

Research Article

Kurt Borg*

Reanimating Public Happiness: Reading Cavarero and Butler beyond Arendt

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Abstract: This article takes as its point of departure Hannah Arendt's discussion of public happiness, contextualising it within her thoughts on politics, democracy and revolution. It draws on Arendt's discussion of how the expression "pursuit of happiness" has historically shifted from a public understanding of happiness into an increasingly privatised one. The article engages with Arendt's account of public happiness in order to reanimate her radical democratic critique of how representative politics reduces the scope of political action and participation; and how the notion of happiness in a neoliberal era can only be interpreted in economic and subjectivist terms. Furthermore, the article turns to examine how recent works in contemporary political thought, namely, those by Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler, extend and transform the stakes of Arendt's account of public happiness. On one hand, Cavarero's notion of surging democracy is considered as an account of radical politics that keeps alive the Arendtian concern with public happiness by contextualising it within contemporary political struggles and social movements. On the other hand, Butler problematises Arendt's discussion of politics for its neglect of precarity; however, this article argues that Butler's work on assembly extends Arendt's by highlighting possibilities of resistance, radical democracy and even public happiness amid experiences of loss and grief. Although *prima facie* it might appear that happiness and precarity are opposed to each other, this article points towards contemporary political practices, such as those of *Ni Una Menos*, that are critically reanimating public happiness through the intertwining of affective registers that range from joy to grief.

Keywords: affect, Arendt, assembly, Butler, Cavarero, neoliberalism, precarity, public happiness, radical democracy, revolution

Men knew they could not be altogether 'happy' if their happiness was located and enjoyed only in private life.

—Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*

Did you smile or laugh a lot yesterday?

—Gallup World Poll Methodology¹

¹ The World Poll of Gallup provides the data for the annual World Happiness Report by surveying individuals from over 98% of the world's countries. The Gallup World Poll Methodology adopts seven performance indexes: Law and Order, Food and Shelter, Work, Personal Economy, Personal Health, Citizen Engagement, and Well-Being. In addition to these indexes, World Poll questions now also measure opinions about topics such as national institutions, corruption, youth development, community basics, diversity, optimism, communications, violence and religiosity. By way of example, the Citizen Engagement index is defined in terms of respondents' satisfaction with the community in which they live, their inclination to volunteer their time and money to assist others, and their attachment and commitment to their community. Other subsidiary topics included under this index include "Voiced Opinion to Official," which is the closest the questionnaire comes to a politicised understanding of well-being. Other indexes that have a socio-political angle include the National Institutions Index, which reflects citizens' confidence in key institutions prominent in a country's leadership, and the Corruption Index, which is a measure of the pervasiveness of corruption that citizens perceive in their country's government and businesses. More information on the Gallup Poll Methodology can be accessed at: www.oecd.org/sdd/43017172.pdf.

* Corresponding author: Kurt Borg, Department of Public Policy, University of Malta, Msida, Malta, e-mail: kurt.borg@um.edu.mt

1 Introduction

Public happiness is a form of happiness associated with political engagement, involvement and participation. Although present in political discussions particularly around the revolutionary period in the eighteenth century, the notion of public happiness has dissipated almost completely in contemporary times, be it in political thought and practice. This seems like a peculiar claim since on an international level, discourses of happiness are dominant, within contemporary academic debates as well as in supranational institutions.² Happiness even has an International Day – March 20 – and since 2012, the UN has been publishing the World Happiness Report on an annual basis. The rationale behind this report is to measure people's happiness in order to guide public policy-making, in an attempt to move away from gross domestic product as the main development indicator to a gross national happiness. Yet, the notion of public happiness is far removed from the hegemonic notion of happiness that underpins exercises such as the World Happiness Report, as the contrasting notions of happiness depicted in the epigraphs demonstrate. For example, the opening statement of the 2023 edition of the World Happiness Report treats happiness as an individualised and subjectivist sense of well-being, and that the task of politics is to create more of it: "The central task of institutions is to promote the behaviours and conditions of all kinds which are conducive to happiness."³ This conception of happiness is further reinforced by a statement found on the landing page of the World Happiness Report website, which states that "national happiness can now become an operational objective for governments."⁴

The concern of this article is neither to discuss the politics and economics of happiness nor to analyse how discourses of happiness are mobilised in contemporary political and policy fora. I leave that task to other important work being done in the flourishing fields of happiness sciences and their critique.⁵ This article politicises the idea of happiness, taking as its starting point Hannah Arendt's discussion of *public happiness*. I unpack the key insights that animate a number of Arendt's texts from the 1960s on the topic, investigating why Arendt was drawn to this notion, how she critiqued its modern collapse as happiness began to almost unilaterally be associated with individualised notions of well-being and how she thought public happiness was re-invigorated beyond the eighteenth-century revolutionary period as well as in her time.

However, the scope of this article is not to present an exhaustive account and interpretation of Arendt's notion of public happiness and its entwinement with other key conceptual notions from her phenomenology of the political, such as plurality and action; again, ample important works exist in this area.⁶ Rather, this article examines how Arendt's discussion of public happiness was taken up by contemporary thinkers, such as Adriana Cavarero and Judith Butler, whose work on surging democracy and public assembly respectively expands and extends the remit of Arendt's discussion by taking into account recent popular mobilisations and social movements that reanimate the virtues and values of public happiness. The article pursues the argument that Cavarero's and Butler's work shows how a plurality of affects intertwine in the political realm; that is public happiness is not just about happiness and the thrill of political action but also about mourning, an embodied sense of precarity and outrage. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of Ni Una Menos, whose practices, discourses and demonstrations present an example of how public happiness can be reanimated in contemporary times. The article centres on Ni Una Menos since, in its theory and praxis, this movement (which emerges from the Global South) embodies the promise of public happiness as alluded to by Arendt, Cavarero and Butler. However, importantly, it is not simply that Ni Una Menos is *an example of*

² For an academic overview of "happiness sciences," see David et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*.

³ Helliwell et al., "World Happiness Report 2023," 16.

⁴ "World Happiness Report," worldhappiness.report.

⁵ For a (predominantly sympathetic) discussion of economic and policy issues related to happiness, see Bruni and Porta, *Handbook on the Economics of Happiness*. For a critical account of the political uses of happiness discourses under neoliberal capitalism, see Davies, *The Happiness Industry*.

⁶ For a number of excellent texts that unpack Arendt's thinking on the political, see Arndt, *Arendt on the Political*; Buckler, *Hannah Arendt and Political Theory*; and Gottsegen, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*.

what these theorists may have in mind as public happiness. Rather, it is argued that *Ni Una Menos* transcends some of the limitations of these theorists' account of politics and public happiness.

