

THE "ORDINARY" AND THE PUBLIC WORLD: THE MODERN AND ANCIENT VERSIONS OF CITIZENSHIP AND POLITICS¹

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Abstract In this paper an attempt is made to theorise the contemporary notion of the "ordinary" in contrast to the ancient Greek understanding of citizenship formed in the context of a perceived division between the private and the public. We begin with Charles Taylor's notion of the "affirmation of ordinary life" and theorise it in light of criticisms of the ordinary by developing the notion of the "ordinary" beyond the negative implications commonly attributed to it such as, being consumed by consumerism. Here, an attempt is made to look at the ordinary in a dialectical manner, one that brings out the ambiguities found in it so as to highlight the pleasures and joys of ordinary life as well as its constrictions. In the final part of the paper a reading of ancient Greek understanding of citizenship and public political life is provided as a back drop to a potential reformulation of our commitments to a public life.

"Within this society, which is egalitarian because this is labor's way of making men live together, there is no class left, no aristocracy of either a political or spiritual nature from which a restoration of the other capacities of man could start anew. Even presidents, kings, and prime ministers think of their offices in terms of a job necessary for life of society, and among the intellectuals, only solitary individuals are left who consider what they are doing in terms of work and not in terms of making a living."

(Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958: 5)

"But when he [Ulysses] came across any common man who was making a noise, he struck him with his staff and rebuked him, saying, "Sirrah, hold your peace, and listen to better men than yourself. You are a coward and no soldier; you are nobody either in fight or council; ..."

¹ This paper is based on reading carried out by the author as part of a research project that led to writing a Ph.D dissertation in social theory titled "Politics Beyond Governance, Reclaiming the Public Realm: A Conversation between Michael Oakeshott and Hannah Arendt" at York University in Toronto in 2007. The author wishes to thank Professors Roy Turner, Alan Blum, Kevin Dowler, Susan Ingram and Greg Nielsen all of whom at York University and Professor Kieran Bonner, at University of Waterloo for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of the material presented in the paper. However, the sole responsibility for the interpretation of the ideas in this paper lies with the author.



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(Homer, *The Iliad*, Book II)

I The “Ordinary” and its Critics

When Charles Taylor frames a modern notion of the good as "the affirmation of ordinary life" (*Sources of the Self* 1989: 14) citizenship as an issue is raised by virtue of its absence. Citizenship in contemporary Western societies, we could add, has no deep significance for most of its possessors in a strong sense. Citizenship is typically grasped as a legal matter, having to do with voting rights, the possession of a passport, the obligation to serve on juries, etc.

Insofar as it has political meaning connected with the voting rights that signify residence in a democracy, the prevalent idea of citizenship does indeed connect with the notion of "the affirmation of ordinary life." In fact, modern politics is largely seen to concern itself with the mundane: the provision of health care, the regulation of commerce, and such basic matters as building codes, zoning laws and the maintenance of city services. All of these, we could say, are essentially concerned with survival and the comfort and orderliness of daily life. As Taylor puts it, the affirmation of ordinary life grounds a "contemporary bourgeois politics" whose chief concern is "welfare" (1989: 14).

Thus, omitted from the notion of "the affirmation of ordinary life" is any reference to, or sense of, a distinction which for Aristotle was fundamental: the "maintenance" of life versus the pursuit of "the good life." For Aristotle the "ordinary," or



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the life of maintenance and survival, was not a candidate for the good life. Rather, it was the province of the household -- of family life, biological survival, etc. and was the "infrastructure" necessary for the pursuit of the good life by the "citizen." Aristotle invokes a very different conception of the citizen than that which dominates modernity. And moderns who speak of citizenship within Aristotle's Athens tend to stress the fact that the Athenians barred women and slaves from citizenship. What is largely ignored in this is the connection between citizenship and the conception of a public world (Taylor, 1989: 13-14, 211-233). This paper seeks to explore the tensions involved in the modern understandings of citizenship and politics, in relation to their perceptions of the private and public worlds.

If common sense understanding in contemporary Western societies takes the ordinary as the good life, Ronald Beiner (1977: 4) brings out the connection between the ordinary and politics when he says that it is "liberals" who support the interpretive community affirming the ordinary, and who agree that the chief task of the political order is to establish a framework within which private aims and conceptions of a personal good may flourish.

