests that democratic renewal requires first and foremost a shift in practice*

Abstract: In this paper, I argue that the contemporary crisis of democracy is not primarily a crisis of citizen attitudes or institutional design, but a crisis of political practice, leading to a growing disconnect between action, speech, and reality. I draw from Arendt's analysis of the crisis of the American republic, in the 70's.

Arendt's work provides an essential compass for agents in democratic institutions -be they political leaders, civil servants, journalists or citizens- to better understand the crisis of democracies, and consequently better address them, instead of scapegoating the symptomatic rise of extremes. With Arendt, we understand why it takes much more than fighting disinformation, increasing transparency, reforming institutions or boosting citizen participation to reinvigorate democracies.

From reading her work extensively since more than 20 years, and out my lifelong experience in the European Commission, from 1983 to 2024, I suggest characterizing the crisis of democratic systems as a *triple loss*, that of meaning, plurality and reality. No communication strategy can substitute for the triple loss of *meaning, plurality and reality*. This is not an argument against strategic communication, but it is a warning against the illusion that communication can substitute for action. I suggest that Arendt's concepts of natality and plurality have the potential of reviving democracies from within. With them, we can renew our understanding of freedom and power, and shift our mindsets to embrace reality instead of fighting against it, and to nurture a "trust in what is human in all people", to enact our plurality.

Keywords: democracy, Arendt, crisis, plurality, reality, meaning



## INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS TO BETTER ADDRESS IT

For Lindsey Stonebridge, the author of “We are free to change the world”, Hannah Arendt has tracked “the development of the mindset that has led, at worst to totalitarianism and, at best, insipid democracy” (Stonebridge, 2025, p. 190) . In “Why read Arendt now”, another recent book about Arendt, Richard Bernstein cites Arendt pointing to the fact that the light that the public space is meant to throw on human action “is extinguished by ‘credibility gaps’ and ‘invisible government’, by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality.” (Bernstein, 2018, p. 2) For Bernstein, Arendt is “an astute critic of dangerous tendencies in modern life » and « this is why she is worth reading and rereading today”. (Bernstein, 2018, p. 3)

Having been civil servant in the European Commission for 41 years, reading Arendt brought intelligibility to what Stonebridge calls “insipid democracy” and Bernstein, “the dangerous tendencies in modern life”. A lot of things function, and function well, in the European Commission. But there are puzzles stemming from deeply entrenched assumptions that may create frustration. To overcome the dilemma between opportunism and indignation, I chose to embrace a “reflexive practitioner” stance. (Dewandre, 2002) (Dewandre, 2005). It is out of this Arendt’s informed experience that this paper is written. It asks: what if democracies falter not because of external shocks, but because those practicing it lose touch with reality, meaning and plurality? This paper is not a charge against institutions, on the contrary, it is written with the conviction that critical reflexivity is essential to reinforce institutions and revive democratic systems.

The importance of understanding is one of the numerous treasures of Arendt’s work. (Arendt, 2011, pp. 307–327). In her interview with Gunther Gaus, she says: “what is important for me is to understand. [...] *certain things get formulated.*” (emphasis added) (Arendt, 2011, p. 3). Arendt’s passion for understanding is contagious to the reader, and reading her triggers sparks of joy. Indeed, the formulation of certain things -to paraphrase her- unleashes sparks of joy, even though this formulation per se does not bring ready-made solutions to the problems being understood. For Arendt, understanding “is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is to try to be at home in the world” (Arendt, 2011, pp. 307–308). So, understanding is not aiming at changing reality, but “coming to terms with it”: that is something! Something that brings relief and nurtures the mind, like a cream on a dry skin.

Arendt’s understanding of understanding renews the entrenched modern approach to understanding we are accustomed to in the administrative environment. We are used to consider understanding as merely instrumental : it is only worthwhile when it provides the ability to shape solution-oriented policies. (Dewandre, 2018) But Arendt flags that understanding is not about unveiling causal relations. “Causality [...] is an altogether alien and falsifying category in the historical sciences. [...] The event illuminates its own past; it can never be deduced from it. [...] Such a belief [in causality] can be concealed in the application of general categories to the whole course of happenings, such as challenge and response, or in the search for general trends which supposedly are the “deeper” strata from which events spring and whose accessory symptoms they are. Such generalizations and categorizations [...] destroy the actual story, with its unique distinction and its eternal meaning, that each historical period has to tell us.” (Arendt, 2011, pp. 318–319).

Instead of the instrumental understanding of understanding, Arendt brings to light an understanding of understanding that entails meaning and imagination.



For Arendt, “the result of understanding is meaning” (Arendt, 2011). Policymakers are so busy with efficiency, efficacy and effectiveness that they focus on justifications, but often forget about meaning. Utopia and ideals cannot substitute for meaning. Instead, they entail the risk of disconnecting political action from reality, condemning it to meaninglessness.

