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Where Is Politics Generated? Althusius, Arendt, and the Role of Mediating Structures in Non-Sovereign Politics

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Abstract

Modern political thought typically understands politics as an order of rule centered on supreme authority, usually sovereignty. However, this sovereign model compresses the rich mediating relationships and plural actions within politics. Taking "where is politics generated" as its core question, this article conducts a comparative study of the political theories of Johannes Althusius and Hannah Arendt from the perspective of mediating structures. The article first elaborates the basic structure of the sovereign model and identifies its underlying social imaginary: political order is understood as a ruling structure established by a unified adjudication center, while mediating communities and plural relationships are regarded as objects to be incorporated into it. On this basis, the article analyzes how Althusius and Arendt, respectively, proposed two non-sovereign forms of politics against different historical conditions of mediating structures. Althusius, writing in a still-corporate world where mediating structures remained abundant, understood politics as a symbiotic order produced through hierarchically constructed communities. Arendt, confronting the modern disintegration of those structures and the decline of the public sphere, redefined politics as the action of plural actors in public space and the generation of power. The former answers how political community is constructed outside the sovereign center; the latter answers how politics can be reactivated within an already institutionalized community.

Keywords: non-sovereign politics; Althusius; Arendt; mediating structures; political action

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1. Introduction

Modern political thought has long understood politics as an order centered on supreme authority [1] (p. 775) [2] (p. 220). Within this narrative, politics requires a center capable of making final decisions, issuing unified commands, and maintaining order. Whether this center takes the form of state law, popular sovereignty, or the general will, the underlying assumption remains constant: political order is a ruling structure established by a unified adjudication center, and political norms are binding because they are backed by decisive reasons for compliance [1] (p. 793–794). From Bodin to Hobbes, this political imaginary gradually became the dominant grammar of modern political theory. When dispersed individuals or groups are brought under a supreme authority, genuine public order is thought to emerge.

Hannah Arendt provided the most sustained critique of this tradition. In her diagnosis, political thought in the Western tradition has gradually equated politics with rule, defined political capacity as the ability to impose one's will upon others, and understood political order as a structure of command and obedience [3] (pp. 107–109) [4] (p. 220). In *On Revolution*, she identified Bodin as a key source of modern sovereignty doctrine, noting that Turgot translated his term *maiestas* into *souveraineté* [5] (p. 24). In *The Human Condition*, she further argued that Bodin grounded sovereignty in private property and economic life, thereby undermining the ancient boundary between the private and the political [4] (p. 68) [6] (pp. 243–244). Arendt's critique has reshaped how contemporary political theory understands sovereignty: not merely as a juridical concept but as a particular way of conceiving political order that forecloses other possibilities [7] (pp. 2–3).

But Arendt's historical reconstruction of alternatives to sovereignty was selective. She turned to the ancient Greek *polis* and to Machiavelli as sources for a different conception of politics. Machiavelli, in her reading, was the sole thinker in the Western tradition who refused to answer the question of what politics is for by subordinating politics to some higher end [8] (pp. 157, 159). This reconstruction, however productive, left significant gaps. Pocock, whose *Machiavellian Moment* drew substantially on Arendt's categories of action and the public realm, nonetheless cautioned against her tendency to organize early modern political thought around a single lineage of decline from action to rule [9] (pp. 116–118, 120–121). The early modern period contained, alongside the sovereign tradition that Arendt rightly identified, other theoretical resources that did not fit her narrative. One of these was the tradition of associational politics developed by Johannes Althusius.

Althusius was an early seventeenth-century Calvinist political thinker whose work was deeply embedded in imperial structures, multi-layered corporations, and the natural law tradition. Arendt never mentions him in her writings [10] (p. 33). This absence is significant. Althusius developed a systematic theory of non-sovereign politics at precisely the historical moment when Bodin was formulating the sovereign model. While Arendt sought to recover non-sovereign politics from the Greek *polis* and from Machiavelli's republicanism, Althusius had already articulated, within the early modern context itself, a path that derived political order from the associative life of communities rather than from a unified sovereign will.