The City as Geography, the Citizen as Consumer, the Ideal as Celebrity

If under the ordinary then, humans are identified primarily as devoted to serving their own desires, appetites, needs and comforts, and the interests and preferences of their individual selves, critics of the "ordinary" identify the self-understanding of such a

citizen as one that turns him foremost into a consumer (Beiner, 1982, 1997; Barber, 2003). From such a perspective, what the ordinary indicates in political terms is that the private interests of individuals have come to dominate public life in the form of consumer culture. When the private is taken as foundational for collective life, the role of politics is seen as guaranteeing the freedom of choice in consumption. The 'ordinary', the mode of the collective in which the city is treated as a market place for consumption and the human being as a creature of her desires, is taken to be a natural state rather than a society that has taken the private as its foundation.

In this view, the city then turns out to be simply the geographical space of residence, and the citizen a mere resident whose main interest is in consumption to further the ends of life. It takes collective human life as constituting a mass of individual consumers whose identity is derived from the consumption of objects governed by the desirability of the other, the highest point of which is marked by the phenomenon of the celebrity.² If the city becomes a mere geographical space of residence for the consumer-citizen, whose relationship to the city is utilitarian, Beiner (1982:108) claims that, for what it matters, the citizen is potentially always in the position of the emigrant who has no strong attachments to the city, and this in turn raises questions about how such a city will sustain itself in the long run.

² I borrow the idea that consumer society is driven by the desirability of the other and that celebrity is its highest point from Professor Alan Blum who in an undergraduate course on Collective Behaviour at York University in Toronto, lectured on this idea. However, the responsibility for the interpretation of this idea as it is shaped in this paper is mine.



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Alasdair MacIntyre (*After Virtue*, 1981) seems to be confirming Beiner's fear for the future of the city whose citizens considers themselves as emigrants, when he says that "a modern liberal political society can appear only as a collection of citizens of nowhere who have banded together for their common protection." For MacIntyre, citizens have to be citizens of a "somewhere," though the "somewhere" does not mean the mere geography of the place but a citizenship tied to a particular polity "rooted in common beliefs" (cited in Barber, 1984: 70) to which citizenship is tied. This raises the issue of dwelling in contrast to the idea of movement.

If Beiner's idea of the citizen under the ordinary as an emigrant suggests the citizen as one who is always ready to be on the move from city to city, the movement associated with the consumer-citizen's life within the city seems to be marked by the constant movement from one object of consumption to another among the large variety of objects in the market place; in such an environment, the value of every object and activity of use is conceivably related to social intercourse, and is turned into a commodity. In this context even private issues such as personal health and fitness are turned into public matters of consumption, and are displayed in the open while presented as private choices (Beiner, 1982, 1987): whether the car, the cellular phone, the television, the latest technological gadget, the SUV, the boat, the holiday home, the cottage; news and information, education, beautification, dieting, fashion, physical fitness, or the incessant search for the latest hot spot in town for entertainment, shopping, wining and dining.



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When the citizen's life is marked by constant movement in the quest for the goods that make her most desirable to others, she seems to be most consumed by the need for the desire of the others. If the constant movement of the citizen from one object to another is in a sense anchored to the desirability of the other, and if the other's desirability is also in turn subject to the same principle, then the totality of such movement can produce only a constant flux in collective life.

That there is possibly a connection between the understanding of an identity and being consumed by the desirability of others is brought into relief by Turner when he suggests that, if "we learn who we are by way of contrast with others with different identities," then "what we are is consumed by others, so to speak, and we desire to be the thing that they are understood to consume" (1990:87). What Turner's insight suggests to us is that, if I desire the other's desirability to fulfil my sense of identity, then under the conditions of the ordinary where the self-understanding of humans is taken primarily to be that of consumers, this identity is fulfilled via the consumption of what the others desire. One succeeds in the ordinary by excelling in what is considered desirable by others, which is ultimately what everyone treats as desirable. The desire here is to be an object for the other's desire. As the market dominates consumption under the ordinary, desirability then is determined finally by market driven demand. If the world of celebrity marks the highest point in consumerism, then the widespread nature of celebrity culture, whether the stardom seen in cinema and television, or in the music or sports industry, is a sign of the spread of consumerism in society.