Besides meaning, for Arendt, understanding requires imagination! Here is how she makes her point:

“We may call the faculty of imagination the gift of the “understanding heart’[...] Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective. [...] Without this kind of imagination, *which is actually understanding*, we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have.” (Arendt, 2011, pp. 322–323).

So, the imagination required for understanding is not mere fantasy and disconnection from reality. Instead, it is what it takes to navigate among several perspectives, be they disciplinary, interest-led, or any other source leading to equally valid explanations. This ability to understand others’ understandings is an essential feature for combining meaningfully different perspectives, when shaping policies or taking political decisions.

In a nutshell, understanding does not provide ready-made solutions; nevertheless, it is not just a luxury. To the least, it brings a better sense of the space for political action, i.e. what can be done and what cannot be done. It also provides a sense of what it entails to ignore the limits of this space for action. This is a clear warning for political leaders and policymakers to be wary of the flaws of the instrumental understanding of understanding. Mobilising causality and focussing on justifications can never substitute for political judgement when adopting policies or taking political decisions.

This paper will now propose understanding the crisis of democracy as the loss of three essential features: meaning, plurality, and reality. It argues that Arendt’s concepts of natality and plurality open to a renewal of democratic practice, while living by her call for *Amor Mundi* requires a radical shift in political mindset.

### THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY AS THE TRIPLE LOSS OF MEANING, PLURALITY AND REALITY

In its Joint Communication on European Democracy Shield (JOIN(2025)791 final), the European Commission and the European External Action Service state that democracies are “under internal and external pressures”. The external pressures are attributed to “authoritarian regimes”, which see “democracies as a threat and deploy increasingly aggressive tactics”, using mis- and disinformation. The internal pressures are not attributed: they are “rising extremism and polarisation, declining trust and engagement, threats to the integrity of elections and the plurality of public debate and free speech, and a deterioration of the environment in which journalists and civil society operate”, all this powered by the digital transition.

In this analysis of the crisis of democracy, between the attributed external pressures and the unattributed internal pressures, there is not the slightest trace of reflexivity aiming at understanding the extent to which the democratic practice and the policies implemented by democracies during the last 40 years may have contributed to fragilizing democracies. This refusal to understand *why democracies became so fragile* leads to the paradoxical implicit statement that *it is in the nature of democracies to be fragile*, and therefore require a sterile environment to survive. So, this kind of diagnostic entails an implicit acknowledgement that democratic regimes are weak and can only be maintained thanks to a “shield” protecting it. Does this mean that democratic systems can only survive if their leaders “protect” democracies? Isn’t it a contradiction in terms for a democratic leader to portray himself or herself as protector of the democratic system?



When democratic leaders defend democracies, they regularly put forward the values at the core of democratic systems and the rights they guarantee. Let's note in passing that Arendt is far from being a fan of value-driven discourse. She regularly put the word "values" in quotation marks when she uses it. Here is what she writes about the impossibility of values to be proper safeguards against authoritarian drifts:

*"And if you want to make a generalization then you could say that those who were still very firmly convinced of the so-called old values were the first to be ready to change their old values for a new set of values, provided they were given one. And I am afraid of this because I think that the moment you give somebody a new set of values you can immediately exchange it too. And the only thing the guy gets used to is having a set of values, no matter which ones."*  
(Arendt & Kohn, 2018, pp. 453–454)

This warning of Arendt should make EU leaders prudent when putting values at the heart of their defense for democracy: value-based declarations do not suffice to justify political decisions, and it can even be counterproductive when there are double standards in living by these self-proclaimed values.

This paper argues that crisis of democracies can only be understood by focusing on the way democracies are effectively practiced. With this focus, the game metaphor comes to mind. Elections are competitions where players win or lose access to power positions, which are almost literally considered as the prize the winner gets for winning elections. Of course, the competition has to be fair, but when fairness is ensured, then the outcome of elections is still considered the best possible way for democracies to allocate power positions.<sup>1</sup> In between elections, voters yield to stakeholders, i.e. interest-led players. Policy-making -especially at EU level- is also considered as a game of multistakeholder interactions. If all players defend their interest, and if all interests are represented, then the outcome of policy-making is deemed to be optimal. The optimal decision is taken when interests have been balanced, through trade-offs. Hence, the need for civil society organisations, for environmental associations, for consumers organisations, to balance business lobbies. Each stakeholder -i.e. interest-led player- is on the calculus mode (remember: this is a game!) and fights over words in the final text, as interests are translated through wording in policy documents. This game, whose endpoint is a piece of legislation or a political declaration, may lead to "oxymorcal compromises" that provide some satisfaction to those who managed to plug some of their words in the text under discussion. But it may happen that the need for compromise hollows the meaningfulness of the text for those outside the game. This can be very harmful to those most impacted by the outcome of these "oxymorcal compromises". The belief that multistakeholder interactions and their ensuing trade-offs lead to an optimal outcome draws from a mental transposition of the concept of markets to a "market of interests". But, to the best of my knowledge, there is no theorem establishing "pareto-optimality" of an alleged "market of interests", that would support the supposed effectiveness of this balancing of interests, enacted by stakeholders. Furthermore, while the benefits of this balancing act are uncertain, there is a cost to it: the loss of meaning of policies and policy-making. Citizens see policymakers playing with their life conditions. If this playful approach may be enjoyable for the few benefitting from policy outcomes, it is absolutely unbearable, for the many who see the satisfaction of their basic needs threatened by policy outcomes. Policymakers are not asked to deliver on demagogic miracles, but in the compromises they shape, they must be able to explain their decision, in a meaningful way that goes beyond the fatalistic acceptance of trade-offs, speaking only to their electorate, and ignoring the rest of the citizenry. Imagination, more than game theory, is what it takes to produce meaningful compromises.

