Hannah Arendt:
The Challenge of World-Building

ROWENA ANTHEA B. AZADA
ATENEO DE MANILA UNIVERSITY
MANILA, PHILIPPINES

⮌

The political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, draws fairly well known distinctions between activities that ensure the human species' biological survival (*labor*), activities that establish the enduring world of human artifice (*work*), and activities that provide those who speak and act with incentives to engage in politics (*concerted action*).[1] She brings particular focus to bear upon the activities of speech and action inasmuch these disclose "who" each human being is, as distinct "from any other who is, was, or will ever be," at the same time that they strengthen the solidarity[2] of human beings with one another by playing themselves out upon "an already existing web" of interrelationships where each newcomer's life story "uniquely affects the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact" (*HC*, 175-176; 184). She is quick to assert, however, that notwithstanding their interrelatedness, there is no overarching meta-story (and therefore no super-author) into which these life stories get taken up — only the multiplicity of those tangible objects that tend to spring up in the spaces between people. Such is the common world of the *in-between*, which functions as the fulcrum between solidarity and

---

[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 7;41;50;199; hereafter referred to as *HC*.

[2] In *On Revolution*, Arendt uses the term "solidarity" specifically to refer to one of three possible responses to the suffering and misery of other people. In this study, however, I use the term "solidarity" more broadly to refer to a political community's sense of collectivity and unity. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 88-89; hereafter referred to as *OR*.

plurality, bridging the space between people without eliminating it, hence, protecting and promoting diversity (*HC,* 52). The proliferative heterogeneity of these objects is not itself problematic, for in it consists the very condition for public life (*HC,* 57). What is problematic is the assumption, oftentimes facilely made, that, in order for people to live with one another peaceably, they need to think alike; that, until they overcome the condition and consequences of plurality, no solidarity could develop among them. No assumption, in Arendt's view, is more destructive of politics than this assumption. It cannot, then, be a "common nature" which brings humans together, nor even necessarily common goals, if by "goals" held in common one means that "singularity of will" prescribed by Rousseau (*HC,* 57). Solidarity, for Arendt, is a matter neither of abstract rationality nor of a common identity, but of those practices of speech, and those activities, that transpire "between those who have [them] in common" in order to "relate and separate [them] at the same time" (*HC,* 52).

Arendt, however, has little to say about how the in-between, the public world, gathers men together at the same time that it prevents them from falling all over one another, except to say that it consists of fabrications of two kinds: the kind involving documents, monuments, art works, written laws, contracts, etc., that is, "texts" that reify thought, speech, even action (*HC,* 184); the kind comprised of the city gates, walls, governments, churches, etc., that is, what "infrastructure" will organize the public spatially (*HC,* 198). In what follows, I would like to explore how both "texts" and the "infrastructure,"[3] provide support to the public/political realm.

Texts

What I am calling texts are those objects that for Arendt are concrete solidifications of the activities of thought, speech, or action. Texts are not *equivalent* to the living realities of thought, speech, and action, but

---

[3] This is not to say that these two classifications are mutually exclusive. A work that seeks to concretize a life story—such as Luneta Park, for example — may also be literal public space where people can gather. Likewise, structures that define a public space — such as Mendiola Bridge — can become for a people a "text" (the term is used loosely) that reveals a life-story.

are reifications of them, fabrications — in the sense, not of their being untruthful, but of their having been materially fabricated) — that arise out of the work of human hands, outcomes of processes with clear beginnings and clear ends. This type of reification is centrally important to the continuing existence of human affairs. Without it, "the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear as though they never had been" (*HC*, 95). Such reification, however, comes at a price. Arendt explains:

> [R]eification and materialization ... is always paid for, and
> ... the price is life itself: it is always the "dead letter" in which
> the "living spirit" must survive, a deadness from which it can be
> rescued only when the dead letter comes again into contact with
> a life willing to resurrect it, although this resurrection of the dead
> shares with all living things that it, too, will die again. [*HC*, 169]

By means of their reification, these objects become independent of their makers, and incapable, as such, of ever fully disclosing them — at least not to the same degree that living speech and action can (*HC*, 168-170, 184).[4] Take as an example of this the news story, a fairly common artifact of public affairs, which comes either as a written report (as with print), as an oral *and* written report (as with radio), or as a visual *and* oral *and* written report (as with television). Whatever the form it takes, by the time it is presented to the public for its consumption, it is several times removed from the original event, removed even from authorial intent.[5] Not in any simple or direct fashion, but only fragmentarily, will it mirror the original event to people who stand "in different locations" within the public realm, where appearance is reality, and actions and