This article proposes that the comparison between Althusius and Arendt yields more than a survey of two non-sovereign approaches. Its central claim is that the locus of political generation depends on the historical condition of mediating structures. By mediating structures I mean the relational forms that stand between individuals and supreme political authority and that carry common life and the flow of power: families, guilds, cities, local communities, associations, councils, and public political spaces. The sovereign model theoretically eliminates these structures, treating them as objects to be absorbed into a unified order. Althusius, writing when corporate society still possessed rich mediating structures, understood politics as the organization and expansion of symbiotic relations among hierarchically constructed communities. Arendt, confronting the modern disintegration of traditional mediating structures and the decline of the public sphere, redefined politics as the action of plural actors in public space and the generation of power between them. The former answers the question of how political order can be constructed outside the sovereign center when associational life remains intact. The latter answers the question of how politics can be reactivated when those structures have already dissolved. The two thinkers thus cover, between them, the principal historical conditions under which non-sovereign politics has been attempted: one where mediating structures remain available as building blocks of political order, and one where they must be replaced by a different generative source altogether.

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This argument builds on existing scholarship but departs from its predominant tendencies. Althusius scholarship has moved from debating whether he belonged to the "medieval constitutionalist" tradition or anticipated "modern federalism" [11] (p. 9) toward recognizing his political order as centered on covenant and multi-layered corporate structures [12] (p. 187) [13] (p. 106). Arendt scholarship has long focused on action, plurality, the public realm, and power, asking whether she successfully proposed a conception of politics different from the domination-obedience model [14] (p. 286) [15] (p. 1). However, these two bodies of research have rarely been brought into systematic confrontation. Existing discussions remain at the level of noting shared anti-sovereign or federalist motifs [10] (pp. 30–35). They do not explain how the two thinkers' answers to the deeper question of where politics is generated differ, nor how those differences respond to fundamentally different historical conditions.

The method of this article differs from both conceptual history centered on semantic changes in political concepts [16] (pp. 27, 75–76) and contextualism that treats political thought as speech acts in specific political controversies [17] (pp. 57–58). The approach here is comparative and structural. It places each thinker's core concepts within their respective theoretical frameworks, while also acknowledging the social structures to which those frameworks respond. Althusius's *consociatio* cannot be understood apart from his account of symbiosis, *pactum*, and multi-layered association; Arendt's action must be interpreted within her framework of plurality, public space, and power generation. At the same time, both conceptual systems emerged within specific social conditions. Althusius wrote within a still-corporate world of autonomous cities, guilds, and estates, while Arendt wrote after the collapse of that world into mass society and totalitarianism. The concept of mediating structures connects these two levels of analysis, providing a common point of reference through which the two theories can be compared without reducing either to the other.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Section 2 analyzes the basic structure of the sovereign model and identifies its treatment of mediating structures as its defining feature. Section 3 examines how Althusius reconstructed politics as an order of association and symbiosis. Section 4 turns to Arendt's redefinition of politics as action in public space and the generation of power. Section 5 concludes by drawing out the implications of the comparison for the concept of non-sovereign politics.

2. The Sovereign Model and Its Treatment of Mediating Structures

To clarify what non-sovereign politics opposes, it is necessary first to identify the defining features of the sovereign model. This section does not attempt a complete history of sovereignty doctrine. Its aim is narrower: to specify the structural logic that Althusius and Arendt both rejected, and to show that the treatment of mediating structures is central to that logic.

The sovereign model rests on two connected claims. The first is that political order becomes possible when a community possesses a unified supreme authority serving as its final decision-making center. Authority in the general sense may be local or embedded in multi-layered relationships, but sovereignty by definition cannot be appealed, divided, or checked. The second claim follows from the first: the plural relationships within a community and the mediating structures that carry them are objects to be overcome, absorbed, and ruled by the sovereign center [18] (p. 34).