<sup>1</sup> This is not ignoring the very important work from David Van Reybrouck (Reybrouck & Annan, 2018), but reflecting on the entrenched common understanding of the essential features of democracies still driving political leaders and media, as well as a vast majority of the citizenry.



Aware of this lack of coherence resulting from the balancing of interests, many consider that the solution lies then in “more political will” able to deliver more coherent policies, be it in favour of the environment, or of social cohesion, or of competitiveness, or of security, or of strategic autonomy, etc...The shortcoming of this coherence utopia brings about the second loss: that of plurality. It ignores that reality is precisely what is seen by each political agent from a different perspective. And it ignores that politics stems out of plurality, and not out of force or violence. This is seen by Arendt as the inherent “frustration with the calamities of action [that] all arise from the human condition of plurality, which is the condition *sine qua non* for that space of appearance which is the public realm” (Arendt, 1998, p. 220). This “frustration with the calamities of action” comes forth when locking politics in an instrumental logic, that of a means to an end. The loss of plurality is especially visible at EU level, as the EU is only considered strong when being a bloc, or acting as One. With Arendt, we understand that the world would not be a better place if we were only One, and we can see that the EU is at its best when it lives by its plurality and make decisions out of a meaningful conversation, taking into account the different perspectives of the different Member States. For policymakers, this implies embracing visible disagreement, and respecting dissenting opinions, rather than striving for artificial consensus.

With the two losses of meaning and plurality, comes a third loss, that of reality. Politics and policy-making is not so much distant from citizens, as we often hear, as it is disconnected from reality. I came to consider the frequent use in meetings of the expression “on the ground” as a symptom of this disconnection from reality. Indeed, it was common in meetings to hear someone ask: “what is the impact of our policies on the ground?” Each time I heard this expression, I could not resist asking: “Who has a pilot license in this room?” Considering policies as objects we are launching from the sky to the ground tells a lot about the remoteness of policymakers, not from citizens, but *from reality*. Another symptom of the disconnection from reality is the recurrent surfacing of the need to “remove red tape”. No legislation has ever been adopted in the name of being red tape! It *becomes* red tape “on the ground”, i.e. in reality. Let’s stick to this space metaphor: it is well known that when objects from space enter the atmosphere, they face extreme temperatures and mechanical pressures. This indeed is also true for pieces of legislation when they “hit reality”. There is a need for a sort of “reality-proof” check for policies and regulations coming out of the interinstitutional fabric to enter the real world. None of the classical dynamics at play in policymaking processes (impact assessment, balancing of interests, power games) guarantees that new policies pass this reality-proof test satisfactorily. Mobilising Arendt’s imagination of the “understanding heart” in the policy-making process, instead of trusting blindly the balancing act between interests would already enhance the meaningfulness and robustness of policies, and therefore nurture democratic legitimacy.

In short, the crisis of democracy is a crisis of practice. The gamification of political action, which entails considering power positions as prizes granted to elections’ winners and policy-making as driven by trade-offs disconnects politics from reality, meaning, and plurality. This gaming turn that “naturalizes” competitive interest-led political behaviours fragilizes democratic systems much more surely than external or internal pressures.

Policymakers, therefore, should go beyond the too classical trade-off approach, where it is commonly accepted that no one can get it all, and each has to make compromise. For Arendt, this sort of fatalistic acceptance that trade-offs and compromises are the name of the game in democracies falls short of the need to go further and cultivate this imagination of the “understanding heart” that opens to a meaningful reconciliation of competing interests.



## ARENDRT'S CONCEPTUAL RENEWAL

### Change of lens can be revolutionary

This section argues that Arendt's contribution lies not in offering new political ideals, but in changing the conceptual lens through which political practice is understood—an intervention with direct consequences for democratic governance.