2 Arendt on Public Happiness

Arendt's systematic treatment of the notion of public happiness is found in *On Revolution*, a book-length study of the French and American revolutions.⁷ Furthermore, in a 1970 interview, Arendt brings the notion of public happiness to bear on ongoing political events at the time, such as the student protest movement in America and beyond.⁸ This section details Arendt's discussion of public happiness in these texts, in relation to her sympathetic account of the American Revolution. Moreover, it considers the tensions and ambiguities inherent in the notion of public happiness in those times, and its eventual collapse as happiness came to be thought of almost exclusively in private and individualistic senses of well-being. The section concludes with Arendt's consideration of how public happiness was re-invigorated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including her evaluation of political movements of her time that, in her view, were reanimating a public sense of happiness. This discussion serves as a basis for the subsequent sections on how Cavarero and Butler engage with Arendt's work in such a way that makes the notion of public happiness particularly pertinent for our times. In so doing, this article seeks to build on Arendt's tentative and partial genealogy of public happiness by identifying contemporary political practices and movements that are reanimating the notion of public happiness in directions, however, that exceed or even problematise Arendt's own understanding of the term.

Connecting with her reflections on the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition*, Arendt's later work on revolutions maintains that the American experience of public happiness referred to a form of freedom that consisted "in having a share in the public business,"⁹ whereby this participation brought with it "a feeling of happiness they could acquire nowhere else."¹⁰ Rather than experiencing engagement in public matters as a burden that keeps one away from private endeavours, "the people went to the town assemblies ... neither exclusively because of duty nor, and even less, to serve their own interests but most of all because they enjoyed the discussions, the deliberations, and the making of decisions."¹¹ Here, Arendt notes a similarity with the French experience, noting how the *hommes de lettres* of the eighteenth century experienced their disenfranchisement by the *ancien régime* not as leisure or a blessing but as a burden of enforced inactivity; "an imposed exile from the realm of true freedom."¹² According to Arendt, such men turned to the study of ancient Greek and Roman writers "to learn about the political institutions to which they bore witness,"¹³ which inspired a renewed interest in the power to participate in public affairs. In Tocqueville's terms, explains Arendt, this is a "passion for freedom for its own sake, for the sole 'pleasure to be able to speak, to act, to breathe.'"¹⁴ It was this public sense of happiness and freedom which served as preparation for revolution.

Despite Arendt's optimistic reading of the successes of the American Revolution, she also identifies its inherent tensions; notably, ambivalences centring around the notion of public happiness itself. Arendt reflects on a linguistic ambiguity found in the US Declaration of Independence, drafted chiefly by Thomas Jefferson, which makes reference to the inalienable rights of "Life, Liberty and *the pursuit of Happiness*."¹⁵ Arendt dwells

⁷ Arendt's discussion of public happiness can also be found in two earlier pieces from 1960. See Arendt, "Revolution and Public Happiness;" and Arendt, "Action and the 'Pursuit of Happiness.'"

⁸ See Arendt, "Thoughts on Politics and Revolution."

⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 119.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 123.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 125.

¹⁵ "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript [emphasis added]. This matter is more extensively discussed in Arendt, "Action and the 'Pursuit of Happiness,'" with regard to what she calls Jefferson's "felicity of the pen."

on how the choice of the expression “pursuit of happiness” was not widely discussed by Jefferson’s compatriots and argues that perhaps this was so since the expression was a familiar one in the revolutionary and pre-revolutionary context. For example, Arendt refers to the prevalence of royal proclamations that referred to “the welfare and the happiness of our people”¹⁶ in order to mean the *private* welfare and happiness of the people. However, while the phraseology of the Declaration interestingly departs from John Locke’s formulation by replacing “property” with “happiness,” Arendt wonders why the text does not make reference to *public happiness*. This is particularly so since this expression was sometimes specifically used by way of contrast to “welfare and happiness.”

Arendt remarks that by settling on the expression “pursuit of happiness” in the Declaration, Jefferson’s linguistic slippage was bringing together both senses of public and private happiness, in such a way that the expression would appeal equally to those whose desire was to secure a new body politic as well as to those in the assembly who were exclusively concerned with safeguarding their personal interests. After all, the ambiguity found at the heart of the expression “pursuit of happiness” was present even in the mind of Jefferson and his contemporaries. On one hand, there certainly was a notion of public virtue and an idea that freedom is the essence of happiness. On the other hand, there was also the idea that happiness was not meant to be found in the public realm; rather, it was the happiness of society which should be the end of government, and that any happiness in the “participator in the government of affairs”¹⁷ was looked upon with suspicion as lust for power. Jefferson himself conceded in his private letters that he looked forward to enjoying his private happiness outside of the public realm. For example, in a private letter to James Madison, he claims to seek happiness not in the troubles of political life, but “in the lap and love of my family, in the society of my neighbors and my books, in the wholesome occupations of my farms and affairs.”¹⁸ Yet in another letter, this time to John Adams, Jefferson presents an opposite understanding of happiness, more in line with a public notion of happiness. While reflecting on the prospect of an afterlife in a letter he wrote to Adams 3 years before their death, Jefferson half-ironically reminisces: “May we meet there again, in Congress, with our *antient Colleagues*, and receive with them the seal of approbation, ‘Well done, good and faithful servants.’”¹⁹ Arendt reads this as “a candid admission that life in Congress – the joys of discourse, of legislation, of transcending business, of persuading and being persuaded – was as conclusively a foretaste of an eternal bliss to come.”²⁰ The double and contradictory conceptions of happiness evoked in these letters written by Jefferson thirty years apart reveal the constitutive tension that Arendt sees as defining the notion of public happiness.

As Arendt concludes in *On Revolution*:

the Declaration of Independence, though it blurs the distinction between private and public happiness, at least still intends us to hear the term ‘pursuit of happiness’ in its twofold meaning: private welfare as well as the right to public happiness, the pursuit of well-being as well as being a ‘participator in public affairs’. But the rapidity with which the second meaning was forgotten and the term used and understood without its original qualifying adjective may well be the standard by which to measure, in America no less than in France, the loss of the original meaning and the oblivion of the spirit that had been manifest in the Revolution.²¹

Thus, irrespective of Jefferson’s intentions, the private sense of happiness became the sole interpretation of the term, with the public sense of happiness being, as Arendt puts it, “our lost treasure.”²² In fact, as Tocqueville

¹⁶ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 127.

¹⁷ Ibid. This expression comes from a letter Jefferson sent to Joseph C. Cabell, dated February 2, 1816: “man ... feels that he is a participator in the government of affairs not merely at an election, one day in the year, but every day.” Founders Online, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-09-02-0286.

¹⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 128–9. The full letter cited by Arendt is: “From Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 9 June 1793,” Founders Online, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-26-02-0219.

¹⁹ Arendt, “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness,’” 207 [Arendt’s emphasis]. The full letter cited by Arendt is: “From Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 11 April 1823,” Founders Online, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-3446.

²⁰ Arendt, “Action and the ‘Pursuit of Happiness,’” 206.

²¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 132.

²² Ibid., 280.

remarked on the French Revolution, “of all ideas and sentiments which prepared the Revolution, the notion and the taste of public liberty strictly speaking have been the first ones to disappear.”²³ Arendt even refers to the comments of Crèvecoeur, an anti-revolutionary diplomat and farmer, as anticipating the collapse of public happiness. Crèvecoeur condemned the revolution for interrupting his private happiness, describing the revolutionaries as demons who “cared more for independence and the foundation of the republic than for the interests of husbandmen and householders.”²⁴ In this vein, he predicted a future in which “the man will get the better of the citizen,” and that the future will vent its rage over those who, in their “colossal vanity,”²⁵ choose public virtue over the happiness of one’s family.