---

[4] Arendt's insistence on the independence (in varying degrees) of the text from the maker of the text has parallels in contemporary hermeneutics. I turn, in particular, to Paul Ricoeur's discussion of the distantiation of the text from its author, as an example. For Ricoeur, the inscription of a lived event as a text is the first of multiple "distantiations" of a text: "Between living and recounting, a gap — however small it may be — is opened up." Paul Ricoeur, "On Interpretation," Kathleen Blamey, trans., in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, trans. (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991), p. 5.

[5] Cf. Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, pp. 78-79. I borrow Ricoeur's term "distantiation."

events are neither perceived nor understood in only one way.[6] So two people today may decide to follow up on the same event, say former Philippine President Joseph Estrada's impeachment in 2000. As a consequence of their distance in time from the event in question, their overall understanding of what happened could diverge significantly, with the first asserting that because Estrada had made perverse virtues of personalism, patriarchy, and a lack of respect for the organizing structures of government, his exit from the scene of governance could not have transpired too soon, and the second pointing out that it was indeed a rare occurrence in Philippine history that a candidate would emerge in the middle of an election campaign who was notable in that he gave speeches, not to minority Filipinos educated in university-English, but to (mostly poor) vernacular-speaking Filipinos, and who, as a result, got elected President, only to be booted out in a national tragedy. In the view of the first, Estrada's impeachment represented an important movement in the direction of a more efficient and transparent governance; in the view of the second, it is instantiated, yet again, class oppression.[7] A thought, practice of speech, or action, that has reified causes people, then, not only to diverge in manifold ways, but also to be gathered from their scattered-ness, insofar as the distantiating effects of reification cause them, not to be folded into the exact same world, but precisely to be scattered and, therefore, susceptible to being gathered.[8] The public world of texts serves both as a bridge and as a

---

[6] "[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" (*HC*, 57).

[7] This does not imply, however, that all interpretations of events are to be taken as equally valid. Indeed, a relativistic interpretation of Arendt's notion of plurality would miss her emphasis on thinking. For Arendt, thinking, "which brings out the implications of unexamined opinions and therefore destroys them — values, doctrines, theories, and even convictions," is a political act in that it liberates the faculty of judgment, the ability to tell right from wrong or the beautiful from the ugly, without subsuming it once again being subsumed under universal principles. See Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Company), pp. 192-193; hereafter, referred to as *LM*.

[8] Ricoeur demonstrates that what remains permanent after these moments of distanciation — the text — can enable understanding *through* distanciation.

necessary barrier between people; it bridges the space between writer and reader without eliminating that space.[9] It is a fabrication of human hands, though not of any specific set of human hands; as such, it cannot be destroyed by any specific individual. There is an analogy to this, in Margaret Canovan's view, in the relationship between the public world and the written contract:

> Being something agreed upon between individuals, [the contract] cannot be abrogated simply by the will of one of the parties. It takes on a worldly existence outside and between the parties concerned, so that it can oblige them against their will, and thereby secure their future against their possible changes of mind.[10]

Because the contract stands outside of all contracting parties, none of these parties may unilaterally change or modify it; they are instead bound to its conditions. The same is true of the reifications of thought, speech, or action that one finds in, say, historiographies and journalistic reportage, or in the shared literature of a nation (e.g. José Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere,* Nonoy Marcelo's *Ikabod,* the music of *Asin,* our school children's regulation textbooks). While these artifacts may elicit a variety of reactions from different people, in different generations, operating in different sectors of society, they may at the same time be shared and allowed to circulate. They comprise the

---

According to Ricoeur, a significant change occurs when oral discourse is inscribed as written text. The text is freed from the spatiotemporal network shared by the speaker and listener; it exists now on its own, with its own world. What it opens to the reader, then, is no longer the world of the writer, but the world of the text itself, such that the reader does not find a path behind the text to the author; rather, he finds a path in front of the text, expanding his own world. What he comes to understand, then, are two things: the world of the text, and himself, standing in front of the text ("The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," pp. 86-87).