Arendt does not invent new words, but it is her original way to look at the world which makes her work so highlighting. Being trained originally in physics, I can't refrain from seeing the similarity between Arendt in politics and Einstein in physics. When Einstein suggested that light was corpuscular, instead of undulatory, he did not change light, nor did he pretend that light was not undulatory, but he stated that light was also corpuscular. He did not change light, but provided another valid way to look at it. Arendt does the same thing in politics, and -to some extent- to philosophy. Arendt read Kuhn's "The structure of scientific revolution" (Kuhn, 1994), this classical reference of epistemology that has popularise the expression "paradigm shift" to refer to moments where progress is not incremental but takes the form of a "jump". Reading this book, Arendt underlined the following two sentences: "This need to change the meaning of established and familiar concepts is central to the revolutionary impact of Einstein's theory" and "Just because it did not involve the introduction of additional objects or concepts, the transition from Newtonian to Einsteinian mechanics illustrates with particular clarity the scientific revolution as a displacement a the conceptual network through which scientists view the world." (underlined by Arendt) (Kuhn, 2025, p. 101).

This is precisely what Arendt achieves for politics: a displacement of the conceptual network through which political actors can re-interpret, notably, humanness, freedom, and power. Arendt does not introduce "additional objects or concepts", but she offers a new "conceptual network through which [we can] view the world", and especially politics within it.

For Arendt, there are five "basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man" (Arendt, 1998, p. 7): life, worldliness, natality, mortality and plurality. Among these five basic conditions, natality and plurality are the most politically significant. They are not ideals to be pursued but matter of facts of human existence that democratic practice must take seriously. These two concepts -natality and plurality- lead to a "displacement of the conceptual network" through which we can understand politics.

### Natality and freedom

For demographers, natality refers to birth rate. For Arendt, natality denotes the fact that human beings are born beings -not created ones. Each human being enters the world as a beginning, and, as such, remains a beginner all along his or her life. That does not deny the fact that we are also mortal beings: being born does not make us immortal. Until Arendt, philosophers focused on mortality, and not on this other evidence, which is that we are not only mortal, but we come to the world by birth. This is especially important for politics, as "[n]atality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought" (Arendt, 1998, p. 9). Indeed, foregrounding birth over death displaces the conceptual framework of politics. With natality, Arendt re-conceptualises freedom not as control over outcomes, but as the capacity to begin—an insight with profound implications for how political leadership is exercised.

In line with the importance she confers to natality, Arendt invites us to pay more attention to origins than to ends. The title of her first major work "The *Origins* of Totalitarianism" (my emphasis)(Arendt, 1994) is telling in this respect. She writes: "history is a story which has many beginnings but no end." (Arendt, 2011, p. 320) Obviously, Francis Fukuyama

had not read Arendt when writing his “End of History and the last Man” (Fukuyama, 1992). Arendt continues: “The end in any strict and final sense of the word could only be the disappearance of man from the earth. For whatever the historian calls an end, [...] is a new beginning for those who are alive. The fallacy of all prophecies of doom [ndlr: and let me add paradise] lies in the disregard of this simple but fundamental fact.” (Arendt, 2011, p. 320) For policymakers, this implies that the meaning of political action can never spring only from delivery against predefined objectives.

For Arendt, human freedom is rooted in our ability to begin something. This contrasts sharply with the common understanding of freedom as absence of constraints, or maximisation of choice options, or control on our environment. That concept of freedom indexed on control and independence is indexed on the modern definition of Man, while Arendt’s conceptual displacement highlights the traps and delusion of such an understanding of freedom. She writes: “If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce” (Arendt & Kohn, 2006, p. 165). Arendt posits clearly that you cannot seek domination and be free at the same time. If it is obvious that being dominated is not being free, Arendt flags, not without irony, that domination of others does not account for freedom. Nor does endless accumulation. For Arendt, the opposite of freedom is necessity. And as human beings, we are all subject to necessity, some to a greater extent than others, but nobody exempted from it.

*“Because all human beings are subject to necessity, they are entitled to violence toward others; violence is the prepolitical act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of world. This freedom is the essential condition of what the Greeks called felicity, eudaimonia, which was an objective status depending first of all upon wealth and health. To be poor or to be in ill health meant to be subject to physical necessity, and to be a slave meant to be subject, in addition, to manmade violence.” (Arendt, 1998, p. 31)*

For Arendt, freedom can only be experienced once a human being is above his or her satiety threshold. Below satiety, human beings are driven by the necessity of staying alive. Above satiety, they can enjoy freedom. With that in mind, those driven by accumulation even once they have reached their satiety threshold choose to remain slave of necessity, instead of experiencing freedom:

*“For abundance and endless consumption are the ideals of the poor: they are the mirage in the desert of misery. In this sense, affluence and wretchedness are only two sides of the same coin; the bonds of necessity need not be in iron, they can be made of silk” (Arendt, 2006, p. 139)*

This is not an argument against authority or leadership, but against the illusion that freedom consists in domination over others or extreme wealth.