Apart from the demise of the notion of public happiness, Arendt contends that another reason why the American Revolution stumbled was because of its failure to institutionalise an intense participatory dimension in the Constitution. Another shortcoming of the revolution she points at is the emphasis placed on the Bill of Rights, the spirit of which goes contrary to that of republicanism and the classical model of democracy. Instead, the political emphasis is placed on the restraints upon government, that is the focus shifts from public freedom to civil liberty, and from public happiness to the pursuit of private happiness. As Richard H. King points out, what Arendt set out to show in *On Revolution* is that:

America’s weakness was not the temptation of dictatorship and terror but the pursuit of wealth and the habit of consumption, the triumph of self-interest over public interest, of private over public happiness ... This was a constant leitmotif in Arendt’s contemporary analysis of the emergence of the citizen-consumer in the mass society.²⁶

The citizen-consumer, for Arendt, marks “the conversion of the citizen of the revolutions into the private individual of nineteenth-century society,”²⁷ a tendency which she saw as partly determining the shape of the twentieth century, and which, one could also say, intensifies with the emergence of neoliberalism.²⁸

In *On Revolution*, Arendt uses the American Revolution as a springboard to a broader reflection on representative politics and its contribution to the demise of public happiness. She maintains that a central difficulty at the heart of revolutionary thinking, an aporia that was identified by the revolutionaries themselves, was: how does one prevent the revolutionary spirit from withering away once constitutions and institutions are brought into being? Arendt notes that the task of the revolutionaries, as they saw it, was to form a constitution that sets the boundaries of the new political realm, but they also had to “assure the survival of the spirit out of which the act of foundation sprang, to realize the principle which inspired it,”²⁹ namely, the passion for public happiness. In the American case, this second task of sustaining the revolutionary spirit was frustrated from the start, not least because of the way in which “the pursuit of happiness” was interpreted more in the direction of private property and thus of civil rights, instead of public happiness and political rights.

However, Arendt traces elements of this second task in Jefferson’s passion for the idea of “the elementary republic of the wards,”³⁰ whereby the republic would also see to the establishment of “councils.” Jefferson fervently describes these as follows: “When there shall not be a man in the State who will not be a member of some of its councils, great or small, he will let the heart be torn out of his body sooner than his power be wrested from him by a Caesar or a Bonaparte.”³¹ On this, Arendt remarks that:

the basic assumption of the ward system, whether Jefferson knew it or not, was that no one could be called happy without his share in public happiness, that no one could be called free without his experience in public

²³ Ibid., 132.

²⁴ Ibid., 135.

²⁵ Ibid., 140.

²⁶ King, *Arendt and America*, 225–6.

²⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 140.

²⁸ See Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

²⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 126.

³⁰ Ibid., 254.

³¹ Ibid.

freedom, and that no one could be called either happy or free without participating, and having a share, in public power.³²

Despite the fact that this idea was never implemented, Arendt sympathetically cites it and agrees with Jefferson that such political participation and action are tied to happiness. She also understands Jefferson's worry that while the revolution gave people their freedom, it did not provide spaces for publicly exercising this freedom since only elected representatives had the opportunity to practise this freedom through activities of expressing one's views, debating and decision-making. On this, Arendt cites the American historian Lewis Mumford who argues that the failure of the Founders to incorporate the township and their meeting halls into constitutions was "one of the tragic oversights of post-revolutionary political development."³³ The tragedy, as Jefferson put it, was that "the abstract, political system of democracy lacked concrete organs"³⁴ since while the Constitution gave power to the citizens, it did not create opportunities for them to act as citizens in the public realm as they did in revolutionary times. Indeed, Jefferson had great esteem for the vigour which he saw in the "little republics"³⁵ prior to the revolution; for him, "there was not an individual in their States whose body was not thrown with all its momentum into action."³⁶

Arendt's diagnosis is that this political sentiment has regrettably fallen out of favour to the extent that "public" and "happiness" are words "which we hardly ever would use together."³⁷ However, in the concluding chapter to *On Revolution*, Arendt argues that remnants of public happiness do exist in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century attempts to establish communes, assemblies, councils, *soviets* and *räte* animated by a similar principle of public happiness.³⁸ These include the short-lived Bavarian *Räterepublic* that existed during the 1918–1919 German Revolution, the Workers' Councils of the Hungarian Revolution, the events of the Prague Spring, and some elements of the student movement in 1960s America. Despite the fact that many of these examples come from the tradition of left-wing politics, Arendt chastises aspects of the Marxian and revolutionary tradition for not being sufficiently ambitious when thinking about what form of government can succeed the revolution, even if they embraced a notion of politics that prizes direct participation. Arendt refers to how Marx argued that organs such as the communal councils of the 1871 Paris Commune were *temporary* organs of the revolution, which must be replaced by a "dictatorship of the proletariat" in the form of a socialist or communist party modelled on centralised governments of nation states. Similarly, she considers the centrality of the party in the Soviet Union to be a betrayal of the council system, which was eliminated in order to ensure that power remained in the hands of the Bolshevik party. Arendt charges that: "So great is the fear of men, even of the most radical and least conventional among them, of things never seen, of thoughts never thought, of institutions never tried before."³⁹

Considering what public happiness might look like in her own time, in a 1970 interview, Arendt explicitly evokes the notion of public happiness to describe what characterises the demonstrations such as those by the student movement. She says:

[I]f I consider what (apart from goals, opinions, doctrines) really distinguishes this generation in all countries from earlier generations, then the first thing that strikes me is its determination to act, its joy in action, the assurance of being able to change things by one's own efforts ... [A]nother experience new for our time entered the game of politics: It turned out that

³² Ibid., 255.

³³ Ibid., 235.

³⁴ Ibid., 236.

³⁵ Ibid., 251.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Arendt, "Action and the 'Pursuit of Happiness,'" 211.

³⁸ For a detailed discussion of Arendt's political thought that contextualises it in the tradition of participatory democracy, and also greatly foregrounds its concern with the citizen council tradition, see Lederman, *Hannah Arendt and Participatory Democracy*.

³⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 258. Indeed, apart from the references to social movements in which Arendt detects traces of public happiness (despite some reservations she had with regard to the student movements), she also proposed a number of ingenious political proposals, some of which "had a strong elitist streak" (Lederman, *Hannah Arendt and Participatory Democracy*, 189). These include Arendt's proposal to transform general suffrage into a system in which (only) those who "demonstrated that they care for more than their private happiness and are concerned about the state of the world would have the right to be heard in the conduct of the business of the republic." (Arendt, *On Revolution*, 279–80).

acting is fun. This generation discovered what the eighteenth century had called “public happiness,” which means that when man takes part in public life he opens up for himself a dimension of human experience that otherwise remains closed to him and that in some way constitutes a part of complete “happiness.”⁴⁰

Interestingly, in this interview, Arendt points to a series of phenomena that account for such uprisings; phenomena which were, according to her, prerequisites of revolution, and which it can be argued are pervasive phenomena in contemporary times, “such as the threatened breakdown of the machinery of government, its being undermined, the loss of confidence in the government on the part of the people, the failure of public services, and various others.”⁴¹ While Arendt critiques the student movement for not being sufficiently organised, she nonetheless uses it to resume her discussion of principles of political organisation and government that can come after revolutions. She refers to the spontaneous organisation of council systems which occurred in various revolutions (the French, the American, the Russian, the Hungarian, etc.) as offering an alternative to the shortcomings of representative politics. Arendt’s description of the desire that animates the council system she has in mind connects directly with the sentiment of public happiness she unpacked in *On Revolution*:

The councils say: We want to participate, we want to debate, we want to make our voices heard in public, and we want to have a possibility to determine the political course of our country. 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. The booth in which we deposit our ballots is unquestionably too small, for this booth has room for only one. The parties are completely unsuitable; there we are, most of us, nothing but the manipulated electorate. But if only ten of us are sitting around a table, each expressing his opinion, each hearing the opinions of others, then a rational formation of opinions can take place through the exchange of opinions.

In this direction I see the possibility of forming a new concept of the state. A council-state of this sort... would be admirably suited to federations of the most various kinds, especially because in it power would be constituted horizontally and not vertically. But if you ask me now what prospect it has of being realized, then I must say to you: Very slight, if at all. And yet perhaps, after all – in the wake of the next revolution.⁴²

Arendt clearly expresses a preference for revolutionary activities that are channelled through institutions. She is sympathetic to and acknowledges the crucial task of political practices, including of resistance, that are initiated apart from the established institutions, as can be seen in her reflections on the student movement in the United States and other practices of resistance to totalitarian Communist states in Eastern Europe. However, she calls for “a completely different principle of organization, which begins from below, continues upward, and finally leads to parliament.”⁴³

There is a marked difference between this “institution-friendly” (i.e. open to being institutionalised) dimension of Arendt’s political thought and contemporary engagements with it as found in the work of Cavarero and Butler. The latter consider the radical potential of movements *outside of* the state and its institutions, to which they adopt a more sceptical outlook. It appears that the tenor of Cavarero’s and Butler’s work (as suggested by the type of social movements which they sympathetically cite, as discussed below) is more attentive than Arendt’s to state-sanctioned forms of violence and structural or systemic injustices. Whereas Arendt’s political philosophical project ambitiously aspired for a new conceptualisation of the state and government, the contemporary uptake of Arendt’s work considered in this article looks to grassroots collective movements as sources of hope and as resistance to the failures and shortcomings of the state. In doing so, Cavarero and Butler engage with Arendt’s political thought in such a way that makes it a critical resource with which to investigate the malaises of contemporary democratic politics while inspiring thoughts on how a sense of public happiness can be reanimated today.

⁴⁰ Arendt, “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” 201–3.

⁴¹ Ibid., 205.

⁴² Ibid., 232–3.

⁴³ Ibid., 232.

3 Cavarero and Butler on Affect in Politics

Cavarero's *Surging Democracy* engages with Arendt's political thought, particularly her account of public happiness, to analyse instances in contemporary political activity, such as that of social movements (in Italy and the United States in particular). Cavarero opens the preface to the English edition of *Surging Democracy* with her account of being in a demonstration of the Sardines movement. This movement, active between late 2019 and 2020, puzzled Italy with the "totally nonviolent behaviour of such a large number of people, of every age and social condition, joyously gathering in public spaces"⁴⁴ to oppose the racist and intolerant discourses and actions of right-wing populist politicians in Italy. What defined these demonstrations was not the typical insurgent mark of protest, but "the thrilling emotion of participating in political demonstrations within a shared public space."⁴⁵ Cavarero recounts her excitement of "rediscovering and experiencing that form of plural, horizontal, nonviolent, generative, and affirmative interaction."⁴⁶

Cavarero coins the term *surging democracy* to describe this "performative type of politics that is enacted when people congregate, reclaiming a public space, or ... when, in order to protest, bodies gather in a shared space, displaying the protestors' corporeal plurality."⁴⁷ Cavarero opts for the term surging democracy to capture Arendt's political sense for a number of reasons. The term "surging" highlights the generative rather than the merely oppositional aspect of plural interaction; thus, it refuses to characterise democracy simply by its againstness, but as being essentially affirmative. For Cavarero, the affirmation at the heart of a surging democratic crowd is:

We are plural, each an embodied uniqueness, distinct and equal, rejecting exclusion and enacting inclusion. We embrace and empower differences. We display differences in flesh and blood ... We congregate bodily to protest segregation and racism. And *there is happiness* in experiencing and sharing the public exhibition of our incarnate plurality. *There is joy* in physically engendering freedom.⁴⁸

Moreover, echoing the centrality of natality in Arendt's philosophical language, as well as Cavarero's own critique of rectitude,⁴⁹ "surging" captures not just the sense of insurrection (i.e. of standing up against) but also "has another meaning far less vertical or bellicose in nature: that of 'springing forth,' 'coming into existence,' ... Or when something is said to be 'welling up' because it springs forth, emerges, pours out."⁵⁰ For Cavarero, surging democracy and public happiness are connected insofar as they both rest on the Arendtian notion of plurality:

To act politically produces a type of happiness different and higher than any private activity, Arendt affirms. ... This happiness entails a being-in-relation. ... Public happiness is not something that is planned and calculated, but rather precisely 'happens' when human beings act in concert in a shared space of appearance. ... Public happiness is discovered and rediscovered by political actors whenever and wherever they perform for the sake of the 'freedom to be free,' thus tasting the constitutive, birthing quality of action.⁵¹

In Arendt's political thought, Cavarero thus traces the enthralling *pathos* of utopia rather than the detached cynicism of realism; a philosophical imaginary filled with hope that dares to speak of the political experience within a shared public space as one of happiness.⁵²

⁴⁴ Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, ix.

⁴⁵ Ibid., x.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., xi. Cavarero refers to a number of different theorists who, like her and like Arendt, reclaim the word *democracy* from the various malaises that have reduced the term to a powerless and vague form of administrative politics. Such attempts include Butler's *radical democracy*, Ranciere's *anarchic democracy*, Abensour's *insurgent democracy*, Lefort's *wild democracy*, Balibar's *democratization of democracy* and Mouffe's *agonistic democracy*. See Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, 4.

⁴⁸ Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, xi [emphasis added].

⁴⁹ See Cavarero, *Inclinations*.

⁵⁰ Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, 12.

⁵¹ Ibid., 41.

⁵² Ibid., 14.

