

# Human rights for more than one voice: rethinking political space beyond the global/local divide

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## Abstract

This paper considers political agency and space as found in Cavarero's *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* in order to take a critical philosophical approach to human rights education (HRE) and the political implications of its increasingly legal discourse. Like Arendt, Cavarero is concerned with a radical rethinking of political space, as not limited to place or legal borders, but bound by our human condition of plurality and relationality. Both Arendt and Cavarero want politics to be coupled with justice, nevertheless, Cavarero provides a notion of politics that lets us think beyond territorial terms of a polis, which opens for exploring an expanded conceptualization of human rights politics, as not bound by national legislative measures, but as concerning political action in-between human beings. In contrast to the dominant discourse on 'human rights experts' who frame the content for HRE, the notion of 'absolute local space' questions the dichotomy of universal/particular in raising the importance of a plurality of unique voices who create a spectrum for the universality of rights.

**Keywords:** *Adriana Cavarero; Hannah Arendt; agonistic; critical philosophy; human rights education*

## INTRODUCTION

The notion of 'voice' in political theory has become a way of conceptualizing the need for plurality and difference<sup>1</sup> in examining political relations. Whereas 'voice' signifies those dissonant and marginalized voices who have been silenced under dominant narratives, the notion of 'voice' is also used to critique the phenomenon of representation, of speaking for others, in the name of others, and of representative claims of a whole group.<sup>2</sup> As Aletta Norval<sup>3</sup> notes, with the 'articulation of new struggles and voices'<sup>4</sup> we need to 'counter the ongoing possibilities of domination'<sup>5</sup>

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that Norval puts forward as a ‘deprivation of voice’.<sup>6</sup> The notion of ‘voice’ in relation to human rights that I put forth in this paper builds on pluralist claims made by, for example, Emily Beausoleil<sup>7</sup> of making ‘space for diverse ways of life’<sup>8</sup> where listening is a necessary condition for politics, since such criticism against representation is helpful in rethinking rights in terms other than ‘individual’ or ‘particular’ claims. The very structure of the international legal framework for rights within the United Nations is built upon conventions of representations (rights of ‘women’, ‘children’, ‘indigenous people’, and ‘migrants’) and upheld by static notions of what counts as legal and political space. By rethinking space beyond the global/local divide, I refer to the need to question national borders and notions of territory in terms of politics and jurisdiction as limiting our creative capacity to think rights ‘beyond borders’. As John Agnew<sup>9</sup> argues, borders ‘fence off of chunks of territory and people from one another’<sup>10</sup> and they matter because they ‘trap thinking about and acting in the world in territorial terms’.<sup>11</sup> The very notion of human rights questions both how we think of legal territory and political space, I argue, where political agency is not limited to citizenship, but where human rights can be voiced in contrast to national sovereignty.<sup>12</sup> But how then, can we rethink political space and voice to move beyond the impasse of representation, domination, and exclusion?

### **A CRITICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL STANCE TO HRE**

Empowerment and the actualization of political agency are two of the aims of human rights education (HRE) in creating an awareness of rights and freedoms for democratic citizenship that has global moral connotations. A distinctive field of studies within HRE is in the field of law education: this legal perspective of rights has become very influential and dominant in formal education, especially in higher education on legal training and instruction, ranging across humanitarian law to European law, international law, human rights, and rule of law. The literature in this field is directed toward a growing profession of ‘international lawyers’, ‘human rights experts’, ‘human rights agents’ (in voluntary organizations) and ‘human rights professionals’ (in UN bodies and agencies). This approach to human rights emphasizes legal competence, knowledge of UN legal bodies and International Conventions, monitoring functions and clashes between different rights and obligations.

In *Human Rights in Action*, Miia Halme<sup>13</sup> analyzes the legalization of HRE by critically examining educational activities of the Scandinavian Network of Human Rights Experts, SCANET, by asking ‘what kinds of conceptions of knowledge, expertise and learning they give rise to?’<sup>14</sup> Halme explores how the SCANET experts ‘contribute to the process of legalization as they teach human rights’.<sup>15</sup> The activities of the so-called human rights experts are ‘predominated by the discipline of law’.<sup>16</sup> The problem with these educational activities in the hands of the so-called ‘legal experts’ that Halme identifies is the asymmetry between the ‘expert’ and the student. She shares this view with Anthony Woodiwiss<sup>17</sup> who argues that ‘today the political concept of human rights is increasingly occupied by communities of lawyers in the

level of regional human rights jurisdictions as well as the UN bodies<sup>18</sup> and with Bhambra<sup>19</sup> who warns against reducing human rights to a legal framework.<sup>20</sup> Halme<sup>21</sup> is concerned that Western legal ‘experts’ hold the agency to decide the content of HRE.