[9] Ricoeur describes the text as "the paradigm of distantiation in communication," displaying what he considers to be a fundamental characteristic of human experience, "communication in and through distance." From this we can gather that Ricoeur's description of distantiation can be taken to help us understand not just the event of understanding a text, but more broadly, the general human experience of bridging spaces among people ("The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," p. 76).

[10] Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 226. See *OR,* p. 175.

bridges to solidarity between people. In politics, Lisa Disch writes: "[A] particular issue is forced into the open so that it may show itself from all sides, in every possible perspective, until it is flooded and made transparent by the full light of human comprehension."[11] People originating from different locations talk about their world in order to affirm it, and the more they talk about it, the more "real" to them their common world becomes.[12] Arendt writes: "The 'common world' … is not present *in itself* in the public realm," but emerges, rather, through the variety of perspectives that arises when people talk about their world.[13] To return to the example of the contract, if one can speak of it as having a power of *fiat,* this power does not inhere in the contract itself, but emanates, rather, from those persons who sign onto it, in order to assure their stake in it.[14] Generally speaking, the objects of the common world by themselves do not constitute the matrix of *interests,* nor do they produce power; they serve, however, as the catalysts of political action. Of crucial importance, then, to political action is the fabrication both of the material world, and of speech-discourses that express a heterogeneity of perspectives, for from the ground of these fabricated materials will another world be coaxed into existence — that world which is *real* insofar as it is the "common world."

In legal bookstores around the city one comes across into piles of tomes on the law that only students and professionals of the law, and few other people besides, ever get around to read. Elsewhere in the city one finds Filipino movies either playing or in storage that mostly those who identify with specific economic or cultural sectors ever watch, and

---

[11] Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 242; cited in *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought,* p. 228.

[12] Lisa Disch, "'Please Sit Down, but Don't Make Yourself at Home': Arendtian 'Visiting' and the Prefigurative Politics of Consciousness-Raising," in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics,* ed. Craig Calhoun and John McGowan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 143. See also Kimberly F. Curtis, "Aesthetic Foundations of Democratic Politics," in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics,* ed. Craig Calhoun and John McGowan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[13] Lisa Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 39.

[14] See John McGowan, "Must Politics Be Violent?: Arendt's Utopian Vision" in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics,* pp. 281-282.

which the elites pay almost no attention to, thereby reinforcing their separateness from the other groups. These books and these movies exemplify a whole class of artifacts that could not be said in any realistic sense to constitute the common public world. On the other hand, current affairs commentaries, with their variety of interlocutors, their multiplicity of perspectives, their multiple ties to every conceivable section of the political spectrum, and which have made their home in the nation's newspapers and magazines — they constitute the *inter-est*, or that which lies between people. They comprise the common objects of discussion, the shared texts that bind a people together.[15] They build solidarity without undercutting the heterogeneity of the objects or viewpoints that figure in the discussion.[16] From a variable position around these objects, "someone talks *to* somebody *about* something that is of interest to both, because it is *inter-est*, it is between them" (*OR*, 81).[17] Upon the ground of those loved things which are held in common, people proceed to concerted action.

Infrastructure

Around the convergence points of *inter-ests, public spaces* emerge as zones where people, however diverse, can encounter one another and potentially engage in concerted action.[18] The things of the world,

---

[15] For further discussions of the distinctions between Jürgen Harbermas' and Hannah Arendt's notions of the public sphere, see Dana R. Villa, "Hannah Arendt: Modernity, Alienation, and Critique" and Craig Calhoun, "Plurality, Promises and Public Spaces," both in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*. One of the points Calhoun makes is that the kind of commitments or contracts described by Arendt are "acts of world-making, not discovery or description. They do not depend on a prior establishment of 'post-conventional' moral reason or on the triumph of rationality at an individual level" ("Plurality, Promises and Public Spaces," p. 238).

[16] "'Visiting' and Consciousness-Raising," p. 142.

[17] See *HC*, 57. See also *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation*, pp. 199-200; and *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 35-36. On this topic, Disch contrasts Arendt with proponents of "unitary" democracy on the one hand, and proponents of "adversary" democracy on the other.