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If the ordinary indicates that consumption here goes beyond merely fulfilling the consumer and the use values of the needs of life and comfort, and it shows that the consumer values the desirability of the other more than the use value of the objects themselves. The interest in desirability then makes reference to the idea of worth, that we desire to appear to others as having worth, that is, having an identity as a human being.

This constant movement in search of the most desirable goods is a sign of the lack of an anchor in collective life, one that would give meaning outside of consumption to the life of the citizen, and a foundation to guide the search for new experiences. It also shows an impatience to dwell, to stay with on anything long enough to cultivate one's taste, to master something in order to experience it fully, to make the residence one happens to occupy a home where one chooses to settle down, inhabit, and remain.

We may pause, though to ask here whether the lived experience of the ordinary necessarily tallies with the above critique of it, given from the perspective of the public. What are the critical issues involved in the above formulation of the ordinary?

If life is taken as something gloomy that needs to be survived then what is missing is the idea of flourishing, which itself is necessary to life. What prevents one from taking life in that spirit? Is it the phenomenon of market to consumerism is tied? Or is it more than that? How would we make something pleasurable out of the ordinary? The ordinary life, which is the basis on which the good life is theorised and practiced, remains a fertile ground for plurality in terms of the wide variety of individual practices adopted in everyday life. Is this plurality an ordeal that we are condemned to survive or an



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occasion to enjoy the pleasures of life while building a good life on its basis? There are myriad ways in which people respond to the ordeal of existence in everyday life. As Michel de Certeau analysed in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), humans have subversively creative ways of tactically responding in everyday life to strategies laid down from above at the macro level. It is not as if the absence of a strong public realm has left the entire world desolate.

If the ordinary represents plurality then the interpretation of the ordinary as survival cannot be taken at face value. A dialectical examination of the negativity of such a view of ordinary life however question whether ordinary life is merely about survival and whether there is no joy and pleasure in the life of the ordinary, which consists of family life and the life of work and friendship. It is the dialectical nature of the life of the ordinary that we begin to examine below in a discussion of the criticism of the ordinary that is levelled against it from the perspective of political life.

Is the Ordinary an Ordeal to Survive?: The Lived Experience

Is it correct to portray modern citizens as having no attachment to their city? Even if they have no strong attachment to a particular city or a nation why would it necessarily be a degenerative factor? If modern citizens are driven by consumerism, what makes consumerism such an attractive proposition? What are the political issues involved in celebrity culture? Even if many modern citizens are driven by the desire to form their



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identities in relation to the desirability of celebrity figures, what would be the nature of the person whose entire identity is formed by his or her relation to a celebrity figure? As these questions suggest, what is required then is an analysis of what makes consumerism an attractive proposition to modern citizens, which would require an examination of the grounds of the allure of the figure of the celebrity, an examination that shows it to be more than mere consumerism.

The notion that modern citizens lack an attachment to their city or country, which is summed up in McIntyre's notion that moderns are citizens of nowhere, is not arguably a lived experience description of citizens' lives in modern democracies in the West. Many citizens in these countries manifest their interest in the city, for example in electing their mayors and other political leaders at various levels into power, the interest varying on the basis of the gravity of the political issues involved. They, irrespective of their political affiliations, show a keen interest in concerns around corrupt politicians should not be allowed to get away with their actions easily, and we see in practical ways how government changes are affected by the exposure of corruption among politicians. Even if such citizens do not have a strong attachment to a particular city or a nation, some will have an attachment to certain ideals such as universal human rights or the welfare of the needy around the world. As already pointed out, these citizens have attachments to families, work places, religious and ethnic communities, all of which would be located within a city or a country and which thereby generate indirect attachment to the latter. For example, do not Torontonians like their city and enjoy its life? The celebration of diversity in Toronto's annual gay parade for which a million of people come out, is an



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indication that the citizens of Toronto are willing to collectively engage in what they consider valuable for their collective life. Citizens of these cities are concerned about the welfare of their fellow citizens and the conduct of their associations. They appreciate that they have devised methods of contributing to the welfare of the needy in society and to the activities that need public support through tax deductions, or tax-free donations to various causes such as public television and other deserving social causes. These urban citizens make efforts to maintain their cultural activities, whether it is the Symphony orchestra, the ballet, literary festivals and awards, or drama, and popular culture is always supported by a large majority of public.