In the human rights phenomenon systemic agency is held primarily by human rights experts who act as educators on what human rights are; what remains within, what falls outside the discourse. Through their systematic agency human rights experts act as intermediaries who translate the discourse to meet local concerns.<sup>22</sup>

The asymmetrical relations in HRE that influences how knowledge can be ‘distributed’ coupled with the underlying danger of such practices of creating ‘human rights agents’ and ‘victims’ may undermine the very political potential of human rights for the future. How can we then reread the concept of human rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), beyond the legal discourse surrounding human rights? Within this question lies the question of political agency and self. Who is termed as a ‘human rights subject’ in the discourse of HRE? Who is equally seen as having the capacity to act for change in relation to equality and freedom?

A legal discourse on human rights frames the scope of urgency for human rights in people’s daily lives, so that individuals who step into the political space with others in the name of human rights act only when they have been violated in their rights. The initial juridical significance of human rights focuses on rights as legal entitlements where the urgency for human rights emerges primarily in human rights violations. Nevertheless, as Halme argues, ‘Few people today would claim that human rights adjudicate solely the relationships of sovereign states and their subjects, although this was arguably their initial juridical significance’.<sup>23</sup> What happens if we see that there is more to the concept of human rights than being a legal term and to talk of rights in other ways than in terms of violations? How can human rights be seen as something not reduced to the application of laws, but as something that is acted, in political community?

Through the UN Conventions, human rights have garnered international legal weight but human rights only become legal entitlements once the international convention is signed and ratified by member states of the UN and incorporated into national law. Making human rights ‘active’ in a legal sense is a process very much dependent on national legislative measures. One could say that the enforcer of human rights in this sense are the lawyers, judges, and legal laymen working in a legal system, and diplomats, governments, and international politicians who negotiate amendments and reservations to the texts. Political agency is in this legal approach to human rights also acknowledged discursively in the role of international non-governmental organizations, such as Amnesty International, who write the so-called ‘shadow reports’ to UN bodies that are assigned to monitor the adherence to the conventions.

The promise of human rights as a discourse for equality lies in the legal approach chiefly on an international level, where the political agency of human rights lies in the hands of legal experts and practitioners. How can human rights be reread in

more local, yet not culturally predefined spaces, where human beings in all their complexity (cultural, individual, and historical) receive a more central role in the conceptualization of political agency?

In order to rethink the concept of human rights beyond the sphere of the juridical, I want to recuperate the political potential of HRE by expanding the notion of rights in terms of *relationality*, *plurality*, and *uniqueness* in *absolute local spaces*, drawing on the political thinkers of Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero.

I am not proposing here that we leave the legal dimension of human rights behind for a more philosophical notion of moral principles. It would be problematic to shift from ‘rights’ to ‘morality’, since the legal enforcement of rights can be seen as political processes in themselves, as I explore below, through the work of Arendt.<sup>24</sup> However, expanding human rights beyond the legal sphere requires critically examining the notion of rights and eventually questioning a divide between private/public and global/local spaces in relation to human rights. This paper expands the notion of a reductionist legal understanding of the concept to a more human-relational understanding—a shift that has implications both for how we perceive education in human rights as well as the politics of human rights.

## ARENDT ON LAWMAKING AS SETTING THE BOUNDARIES FOR RIGHTS AND POLITICS

Arendt finds in the Greek and Roman notions of *nomos* and *lex* conceptions of law that are freed from the enforcement of the nation-state, where laws receive their authority from a coercion based on obedience and command. As Keith Breens argues in *Hannah Arendt and the Law*: ‘(. . .) returning to the idea of *nomos* and *lex*, Arendt hopes to contest the assumption that all polities have their ‘origin in crime’, in violent confrontation (. . .)’.<sup>25</sup> Instead, Arendt conceptualizes law in political, relational terms, where *nomos* is the prepolitical creation of a common world and *lex* is the creation of new relations and ties.