Before moving on to describe contemporary instances of what Cavarero regards as public happiness, it is useful to delineate two models of what, according to her, public happiness is not: these being exclusionary forms of populism, and happiness economics. With regards to the first, Cavarero adamantly points out that one of the major political threats to surging democracy is “exclusive neopopulism,”⁵³ further exacerbated by contemporary digital platforms. This form of populism poses as an attempt to further democracy by critiquing the political “establishment” and claiming to do politics in the name of “the people” while resting on exclusionary modes of delineating which individuals and social groups qualify as “the people.” Referring to the digital populism of the Five Star Movement in Italy, Cavarero argues that such movements portray themselves as champions of a participatory form of politics that consults the people (using digital platforms with evocative names such as “Rousseau platform”). However, for Cavarero, exclusive populism does not cultivate an Arendtian sense of plurality and public happiness; rather, it creates “a climate of permanent electoral campaign” in which the leader benefits from “the uninterrupted flow of communication,” “plays upon the people’s emotions” and “adopts the visceral language of the mob and openly espouses intolerance.”⁵⁴ Indeed, Cavarero concludes, “exclusive populist agendas constructed on nationalism, xenophobia, racism, sexism, homophobia and the like, are highly incompatible with Arendt’s idea of politics,” whose content implies “openness toward others, regardless of their belonging to a group, a nation, a minority, a religion.”⁵⁵

Furthermore, Cavarero’s analysis evokes Arendt’s critical discussion of how happiness has descended into the merely individual private realm by critiquing the conception of happiness underpinning many contemporary hegemonic models of the politics and economics of happiness. Cavarero refers to the contemporary predominance of discourses of happiness, in the form of university courses on the topic, self-help books and marketing directed at individualistic and consumer-oriented understandings of happiness.⁵⁶ Cavarero’s point in this regard is that we must avoid “confusing the Arendtian concept of public happiness and the sociological, psychological, political, and, especially, economic and liberal notion of happiness – collective or private, utilitarian or hedonistic – which contemporary debates focus on.”⁵⁷ In other words, while discourses of happiness are currently proliferating on a popular level as well as in debates on economics, development and public policy, *public happiness* as a quintessential political emotion receives comparatively little to no attention. The sad reality, for Cavarero, is that mass society “foments and economically exploits the individual desire for a happy life,”⁵⁸ while offering few opportunities to experience public happiness.

In view of this, Cavarero turns to consider political practices and movements that carry within them the potential for public happiness. She argues that, in our contemporary times of political crises as exemplified by movements protesting structural racism, the loss of migrant lives and climate catastrophe, “the time has come for current democracies to rediscover the ideas and practices that originated them at the threshold of modernity.”⁵⁹ In this spirit, Cavarero points to a number of instances which can qualify as public happiness within the contemporary political landscape. She refers to the 2017 Women’s March in Washington, the 2018 March for Our Lives and the 2019 Global Climate Strike; demonstrations which in different but related vocabularies were described by their participants as “experiences of affirmative energy and joy.”⁶⁰ Cavarero observes that

⁵³ Ibid., 8. This notion, which Cavarero draws from the work of Paolo Graziano, is contrasted with that of the radical left inclusive neopopulism, associated with the work of Laclau and Mouffe. Indeed, an argument can be made that certain manifestations of left populism, insofar as they are concerned with radicalising democracy, can constitute one approach to how public happiness can be reanimated in contemporary neoliberal times. In a sense, one line of further research animating this article is the idea of public happiness as left populism as radical democracy. Public happiness, therefore, can be seen as challenging the contemporary depoliticisation of the political realm and the neoliberal undoing of democracy (see Brown, *Undoing the Demos*), as well as resisting the post-political consensus or the post-democracy situation (see Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*).

⁵⁴ Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, 17.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁶ Other literature that can be cited in this regard include Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, as well as the sources listed in Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, 102n.35.

⁵⁷ Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, 43.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁵⁹ Ibid., xv.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 44.

such spaces constitute contemporary sites for public happiness: “in the vocabulary of those who have the chance to participate in political movements capable of experiencing a surging democracy, terms like *joy* and *happiness* appear quite often.”⁶¹ These spaces carry within them the “old” taste for freedom that Arendt refers to; there, the democratic thrill and collective pathos inherent to political participation are rediscovered anew, “as if they were spaces of participation in which participants ‘happen’ to discover and recognize that public happiness is transmitted from generation to generation like a hidden treasure.”⁶² As Olivia Guaraldo eloquently puts it, despite being forgotten by theory, public happiness is very familiar to political praxis:

Actors don’t know it before the actual happening of it, yet when it happens they recognize it as something that resonates with them, that fits their being, enhancing at once their pleasure in the company of others and their urge to appear to them, to tell them what they think and what they want to do and say. *When it happens, they recognize it as happiness.*⁶³

As can be seen by the examples cited, the demonstrations in which Cavarero locates a reanimated sense of public happiness are ones struggling against sexism, racism, xenophobia and climate catastrophe. Thus, alongside the emphasis on “positive” affects, such as happiness (and even joy), is another affective register, one characterised by “negative” affects such as anger, outrage and even fear. This intertwining of affects is a point that can be further demonstrated through Butler’s work, which although *prima facie* is associated with the politics of mourning and grievability, nonetheless also contains resources that can enable a rethinking of the notion of public happiness.

Butler’s critical and inventive engagement makes Arendt’s work speak more directly to contemporary concerns. For the purposes of this article, I will focus on Butler’s engagement with Arendt in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*.⁶⁴ In this work, Butler draws on Arendtian notions such as cohabitation and space of appearance; however, Butler also contests aspects of Arendt’s thinking such as the sharp distinction she draws between the public realm and the private sphere, and critiques Arendt for, despite acknowledging that “the revolution is embodied,”⁶⁵ characterising political actions directed at ameliorating bodily needs and life’s necessities as merely motivated by necessity rather than the true freedom to be found in the political realm. Indeed, Arendt’s reluctance to consider bodily requirements as a core political issue is tied to another contentious point in her political thought, which is her outlook on the “social question.” This refers to the political attempts to respond to the social grievances instigated by the move away from agrarian society due to industrialisation. As understood in the Marxian tradition, the social question is what motivated the founding of trade unions and political parties, as well as the occurrence of strikes and rioting in the nineteenth century. Arendt does not regard the social question as belonging to the proper public sphere and, thus, the political realm. Moreover, she argues that attempts to politicise the social realm tarnish the concept of freedom by associating it more with liberation.⁶⁶ Arendt faults both Marx and liberalism for contributing to the transformation of the meaning of the truly political or public realm; Marx by glorifying work outside of its private sphere and foregrounding the necessities of biological life; and liberalism by characterising politics as principally concerned with the maintenance of life and the safeguarding of individual interests. This outlook towards the social question also explains Arendt’s evaluation of the French Revolution, which she regarded as primarily motivated by hunger and destitution. As Arendt remarks, “the cry for bread will always be uttered with one voice,”⁶⁷ which in view of her concern with the dangers of eliminating plurality and uniqueness, is quite a scathing evaluation

⁶¹ Ibid., 35. On this point, Cavarero fruitfully refers to the work of Lynne Segal on the experiences of transformative energy and shared joy within 1960s feminist political performances. See Segal, *Radical Happiness*, cited in Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, 36.

⁶² Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, 44.

⁶³ Guaraldo, “Public Happiness,” 413 [emphasis added].

⁶⁴ Butler’s engagement with Arendt’s work is not limited to this text, but can be found in other texts, such as *Parting Ways* and *Who Sings the Nation-State?*

⁶⁵ Butler, *Notes*, 46.