Bodin provided the classic exposition of this position. Prior to his intervention, political authority in late medieval Europe was dispersed among royal power, legal authority, customary rights, and hierarchical consultation [19] (pp. 62–64). Bodin sought to compress these dispersed elements into a unified judgment: any genuine political community must possess an indivisible supreme power, which he defined as "the absolute and perpetual

power of a commonwealth" [20] (I. 8). His theory did not merely strengthen the case for royal power. It changed the very understanding of political order. The late medieval structure, which had retained a plural balance among layered rights, local customs, and corporate privileges, was reframed as an inadequate or transitional condition that only sovereignty could properly organize.

Hobbes radicalized this logic by asking a more fundamental question: why can a community not be maintained without a sovereign? The answer he gave redefined the problem of order as a problem of final adjudication [21] (p. 38). In *Leviathan*, Hobbes defined a covenant as "the mutual transferring of right" [22] (p. 89). But mutual promise alone, he argued, cannot sustain order. Under conditions of mutual fear and suspicion, no one can be certain that others will keep their promises. Only the presence of "some coercive power" above the contracting parties, capable of compelling "men equally to the performance of their covenants," can give the covenant political efficacy [22] (pp. 95–96). From this perspective, plural relations and mediating society are not political resources but sources of uncertainty. Only when "the multitude so united in one person" does a genuine political community emerge [22] (p. 114). Sovereignty, for Hobbes, is not the result of society but the precondition for establishing social order [23] (p. 492).

Hobbes's attack on the classical tradition was directed above all at Aristotle. As Stauffer has shown, Hobbes saw the Aristotelian conception of politics as an unstable compound of opinion and passion, incapable of providing a secure foundation for order; his solution was to reconstruct political order on the model of fabrication, in which a single sovereign will shapes the commonwealth as an artificer shapes material [24] (pp. 484–486).

It is worth noting a precise point here, because it bears on the comparison with Althusius in the next section. In the Hobbesian contract, the formal structure of the covenant is horizontal. The words Hobbes gives to the covenant in *Leviathan* 17 run as follows: "I authorize and give up my right of governing myself, to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner" [22] (p. 114). This is an agreement between citizens, not between citizens and the sovereign. The sovereign is not a party to the covenant and therefore cannot be bound by it, which is precisely why the sovereign's power is unlimited [22] (ch. 18). The difference between Hobbes and Althusius does not lie in whether the contractual moment is formally horizontal or vertical. It lies in what the contract produces. In Hobbes, a horizontal agreement among individuals generates a vertical ruling structure above them. In Althusius, horizontal agreements among associations generate a higher-level association that remains accountable to the associations that constituted it. The point of divergence is structural, concerning what kind of political order contracts bring into being.

Placing Bodin and Hobbes together reveals the social imaginary underlying the sovereign model. The formation of political community is conceived as a movement from plurality toward unity, and this movement has three features. First, conflict takes priority over association. Without a unified center, plural communities cannot form stable order but will fall into conflict. The primary task of politics is therefore to control conflict rather than to maintain plural relationships. Second, unity takes priority over mediation. The sovereign model does not require the elimination of local communities and corporations, but it does require that these institutions submit to a sovereign center that derives its authority "from the consent of … those … governed" [21] (pp. 39–40). Mediating institutions are tolerated insofar as they serve the order established by the center. Third, political order stems from adjudication rather than generation. Order is not understood as a product gradually generated from plural relations but as an adjudicative structure established around a center capable of final decisions.

This imaginary also depends on a simplified premise about reason and common interest. Canovan has observed that sovereignty theory assumes that "any citizen thinking rationally about these shared interests must come to the same conclusion as any other" [14] (p. 291). Once this premise is accepted, plural opinions and disputes cease to be understood as political life itself and become problems requiring adjudication by unified authority. Arendt's critique of the sovereign model, as noted in the introduction, targets precisely this reduction [3] (pp. 107–109) [6] (pp. 243–244) [7] (pp. 5–6).

Against this background, the question posed in the introduction can be reformulated more sharply. If common life contains not only conflict but also communication, promise, cooperation, and common action, does the sovereign model prematurely define the starting point of politics? Althusius and Arendt both answer in the affirmative, but from different directions. Althusius holds that politics is a relationship of association and symbiosis [25] (p. 12); Arendt holds that politics exists only when plural actors act together in public space [4] (p. 182) [5] (pp. 169–170); see also [14] (p. 286) [26] (p. 101). The following sections examine each response in turn.

