Assessing the Critical Capacities of Democracy through the work of Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas: the Occlusion of Public Space and the Rise of Homo Spectaculorum

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Taul Harpe
Abstract

This thesis is an exploration of the condition of critical debate in contemporary liberal democracies that is based upon a combined reading of the works of Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas. It begins with an elaboration of the position that Arendt and Habermas identify a similar malaise as afflicting modern liberal democracies, which is argued to result from a shared perception that such democracies fail to create a forum for critical public engagement. The argument that their democratic theories are highly complementary is further developed through an examination of their solutions to this critical failure, for these solutions reflect a sharing of important premises concerning the nature of power and freedom on the parts of Habermas and Arendt. A complementary reading of Arendt and Habermas also allows for a synthesis of their theories that results in a highly coherent picture of the form and processes of an ideal democratic forum. This synthesis of Habermas and Arendt, however, also suggests (or, at least, allows for the theorising of) the emergence of a new genus of political actor who is unlikely to engage in such a forum – a genus hereafter referred to as *homo spectaculorum*.

This thesis, therefore, makes three related claims. The first, and most important, is that it is possible to read Arendt and Habermas together as highly compatible democratic theorists and that their analysis of contemporary political conditions presents a single position from which to view the critical failings of liberal democracies. The second claim is that synthesising Arendt’s and Habermas’s democratic theories enables the theorising of an ideal public space, along with the emergence of *homo spectaculorum*. The third, and final, claim made in this thesis is....
that the same conditions that lead to the emergence of *homo spectaculorum* can be understood to undermine the emancipatory potential otherwise proffered through critical public spaces.
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