According to Arendt,<sup>26</sup> the Romans made laws through political activity, where treaties were coming into force through speech and action of ‘proposals and counter-proposals’<sup>27</sup> between the two contracting parties, and were only accepted under a consensus-oriented process. The Greeks, on the contrary, disconnected lawmaking from political activity. The crucial distinction that Arendt<sup>28</sup> draws between legislative activity between the Romans and the Greeks is that for the Romans laws ‘belong to the realm of politics’,<sup>29</sup> whereas for the Greeks legislation was not something that involved the people of the polis; legislation was written by one person, and ‘the legislator’s activity was so radically disconnected from the truly political activities and affairs of the citizens within the polis that the lawgiver did not even have to be a citizen of the city’.<sup>30</sup> In the Roman republic, the matter of laws ‘was that of a contract, a lasting tie’<sup>31</sup> linking people together. Since these contracts were written after wars between former enemies, the law created relations and increased the world

in-between people. For the Romans, the law 'establishes new relationships between men',<sup>32</sup> it links people together as an 'agreement between contractual partners'.<sup>33</sup>

The Roman law has this contractual character in common with human rights treaties and declarations, as these only come into force after much negotiation, speech, and action in international political arenas, where the process of drafting declarations and conventions can be seen as a political process. When declarations on human rights have been created, these in turn create lasting ties between people of the world. Like the Roman laws, human rights declaration and conventions increase the world in which we speak and act of human rights, through the increasing numbers of member states who sign and ratify such human rights treaties.

But as Arendt suggests, a mere legal view of human rights negates the very human-relational character of rights, giving precedence to the right of sovereignty and hence the relation between a state and its citizens. As such, the dominant legal discourse on human rights today can be read through the Greek view of rights.

For the Greeks, law is neither an agreement nor a contract; it certainly does not arise between men in the back-and-forth exchange of words and action, and thus does not itself belong in the political arena, but is essentially conceived by a lawgiver and must first exist before it can ever enter into the political realm.<sup>34</sup>

We can see here that what matters is the marking of borders and not the formation of ties and linkages. The law is hence not binding outside the polis; its binding power applies only to the space that it encloses and delimits. The law in this sense can be correlated to the notion of national jurisdiction (that only abides to the national citizen) where we find no place for the concept of human rights other than as incorporated in the national legal system, where it again becomes limited to the notion of citizen rights. The law in this sense 'has something violent about it'<sup>35</sup> since it is the result of a 'production, not action'<sup>36</sup> where the lawmaker does not have to even be a citizen and the law is not preceded by any political action. For the Romans, the contractual law created relationships, and for the Greeks, the law, *nomos*, was in place to regulate the relationships created through action.

If we want to express this in modern categories, we would have to say that for the Romans, politics began as foreign policy, that is, as the very thing the Greek mind had completely excluded from politics.<sup>37</sup>

The distinction between the Roman and the Greek definitions of law, or *nomos*, contributes to an understanding of the difficulty of discussing the concept of 'human rights' in legal terms. Human rights can be seen as both 'Roman'- and 'Greek' like. Human rights were formulated in an international arena after World War II for the purpose of lasting peace, as people claimed that there would be no lasting peace without human rights, and no human rights without lasting peace. In this sense, the conception of human rights falls better into Arendt's conceptualization of the Roman law, as a way to create lasting ties in the world, although the ties the Romans created involved colonization under a dictating empire, not peace on equal terms.

Today, national jurisdiction is what upholds, and potentially limits the notion of rights, in the form of citizen rights. Political agency of individuals in terms of claiming or enacting their human rights is today dependent on the recognition of such political demands by states that are willing to realize rights and freedoms for their citizens and for people living under their jurisdiction, where political space of citizens and non-citizens is limited within legal borders of democracies. Nevertheless, the creation of international UN treaties and conventions on human rights and their application in regional legal systems has come to question this national sovereignty, as through the creation of the European Court of Justice under the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms from 1950, where European citizens can appeal against national court decisions on issues of human rights.

Can we discuss human rights beyond the dichotomy in legal terms between universal rights and national jurisdiction? If political space is not defined only through the means of restricting place within legal borders, a space that distinguishes ‘them’ from ‘us’, but is conceptualized in relational terms (where universal and local coincide in spaces that are not bound by place), we may find new, radical ways of imagining political action, pointing toward new recognitions of rights beyond borders. As a way of exploring this possibility, I turn to Cavarero<sup>38</sup> and her conception of ‘absolute local space’. However, I first argue for why the Arendtian notion of political space is not sufficient enough for rethinking space in relation to human rights in our current global situation.