### Plurality and power

Among the five aspects of the human condition, plurality is the other one (with natality) which is at the heart of the political realm. In Arendt’s words, “[w]hile all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition -not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* of all political life.” (Arendt, 1998, p. 7) Plurality denotes “the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.” (Arendt, 1998, p. 7)

Like the fact that we are born, the fact that we are many, might seem so obvious that it can hardly be relevant for philosophers or political theorists. Yet, this seemingly obvious fact becomes, in Arendt’s hands, a foundational political concept: plurality is not a complication of politics; it is its condition of possibility. As she did for natality, Arendt coins a

concept out of plurality that bears a huge potential for renewing the conceptual framework with which we engage in human affairs. In plurality, Arendt bundles together three distinctive features of the human condition: equality, uniqueness and the revelatory character of human identities.

Arendt's equality is not modern equality (Dewandre, 2018), which is a core ideal of Modernity that haunts us so much that we end up being obsessed by... inequalities. For Arendt, we are equal in kind, if only because we are all human. Arendt's equality is at the core of politics, because politics is about relations among equals, among peers. For Arendt, entering into a political relation with someone is *granting* him or her a peer status. Without this equality, political systems are not truly political, and even less democratic. When political institutions treat citizens primarily as stakeholders, beneficiaries, or audiences rather than as peers, political relations are replaced by managerial ones.

The second component of plurality is uniqueness. "In man, otherness [...] become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings." (Arendt, 1998, p. 76) Uniqueness springs out of natality: "each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world" (Arendt, 1998, p. 178). There are intimate connections between natality and plurality. While modern equality struggles with differences, perceived primarily as inequalities, Arendt embraces equality and distinction in one go with plurality: we are equal in being unique. And politics exists because human beings are simultaneously equal to each other and distinct from each other.

The third and last component of plurality is the revelatory character of our who-identities. "In acting and speaking, men [...] reveal [...] their unique personal identities [...] This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction of 'what' somebody is [...] can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose" (Arendt, 1998, p. 159). "[I]t is more than likely that the 'who,' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remain hidden from the person himself, like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters" (Arendt, 1998, pp. 179–180).

This revelatory character of human identities is of utmost importance for political leaders, as no human being can escape it, as powerful as may be. Twenty years after having written the *Human Condition*, the leak of the Pentagon Papers by Daniel Ellsberg gives Arendt the unfortunate opportunity to illustrate this *a contrario*. In *Home to Roost*, she writes that "[t]he terrible truth to be gleaned from the story told in these papers was that the only permanent goal had become the image itself, which was debated in countless memoranda and 'options,' that is, in the 'scenarios' and their 'audiences,' the very language borrowed from the theatre." (Arendt, 2009, p. 263) What Arendt calls the "Madison Culture", based on the fact that main US media were concentrated on Madison Avenue in New York City, is a cancer to the public realm. Indeed, the belief of political leaders that they can control their image, through communication, is an illusion. Instead of controlling their image, they only *reveal* their *desire for* control and but unmistakably appear narcissic.

Indeed,

*"The basic error of all materialism in politics-and this materialism is not Marxian and not even modern in origin, but as old as our history of political theory is to overlook the inevitability with which men disclose themselves as subjects, as distinct and unique persons, even when they wholly concentrate upon reaching an altogether worldly, material object. To dispense with this disclosure, if indeed it could ever be done, would mean to transform men into something they are not; to deny, on the other hand, that this disclosure is real and has consequences of its own is simply unrealistic."* (my emphasis) (Arendt, 1998, p. 183)



“Overlooking the inevitability with which men disclose themselves” is a key driver of the fragilization of democracies. Expecting from the citizenry to not perceive the difference between projecting an image, on the one hand, and revealing one’s identity, on the other hand, “is simply unrealistic”! The ruling class has locked itself down, not in an ivory tower, but in this “irrealistic” assumption that they could get away with the revelatory character of their identity, by controlling their communication policy. For political leaders and institutions, this means that communication strategies should not aim at controlling their image, but instead, accompany the unavoidable revelation of their identities. Attempts to control their image only provokes in return requests for transparency. With Arendt, we come to understand that transparency-as-a-solution is a necessarily deceptive approach, that forms a vicious circle with communication strategies aimed at control. This vicious circle control/transparency is a *pis-aller* that dissolves trust. Transparency brings to light things that should not have been done, and this matters a lot. The Epstein files are a case in point. But if transparency provides an important sense of justice when wrong-doers are caught and punished, it does not per se feed the right-doings. And acting righteously only by fear of being caught will not revive democratic systems. Hence, this is an invitation, not to be against transparency, but to understand that it is only the counterpart of the deceptive attempt to substitute revelation with control. By itself, transparency will not revive democracies. Political leaders and policy-makers are invited to keep in mind “the inevitability with which [they] disclose themselves” when they act and address the public with authenticity, i.e. in consciousness of this revelatory dimension of their identities, that they can only try to conceal at the price of their own humanness. Power actualizes itself only when (wo)men acting together embrace and acknowledge their plurality, i.e. when they act, keeping in mind that this inevitably reveals their identity and leads to an outcome that always differs from expectation and anticipation. It is only when political leaders embrace the revelatory character of their identities, that their words are perceived as authentic and their acts as meaningful.