If Paul Gilroy (2005) found that, the notion of rootedness when applied to relations between nationalities, had a racist outcome in terms of identifying citizens with the traditions of a given community, the simultaneous suggestion that ethnic communities use the concept to combat racism highlights how the notion of rootedness is an animating one in society. Alongside this, the idea that, increasingly contemporary people enjoy a fluid identity which refuses to be tied to any specific tradition in which one has roots needs to be explored within such a context, to argue that rootedness is what makes a person a good citizen seems to have no validity. What such changes and diverse usage shows is that our notions of citizenship undergo changes from within the context of the real lives of people and then that in this light to which then theory needs to hold up a mirror not in order to uphold certain ideals but in order to find what forms of citizenship can and are being developed out of the lived experience of contemporary citizens.



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While consumerism undoubtedly drives celebrity culture, the attraction to the figure of celebrity may suggest that such attraction is the result of the decline of political life rather than the cause of the decline of politics. It is hard to imagine a sustainable world in which the majority of individuals live life entirely determined by the desirability of the other and marked by the figure of celebrity. The idea here is that our identities have many dimensions, that come to light in diverse moments of our interaction with others or ourselves and therefore any one single dimension of our identity does not dominate our lives all of the time.

While critics may be correct in that consumer culture is prevalent in modern society, to portray society as being entirely dominated by such a consumerism would be to deny the complexity of lived experience. This it should be noted is a critique of only one formulation of the ordinary and not its entirety. That all areas of human life are not treated as a matter of consumer preference is indicated by the recurrent public interest in issues around family and education as for their bearing on individual and collective life.

The Fear of Homogeneity, Uniformity and Conformity

Critics of the ordinary have raised concerns about the impact of the life of the ordinary on the collective life of the community, drawing our attention to increasing homogeneity and uniformity in the means of satisfying human needs and desires, and the resultant conformity, banality and deracination of the lives of citizens. The undifferentiated desires and preferences generated by the need for conformity is often taken to be the hallmark of the ordinary. These criticisms make reference to the collective



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concern regarding the absence of higher human capacities beyond the ordinary, such as the cultivation of self-reflection, the ability to differentiate and discriminate, the capacity for judging or exercising taste; that is, the ability to choose, in a strong sense. They also make reference to the collective concern with diversity, plurality, and the attachment to community.

Hannah Arendt has observed that the mass culture that has come to prevail under modernity encourage uniformity in so far as "same desires and needs [are] catered to collectively" (Canovan 1992: 117). Ronald Beiner charges that "liberalism with its shopping mall culture where one has hundreds of shops to choose from, all of which sell the same junk" and "brings about more and more sameness of tastes, of clichéd perception of the world, dreary conformism". "[W]hen one actually surveys the liberal reality, what one sees is more and more sameness of tastes, of clichéd perception of the world, of the glum ennui with which one reconciles oneself to monolithic routines of our world" (1982: 23).

When Beiner cites Stephen Macedo, who "has written that "liberalism hold out the promise or the threat, of making all the world like California" (1997: 12 - 14), what exercises Beiner's concern seems to be the threat of the same uniform consumer culture taking over the world and the resulting banality. For Beiner (1982: 23), uniformity in the activities we conduct in our collective public life makes life "dull monotonous and predictable." Beiner suggests here that the ethos of individualism threatens to produce a homogenous culture focussed on the "ordinary" across the world, the threat being that

this would eliminate a notion of the collective good outside that of the individual goods of the ordinary.

Therefore, the political implication of uniformity under the ordinary is that catering to the desires and needs of individuals are brought under the dominance of a homogenising market, minimising opportunities for the sustenance of diversity and heterogeneity which are manifestations of human plurality, and which need to find expression if human society is to preserve its stability in the long run. Under the ordinary the opportunities available for the manifestation of human plurality become scarce and exclusive, enforcing the dominance of uniformity within society.

Diversity manifests independence among humans. A diversity of views on substantive issues invigorates collective human life whereas homogeneity dulls it. One version of that diversity present in the ordinary is in the superficial character of consumer brands. However, real diversity would have to be in terms of the qualitative differences in how humans act within collective life. Consumer branding strives to simulate the presence of a qualitative difference in a context where it is absent. When difference is privatised and turned into an individual matter of consumer choice, substantive differences related to the collective good, the substance that makes for a rich public life, are eliminated and turned into a superficial difference, that of choosing between consumer brands.