## IN NEED OF POLITICAL SPACE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

When Hannah Arendt<sup>39</sup> argues for the reemergence of political space, a space in-between people, she is not referring to lawmaking, as the law is a formal boundary, set up to regulate violations in public spaces. ‘All laws first create a space in which they are valid, and this space is the world in which we can move about in freedom’.<sup>40</sup> There is a distinction here that Arendt draws between public and political spaces. The public space is the private household on a larger scale, where the life of necessity, formerly the responsibility of the private household, has become a collective responsibility within the nation-state through the national economy. The public space is the common world in which people step into unforeseen relational webs and ties through their words and deeds, out from the private sphere of the home. Hence, the public space is a common space where goods, trade, and economy is handled in the public, as a form of market. It is in the public where people’s actions and speeches receive their political significance, where the unique being is reciprocally born in his/her unforeseen identity, determined by relations. This public life in which a political space is possible is not to be conflated with a notion of the nation-state. As Bonnie Honig reads Arendt’s political conception,

(...) Arendt’s call for a recovery of the public world is anti-statist; indeed, we can complain that Arendt’s philosophy as a whole suffers from certain ‘state-blindness.’ However, if such revitalization of public life does not mean the strengthening of the state but the growth of a political sphere independent of the state, where must this sphere be located (...)?<sup>41</sup>

The political space is created in the space in-between unique and different others, which opens up in human interactions through words, speech, and action, a space where different world views meet under the condition of multiplicity. For Arendt, as for Adriana Cavarero,<sup>42</sup> the irreplaceable *who* in a political space of difference is fundamental for the relationality of politics where we become distinct through how our actions are perceived by others. Following this view of politics as a relational concept, we see how political agency is realized *in* relations; hence, we are dependent on others for political agency.

Arendt's thought on human rights circles around a critique of the dichotomy between its universal aspiration for equality and the local inequality linked to difference, where human beings are marginalized and kept outside of the political community, where people of the 'polis' grant each other rights. In her critique, Arendt points to a gap in the conceptualization of 'human rights' where rights are granted to those who already hold political agency.

Arendt argues that human rights have their social and political imaginary<sup>43</sup> with the aim of bridging the gap between citizen and non-citizen, between those who are granted rights in their status as legal subjects before the law and those who are not covered by such assurances. The political imaginary is the vision of their inclusion in a political community through human rights.

In her writing of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*<sup>44</sup> Arendt points to the actuality of war and displacement of people, which for her is the weak point in the concept of human rights. Arendt focuses here on the people who are left out of the political imaginary of human rights as nation-states refuse to turn into a reality the most symbolic of all the 30 articles in the UDHR, namely the right to seek refuge in another country and be granted asylum. This includes the right to a nationality and to citizenship. This weakness has been followed up in different ways by scholars who have critically examined the gap between citizenship and human rights and the role of nation-states in this respect.<sup>45</sup> What this critique lacks, however, is an acknowledgement of political agency that is neither bound to legal space, nor to an understanding of political action as possible only for individuals within the boundaries of nation-states.

For Arendt, one needs to be part of a *polis* in order to act for political change. She hence problematizes the lack of political agency of people who live physically inside but politically outside of a community; in other words, the millions of stateless people in the world, of immigrants, refugees, third nationals, religious-, ethnic-, and cultural minorities who were at the end of World War II (and continue to be) not acknowledged of having a political voice, as part of the nation-state of the majority. As 'aliens' they are deprived of the right to have rights, of taking part in political action in community, and this becomes a double burden, since without rights, they are neither seen as equals nor are they seen as agents who can take part in changing society toward equality.

The notion of universal equality clashes in an Arendtian sense here with the specificity of difference, where she sets a limit for political change.

The dark background of mere givenness, the background formed by our unchangeable and unique nature, breaks into the political scene as the alien which in its all too obvious difference reminds us of the limitations of human activity—which are identical with the limitations of human equality.<sup>46</sup>

Although included in a declarative sense of ‘human rights for all’, human beings continue to be at the mercy of nation-states that seem reluctant to increase the scope of rights claims that would heighten the pressure for social and economic justice as well as interfere with the rights of the state. The dependency of the realization of human rights continues to be, in legal terms, a question for international law and international politics, stressing inter-national relations as well as giving primacy to the relation between the individual and the state. Arendt is critical of the nation-state and speaks of national politics more in terms of ‘rhetoric’, ‘bureaucracy’, and ‘interest and power’<sup>47</sup> to show that this level of politics is limited. What Arendt is concerned with, and where she sees the potentiality for change and renewal, is in the political action in-between human beings when we speak and act in community. Therefore, her greatest concern here is with the deprivation of some people of being part of the political community, since it not only robs them of the freedom of political action but ultimately limits the possibilities for change in the world.