3. Althusius and the Associational Origin of Politics

The significance of Althusius lies in his having proposed, at the very moment when the sovereign model was being formulated, a systematically different account of where politics is generated. He was a near contemporary of Bodin, but their theoretical orientations diverged sharply. For Althusius, politics does not primarily stem from sovereignty or unified will but from associational relationships [27] (p. 37). This claim must be understood within the political world in which he lived.

From the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth century, the Holy Roman Empire in which Althusius lived and worked was not a state ruled by a single sovereign center. Rich mediating structures existed as legal units with recognized corporate personality, and political power was dispersed among them [11] (pp. 11–12, 23). Autonomous cities, guild organizations, and local communities not only performed social and economic functions but also participated in political life, undertaking the organization, consultation, and flow of power [13] (pp. 111, 113). Urban political history confirms that early modern European cities were important sites of political activity. Councils, committees, and guilds could participate in public decision-making and negotiate with superior authorities [28] (p. 222).

This multi-layered order was under increasing pressure. Autonomous cities and local communities were repeatedly drawn into tensions with centralizing forces [29] (pp. 206–211), while territorial competition and theories of sovereign centralization strengthened the vision of a unified center. European states at the time faced, in Elazar's formulation, a choice "between the federalist and centralist models" [30] (p. 2). Emden, where Althusius served as municipal syndic for many years, exemplified this tension. As an important North German port and a center of Calvinism, Emden came into conflict with the local count over religious jurisdiction and economic interests in the late sixteenth century, a conflict that soon developed into a question of political self-determination [11] (pp. 9–10) [31] (pp. 5–6). It was against this background that Althusius articulated a theory distinct from sovereignty doctrine.

At the beginning of *Politica*, Althusius defines politics as "the art of associating (*consociandi*) men for the purpose of establishing, cultivating, and conserving social life among them" [25] (p. 12); see also [12] (p. 187). The core object of politics is not rule, but association. "*Consociatio*" refers to relationships formed through express or tacit agreement, and the purpose of forming such relationships lies in "symbiosis," where people exchange things "useful and necessary" for the maintenance of life, including resources, services, knowledge, and norms [25] (p. 12). In this sense, the polity, for Althusius, is a structure of common

life built around communication and associational relationships, a "symbiotic community" (*consociatio symbiotica*) [32] (p. 32).

Althusius also cites Plutarch to demonstrate the early roots of his theory. Plutarch pointed out that "polity" has three meanings: first, the communication of rights (*jus*) in the community, emphasizing that the polity involves the transmission of rights and the establishment of partnership based on mutual benefit; second, the manner of administering and regulating the commonwealth; third, the form and constitution of the commonwealth that directs the actions of citizens [25] (p. 13). Sovereign political thought typically emphasizes the third meaning and builds a center of authority around sovereignty itself. Althusius's approach is closer to the first: "a concept of living together in mutual benevolence organized politically in a plurality of social organizations" [11] (p. 22).

This theory presupposes a different picture of human nature and society from Hobbes. Althusius does not regard the plural condition as necessarily leading to universal war. He assumes that human beings have a natural inclination toward "benevolence" [11] (pp. 21–22). Natural law, in accordance with divine order, "urges people toward good and calls them away from evil," thereby forming the "foundation of law" for political order [33] (p. 441). The "conjugal/marriage" relationship, the family, formed in accordance with natural law, and the "kinship" relationships derived from it, are regarded by Althusius as "the seedbed of all private and public associational life" [25] (p. 26). In Althusius's view, the family is the basic unit of natural life and the smallest practical field for organizing communal life [32] (p. 34). Through mutual association, it gives rise to higher-level political communities. Therefore, plurality based on nature is itself regarded by Althusius as the organic generative structure of politics, rather than an object to be overcome as Hobbes conceived. Bretherton describes the difference as one over whether "political life is understood as a post-Fall development or whether it is an original part of creation," and for Althusius, politics is "a good in itself" [34] (p. 321).