⁶⁶ On Arendt’s notions of the public, the private and the social, see Canovan, “Politics as Culture.”

⁶⁷ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 94.

Butler argues that if there is a radical democratic potential in public assemblies, this can be seen in demonstrations that foreground precarity and call for ensuring that the conditions required to sustain a livable life are met. In highlighting the power of assembly, Butler also seeks to revive a notion of popular sovereignty as a reaction to the contemporary neoliberal collapse of the political realm. This collapse, Butler argues, is not just a contemporary phenomenon:

Democratic theories have always feared ‘the mob’ even as they affirm the importance of expressions of the popular will, even in their unruly form [A]uthors as diverse as Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville, wondered quite explicitly whether democratic state structures could survive unbridled expressions of popular sovereignty or whether popular rule devolves into the tyranny of the majority.⁶⁸

This in no way means that Butler uncritically celebrates the power of crowds. Not any assembly is necessarily a democratic force, in the same way that not any form of affective invigoration qualifies as public happiness. To highlight this point, in an important passage in *Notes* (which, interestingly, creates a parallel with Cavarero’s work by drawing on the verb “to surge”), Butler clarifies that their motivation is not to endorse any form of public assembly or protest: “There are, after all, all sorts of surging multitudes I would not want to endorse (even if I do not dispute their right to assemble), and they would include lynch mobs, anti-Semitic or racist or fascist congregations, and violent forms of antiparliamentary mass movements.”⁶⁹ Moreover, while acknowledging the centrality of affects and passions in politics,⁷⁰ Butler cautions against simply regarding as progressive or critical public displays of affect in political assemblies: “I am less concerned with the ostensible vitality of surging multitudes or any nascent and promising life force that seems to belong to their collective action than I am with joining a struggle to establish more sustaining conditions of livability in the face of systematically induced precarity and forms of racial destitution.”⁷¹ This once again highlights how Butler’s understanding of politics moves beyond Arendt’s by politicising conditions for livability. Here, Butler proposes a notion of radical democratic politics that retains at its core a reanimated sense of public happiness and affective intensity:

The final aim of politics is not simply to surge forth together (though this can be an essential moment of affective intensity within a broader struggle against precarity), constituting a new lived sense of the “people,” even if sometimes, for the purposes of radical democratic change—which I do endorse—it is important to surge forth in ways that claim and alter the attention of the world for some more enduring possibility of livable life for all. It is one thing to feel alive, or to affirm aliveness, and yet another to say that that fleeting sense is all that we can expect from politics. Feeling alive is not quite the same as struggling for a world in which life becomes livable for those who have not yet been valued as living beings.⁷²

This is the form of resistance and political action that Butler traces in the Gezi Park protests, for example; resistance as public happiness, one could say.⁷³ In fact, a 2018 discussion between Butler and the Turkish political philosopher Zeynep Gambetti explicitly evoked “the idea of public happiness in the wake of public resistance, using the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul as a springboard.”⁷⁴ Butler’s thoughts on the politics of the squares or the streets can shed important light on how the notion of public happiness can be reanimated today. Crucially, and this is where Butler departs from Arendt, whatever there is to be preserved in the notion of public happiness – its emphasis on people’s participation and its radical democratic potential, for example – Butler foregrounds by connecting it with notions of vulnerability and dependency. What this means is that in

⁶⁸ Butler, *Notes*, 1.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁷⁰ Indeed, one wonders what it would mean to think of an unaffected politics, as some technocratic understandings of politics as administrative problem-solving or rationalistic calculation would have it. On this matter, and on how mainstream politicians posit themselves as possessing the truth and rationality required to govern, as opposed to other politicians which they regard as emotional, post-truth and populist, see Galanopoulos and Stavrakakis, “Populism, Anti-populism and Post-truth.”

⁷¹ Butler, *Notes*, 183.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ For more by Butler on the Gezi Park protests, see Butler, *Notes*, 154–92. See also the chapters by Gambetti and Ertür in Butler et al., *Vulnerability in Resistance*.

⁷⁴ See bampfa.org/event/public-happiness-judith-butler-and-zeynep-gambetti.

the political movements analysed by Butler – including, for example, the Occupy Movement, demonstrations in Tahrir Square, Puerta del Sol, Gezi Park and the Brazilian favela movement (and, as will be argued later, the Ni Una Menos movement) – “the basic requirements of the body are at the center of political mobilizations – *those requirements are, in fact, publicly enacted prior to any set of political demands.*”⁷⁵ Contra Arendt’s critique of the “social question” as displacing the true realm of politics, Butler foregrounds the embodied dimension of acting in concert, especially when the bodies assembled in the streets demonstrate the condition of precarity and incorporate it in their rallying cries and resistance:

it is *this* body, and *these* bodies, that require employment, shelter, health care, and food, as well as a sense of a future that is not the future of unpayable debt; it is *this* body, or *these* bodies, or bodies *like* this body or these bodies, that live the condition of an imperiled livelihood, decimated infrastructure, accelerating precarity.⁷⁶

Thus, public happiness is not what follows once the “social” issues pertaining to the “realm of necessity” are removed from the proper political realm. Rather, Butler’s suggestion is that one form that resistance can take is the mobilisation of vulnerability or exposure itself; that is “vulnerability as a form of activism.”⁷⁷ Therefore, one domain where the people are intervening directly in the political realm is when they resist conditions that are rendering life unlivable, making bodily needs, including demands for food, shelter, healthcare and other supports required for survival their primary rallying point. Such political practices do not function by doing away with the realm of dependency and necessity; to the contrary, they *demonstrate precarity*.⁷⁸ For Butler, such demonstrations are, at once, “Arendtian and counter-Arendtian,”⁷⁹ since they powerfully intervene in the public realm but do so *through* politicising bodily requirements and support provision. Cavarero too, dwelling on Butler’s creative reading and use of Arendt, remarks that it is unlikely “[t]hat Arendt would have defined as genuinely political the phenomenon of assembled bodies that march in protest.”⁸⁰ This is so not only due to the content of these demonstrations but also their form, with Arendt favouring the dimension of the agora where “those present must see and hear each other”⁸¹ rather than a mass of people. Yet, despite Arendt, the argument put forward in this article is that the critical virtues and democratising possibilities that Arendt saw in the notion of public happiness can be seen as existing in such political mobilisations rooted in precarity.

Indeed, Butler concludes a 2013 interview by noting how the sociability and solidarity that marks demonstrations such as the Occupy Gezi protests counter the depoliticising tendencies of neoliberalism and invigorates people to craft novel forms of living and acting together, an experience that brings with it pleasures and joys amid the precarity and hardship being faced:

Those are rare moments, perhaps what Arendt would understand as founding or inaugural moments, and especially hard to find under neoliberal conditions, but also under conditions where state is increasing its authoritarian control and public spaces are intensely surveyed or controlled. *Popular resistance has its pleasures, its joys.* It is not just because they are transforming the conditions of their lives together, but because they are part of a transformation that is happening in unexpected ways, in ways that let hope live again. We were talking in the seminar about public happiness. *My guess is most people do not associate political action with public happiness. But maybe now they do, which means that next time, we see what comes!*⁸²

It is for this reason that I disagree with Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen’s claim that, by thinking of politics primarily in terms of resistance, including in their discussion of Arendt, “in Butler’s recent work too ... [t]he affective register of politics remains dominated by precariousness, loss, and lamentation, whereas public happiness and

⁷⁵ Butler, *Notes*, 182 [emphasis in original].