George Grant (cited in Beiner, 1982: 23) brings out a different dimension in the uniformity that the ordinary is believed to impose on the collective. He notes that when



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the ordinary requires that differences in human choices are privatised it gives a monolithic character to the landscape of public places: "As for pluralism," differences under the ordinary "are able to exist only in private activities: how we eat; how we mate; how we practice ceremonies. Some like pizza, some like steaks; some like girls, some like boys; some like synagogue, some like the mass. But we all do it in churches, motels, restaurants indistinguishable from the Atlantic to the Pacific" (Beiner, 1982: 23-4).

What Beiner together with Grant represents is the idea that a lack of imagination is found in our public architecture, in the landscape of our public spaces that serves as an expression of the character of our public life. Instead of a public culture that socialises us into citizenship there is consuming in public. Grant's claim is that difference is eliminated from public life by way of displacing it to the prerogative of the private individual. Grant seems to be suggesting that difference needs to find manifestation in public life if human society is to flourish or at least reproduce itself with some stability.

In the public political life of the community, when the consumer is in as the typical social actor, then citizenship is out (Beiner, 1982: 98-141). If human life is taken to be reduced entirely to a matter of the private choice of individuals, when differences among humans do not find expression in public and have no input from public political life and do not open up our choices to public discussion, collective life loses its vitality and impoverishes public life. The richness of our collective life is in the diversity and plurality of our expressions of life. If differences among people are brought out in public, people can identify their own diversity through them.



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The fear here seems to be that homogeneity will dull our sense of diversity, originality, and independence, affecting the stability of our collective life. When the general tendency is to homogenise consumption, preserving diversity in its richness becomes a privilege of the elite in exclusive places of consumption. As an alternative, diversity tends to be represented by faked forms of authenticity in public life, for example in architecture that superficially reproduces facades of grandiose classical forms for buildings that serve mundane purposes of the ordinary life.

What the homogeneity of the mass market, epitomised by the supermarket, marginalizes from collective life is the sense of difference manifested in the local community, with its neighbourhood market and shops which are increasingly obliterated under mass production and consumption.

The mass market Grant refers to offers the convenience of choosing from among a standardised range of goods where, despite the array of products there is no substantive difference between goods in any strong sense. When difference is privatised, difference itself is turned into a commodity in branding where consumers tend to identify themselves with a specific brand. But even with high end brands being available to a considerable section of consumers, diversity under the ordinary finds its niche finally in exclusive shops where branding beyond branding, rather than any significant qualitative difference in goods becomes the ultimate idea of being different.

Arendt seemed to have anticipated Grant's complaint when she says that "[D]istinction and difference have become private matters of the individual," (Arendt,

1958: 41) matters of personal taste when "society has conquered the public realm," whereas traditionally they are matters taken up in the public life of the collective.

What Beiner's criticism of consumerism suggests is that when the good life of the citizen is seen as actively pursuing the "ordinary," conditions are created in society that lead to the deracination of the lives of citizens, making them unfit for active citizenship in public political life. When the individual is given priority over community, Beiner states that the role of politics is seen as guaranteeing "maximal latitude and minimal hindrance in the forming of preferences by individual choosers and consumers" (1982: 107).

Thus, under the ordinary, politics guarantees individual choosers the freedom and security to choose, making the relationship of the citizen to his collective a utilitarian one.

Under the ordinary in this case, the forming of preferences or the making of choices by individual consumers is understood as an individual right and its impact on the collective good is overlooked. The individual decides what is good for himself, as if the choice of the individual good has no bearing on the collective good. Here choosing the good life itself becomes the prerogative of the individual consumer and the notion that there are competing substantive notions of collective good requiring collective adjudication is disregarded. As such, the collective good comes to be interpreted as the individual good, merely the aggregate of individual goods.

Benjamin Barber's critique of the ordinary adds another significant dimension to the criticism the ordinary has brought forth when he says that "The modern consumer is the most recent incarnation of this [liberal portrayal of the] small man, the last in a long



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train of models that depict man as a greedy, self-interested, acquisitive survivor whose prime concern is in material satisfaction. The consumer is a creature of great reason devoted to small ends. His cherished freedom is chained to the most banal need. He uses the gift of choice to multiply his options in and to transform the material conditions of the world, but never to transform himself or to create a world of mutuality with his fellow humans (2003: 22).

