

Author: Sunday Isaac ANYANWU

Thesis Project: "An Assessment of the Notion of Revolutionary Action in the Philosophical Literature of Hannah Arendt"

Moderator: Revd Dr Akaninyene Pius Ekpe, MSP

Department: Philosophy

Year: 2014

79pp

Political histories show that radical transformations have often been achieved through revolutionary actions. These revolutionary actions often take diverse form and have not been without consequences. In fact, anyone concerned with political history is aware of the role revolutions have often played in defining the path of political events. As such, some philosophers like Karl Marx argue that revolutions are the locomotive of human history.

Hannah Arendt, contesting some Socratic philosophers, especially Plato, who gave priority to the contemplative life over the active life, argues that in the modern era, contemplation has become insufficient and meaningfulness lay in the active life. The active life is actualised not in the private realm of the social/private concerns nor characterised by bodily necessities, but in the public realm where engagement with the world through discussions, debates and the free expression of opinions take place. Arendt argues that the public life is political in nature because in it we rediscover the truth known to ancient Greeks that action is the supreme blessing of human life. In Arendt's view, it is action that bestows significance to the life of individual women and men. For this reason, she holds that revolutionary action is the sole political event that confronts us immediately and ineluctably with "the problem of beginning".

Revolutionary actions become the political activity through which humans disclose their unique individuality amidst the

plurality of persons with whom the conceived action is actualised. In addition, natality, that is, being born provides a possibility for action in the world in order to bring about something new. According to Arendt, labour, work and action are the three categories of human activity that contribute significantly, yet distinctively, to the realisation of our human capacity. Of the three, she accords a central place to action. With the possibility of action as ontologically rooted in the miracle of birth, Arendt avers that humans are constantly reminded that although they must die, death is not the reason for being born. They are not born to die, but they are born to introduce the unexpected, to start something new. The capacity to act carries with it a potential to realise our highest human capacity such as freedom and individuality.

The most concrete examples of the capacity of human action to bring about the unanticipated, to disclose individuality amidst plurality of persons, according to Arendt, are modern day revolutions, especially the French and American revolutions of 1789 and 1775 respectively. For Arendt, what ought to count in evaluating a revolutionary action as either a success or a failure is that no one can know with epistemic certainty what reef lies concealed beneath the silent waters of revolutionary action. Arendt considers the French revolution as a failure while the American Revolution is estimated to be a success. The reason for this conclusion is not based on the difference in the level of violence experienced in the two revolutions. Unlike the French revolution, the American Revolution succeeded in maintaining a valuable separation between the private and the public realms because it remained focused on achieving constitutional liberty for its people; whereas the French revolution focused on the social which brought about degeneration into the Reign of Terror. For Arendt, revolutionary actions are often attempts by humans to create a political space in the public realm where the reality of freedom could be achieved.

Also, Arendt opposes the idea that revolutions are shaped by historical forces, as argued by Marx. For Arendt, their essence lay in human actions whose intrinsic characteristic is boundlessness (unpredictability and irreversibility). The unpredictability of revolutionary action is about beginnings, that is, a required novelty explained as an act that somehow ruptures from what precedes it and initiates us into an undetermined future. Unpredictability is

remedied by the capacity to make and keep promises which ensures the stability of revolutionary action. The irreversibility of revolutionary action implies that once an act is enacted, it cannot be revoked. Irreversibility is remedied by the capacity to forgive. Forgiveness frees the actor from the staying power of his/her action. An alternative to forgiveness is punishment which strives for correction, not revenge. In Arendt's view, revolutions are not mere linear historical itinerary but a break in history, an interruption of an unfavourable *status quo* in an attempt to bring forth a new beginning.

Revolutionary actions have two stages: the stage of rebellion against injustice or totalitarian inclinations, and the stage of the establishment of institutions of lasting values that consolidates the revolutionary gains. In effect, a major condition for judging a revolution as either successful or disastrous is whether or not the revolutionary action is able to attain freedom that is stamped on something intangible such as a Constitution because a Constitution makes for the possibility of creating a public space of action.

In my reading of Arendt, however, I came to a conclusion that with the world around us, the distinction between the private, the public and the social are not easily made. This is because these categories also form a part of the intertwined web of human relationships that characterises our world. Beyond accessing basic amenities of life, people need utopias that inspire them to common visions for greatness. Thus I believe that to be focused on engaging in political revolutionary actions, humans need to transcend, first, their biological needs. This can be achieved when they, together with the government, work towards ensuring that the necessary conditions for such transcendence are put in place as well as attending to questions of social and economic justice. With the basic human needs provided for, the quest, if need be, for a political revolutionary action aimed at a positive foundation of freedom can possibly be embarked upon without the nation running the risk of becoming like the proverbial land that swallows its own inhabitants.