[18] Craig Calhoun points out that in avoiding the identification of the public world with the state (or any institution with similarly rigid boundaries), Arendt allows for the public world to be conceived of in terms of many public spaces, rather than a single space. I wish to add that Arendt's description of the public world as comprised of many tangible things rather than a single tangible thing, also supports Calhoun's interpretation ("Plurality, Promises, and Public Spaces," p. 251).

the products of many human hands, have therefore a second function: they define and configure durable public spaces that can outlast the instability and unpredictability of human action. Among such things are the tangible objects that define common spaces where people can gather — meeting rooms, town plazas, and Internet discussion boards — and configurations of persons that are the outcomes, not of spontaneous organization, but of the permanent hierarchies and institutions defined by inherited laws — provincial councils, state legislatures, churches, etc. It must be recalled, however, that neither the spaces defined by tangible objects, nor the institutions configured artificially by humans, *cause* political activity. For political activity is always an act of spontaneity and initiative. Taking the Greek *polis* as her example, Arendt writes:

> The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.

These political activities of "acting and speaking together," however, like all human action, are unpredictable and fleeting. It is physical, durable spaces, artifices that have been institutionalized, that *facilitate* the future emergence of political activity, and prevent political action from "perishing with [people's] dispersal and return to their isolated homesteads" (*HC*, 198). Arendt elaborates:

> The organization of the *polis*, physically secured by the wall around the city and physiognomically guaranteed by its laws ... is a kind of organized remembrance ... It assures the mortal actor that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and, generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men ... It is as though the walls of the polis and the boundaries of the law were drawn around an already existing public space which, however, without such stabilizing protection could not endure, could not survive the moment of action and speech itself. (*HC*, 198)

Arendt's distinction between political activity and the durable manifestations of a body-politic puts in perspective the formal exercises which we often label "political." The election of individuals

to Congress, for example, does not guarantee that, within the halls of the *Batasang Pambansa* [Congress], they in fact will engage in political activity. The inscription in the Constitution of the guarantees of the right to free speech or the right of feedom of assembly does not result in the automatic, spirited exercise of these rights by citizens. The establishment of *barangay* halls or radio stations — an infrastructure that will allow people to gather and communicate their ideas to one another — does not ensure that people *will* in fact gather or engage in meaningful communication. What these structures facilitate, however, is the spontaneous emergence of power. Whenever a town plaza or village hall, or even an employees meeting room in an office building, is constructed, there is a greater likelihood that the local community will invest in concerted political action. Take the EDSA Revolution of 1986, which was an act of power catalyzed by the prior growth of all kinds of shared spaces. A decade and a half of anti-Marcos sentiment (1967-1983) had failed to produce an earlier revolution on account of the absence of a concordance of forces powerful enough to oust Marcos. As much as the opposition had grown in terms of the sheer numbers of people who were identifying as such, it was nevertheless hobbled both by intractable ideological differences among its constituents, and an absence of consolidated organization. In one of the best moves against concerted action against his rule, Ferdinand Marcos had totally jettisoning the "parliament of the streets" (a device central to the exercise of people's power during the First Quarter Storm), by imposing prohibitions on public assembly. The crackdown on all media outfits in tandem with the culture of fear sowed by the ruling military, preempted the convergence of anti-dictatorship powers. With the "official" (though, in fact, window dressing) end of Martial Law in 1981, people were allowed to assemble again, and as much as the different ways and spaces in which they did had no final protections or guarantees, the fact that, after a fashion, they could gather publicly, fostered those conditions that produced the 1986 Philippine revolution. The parliamentary elections of 1984, for instance, set the stage for the formation of alliances between the various anti-dictatorship groups, and the adoption of a shared battle cry, namely an election boycott. Other events further facilitated the growth of power. Mention must be made in this connection of the Convener Group of late-1984. Rumors had been flying around of a possible snap presidential election.

Salvador Laurel stood as the main opposition candidate, because he alone, according to popular percepion, possessed the political machinery to post a victory over Marcos. His perceived rightist leaning, however, made him unacceptable to many of the left-oriented groups. In response to the mobilization of the Left, a group of mostly Jesuit-trained people formed a Convener Group with the objective of forming a tactical alliance among the divided opposition. In May 1985, the militant Left attempted as well to consolidate the opposition forces through the Bayan Founding Congress. It floundered, however, on the shoals of bitter political infighting, which isolated the political Left. The Bayan Founding Congress fiasco obliquely paved the way for the coalescence of the forces that would play prominently in the February 1986 events, with the Convener Group emerging as the unifying alliance of anti-dictatorship movements. This alliance provided Corazon "Cory" Aquino, Ninoy Aquino's widow, her principal support in the snap elections.[19] Journalist Sandra Burton observed:

> [During] the four days in which a dictatorship collapsed and a fragile, new government was installed in its place, the warring social and political forces that had blocked peaceful change so often in the past came together in a brief, harmonious moment of mutual interest and inspiration. As a result, the events which came to pass along the highway that was appropriately named *Epifanio de los Santos* (EDSA) transcended, for once, the individual claims and factional rivalries of the people involved.[20]

Thus we see how the public spaces that began to emerge in 1981 ultimately facilitated the concerted action that reached its culmination in February 1986.

Arendt's call for the erection of durable public spaces, makes us want to ask, however, what sort of a public sphere did she envision? Did she mean a single, unitary public sphere? An answer in the affirmative has been offered by a number of scholars, although both Dana R. Villa

---

[19] Joel Rocamora, *Breaking Through: The Struggle Within the Communist Party of the Philippines* (Pasig: Anvil Publishing, 1994), pp. 36-38; Sandra Burton, *Impossible Dream: the Marcoses, the Aquinos, and the Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Warner Books, 1989), pp. 282-286.

[20] *Impossible Dream,* pp. 375-376.

and Craig Calhoun disagree with this interpretation. In Villa's view, if Arendt begins by stating her observation of what *is*; her description of what is does not amount to a rhetorical call for the restoration of a unitary public sphere.[21] Calhoun agrees with Villa, noting that while Arendt's use of the term, "public sphere," is not consistent, she explicitly cites the impossibility, within the United States, of a single, integrated public space: "Since the country is too big for all of us to come together and determine our fate, we need a number of public spaces within it."[22] This reading is consistent with her insistence on plurality. Arendt envisions political action, argues Calhoun, in "multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting public domains."[23]

Texts and Infrastructure in the Philippine Context

For Arendt, then, the tangible works of human hands — the common world — are crucially important to the formation of solidarity within a political community. One difficulty with respect to "world-making" in the Philippine context, however, is the local predilection for casting world-making in foundationalist, universalist, abstract terms. It appears this is the way texts — in particular, written literature — are subsumed under nation-building projects in post-independence Philippines. In her book, *Necessary Fictions,* Caroline S. Hau describes a number of initiatives that have been taken to deploy written texts, including literary texts, in the formation and consolidation of a nationalist consciousness. Apolinario Mabini's protracted effort, as a member of the Revolutionary Government, to establish a state-regulated educational system was such an initiative, as was the American-period Education Act of 1901, which provided

---

[21] Dana R. Villa, "Hannah Arendt: Modernity, Alienation, and Critique," in *Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics*, pp. 199-200.

[22] Hannah Arendt, "Thoughts on Politics and Revolution," trans. Denver Lindley, in *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1972), p. 232; cited by Calhoun, "Plurality, Promises, and Public Spaces," p. 239.

[23] "Plurality, Promises, and Public Spaces," p. 239. Calhoun notes his disagreement with the model of the public space described by Seyla Benhabib in "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere,* ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993).

for free public primary instruction to train people in the duties of citizenship, and as was the so-called Rizal Bill of 1956, which made it mandatory at all colleges and universities, public and private for students to undertake the study of Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*.[24] Implicit in each of these initiatives was the idea, first, that a "correct" consciousness could be imbued in an "ideal" citizen, and second, that this "ideal" consciousness needed to be established within citizens *prior* to political action.[25] These exemplary texts — literary and otherwise — may be designed to cross over to a broader public, and may be passed down from one generation to the next by means of the lofty principles of thought, speech, and action which they reified, but what in the concrete these principles signified could never be decided in advance. Only over time, in the interplay between the texts and the changing political community, would such significations emerge. Not what teachers say about the *Noli Me Tangere* to their students in class, but Filipinos' continuing and pluriform struggle to define political value for themselves, seals the *Noli* in its greatness. It is this struggle which supplies the incentive for Rizal's work to be brought into classroom discussion at all.