The central structural claim of Althusius's theory is that individual human beings are always first embedded in various associations, and political community is the result of the layered combination of these associations [12] (p. 195). Political order is not the connection between a unified will and individuals but the association of associations [35] (p. 29). In sovereignty theories that emphasize centralization, there is "little or no room for mediating institutions" [12] (p. 187), whereas in Althusius's conception, mediating structures are constitutive elements of political order itself [36] (p. 139). The sovereign question of who possesses supreme authority is dissolved and transformed into the question of how public life is organized. As Hüglin puts it, Althusius denied the understanding of politics as "the exercise . . . of power" [37] (p. 45).

The "philosophical foundament" for organizing this public life of association is the *pactum* [11] (p. 22). The contrast with Hobbes, already established in Section 2, concerns the structure that the contract produces. In Althusius, the *pactum* is a mechanism for maintaining horizontal association among equal partners, and its result is gradual rather than immediate. It is not for establishing supreme authority but an agreement among equal associations to construct a slightly higher-level union [25] (p. 12). This distinction matters because it clarifies what Althusius's non-sovereign politics does and does not affirm. It does not deny the necessity of higher-level public organization. It denies the absolutization of sovereignty. The question for Althusius is not whether unity is needed but how unity is to be achieved [38] (p. 126). A direct contract that constructs a sovereign places plural individuals before an absolute universal will. A hierarchical *pactum* built gradually upon mediating structures provides a porous network for accommodating plurality.

Therefore, the definition of political authority also changes accordingly. Under the sovereign model, authority is effective because it stands above all mediating structures with

the status of final adjudication, and it "presupposes that the paradigmatic power relation is that by which a sovereign imposes his will on his subjects" [39] (p. 132). However, in Althusius's view, authority derives legitimacy from within communal relationships and serves those relationships. The "only source" of power is "the right of symbiosis," that is, the organizational process of mutual communication among the people [11] (p. 24). Higher communities are not masters of lower communities but their agents [25] (p. 58) [40] (pp. 18, 21). Political authority is not transmitted from top to bottom but emerges from the *pactum*-based associational process of lower associations, authorizing upward as needed to construct higher-level associations.

With this structure of association, symbiosis, and *pactum*, Althusius provided a vision of political order emerging from communal relationships. The historical limitations of this theory are evident. It depends on a social world that still possesses strong communal structures [41] (p. 81). As corporate society gradually disintegrated, Althusius's theory was largely forgotten [42] (p. 29). It was not until the late 19th century that the German jurist Otto von Gierke brought Althusius's theory back into scholarly view. His pioneering works *The German Law of Associations* (Das Deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht) [43] and *Johannes Althusius and the Development of Natural Law Theory* (Johannes Althusius und die Entwicklung der naturrechtlichen Staatstheorie) [44] attempted to re-establish a political order different from the central state based on "Germanic" communities [45] (p. 9). But Gierke's efforts remained highly confined to the German-speaking world. It was only with Carl Joachim Friedrich's scholarly reintroduction of Althusius's Politica in 1932 and Frederick Smith Carney's English translation in 1964 that Althusius's theory gradually provoked academic discussion across federalism, constitutionalism, and covenant.

By the mid-twentieth century, the social conditions for Althusius's associational politics had been profoundly altered. The two world wars dismantled traditional social structures and consolidated the logic of sovereignty in an unprecedentedly centralized form. Communal bonds, natural law order, and intermediary bodies were severely weakened. In this context, whether politics could still be generated from plural relationships became a fundamental problem concerning modernity itself. It was at this historical juncture that Arendt's political theory posed the question anew. She did not appeal to existing communal structures. She placed the foundation of politics in human action and public communication, attempting to rethink the possibility of political community in a world where the old communities had already shattered.