The human being who has lost his place in a community, his political status in the struggle of his time, and the legal personality which makes his actions and part of his destiny a consistent whole, is left with those qualities which usually can become articulated only in the sphere of private life and must remain unqualified, mere existence in all matters of public concern.<sup>48</sup>

The mere existence of people who have no part in a community and their lack of choices lead only to a life of isolation sustaining a life of necessity. In her work on Rahel Varnhagen,<sup>49</sup> Arendt deals with this theme of the double strain of being an outsider and being forced (by a position as unqualified) into a private sphere where political action is out of reach. According to Arendt, political action is only possible between equals, in other words between human beings who have political freedom and whose voices are recognized as political action in community. Arendt has been criticized for this division between the private and the political in relation to rights and justice in feminist research.<sup>50</sup> Benhabib, for example, argues that to redraw the lines of the public and private life, one needs to engage in Arendt’s conceptions about their interdependence. Benhabib critiques Arendt on the division of the private and the public sphere in terms of politics, in her argument that private life should also be made, like public arrangements, a matter of justice.

### **THE RETREAT TO THE PRIVATE SPHERE IN LOSS OF RIGHTS AS SEEN IN THE NARRATIVE OF RAHEL VARNHAGEN**

In her work on Rahel Varnhagen,<sup>51</sup> Arendt deals extensively with what it can mean to lead a life without political action, to be forced to lead a life in the private sphere,

where political action is not a choice and where all effort is focused on the material necessity of life. 'Life of necessity' is not to be confused here with being poor. According to Arendt, a wealthy man who chooses to spend his fortune on goods 'is like the free man who chooses to become a slave under the life of necessity' because political life gets suffocated under the efforts to sustain what one owns. For Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen keeps an economic and social status in society as a *pariah*, that is, someone who is different and kept outside of rights and politics. In her biography of Rahel Varnhagen,<sup>52</sup> Arendt discusses the situation of being Jewish and a woman in 19th century Germany. Rahel retreats from political and public life, into herself, through *Romantism* and inwardness. Rahel invited people to her salon, a private place where people (writers, actors, nobles, and upper middle class) could meet in intimate spaces to communicate more freely beyond class and titles.

Arendt reads into Rahel's life story, the struggle of wanting to assimilate, to stand on equal terms, into a community lacking any pretext of equal rights. Rahel manages to marry into economic- and social class status, but at the expense of having to reject or hide her difference, that which distinguishes her uniqueness. In her last years, Rahel felt that she has lost her life for a kind of social status that is nonetheless confined within the walls of the private. Arendt concludes that the only choice for the pariah (the different in society who has no part in political community) is to 'disdain the alternative of becoming a parvenu'<sup>53</sup> (someone who has assimilated and lost his/her identity, sacrificed what made him/her different and an outcast).

Benhabib<sup>54</sup> offers another reading of the book on Varnhagen, arguing that the salons can be seen as a new definition of the public sphere, where political interactions between women are seen in terms of cooperation instead of agonism. She hence argues for an understanding of the salon as a site where the public and private meet, a space of 'human solidarity'. However, Maria Lara and Joan Landes critique Benhabib on this reading in that she does not address the side of political life where agonistic action 'provides the possibility for individuals to appear in public, to challenge traditions and prejudices, and to claim recognition for marginal groups'.<sup>55</sup> Lara and Landes argue that Arendt's political thinking can be captured neither in an agonistic nor associational concept of political action, because Arendt embraced both sides of politics, which is both problematic and fruitful for rethinking politics in terms of rights and justice. As Arendt writes,

Equality, in contrast to all that is involved in mere existence, is not given us, but is the result of human organization insofar as it is guided by the principle of justice. We are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights.<sup>56</sup>

For Arendt, political community is only between equals, who are equal in formal and legal terms, but we are not born equal and hence women, children, minorities, and people 'out of place' are not granted any place in this community. However, Arendt maintains that the aim of political action is freedom, a freedom that can only

be attained through plurality: it is only through different and multiple perspectives of the world that we can truly see the world and be free, according to Arendt.

Arendt struggles in her critique of human rights, as I see it, with her own identity as woman and Jewish, through her realist view of human suffering, violence, and social inequality, a world view that she balances with her almost utopian way of arguing for equality and freedom as premises for political space, in times when people are not seen as equal before the law or included in this *polis*.