A parallel question could be posed to institutions created for the purpose of building shared spaces for dialogue and action: Do these spaces — insofar as they are geared towards public participation in policy-making — sufficiently respect the twin poles of solidarity and plurality in the way Arendt envisions? Lisa Disch observes that in democracies in general, institutional mechanisms for participants' dissent are usually provided for only when deliberations regarding a certain issue are underway, but *after* decisions are made, dissent is silenced.[26] In *State-Society Dynamics: Policy Making in a Restored Democracy*, Jose J. Magadia brings observation to bear upon large-scale manifestations of decentralized power (or genuine "power," in Arendt's terminology) in post-Marcos Philippine history, namely,

---

[24] Caroline S. Hau, *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946-1980* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), pp. 1-2, 26-30.

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 38-42.

[26] *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 216, citing Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 192-193.

the nongovernmental organizations, people's organizations, citizens' associations, and multi-sectoral alliances that provided alternative durable shared spaces to the conventional political parties that in the Philippines serve to undewrite mere electoral machineries.[27] In particular, he examines their participation in the policy-making processes of the government, and the difficulties that arise when mechanisms develop within the deliberative process itself to clear away dissent. In the early years of the Aquino administration, for example, the Labor Advisory and Coordinating Council (LACC) attempted to influence the bill amending the 1974 Labor Code passed under President Ferdinand Marcos.[28] The LACC was originally comprised of five major labor groups: the Kilusang Mayo Uno, the Federation of Free Workers, the Affiliates of the World Federation of Trade Unions, the Lakas Manggagawa Labor Center, and the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines, which bolted from the coalition soon after its founding. Although the LACC exerted some influence on the drafting of the bill, the resulting House Bill (HB) 11524 was rejected by the LACC on the grounds that certain provisions were inimical to workers' right to strike, to collective bargaining, to self-organization, and to the principle of fostering industrial harmony. Numerous attempts were made to build consensus among its members, but the final bill signed into law in 1989 as Republic Act 6715 was hardly distinguishable from HB 11524.[29] Although the unpredictability of human action showed up in this case, Magadia cites as a major contributor to this undesirable outcome the deep divisions and antagonism within the LACC's ranks. Monthly caucuses were held, presumably to build consensus, but fundamental differences in ideology severely curtailed the grounds upon which

---

[27] Jose J. Magadia, *State-Society Dynamics: Policy Making in a Restored Democracy* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003), pp. 1-4, 8-9. The network of societal organizations involved in policy-making in post-Marcos Philippines has parallels with Arendt's vision of local deliberative citizens' councils in the extent to which they are grassroots in nature. See *OR*, 248-255; see also Michael G. Gottsegen, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 118-119.

[28] In his book, Magadia studies two other cases as well: the Congress for a People's Agrarian Reform's attempt to influence agrarian land reform policy-making, and the Urban Land Reform Task Force's attempt to influence urban land reform policy-making, all during the Aquino administration.

[29] *State-Society Dynamics*, pp. 71-75.

consensus could be built.[30] Magadia observes that the structures for decision-making that the LACC adopted proved to be more harmful than helpful, with the consensus rule emerging as "more of a deterrent than a search for compromise."[31] The question, then, becomes, in an alliance with divisions as deep as those that presented themselves in the LACC, should an alternative form of consensus-building not have been sought — one in which dissent would have been protected rather than silenced?

Arendt herself makes no procedural recommendations relating to public discussion *per se.* Lisa Disch, however, suggests mechanisms that could be built into organizations ensuring the recording of dissent as a way of keeping the door open to future discussion.[32] To illustrate how such a model of communication on *inter-ests* could be made to work in practical politics, Disch offers the model of the Supreme Court sitting *en banc* to decide on a contentious issue. Supreme Court decisions are made on the basis of a majority vote, but in the event of a close vote, dissenting interpretations of the case are recorded as well. Lawyers in future cases referring back to Supreme Court decisions are free to refer back as well to dissenting opinions.[33] Following such a model, when a group or political community arrives at a decision by a majority vote to pursue a single course of action, it could nonetheless make provision for dissenting views to be recorded and taken up again at a later time. The value of recording dissent is that in making these disagreeing views public, the political community allows the dialogue taking place among its members to become truly revelatory of the many unique life stories, and the variety of principles valued within that community. Disch observes that within such a framework, Arendt's discussion of *inter-ests* breaks the impasse between the vision of a "unitary" democracy, on the one hand, where solidarity is grounded in an "essential sympathy," and an "adversary" democracy on the other, where given the inevitable diversity of interests, "abstract procedure is the best protection against tyranny." She writes:

---

[30] *Ibid.,* pp. 85-88. Even the "Twelve-Point Covenant of LACC Unity" drafted in 1991 as an attempt to consolidate itself was largely palliative. See also pp. 75-76.