4. Arendt and the Action-Based Origin of Politics

The historical context Arendt inhabited differed fundamentally from Althusius's. Europe between the two world wars underwent a structural crisis in which corporations, local communities, and stable social identities that had originally served as political mediating bodies were steadily disappearing, while large-scale mass politics rapidly rose [46] (pp. 256–259) [47] (pp. 761–762). Arendt diagnosed this as the emergence of mass society. Here "mass" does not simply refer to numerical expansion but to a de-structured social state: individuals detached from existing class, corporate, and communal ties, simultaneously isolated and politically highly mobilizable. Baehr points out that, in Arendt's view, this transformation caused civic responsibility to dissolve amid widespread political apathy while also providing the social conditions for totalitarianism [48] (p. 12).

The governance model of the modern state changed alongside this social transformation. With the expansion of the welfare state and administrative systems, issues originally belonging to the social sphere were increasingly incorporated into state governance, and politics gradually evolved into technical treatment of social problems. Arendt's deeper concern was that intermediate institutions capable of transforming social demands into

objects of public judgment were disappearing. Politics was ceasing to manifest as public action and opinion formation and was instead becoming administration [49] (p. 281) [50] (p. 856).

At the intersection of these transformations, a fundamental question emerges. When traditional communities disintegrate, the public sphere shrinks, and politics is transformed into administration, what does politics itself still mean? Arendt's answer begins with a diagnosis of how political thought arrived at this condition. Her account of this development has been noted above. What needs emphasis here is her constructive response: her redefinition of politics as action.

To recover this possibility, Arendt turned to the ancient Greek *polis*. In *polis* life, the political was first and foremost a practice that unfolded through words and deeds. Individuals present themselves to one another in the public realm and construct a shared political reality through discussion, interaction, and judgment [51] (p. 142). Politics, in this understanding, is not a tool for achieving some predetermined end but an activity in which plurality can appear. Within it, "reality could appear and be seen from all sides . . . the plurality and freedom of men had full play" [51] (p. 143).

Arendt argued that this understanding of politics was gradually displaced by another paradigm, beginning with Plato. The historical trigger for this transformation was the death of Socrates. Socrates attempted to bring dialectics and reflection into the public life of the *polis*, but his execution demonstrated to Plato that in the public sphere, reflection and judgment do not naturally possess persuasive power and may even succumb to slander [3] (p. 107). The instability exposed by Socrates' fate was not accidental. Greek political life was deeply shaped by the agonal spirit, in which citizens viewed others as opponents rather than partners [52] (p. 82). The adversarial structure oriented toward excellence and victory constantly eroded the stability of the public world, ultimately contributing to the decline of the *polis* [53] (p. 770). The death of Socrates was the concentrated outbreak of this internal tension.

For this reason, Plato turned to seek a more stable foundation for politics. Arendt considers this the crucial turning point in the Western tradition of political thought: politics was increasingly understood as a form of making or fabrication, an order to be designed and controlled [3] (p. 109) [54] (p. 88). As one scholar summarizes, "political life thus became an engineering project" [55] (p. 53). The key to this turn lies in its implication. Once politics is understood as an object that can be constructed according to some idea, those who grasp this idea are conceived as entitled to command others, while others become the material for this fabrication. This intellectual turn fundamentally presupposes an asymmetrical relationship of rule.

The equation of politics with fabrication has continued into modernity. In *On Revolution*, Arendt asks why modern society can maintain institutions in form while losing politics in substance. Her answer points to the persistence of the command-obedience model [56] (p. 36), which tends to concentrate initiative at one end while compressing others into objects to be governed. Arendt therefore denies that "ruling has any proper place in politics at all" [15] (p. 3). In her view, a deep error in modern political thought lies in the "escape from action into rule" [4] (p. 220); see also [39] (p. 136). Because action is unpredictable, cannot be fully controlled, and always faces plurality and contingency, and because "nobody can know where the actions . . . will lead" [14] (p. 293), rulers continuously attempt to replace action with fabrication, management, and command. The political problem is thereby redefined as a problem of order control. This is also why Arendt laments that revolution once opened space for the common action of the people but failed to give posterity "the opportunity of . . . acting as citizens" [5] (p. 253). The continuous pursuit of stable order

constantly compresses this space, forcing one to "fixate power" within institutions, and transforming public freedom into an object of representation and delegation [57] (p. 215).