As human beings, not only can’t they pretend that their communication strategy can succeed in projecting their desired image, but they can’t refrain from “making mistakes”, i.e. some form of spontaneity that indeed reveals who they are. Hillary Clinton gave an archetypical example of this when she qualified Trump’s voters in her 2016 campaign as “deplorables” (Chozick, 2016). Clinton overlooked the fact that she was heard and seen saying, not only to those she considered her peers, but also to the “deplorables”, who have a brain, and are also her peers to some extent, endowed with natality and plurality, as she is. So, with that statement, she could not avoid revealing her contempt for the citizens attracted by Trump, and thereby reinforcing their attraction to him.

This leads to the sensitive issue of the “elite” status in democratic societies. Arendt writes:

*“My quarrel with the ‘élite’ is that the term implies an oligarchic form of government, the domination of the many by the rule of a few. From this, one can only conclude- as indeed our whole tradition of political thought has concluded- that the essence of politics is rulership and that the dominant political passion is the passion to rule or to govern. This, I propose, is profoundly untrue. The fact that political ‘élites’ have always determined the political destinies of the many and have, in most instances, exerted a domination over them, indicates, on the other hand, the bitter need of the few to protect themselves against the many, or rather to protect the island of freedom they have come to inhabit against the surrounding sea of necessity” (Arendt, 2006, p. 276)*

What Arendt calls the “surrounding sea of necessity” is the portion of the population which is starving or in risk of poverty. If political regimes end up nurturing freedom only for a few, the “surrounding sea of necessity” will inevitably aim at overthrowing them. This is what happened in the French Revolution (Arendt, 2006). And this feeds today the rise of populism (Krstev & Holmes, 2019; Piketty, 2017; Turchin, 2023; Wolf, 2024). From the “sea of necessity”, citizens see the freedom enjoyed by the happy few and understand that they cannot access it. For them, the benefits of democratic systems are out of reach.

Arendt's harsh critique of elites in democratic system is -of course- not a defence for autocracies! For her, "[t]he popular belief in a 'strong man' who, isolated against others, owes his strength to his being alone is either sheer superstition, [...] or it is conscious despair of all action, political and non-political, coupled with the utopian hope that it may be possible to treat men as one treats other 'material'" (Arendt, 1998, p. 188). Arendt distinguishes power from strength: "while strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together" (Arendt, 1998, p. 200). This conception of power is particularly relevant for the European Union, where authority does not stem from sovereignty but from the capacity of plural agents to act together.

In a nutshell, in this section, we have seen how Arendt's natality and plurality reshape how freedom and power are to be understood. This requires significant shifts in political mindset. The following section explores two such shifts: from fighting against reality to embracing it (*amor mundi*), and from gaming to acting out of plurality.

## SHIFTS IN MINDSET TO REVIVE DEMOCRACY

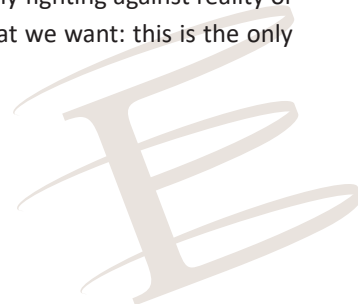
### **Amor Mundi: from fighting against reality to embracing it**

For Arendt, it is clear that there cannot be guarantees against the worst happening. As such, we are dancing on a volcano. And this is almost literally true in the nuclear age. Those considering that there are such a thing as a guarantee against the worst happening can only get the guarantee ...that it will happen! This is the tragic irony of self-fulfilling prophecies.

What does Arendt recommend instead? To love the world! Reality is contingent, because "[t]he event constitutes the very texture of reality" (Arendt, 1998, p. 300). Because the outcome of action among political agents endowed with the capacity to begin is unpredictable, reality is an emergent becoming of something that is but could have been different, or not been at all. This is what being contingent means: to be while could not have been. Like reality, each human being is contingent.

Arendt notes with a smile that "reason's aversion to contingency is very strong" (Arendt, 1971) The entrenched conceptual framework we are living by is valuing reason above everything else, at the exception -maybe- of progress, his companion flagship of modernity. (Dewandre, 2018) The valuation of reason as the most distinctive and precious faculty of human beings makes contingency look like a failure of reason. In policy documents, this contingency is referred to as "uncertainty", unveiling a strong bias in favour of certainty. So, because reality is contingent, reason's aversion to contingency spills over to a reason's aversion to reality. And this is why Arendt's work is so important, when it reminds us of the importance to "come to terms with reality" and its contingency, notably by understanding it. She regularly warns against the great danger for politics to disconnect from reality: "when the facts come home to roost, let us try at least to make them welcome. Let us try not to escape into some utopias -images, theories, or sheer follies" (Arendt, 2009, p. 275).