So how can we deal with this paradox that Arendt raises in relation to human rights, that we are not born equal (as the preamble to the UDHR states) but that equality is a political project where people must decide to grant each other equal rights in the face of difference and plurality? If equality is a premise for political action, as Arendt argues, then how can transformative, political action come about in communities that keep repressing or even extinguishing through human violence the difference that makes up its plurality? This question not only concerns the plurality of politics, but the very understanding of who is considered as having political agency in a world of formal and legal inequality. As Bonnie Honig points out in relation to Arendt's critique of human rights, 'For "others", whose very nature prevents them from ever becoming citizens because their identity *is* their embodiment (. . .), there is no negotiating the public/private impasse'.<sup>57</sup>

Arendt's critique of human rights, related to political community, exposes the discrepancy between the universal notion of human rights and the particularity of national politics through which human rights are negotiated.

In the following, I develop Arendt's notion of political space on three critical points: 1) on the distinction between private and public space in relation to rights; 2) on the unlimited space in the notion of universal human rights that threatens the limited space of national jurisdiction, which are bound to borders that include and exclude people based on citizenship and nationality; and 3) on the premise that Arendt holds for political space as a space of equality when that equality is neither a social reality nor 'given to us by nature' as the UDHR states.

In order to develop these three critical points, I find it helpful to turn to Cavarero<sup>58</sup> and her conceptualization of absolute local space. Absolute local spaces (similar to the notion of cosmopolitan space I have developed elsewhere with Claudia Schumann)<sup>59</sup> is a notion that elucidates both sides of political action: the agonistic *and* the associational. In turning to Cavarero, I find a fruitful path toward conceptualizing human rights beyond a legal discourse, through Cavarero's radical rethinking of politics in terms of voice and uniqueness. Cavarero offers a rethinking of Arendt's notion of political space that collapses the distinction between private/public that Arendt so forcefully dichotomizes, where a political space is not located in a geographical territory, but created whenever and wherever agonistic voices are raised in concert, as will be dealt with in the following. In dealing with a relational perspective of political action, Cavarero develops the otherness of the other that Arendt discusses in relation to political plurality into the concept of uniqueness and voice.

## **ABSOLUTE LOCAL SPACE AND VOICE**

(...) the vocalic helps not only to think in even more radical and corporeal terms the ontology of uniqueness, but it helps above all to conceive of politics in terms of a contextual relation, entrusted to speech, which does not appeal to territory or identity myths of community.<sup>60</sup>

Cavarero develops Arendt's notion of political space in what she names the 'absolute local'. With this term, Cavarero captures a political space in the era of globalization that is not limited to a specific territorial place, but rather a space created when people interact in speech and action. It is present through words and deeds, as a space in-between human beings. Cavarero names the in-between of politics as a space, not a territory.<sup>61</sup> The 'political consists in a space created by acting and speaking together',<sup>62</sup> which can be anywhere and any time. In our globalized time, Cavarero argues, 'this interactive space could therefore be called an absolute local (*locale absolue*), "absolute" because freed of the territoriality of place and from every dimension that roots it in a continuity'.<sup>63</sup> This is a relational space where 'the local puts in play uniqueness without belongings'<sup>64</sup> which means that we are stripped of our particularity, down to the uniqueness of being in relations. The local is a contextual space, which is 'opened by'<sup>65</sup> a question of who we are rather than what we might represent. This is a politics that concern identity, where the agonistic self get a glimpse of herself in voicing her uniqueness in relation to different others, and where this identity is relational, complex, and dependent on the reciprocity of speech and action. Cavarero develops here Arendt's critique of representation, that '(...) stable identity threatens to close the spaces of politics, to homogenize or repress the plurality and multiplicity that political action postulates'.<sup>66</sup> What Cavarero offers through the notion of the 'absolute local space' is the very idea that the identity of political subjects is ontologically subjected to the agonistic and associational action that emerges when people raise their voices in concert against oppression and social injustices. The ontological condition of relationality for Cavarero is valuable in rethinking HRE and politics, since it grasps something fundamental with the very notion of rights and how we perceive them: as dependent on others, not for realizing out rights, but that human rights cannot be understood based solely on a notion of human sovereignty and autonomy.

### **The distinction between private and public in relation to rights**

Modern conceptions of politics and speech have neglected the relation between speech and voice, argues Cavarero, because of the embodiment that comes with an acknowledgement of voice, which Cavarero sees as a feminist perspective. According to Cavarero, the 'antipatriarchal valence of the vocalic'<sup>67</sup> lies in the recognition of the voice 'which demands that the political essence of speech is rooted in the corporeal uniqueness of the speakers and in their reciprocal invocation'.<sup>68</sup> Following Cavarero on this point, I argue that a conception of political space that starts with uniqueness and voice dissolves the binary of public/private, since space is not here

defined in relation to territory, but *in* relations marked by plurality and uniqueness. Cavarero argues that we need to make ontology a starting point for politics. This means that abstractions of the political ‘subject’, ‘Man’, or a universalistic ‘individual’ in political theory lack the critical means of facing the problematization that the ontology of injustice, violence, and inequality presents to us. This distinguishes deeply Cavarero from Arendt’s idea of political space. Dissolving this dichotomy between public/private through the work of Cavarero does not automatically open up for everything relational to be included in the notion of politics, which would erode the concept altogether, leaving it powerless to bring about change, but Cavarero questions an understanding of politics as ontologically excluding the actions that come about in human relations in the private sphere.