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 10 [emphasis in original].

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷⁸ Butler and De Boever, “Demonstrating Precarity.”

⁷⁹ Butler, *Notes*, 97.

⁸⁰ Cavarero, *Surging Democracy*, 55.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Arik et al., “On Vulnerability, Interdependency and Popular Sovereignty,” 35 [emphasis added].

joys of action go unnoticed.”⁸³ It is certainly true that Butler’s work, particularly since *Precarious Life*, has been associated with the politics of mourning and grievability;⁸⁴ however, as the aforementioned quotation by Butler suggests, the affective register of politics in their work is broader than the sole focus on mourning and loss. Butler’s foregrounding of mourning, susceptibility, vulnerability and dependency – and the affects these mobilise – can (and, indeed, must) be read alongside the affective register of joy, affirmation, thrill, vibrancy and happiness evoked by Arendt and Cavarero. Thus, importantly, for Butler, the two affective registers are not mutually exclusive, but rather co-dependent; there is no joy without eventual loss, no thrill without possible failure, no affirmation without looming destruction. Butler’s take on the affective intensity that can accompany public assembly does speak of public happiness (although it only gestures towards it in a tentative manner), but also widens the affective register of this experience in such a way that it includes joy, mourning, pleasures and sensations.

This could be one sense of Butler’s notion of *sensate democracy*. Butler introduced this term in *Frames of War* in the context of examining the ways in which war is sustained by impacting what we can sense, intensifying sensations to certain happenings while deadening affect in response to other events, whereby such regulation of shock and outrage “works to undermine a sensate democracy, restricting what we can feel.”⁸⁵ Analogously, the deadening of affect by hegemonic political practices within contemporary liberal democracies can be seen in the loss of trust in institutional politics and the disappearing scope of direct decision-making by citizens and individuals on policies that impact them.⁸⁶ On the other hand, affect is enlivened in destructive and aggressive ways in practices that mobilise hate and rage towards particular social groups based on issues of race, class, religion, sexuality and gender. In response to this, a reanimated sense of public happiness, one which complements Cavarero’s surging democracy and Butler’s sensate democracy, re-invigorates the realm of the political and expands possibilities for political action, while remaining deeply committed to transforming structures and institutions that contribute to the differential distribution of precarity across different populations and social groups. It is this sense of public happiness that can be witnessed in the Ni Una Menos movement.

4 The Public Happiness of *Ni Una Menos*

In more recent work, Butler has written about movements, such as Ni Una Menos, which embody a radical democratic potential of reanimating a sense of public happiness in contemporary times.⁸⁷ Ni Una Menos [Not One Less] is a grassroots feminist movement that originated in Argentina in 2015 as a movement campaigning against gender-based violence, but whose concerns and reach expanded beyond that as its rallying cries and actions spilled over into other countries and continents. What Butler praises in this movement is its transversality, that is its ability to link and connect peoples engaged in varied struggles and with different concerns, such as anti-femicide, struggles against workers’ exploitation, colonial dispossession, extractivist capitalism and finance under neoliberalism. Moreover, as Butler puts it in their endorsement of the work of Veronica Gago, a political theorist and one of the organisers of Ni Una Menos in Argentina, in Gago’s text (and practice), “embodied thought takes shape as affect, action, and a new understanding of collective potential.”⁸⁸

⁸³ Hyvönen, “Political Action Beyond Resistance,” 205, cited in Guaraldo, “Public Happiness,” 401.

⁸⁴ See Eng and Kazanjian, *Loss*; and Hutchison, *Affective Communities in World Politics*.

⁸⁵ Butler, *Frames of War*, 52.

⁸⁶ Social scientific literature on these topics, adopting diverse methodological and conceptual frameworks, include Butzlaff and Messinger-Zimmer, “Undermining or Defending Democracy?,” Lenard, “The Decline of Trust, The Decline of Democracy?,” Mauk, “Rebuilding Trust in Broken Systems?,” OECD, “Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy,” and Pantazi et al., “Power to the People.”

⁸⁷ For more by Butler on Ni Una Menos, see Butler, *What World Is This?*, 101–9. In this postscript, Butler has also written on the Movement for Black Lives.

⁸⁸ Gago, *Feminist International*, ii.

In *Feminist International*, Gago refers to one practice of Ni Una Menos – the assembly – that is particularly relevant to the topic of this article. She discusses the political role and significance of the assembly, characterising it “as a *situated apparatus of collective intelligence*.”⁸⁹ Gago emphasises the role of the assembly to produce sovereignty over what is collectively decided upon, mixing together differences in experiences, expectations and languages. Moreover, the materiality of the assembly is foregrounded: “the assembly is the *concrete place where words cannot be detached from the body*.”⁹⁰ Contra Arendt, the body becomes the site of politics. The body is not bracketed out of politics; rather, its centrality to political action is continually affirmed: “Where raising one’s voice is to gesture, breathe, sweat, and feel that the words slip and are trapped in the bodies of others. ... The fabric of the assembly shows again how laborious body-to-body work is.”⁹¹ Yet, with Arendt, Gago affirms that the assembly produces the right to appearance. This type of assembly announces a different space than the exclusionary ancient model of the polis; it is an assembly *of bodies*, the space “where bodies function as a ‘referential force,’ and the situation that enables an alliance based on the assumption of precarity as a common condition that is politically imposed.”⁹²

In a 2018 interview, Cecilia Palmeiro, a founding member of Ni Una Menos, evocatively describes the power of organising through the popular assembly:

Assemblies are a form of direct democracy with no representative hierarchies. Ni Una Menos does not represent the voices of those less privileged, but we amplify them. In assemblies, we elaborate and negotiate our claims and proposals, we discuss ideas, and we build a collective inclusive voice. The assemblies are the space that guarantees horizontality in the decision-making process. ... In these processes we are creating a different sort of power, a power that is not accumulated in capitalist terms, but that permeates our subjectivities. [...]

In our experience, organizing in open assemblies guarantees that all voices and bodies matter and that we learn from each other and appropriate each other’s struggles. ... It is crucial that at the same time that we contest the existing order, we create utopias, and put them into practice.⁹³

The resonance between this description of the assembly and the notion of public happiness is striking. Palmeiro’s description of the popular assembly overlaps with Arendt’s criticism of the shortcomings of representative politics, her endorsement of the council system, as well as her view that a key dimension of the revolution is to result in the instalment of institutions and practices that outlive the revolutionary fervour. It is in such contemporary movements that the spirit of public happiness, as conceived by Arendt but also going beyond her formulation, can be found again.

