Immigrants’ Rights in the Public Sphere: Hannah Arendt’s Concepts Reconsidered

Mariana San Martín
University of Buenos Aires, Argentina

Received 15 December 2008; accepted 2 February 2009

Abstract
Based on Arendt’s concepts of public and private spheres, immigration issues can be approached from an emphasis on how the most fundamental of all human rights, which is being denied to immigrants, is the most basic constituent of the human condition: the ability to interact in the public realm through action and speech. The granting of this right would enable immigrants to become unique human beings, with the capacity for transformation. As they are presently deprived of these and other rights, they are confined to the most primitive sphere, that is, the one of pure survival. Therefore, a differentiation must be made between dissimilarities in the nature of reception and treatment of diverse immigrants’ groups.

Keywords
immigration, Hannah Arendt, public sphere, America, Europe

Deepening an Understanding of Immigrants’ Lives through Arendt’s Categories

In order to delve into the phenomenon of the millions of people who are living the situation of precarious immigration and involve ourselves deeper in their way of life, including the constant violation of rights that they suffer each day, we will look at this matter as a personal, social, and political problematic, using some of Arendt’s categories. We believe that her categories will support our effort to approach different aspects of identity concerns of immigrants. Thus, a knowledge-based outcome may help us in the future to think about public policies and ways of understanding better this phenomenon by taking into account their particularities.
Beginning with Arendt’s differentiation between the public and private spheres, the immigrant’s place in the new society he/she enters can be analyzed from an emphasis on two considerations that are central to the development of human beings as unique and different, separated from animals, and that corresponds to the public realm: action and speech. The first one is one of the three main human activities Arendt refers to. The other two are labor and work. Each one corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which humans have lived on earth. Labor is the activity that corresponds to the biological process of the human body, and is carried out in rhythm with nature. It comprises all the activities that are necessary to sustain life (for example, obtaining food, water, shelter, and reproduction). Work then, refers to the utilization of natural materials so as to produce lasting objects and provide an artificial world of things. Both labor and work have to do with things, with the materials of nature or nature herself, and they both can be carried on by solitary individuals, that’s why they both have to do with the private sphere, as opposed to action and speech.

Action is, from this perspective, the only activity of these three that occurs among humans without the mediation of things, and corresponds to the human condition of plurality. This plurality is the condition for political life. This means that the fact that no person is equal to anyone who has lived, lives, or will live, is an aspect central to the understanding of human action. With regard to immigrants, as we will see, as they can’t be in the public sphere, all these potential individualities are lost. And for this reason the world loses millions of possible contributions for its development and improvement, because there is no place for this sector with respect to action and plurality. We will develop this concept later.

Before we deepen into these main concepts and show their explanatory power regarding the matter of immigrants, we have to understand first the main and most substantial difference: that is the one between the private and the public realms. We can begin by saying that since the birth of the city-state man has, in addition to his private life, a second, political life. Now every citizen belongs to two different orders of existence, and there is a sharp distinction between the communal and the property owned by each one. In the past, Europeans were able to come to Latin America, act and change their reality. As this, they belonged to both spheres. Nowadays however, the lives of immigrants that go from Latin America to Europe are circumscribed to one of these two spheres – the private one, loosing their transforming potential and sacrificing vital aspects of their existences.