What Barber suggests here is that the best of humanity is achieved in aspiring for greatness or excellence, in reaching for higher things, in stepping outside the self into the life of the collective world and living life fully, beyond survival. He suggests that human flourishing does not lie in seeking only the satisfaction of one's desires in consuming and amassing material goods. According to Barber's interpretation, while the maintenance and survival of life is necessary for human existence, there is life for humans outside the self-interests of material satisfaction.

Barber's modern consumer is one who has not had the opportunity to cultivate the habits of moderation. The freedom of choice in the marketplace is a freedom devoted to banal ends which we need somehow to fulfil in order to sustain our material lives. What is lacking in this consumer mode is a collective life outside the ordinary. Lacking any idea of spiritual or political greatness, the "small man" cannot transform himself to a higher level as long as he does not take the initiative to question and reflect on the habits of consumerism. However, the ordinary itself here does not possess the resources for such a transformation.



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The charge of conformism implies the absence of dissent, of a difference of views, criticism, or independent thinking in collective life, and suggests that this lack impoverishes collective life. The idea here is that, whereas the human world needs constant renewal by the manifestation of different views that emerge from the condition of human plurality, if let to ossify by means of conformism it will decay (Arendt, 1958). Human collective life needs criticism to prevent it giving rise to the herd mentality which potentially can produce destructive behaviour among its citizens.

Under the ordinary we assume that we exercise the freedom of choice, but in choosing what others desire in fact we tend to choose what the market drives us to buy by way of others' desires, and thereby act in conformity. We choose what society wants us to choose, as our preferences are already social. If to exercise choice is to be guided by undifferentiated preferences, then it is an acknowledgement of the absence of substantive standards to guide us.

The ordinary believes that choosing is the prerogative of the individual whereas critics of the ordinary suggest that choosing involves more than mere individual decision making and that the ordinary needs to reflect upon the activity of choosing. The severity of conformity under the ordinary is evident in how individuals often make an extraordinary effort to acquire new experiences. Resistance to conformism under the ordinary generally takes the form of what has come to be known as deviance rather than rebellion.



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In response to the critics' complaint of liberalism that, where everyone can choose what to do, some may suffer not having the desire or the ability to choose higher or better things in human life, Richard Rorty has taken the position that the price that a liberal society may pay for its freedom would be that some people may choose to remain ignorant. The political implication of Rorty's position is that society can come under the threat of being unable to renew itself if it does not address the issue of what happens when it chooses to ignore that the freedom of choice can simultaneously condemn many of its citizens to banality.

What can be termed the complacency expressed by Richard Rorty, when he acknowledges that the liberal order ...embodies a decision that human beings be "bland, calculating, petty and unheroic" because this is the necessary price one pays for a society that cherishes individual liberty (cited in Beiner, 1997: 12), does not seem to convince Beiner who worries over the deracination of citizens by what he calls a "mass consumer culture" (Beiner, *ibid*). Seen from the perspective of Beiner, what Rorty's self-satisfaction concerning the moral inadequacy of liberal political order fails to appreciate, is that if people degenerate it stultifies the possibilities that exist for a healthy public life. Deracinated people are not the best contenders for active citizenship (Beiner, 1982: 74). Beiner's worry can be taken to mean that even a "liberal order" of the nature that Rorty himself appreciates, needs citizens who would take it as their political responsibility to sustain.



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In suggesting that the price of individual liberty in life can become banal for many, Rorty does not deny the value of the good characteristics represented by the opposites of what he admits to be poor human qualities, but for him they could not form the basis for the life of many in society. For Rorty then, there is a trade-off between valuing the individual freedom to choose and considering the possibility that a large majority of people in society could have the opportunity to cultivate themselves out of the banality of the ordinary. He cannot imagine that it is a possibility for the most to have access to the best, as the saying goes.

Rorty seems to think that the freedom to choose involves the freedom to choose badly as well and that it is the price of liberty. Hence, by valuing individual liberty above everything else, Rorty is disinclined to address the question of whether in the long run it would not affect the quality of life of the collective, and even the offspring of those members of the collective who have been able to acquire better qualities initially. How can the desire for independence and originality be sustained in a society where banality is spreading all around? What would be the attitude of society to the condemnation of many of its members to choose badly while a few become self-governing individuals engaged in higher activities beyond the ordinary? If, under the sway of the ordinary, most people choose what society wants them to choose, then banality is not really an individual choice but a collective choice.