Embracing, facing, instead of escaping or fighting against: this is a consistent thread of Arendt's work. Policy objectives are generally formulated as fight against something: inequalities, pandemics, climate change, unemployment, de-industrialisation, etc... "Words used for the purpose of fighting lose their quality of speech; they become clichés" (Arendt, 2011, p. 308) and clichés "have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality" (Arendt, 1981, p. 4). "Th[e] revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them that is, in sheer human togetherness" (Arendt, 1998, p. 180). Instead of considering that only fighting against reality or against each other is worth our intelligence or energy, we should nurture the germs of what we want: this is the only way to make them grow.



Reality's contingency does not make it flexible to the point that it can be made to correspond to any ideal or utopia. But it does not make it so rigid that there is only one way to make sense of it. Reality is what can only be seen from different perspectives, precisely because we are surrounded by it and not on top of it. Meaning is at the edge of reality and plurality.

**Reality is not truth. And coming to terms with reality is not establishing truth.**

*As distinguished from this "objectivity," [...], the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life [...]. Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear. (Arendt, 1998, p. 57)*

If the European Union would end up being united on utopias more than in reality, it would be no different than a mob and I would not be reassured about what it could deliver. Mass society and tyrannies have a lot in common: "the end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective." (Arendt, 1998, p. 58) While democracies are of course not totalitarian, it is important to be wary of the totalitarian germs when political debate focuses only on the need to reach a consensus and becomes detached from facts, lived experience, or practical consequences.

The world is to be taken care of, even if it does not correspond to our ideal and despite all the atrocities and other downsides that it entails. In a nutshell, Arendt's love of the world is a shift in mindset without which democratic renewal is impossible. Arendt criticized approaches that treat political action as a matter of manipulation, optimization, or image management. In her analysis of the Pentagon Papers, she showed how decision-makers became more concerned with saving their face – or at least trying to – than with embracing reality. When politics becomes just a game, reality becomes an obstacle rather than a guide.

**"Trust in what is human in all people": from gaming to acting out of plurality**

The second shift that can revive democracy is for political leaders, policy-makers and media to turn their back to the "gaming" metaphor, and the mindset that goes with it, notably focus on short-term wins, obsession with messaging, calculus to feature well in polls. Political actors no longer ask whether an action makes sense, but whether it plays well. Digital media amplifies this. Metrics of visibility, engagement, and outrage increasingly displace judgment, deliberation, and responsibility.

We mentioned above how plurality entails being seen when acting and thereby revealing one's own identity. If those "within the system" can live by the gaming metaphor, those "on the ground" cannot. They cry for policy-makers to step out of their gaming mindset and extend their imagination, as their "understanding heart", to the impact of political decisions on their living conditions.

Arendt expressed a strong preference for participatory democracy and what she calls a "council system" over representative democracies. In my view, representative democracies can benefit from Arendt's work if elected representatives, when they interact with each other or with their electorates, live by their plurality and natality, instead of strategizing and gaming to win over others.



Arendt calls for making a radical distinction between the doubt which became the engine of scientific knowledge production, since Copernic, on the one hand, and the trust needed in the realm of human affairs, on the other hand. Suspicion is the form taken by doubt when applied to human affairs. Arendt reminds us that trust cannot emerge from a generalized suspicion. Out of suspicion comes only isolation, which is the opposite of plurality, and paves the way for totalitarian regimes.

For Arendt, the best way to avoid a totalitarian experience 2.0. or a generalized nuclear conflict is to celebrate and nurture the opposite of a generalized suspicion, i.e. a “trust, which is difficult to formulate but fundamental -in what is human in all people.” (Arendt, 2011, p. 23)

This “trust in what is human in all people” is NOT naïveté. It is treating others as peers, endowed -as we all are- with the “five basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man” (Arendt, 1998, p. 7). With that in mind, demonisation of the other is inherently anti-political. Although Arendt has contributed significantly in designating Hitler as an embodiment of evil, she warns against the laziness and the danger of “hitlerising” or “stalinising” any enemy that stands on our way:

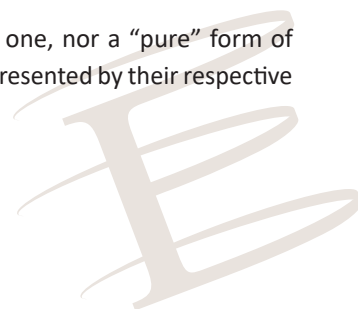
*“[These men] prided themselves on having learned from the past -from Stalin’s rule over all Communist parties, hence the notion of ‘monolithic communism’, and from Hitler’s starting a world war after Munich, from which they concluded that every gesture of reconciliation was a ‘second Munich’. They were unable to confront reality in its own terms because they had always some parallels in mind that ‘helped’ them to understand those terms.” (Arendt, 1971)*

Isn’t demonisation of others rooted in the ‘darkness of the human heart’? By this, Arendt means the basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow, and out of the impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act. Man’s inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing) is the price human beings pay for freedom; and the impossibility of remaining unique masters of what they do, of knowing its consequences and relying upon the future, is the price they pay for plurality and reality, for the joy of inhabiting together with others a world whose reality is guaranteed for each by the presence of all” (Arendt, 1998, p. 244). Don’t we demonize others simply because of this abyss of our potential unreliability we are all faced with?