### **A political space beyond the universal/local impasse**

With a conceptualization of political space as not definable within a particular geographic area, but rather as a space that opens up and ends in vocalic and reciprocal communication between unique human beings, Cavarero questions the passivity that often results when we depend on the universal ‘promises of the global’.<sup>69</sup> Cavarero calls for a rethinking of politics that she argues starts with ‘a radical rethinking of ontology’<sup>70</sup> where she focuses on the connection between the voice and the absolute local,

The task is to bring about a revolutionary perspective – or, rather, to challenge the identificatory pretenses of the local, rather than counting on the universalizing promises of the global.<sup>71</sup>

In relation to human rights, I read in a political passivity that follows from counting on what human rights can ‘do’ for human beings in vast contexts, instead of creating political space where people raise their unique and different voices and act politically together. In the words of Cavarero, ‘This means that the local (...) is immediately anywhere—almost as if it were a global condition of human plurality that is a political community’.<sup>72</sup>

The politics of human rights is not reduced here to a legal discourse on territory and borders of nation-states, nor to an utopian abstraction of justice where equality is seen as an already existing premise for politics. Rather, a politics of human rights questions the territorial basis of nation-states and elucidates the politics of human relations and voice, where ‘you’ and ‘I’ make a difference through our unique voices.

The absolute local is thus the name of a taking-place of politics that has no predefined borders, nor any fixed or sacred confines. It is not a nation, nor a fatherland, nor a land. It extends as far as the interactive space that is generated by reciprocal communication.<sup>73</sup>

Following Cavarero, the notion of ‘human rights’ is in this sense not to be seen as a project entrusted to the nation, but a relational politics or uniqueness and plurality, where the words of ‘regardless of social belonging’ receives a meaning beyond

territory and national legislation. The territorial premise of the state becomes a contradiction to the notion of human rights, with the meaning of every individual being entitled rights regardless of nationality. The nation binds people through territory and the social construction of nationality and citizenship. The notion of human rights, on the contrary, is de-territorialized and not bound to place or social belonging. What is needed for a rethinking of human rights in relational terms is an acknowledgement of the fact that political responsibility is not confined to the nation-state, but to the plurality of unique beings who act in relations. 'Because it is faithful to the ontology of plurality, the local puts in play uniqueness without belongings and entrusts the sense of the relational to this alone'.<sup>74</sup> What this comes down to is a depolitization of the *what*, by asking, who are you, instead of 'what do you represent' in terms of social belonging. It is a 'priority of the who with respect to the what' (ibid.).

### **Voicing inequality through a politics of uniqueness**

Cavarero conceives of politics in terms of a contextual relation entrusted to speech. 'The protagonist of this politics is a speaker who, leaving aside his or her belonging to this or that identity group, communicated him- or herself first of all as voice'.<sup>75</sup> What Cavarero stresses is that the voice is embodied and unique, whereas speech is words, it has resonance in a specific human being. This understanding of voice as a signification of uniqueness becomes crucial, for instance, in the notion of the rights of the child, a child who may not always be able to speak in words, but who can raise a unique voice in the presence of injustice. In the case of infants and children, the relationality with adults is crucial, since the active listening and thus the response to the child's cry is essential for the child's human rights, which are upheld relationally, in order to be respected. As Cavarero argues, 'the act of speaking is relational'<sup>76</sup> meaning that 'what it communicates first and foremost, beyond the specific content that the words communicate, is the acoustic, empirical, material relationality of singular voices'.<sup>77</sup>

Cavarero asserts that each one is grounded in his/her own voice and in his/her speaking with others taking part on a political arena, which is absolute local, since it is not confined within specific geographical borders. Cavarero paraphrases Arendt in saying that 'politics takes place, but it is not a place'.<sup>78</sup> Cavarero's radical rethinking of politics that starts from ontology of uniqueness stands in contrast to Iris Marion Young<sup>79</sup> and her notion of politics requiring recognition of difference in terms of collectives. Young's focus on the establishment of alternative political spaces of difference that question the dominant discourse of the majority is a notion of politics that starts in particularity (of cultural, religious, or other particular group belongings). Cavarero acknowledges, not collective difference, but uniqueness in her notion of political space, where she emphasizes a meeting with someone *who* is different in her uniqueness, instead of the significance of *what* is different between 'us' and 'them', which leads to the formation of collectives.