The charge of banality laments the absence of originality, the loss of human capacity for initiative and creativity. The human desire for originality under the ordinary

is displaced onto branding as if one could become original in consuming commodities. Here, the task of advertising becomes that of feigning originality.

If the likelihood of banality among its citizens undermines the possibility of a healthy public life and in turn the possibility of reproducing itself as a city that assures freedom to its citizens, then the absence of incentives to strive for originality that criticism of banality makes reference to ironically requires a public realm. As Arendt would say, being original in the sense of achieving a unique identity as a person requires achieving excellence in public performance. Excellence, according to Arendt, "has always been assigned to the public realm where one could excel, could distinguish oneself from all others. Every activity performed in public can attain an excellence" which by definition always requires the presence of others, "the formality of the public constituted by one's peers" (1958: 48-49).

That the ordinary deracinates is a charge against treating one's city as a place of consumption rather than as the location of a public culture to which one is attached because one is a product of that culture. Socrates reminds us of the significance of the concept in his refusal to flee Athens upon conviction.

In the absence of a public culture the temptation would be to take the ordinary as a given condition and therefore as beyond transformation. The consumer citizen has yet to develop an interest in the city as the place where collective life is developed and therefore where one has her roots. Hence the citizen will have no reason to stick up for her city, unlike the New Orleanians in the aftermath of the Katrina hurricane.



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If the absence of a sense of having roots is taken as an opportunity to celebrate cosmopolitanism (understood as being attached to nowhere, which is the same as claiming to be a citizen of the world), it poses the question of whether one could become a citizen of the world without first becoming a citizen of a particular city when the idea of being a citizen of the world is itself a product of the culture of a particular city, and not of a nowhere.

That the ordinary has a tendency, in Beiner's words, to "turn all areas of human activity into matters of consumer preference" (1982: 22) and to turn the freedom of individual choice into commodities (1982: 100-102), means that it threatens to undermine the possibility of a strong sense of citizenship and politics.

To begin with, what Beiner raises here is the issue of ethicality involved in the choices humans make. This cannot be left entirely to the preference of individuals who see themselves first and foremost as consumers of commodities, because individual choices have serious implications for how we perceive ourselves as humans, and therefore will also affect how we reproduce our world in the form of a stable society. If all areas of human life are treated as commodities subject to consumer preference, what would the collective life of such a society look like?

Beiner raises such a concern when he points out that when the ordinary takes the state as the guarantor of the rights of individual choosers and consumers to form and make preferences, and if the same view that choosing is the prerogative of the individual is taken towards the political community, then citizens will not be attached to the state.



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They would be like emigrants who can choose to go anywhere in search of the best choices they are able to make, each choice to be superseded by another (1982: 108).

Citizens of such a city need not have an attachment to the city except as a free port where consumers congregate from all over the world to get the best bargains. But what would be the free port of those who are its residents –let us say of Singapore or Dubai? Would they behave as if they are –citizens of nowhere? Alternatively, that they have agreed to make their city a free port can be taken as a choice they exercise in the interest of the collective, the point being that even a city which is conceived as a free port needs its citizens to be attached to the city rather than distanced like bargain hunters who visit the city.

Hence Beiner's (ibid) position that if citizens treat the city the same way they treat consumer goods they have no strong reasons to obey the law and support the government except when such things facilitate consumption, which means that when our consumerist way of life is at stake we may need not obey the law or respect the government. An alternative way of looking at the issue would be that we support the government and the law because we feel that such support is required of us as citizens of our country.

Beiner's observation that the ordinary "excludes the need to adjudicate between competing conceptions of the good life" (1997: 8-9) is a reminder that, under the ordinary, there cannot be a conception of a common good acceptable to the collective. This can only come about through a consideration of competing conceptions of the good life for the collective. The absence of an evaluation of alternative understandings of the



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good life misses the opportunity to develop the ability to discriminate within the ordinary by questioning it. Under the ordinary, when citizens seek to secure their identity by the acquisition of goods, what is missing is the questioning of the good of the goods thus consumed, insofar as the stating of preferences fills the space available for questioning. If consumerism arises in the absence of a desire to adjudicate between competing conceptions of the good life, then the self understanding of the citizen as consumer excludes any input outside oneself in determining the form of good life for oneself. Hence, the public input into the lives of citizens takes the superficial form of advertising in the market.