[31] *Ibid.,* p. 121.

[32] *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy,* 216-217.

[33] *Ibid.,* p. 212.

> Arendt's work suggests that [these two views] are alike in leaving individuals' points of connection and points of difference unstated and unarticulated. Where attention to differences jeopardizes unitary democracy, which depends on the myth of a common consciousness that is so deeply felt that it would not be contested … the effort to achieve commonality is simply irrelevant in a liberal democratic society, which is adversarial precisely because it is assumed that contestation is *all* there is and no common interest can come of it.[34]

In contrast, *inter-ests* remain the in-between, linking and separating humans at the same time. Thus, the potential for concerted action notwithstanding, the dialogue is less directed towards a kind of consensus-building that silences disagreement, and more towards the revelation of unique perspectives on the issue at hand. People who hold minority viewpoints are not alienated by the dominance of a single viewpoint, but encouraged instead to continue to share their perspectives. Political participation, then, becomes an invitation to participants to engage differently-minded fellow-citizens in a dialogue of diversity. In later assessments of past actions taken, when the group has the advantage of hindsight, both majority and minority perspectives may be cited as measures by which to gauge actions. As these varying viewpoints are repeatedly recalled by a political community, a deeper sense of awareness of its principles emerges.

A second difficulty with respect to "world-building" in the Philippine context is local conditions of material and financial constraints. In her study of the manner in which Filipino written texts bring to articulation the changing self-understanding of Filipinos of their own political milieu, Hau laments the paradoxical lack of impact of written texts upon everyday Philippine life. Although these texts do record the experiences and aspirations of the Philippine people, too few Filipinos can afford the luxury of reading them.[35] To the written text, we may add films, television, radio, and most other reified forms of popular culture that remain inaccessible to Filipino people too poor to afford them. The "public" reached by these texts is still a "public" that remains small in relation to the Philippine population. The limitation

---

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[35] *Necessary Fictions*, pp. 271-272.

of resources with which to build a common world is felt not only in text-making, but also in building those objects — tangible or intangible — which configure shared spaces. In Magadia's comparative analysis of three cases wherein societal organizations influenced policymaking on a national scale, he notes that the level of cohesion in each organization was proportionate to the availability of certain resources: a physical office which could serve as a base for coordination, and a professional staff of regular employees to organize and coordinate tasks.[36] We may add that the larger an organization, the more resources are needed to provide a base or a staff big enough to do the work of coordination. Again, we see how a lack of material and financial resources can be an impediment to the task of world-building.

Poverty in the Philippines is a real hurdle in the task of world-building. Certainly, political speech and action are not *dependent* on the world; the latter are mere catalysts for the former, and the limitedness of shared texts and spaces notwithstanding, political speech and action are always possibilities. Nevertheless, Arendt's reflections highlight the importance of overcoming poverty, not just for the sake of survival, but also for the sake of the fabrication of a world conducive for solidarity.[37]

Conclusion

In 1986, the People Power Revolution spelt the end of Ferdinand Marcos' authoritarian regime in the Philippines, restored conventional democratic structures, and ushered in an era of rejuvenated political activity. A strengthened civil society and increased people's participation marked the beginning of a new phase in the process of democratization in the country. It, however, has been a process with as many stops as starts, with old habits of patronage and top-down policy-making remaining firmly entrenched in many areas of Philippine life.[38] We return, therefore, to the situation described at

---

[36] *State-Society Dynamics,* pp. 119-120.

[37] Her discussions on the overcoming of economic need, however, are not without difficulties of their own. Many scholars consider her distinction between work and action to be far too rigid, failing to sufficiently account for the merging of political and economic concerns in real life. See *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt,* pp. 63-65.

[38] *State-Society Dynamics,* pp. 1-4.

the beginning of this study: the situation of fragmentation apparent in contemporary Philippine society signaling a need for concerted action, but also a condition of diversity and the imperative to protect that diversity.

In this manner at least could the theme of solidarity-forging in the political thought of Hannah Arendt be seen to be tied to a framework that gives as much importance to the protection of the dissenting voices of plurality as it does to public participation. ✧