Apart from its material and embodied dimension, Gago and Ni Una Menos highlight the crucial affective dimension of the assembly and the movement: their practices are rooted in anger (but not in violence), in passion (but not victimisation) and in joyful desire (rather than just mourning).⁹⁴ Its affective dimension is a vibrant one, even as it is intertwined with precarity, destitution and violence. Nonetheless, what the movement is bringing to life is not reducible to that which it is reacting against (sexism, violence against sexual minorities, extractivism, etc.). It also spills over by animating novelty: new forms of organising, of sociality, of political subjectivity, and of democratic co-existence. Referring to the March 2017 International Women’s Strike, in which Ni Una Menos played a key role, Gago writes:

On that day in March 2017, we felt the earth shake beneath our feet. But during the preceding months, we had moved with the certainty that what we were doing, or stopped doing, was decisive. We had organized assemblies, attended small meetings here and there, talked, wrote, listened, fought, conspired, and fantasized. We even dreamed at night about what was left to do in the coming days. Compañeras around the world would simultaneously do similar things: coordinated by slogans and

⁸⁹ Ibid., 155 [emphasis in original].

⁹⁰ Ibid., 161 [emphasis in original].

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 179.

⁹³ Branigan and Palmeiro, “Women Strike in Latin America and Beyond.”

⁹⁴ See Sosa, “Mourning, Activism, and Queer Desires.”

intuitions, by practices and networks we had been weaving for some time, as well as by gestures that we did not even know lived inside of us. We were magnetized by a strange shared feeling of rage and complicity, of potencia and urgency.⁹⁵

This is public happiness reanimated. It is a sense of public happiness that does not seek to disavow the corporeal, the affective and the precarious. It also seeks to go beyond the state and its institutions, instead imagining and inhabiting new images of counterpower, “of a popular sovereignty that defies faith in the state as monopoly over the political, of insurgencies that have renewed dynamics of decision making and autonomy.”⁹⁶ Gago emphasises that such moments are intermittent and fragile, but insofar as they produce new forms of embodiment and of power, they become a movement that reanimate public happiness by raising the question: “What does it mean to act together when the conditions for doing so have been devastated?”⁹⁷

5 Conclusion

In *The Happiness Industry*, William Davies powerfully critiques the hegemony and depoliticising effect of contemporary discourses of happiness:

A growing number of corporations employ ‘chief happiness officers’, while Google has an in-house ‘jolly good fellow’ to spread mindfulness and empathy. Specialist happiness consultants advise employers on how to cheer up their employees, the unemployed on how to restore their enthusiasm to work, and – in one case in London – those being forcibly displaced from their homes on how to move on emotionally.⁹⁸

This shows not just the emancipatory sterility of contemporary discourses of happiness but also highlights their ideological function in suppressing thoughts and practices of resistance. The privatisation of happiness is complemented by a certain depoliticisation, or rather, by the retreating scope of direct political engagement and participation. This article aspired to show how discourses (and experiences) of public happiness can function *otherwise*, towards other political horizons and realities.

With this thought in mind, this article turned to Arendt’s interest in the notion of public happiness, not to simply endorse her analysis but to see how it can be evoked within contemporary political realities. Reanimating the notion and experience of public happiness is one crucial task of progressive social movements. What attests to this being a fruitful line of inquiry are the ample works referring to the joy of congregating, the newly found feelings of happiness when planning the running of assemblies, or of claiming public space and voicing one’s concerns as a people, mixed with the emotions of fear, grief and anger in response to the clamping down on freedoms, censorship or state violence.⁹⁹ Of course, affect in politics can go in different directions, as can be seen in heightened feelings of fear, disgust and hate towards migrants, LGBTIQ individuals, women and BIPOC as instances in which feelings, including public feelings (i.e. affective reactions caused by or in response to political affairs), make their way in the public realm.¹⁰⁰ Thus, rather than bracketing away the affective from the political, the task for contemporary progressive social movements is to redirect affect in the direction of the principles that underpin public happiness, namely, a sense of public freedom, a right to access the public realm, having a share in public power, and to be “a participator in the government of affairs.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Gago, *Feminist International*, 34–5 [emphasis in original].

⁹⁶ Ibid., 162.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Davies, *The Happiness Industry*, 4.

⁹⁹ See Goodwin et al., *Passionate Politics*.

¹⁰⁰ See Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*; Samuels, *Psychoanalyzing the Left and Right After Donald Trump*; and Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*.

¹⁰¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 127.

With Arendt, and sometimes beyond her, this article sought to show how public happiness is a notion worth rediscovering as it can enable a powerful critique of the collapse of the political realm and the shrinking role of people's political involvement. A reanimation of public happiness can also inspire new forms of political action as well as give a name to a prevalent sentiment being invigorated by social movements that are rediscovering the "lost treasure" of public happiness. With Cavarero, my motivation in calling for a reanimation of public happiness was not to celebrate the "great revolutionary men" of the eighteenth century but to see what could constitute an analogous sense of public happiness today in light of contemporary crises and catastrophes faced by neoliberal societies with regard to hate, exclusion, social and economic inequalities, neopopulism, new forms of authoritarianism, extractivist, digital and financial capitalism, and so on. With Butler, this article has argued that, although this might sound paradoxical, affective intensities such as mourning and outrage can serve as a basis for public happiness today. After all, as Butler suggests, public assemblies in the face of precarity – with their potential for action alongside the risk that they may be met with state or police violence – bear witness to "a form of social solidarity *both mournful and joyful*."¹⁰²

Despite these infrequent references to joy and public happiness by Butler (often made by referring to Cavarero's work¹⁰³), their work does not systematically flesh out a notion of public happiness but only gestures towards it. For this reason, the article centred on Ni Una Menos insofar as this movement embraces the varying notions of public happiness as put forward by Arendt and reworked by Cavarero and Butler, while also going beyond some of the limitations of these theorists. Ni Una Menos embraces Arendt's critique of how contemporary democratic societies do not offer sufficient spaces for political action, while bearing witness to practices (such as the assembly) that inspire direct political participation; yet, contra Arendt, the movement's organising is prompted by a concern with a lived sense of precarity experienced as exploitation, abuse, gender-based violence, poverty, austerity, debt, homelessness, food insecurity, poisoning by agro-toxins and so on. This emphasis on precarity and the complicity of state institutions in reinforcing violence places Ni Una Menos more in line with Cavarero's and Butler's political outlook. In fact, the movement bears witness to what Cavarero refers to as the surging and generative powers of democracy. And, with Butler, Ni Una Menos highlights the importance of transversality (indeed, it could be argued that Butler's recent thought on assembly is informed and inspired by their exposure to social movements such as Ni Una Menos), of articulating ever-expanding demands that are not rooted in pre-established social identities but are articulated *in the midst* of gathering, of translation and the building of alliances despite ambivalences and tensions, and of being moved through mourning and grief without being tied to just that affect. Yet, beyond Butler, Ni Una Menos presents a theory and a practice that breaks away from the emphasis on victimisation and mourning. Finally, while Butler only seems to gesture towards the possibility of public happiness in contemporary times, Ni Una Menos pushes forward their work by demonstrating what public happiness and the joys of political action within a radical democratic imaginary can look like.

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¹⁰² Butler, *Notes*, 23 [emphasis added].

¹⁰³ See, for example, Butler, *Perdita e rigenerazione*.

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