It is precisely in response to this tradition that Arendt re-founds politics upon action. In *The Human Condition* and *Between Past and Future*, she distinguishes human basic activities into labor, work, and action. Labor corresponds to the cycle of life maintenance, work corresponds to the creation of the human artifice, and action is the only activity that occurs directly between human beings [3] (pp. 59–61) [4] (pp. 7–9). Through this division, Arendt separates politics from rule, fabrication, and administration. Political action is not a tool for organizing people toward some pursuit but a public practice that unfolds among plural actors, and its meaning lies in the action itself rather than its results [58] (p. 878); see also [59] (p. 59) [60] (p. 22). Action holds this central position because of its connection to natality. Every action signifies a new beginning, breaking established causal chains and making new relationships and meanings possible [4] (pp. 176, 246) [59] (p. 57). Precisely for this reason, Arendt compares action to a "miracle" [4] (pp. 246, 205). Through action, "we insert ourselves into the human world," and this insertion feels like "a second birth" [4] (p. 176). In this sense, politics is not the execution of an established order, but a practice that constantly opens up new relationships, new judgments, and new possibilities of world [58] (p. 876) [61] (p. 762).

The political significance of action also lies in its rootedness in human plurality, which is itself "the condition of human existence" [62] (p. 647). It is not "man" as an abstract unity, but "the plurality of men" [14] (p. 286). Unlike relatively isolated labor and work, action "happens in public and in the plural" [63] (p. 16). If politics for Althusius is generated from the multi-layered organization of the communal world, then for Arendt it is generated from human plural existence itself, wherein each person exists "as a distinct and unique being among equals" [4] (p. 178). Plurality is not, for Arendt as it was for Althusius, an *anthropological premise* for forming political structure, but precisely the *ontological condition* for the occurrence of politics.

It is in the sense of founding politics upon "action" that Arendt further introduces the concept of the "public realm." For Arendt, the public realm is first and foremost a space of appearance, where people can be seen and heard, and where they reveal "who they are" rather than merely "what they are." Therefore, the public realm is not an external stage for politics, but a necessary condition for the emergence of politics. In this space, actors face one another not as bearers of interests or objects to be administered, but as actors capable of initiating relationships, responding to others, and collectively building the world [64] (p. 301). Without the public space, action and speech would "lose all human relevance" [4] (p. 182); speech would degenerate into command, and action into execution. Arendt thus links the public realm, action, and political power: political power is generated in such a space of appearance.

This linkage produces a fundamental divergence from the sovereign political tradition. In the sovereign model, power is usually understood as a centralized capacity for rule, manifested as the authority to command, control, and render final decisions. Arendt's position is that this understanding conflates power with violence. She distinguishes them sharply. Power is not an attribute possessed by any subject, nor is it the result of will overpowering others, but rather "springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse" [4] (p. 200); see also [5] (p. 175). In this sense, power is not a means but "an end in itself" [39] (p. 142), a relational reality jointly created by plural actors in the public world, through which the political world comes into existence through continuous interaction. In contrast, violence is an instrumental means that, although capable of enforcing obedience, cannot create or sustain the political world [65]

(pp. 143–151) [66] (p. 366). Political power does not stem from unified will and cannot exist independently of common action [65] (p. 179). It is therefore essentially anti-sovereign.

5. Mediating Structures and the Generation of Politics: Comparison and Conclusions

The reason Althusius and Arendt merit comparison is not that they both value plurality or both oppose the sovereign model. They merit comparison because they confronted the same structural question under fundamentally different historical conditions: when politics is not understood as the rule of a unified center over disagreement, where is it generated? The preceding sections have shown that their answers diverge precisely along the axis of mediating structures.