Trusting what is human in all people entails resisting the urge to govern through simplified agonistic narratives. It is a plurality’s corollary to engage with others in full consciousness of the common world we live in and with a curiosity for their perspective, even a *thaumadzein*, i.e. a sense of wonder. “If philosophers [...] were ever to arrive at a true political philosophy, they would have to make the plurality of man, out of which arises the whole realm of human affairs -in its grandeur and misery- the object of their *thaumadzein*.” (Arendt & Kohn, 2005, p. 38)

This calls for abstaining from disqualifying or silencing dissenting views, under the cover of misinformation, but instead engaging with them. Since the COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine, there is a dangerous multiplication of issues and ideas considered by policymakers and media as “antidemocratic” or “anti-EU”. This is utterly paradoxical and counter-productive. Extreme right political parties champion themselves for defending freedom of expression, against the political center which ends up defending democracy with authoritarian means.

Arendt is particularly inspiring for the practice of democracy at EU level, which is neither one, nor a “pure” form of representative democracy. The European Council is an assembly where Member States are represented by their respective



Heads of State or Government, as designated by their representative democratic systems. When they sit together around the European Council table, they sit as peers to each other. They embody the plurality of Member States, and should engage with each other as plural beings, not as players simply defending their interest against the others, in order to claim political victory!

The same applies to interinstitutional relations: Council, Parliament and Commission are also peers to each other, and should interact as plural beings instead of interest-led players. This includes, as mentioned above, a curiosity for others' stance, and the "imagination of an understanding heart".

This shift calls into question governance models that prioritize control, prediction, and performance indicators at the expense of judgment. It also challenges the belief that better communication can compensate for meaningless or incoherent action. For the European Union, often criticized for technocratic distance, Arendt suggests that legitimacy depends more on the capacity to build on diversity truthfully, and let genuine agreements emerge out of plurality, rather than seeking unity, just for its own sake.

### **CONCLUSION: RECOVERING MEANING, PLURALITY AND REALITY.**

This paper is a call for abandoning what can be seen as a "freaking out" attitude, looking for scapegoats everywhere, and screaming to any initiative from Trump, Poutine, Xi, Orban, and even recently De Wever! This attitude gives the sad spectacle of the EU being like a toy on which pushing a button provokes just screams, at the expense of the "thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence." (Arendt, 1981, p. 4)

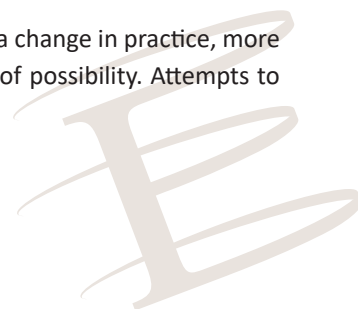
Plurality and politics are played under the sky and not in a sterile chamber for weak patients. We have to step out of our straightjackets and habits, and trust our ability to revive democracy from within.

This paper has argued that the contemporary crisis of democracy cannot be understood primarily as the result of external threats, technological disruption, or citizen disengagement. Following the insights of Hannah Arendt, it has shown that the erosion of democratic legitimacy is rooted more fundamentally in how democracy is practiced.

Across institutional settings, governance has increasingly taken the form of technocratic management, interest-balancing, and image control. While often efficient, this mode of action tends to produce policies that are difficult to understand, politically evasive, and experienced by citizens as incoherent or hollow. In such conditions, trust cannot be restored through better messaging or procedural fixes alone. When political speech loses its anchoring in reality, and action is reduced to a calculus in view of winning rather than exerting responsibility and revealing one's identity, democratic authority withers.

This paper has also argued that strategic communication cannot be a substitute for authenticity. Leaders and institutions inevitably reveal themselves through what they do and say. Where there is a persistent gap between declared values, policy practice, and observable reality, citizens perceive not reassurance but manipulation. Credibility, therefore, is not a communicative asset to be managed, but a political quality that emerges from coherence between action, speech, and intent.

The central conclusion is thus straightforward but demanding: democratic renewal requires a change in practice, more than institutional reforms. Plurality is not a weakness of democracy but its very condition of possibility. Attempts to



suppress plurality—by presenting political choices as technical necessities or moral imperatives—may look like political victories, but at the cost of long-term trust. Power, in Arendt’s sense, does not arise from dominance or narrative control, but from acting together among equals. This insight is particularly salient in complex political systems—such as the European Union—where diversity and disagreement are structural features rather than temporary obstacles. Plurality must be honored, not concealed behind claims of consensus.

Finally, the paper has proposed a shift in mindset: from control of outcomes to engagement with the world as it is. Reviving democracy does not require eliminating contingency or disagreement, but accepting them as a corollary of political freedom. To care for the world—*amor mundi*—is not an abstract moral stance, but a practical commitment to act meaningfully within it.

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