Political space does not emerge between equals in rights, but in the rereading of Aristotle that Cavarero makes, politics emerges in the space in-between human beings with reason, if the Greek word for *logos* is, as Aristotle writes in *Poetica*, *phone semantike*, interpreted here as ‘signifying voice’. Politics emerges in spaces between ‘the ones who have signifying voices’. This means that ‘Man’ is not political and can never be political in himself but the ontological premise of plurality is what makes politics occur, in-between ‘men’. In trying to name the world *what* is said loses part of its meaning if treated as disembodied from the one who speaks, as Cavarero argues, ‘the voice, which is embodied in the plurality of voices, always puts forward first of all the who of saying’.<sup>80</sup> In speaking of human rights, it matters who speaks, because that who is not just a representative of ‘women’, ‘immigrants’, or ‘men’, but a someone who is ungraspable in terms of social belongings, someone equal in dignity even in lack of rights. This agonistic aspect of voice that Cavarero conceptualizes evokes understandings of the self as relational, conflicting, complex, and in constant struggle of redefining himself/herself in relations to others and the world. There is a similarity here with Bonnie Honig’s agonistic reading of Arendt’s idea of political space.

Agonistic (...) and performative, this politics seeks to create new relations and establish new realities, as well as to amend and augment old ones ... even in the private realm.<sup>81</sup>

## CONCLUSION: HUMAN RIGHTS FOR A PLURALITY OF VOICES

To conclude, what the politics of the voice elucidates in relation to the problems of space and human rights is that: 1) in the deterritorialization of place, where politics take place but is no ‘place’, there is no longer a depolitized space called the private, since the political is the reciprocal communication of voices who raise their uniqueness in relations that can take place anywhere; 2) human rights do not risk being reduced to citizen rights when we rethink politics in globalized, yet local terms of the absolute local space that emerges where people talk with each other (through phone, on the Internet, Skype, wherever the unique voice of the other meets the embodied voice of another); and 3) a political space does not emerge solely between individuals who are equal in formal and legal terms, but in spaces between ‘the ones who have signifying voices’, which includes those who are equal in dignity even though lacking in rights.

The public space has become global through international trade and the opening up of so-called ‘free markets’, but notions of political space continues to be conceptualized as confined within legal and national borders that maintain social categories of so-called citizens and non-citizens, of nationals and illegal immigrants, of rights-holders and aliens. The radical rethinking of legal and national borders that has occurred in the ‘world economy’ of trade and consumption has not seen its equivalence in the sphere of politics. Therefore, there is a need for radically rethinking politics in terms that transcend and question the presumed dichotomy between global and local—as Cavarero proposes through the concept of ‘the absolute local’ as a political space where diversity and uniqueness is voiced through narratives.

Instead of entrusting change to ‘human rights experts’, the political potential in human rights lies in the in-between of unique persons, who, through their personal voices, speak out against injustice and oppression, not bound by identity politics, but by a willingness to act in the world. Through the uniqueness of every single voice, we come together in our difference and utter diversity, which is the only thing that keeps people together according to Arendt: that no one is like the other, still we recognize each other as human beings.

In talking about human rights as not bound by a legal discourse nor by the confines of nation-states, as speaking from lived experience what concerns people in the present, there is neither the illusion that we speak in sameness, nor that we see the world ‘the same’, but we see the world from our distinct perspective, which is rooted in the specificity of our ever changing present. Relatedness in this sense does not occur between a social utopia of equals who are seen as equal in rights and dignity, or through a kind of sameness, where people belong to the same nationality or are citizens in the same polis. Rather, relatedness comes in this sense through voicing what is urgent for ‘you’ and ‘me’ that we can act upon politically. Human rights are hence open for interpretation, for the unique to speak through the universal discourse of rights and duties. This rethinking of human rights entails a rethinking of HRE as not limited to instruction on legal entitlements, but rather as a learning process of becoming in relations, where rights and duties have a place in the in-between of human subjects. Human rights learning receives a political significance for the future and an urgency through human relations where the embodied uniqueness of different selves takes shape in a new form of political action. Instead of rights of ‘Man’, rights of the ‘individual’, in isolation (an absurdity) its human rights for a plurality of voices.

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