Althusius grounded politics in the world of associations, understanding it as the organization and expansion of symbiotic relations. Political power, in his account, is generated in a "horizontal process of communication" among associational members at various levels [67] (p. 279). Arendt similarly emphasizes the "communicative (rather than strategic)" nature of political power [39] (p. 142). But for her, politics is generated in the public action of plural actors, understanding power as a relational reality generated "out of the kinds of actions that we engage in with others" [39] (p. 138). What Althusius confronted was a communal world still rich in mediating structures, so his core problem was how to organize plural communities so that associations at different levels could progressively construct public order. What Arendt confronted was a modern society where mediating structures had already disintegrated, so her problem was whether politics could still occur at all in the absence of stable communities and public media. The former takes organization as its core; the latter takes action as its core. The former devotes itself to sustaining the generation of order from existing communal life, while the latter attempts to prevent politics from being swallowed by the logic of order altogether [58] (pp. 881–882).

This difference in generative logic carries a corresponding difference in normative orientation. Althusius's political theory ultimately revolves around the maintenance of communal order. His concern is with how common life is organized and how layered associations can be articulated into a stable political community without recourse to sovereignty. Arendt's normative concern points more directly to political freedom itself [68] (p. 91). She does not deny the importance of institutions, but she remains alert to the danger that once order is elevated to the highest goal, politics will degenerate into administration and rule, losing its dimension of freedom. For Arendt, action is not only the realization of freedom but itself constitutes freedom [62] (p. 657).

It is here that the explanatory power of the two thinkers becomes complementary. The question Althusius more easily answers is how an organized political community can exist without the priority of sovereignty when mediating structures remain available. The question Arendt more easily answers is why a community with functioning institutions and stable order may still lack politics. The former explains how non-sovereign order is possible when mediating structures remain abundant. The latter explains how, after the decline of those structures, politics can still reappear as action among plural actors.

The theoretical limitations of the two also point in opposite directions, and these limitations reveal the constraints imposed by their respective historical conditions. Althusius depends on a communal world with stable hierarchies, religious bonds, and mediating organizations. Once these structures disintegrate, his theory has difficulty explaining political generation in highly fluid and individualized societies. Arendt's difficulty lies in the persistent tension between her account of political action and the institutional conditions required for its durability. Because she strictly distinguishes politics from society, labor, and administration, she has difficulty adequately explaining the relationship between public

action and economic structures, including inequality, in modern large-scale societies [69] (p. 340) [68] (p. 95). Meanwhile, if power exists only in common action, then how modern political communities maintain continuous stability remains an unresolved problem in her framework [70] (p. 32). Althusius's limitation is thus the mirror image of his strength: he can explain the organization of order but struggles to explain its renewal under conditions of structural dissolution. Arendt's limitation is the mirror image of hers: she can explain the moment of political generation but struggles to explain its institutional persistence.

Read together, the two theories illuminate the conditions under which non-sovereign politics becomes possible. Althusius shows that, where a corporate social fabric remains intact, politics can proceed from associational relationships without constructing a sovereign center. The mediating structures of family, guild, city, and province are not obstacles to political order but its generative materials. Arendt shows that, where that fabric has been torn apart, politics must be generated from a different source: the action of plural actors in public space and the power that arises between them. Neither answer is universally applicable. Each is bound to a specific historical condition of mediating structures, and this is precisely why neither thinker can serve as the sole model for non-sovereign politics.

This conclusion bears on the question posed at the outset of this article. The sovereign model defines politics as beginning when plurality is brought under a unified adjudication center. Althusius and Arendt refuse this definition. But their refusals take different forms because the social world to which each responds differs. Althusius's refusal remains within a world where mediating structures still carry political life and asks how those structures can be organized into a political community without a sovereign. Arendt's refusal begins from the dissolution of that world and asks whether politics can be regenerated at all, and if so, from what. Taken together, they demonstrate that where politics is generated is not fixed by a conceptual definition but shifts with the historical condition of the relational forms that stand between individuals and supreme authority. Non-sovereign politics is therefore not a single model awaiting theoretical specification but a field of possibilities whose shape depends on the social foundations available for political generation. This is the central lesson the comparison between Althusius and Arendt offers to contemporary political theory.

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