Alternatively, consumerism, if framed within the idea of the good life, would lead us to question the value of consumerism as a good life by comparing it with alternative conceptions of the good life.

Thus, under the ordinary, the forming of preferences or choosing by individual consumers is understood as the individual right of the consumer, and its impact on the collective good is overlooked. Choosing the form of the good life itself then becomes the prerogative of the individual, hence the usage of the term *lifestyles* to name it. When identity is taken to be based on the freedom of the individual to choose to satisfy one's needs by fulfilling the desirability of the other, then the term *lifestyle* refers to such an identity.

The ordinary promises a rich multiplicity of different conceptions of the good or of the ends of life (Beiner, 1982: 23), which in reality has taken the form of lifestyles.



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Thus, under the ordinary the idea of the good life itself is turned into a choice of individual preference. It is as if a meaningful life can be lived as a collection of lifestyles when it is taken to be based on the desirability of others with whom one identifies oneself. This can change according to the dictates of the prevailing trends in society.

When Roy Turner refers to the self-understanding of the ordinary as a community which is unable to take pride in or identify with any particular way of life lived by its diverse members which it understands as lifestyles because it regards them as primitives, as atoms and origins beyond question (1990: 87), the implication he draws is that the idea of lifestyles treats members of the community as if they originated outside the formation by collective life. He suggests that what are termed lifestyles are different ways of life adopted by members of the community which need to be adjudicated collectively as to their good instead of treated as mere individual choices.

Roy Turner makes explicit the connection between the individual choices we make and the collective mediation of such choices when he says that if taste is an educated capacity for making worthwhile distinctions then to say that the choice lies entirely with the individual is to treat the connection between taste and its object as being beyond the sway of argument or judgement (Turner, 1991:9). The idea of choice that the life of the ordinary makes reference to in its strongest sense is the capacity for discrimination. We learn to choose well, that is, to make judgments in exercising our general sense of the good in specific contexts by which we reach higher levels of discrimination. Consumption to fulfil the needs of life in general does not demand the



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exercise of judgment at a higher level. This only becomes requisite when our consumer needs are driven by the desirability of the other which is governed by the market itself. Choosing well, which is different from choosing merely by preference, is guided by the sense of the good life that we want to have for the collective, that is, by living by the standards we adopt for collective life.

Charles Taylor: “Strong Evaluations”

The life of the ordinary has a sense of standards which are only superficial. It nevertheless points in the direction of stronger substantive ones. Hence, evaluation that involves consumerism would fall under the category of what Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* (1989) calls “weak evaluations” as opposed to “strong evaluations” the latter referring to “whether desires are distinguished as to worth” (Taylor, 1985:18). “Strong evaluations” are discriminations based on worth. They are moral standards for judgment, outside us, our own desires, inclinations, or choices” (1989: 4). Taylor’s position is that the weak evaluator “is already reflective in a minimal sense in that he evaluates a course of action, and sometimes is capable of acting out of that evaluation as against under the impress of immediate desire. And this is a necessary feature of what we call a self or a person” (1985: 23).

Roy Turner suggests that Taylor’s strong evaluator is a self in a particular mode in the same way that the weak evaluator is, and that the distinction between the two is not a matter of education but of practice. The implication is that the weak evaluator can



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become strong through practice. According to Turner, the weak evaluator is one who denies either the capacity or the need to evaluate strongly, repressing the history of preference as though preference were pre-social (immediate) (1991: 9). Turner reminds us that if we believe that our preferences are immediate, as we do under the ordinary, then what we forget is that they are social. This means that we can become strong evaluators by acknowledging that we choose within a history of preference and begin to examine our own preferences, which are provided to us only by the collective.

Taylor argues that the choices we make are always guided by evaluations and that the strong evaluations available in collective life guide us in making strong distinctions in choosing. We cannot help but refer to strong evaluations if we are to choose well, which requires choosing by being aware that choices have consequences for oneself as well as the collective. This makes the element of reflection essential to choosing.

The common sense understanding of citizenship as a legal matter and of politics as attending to the mundane needs of everyday life signifies what Hannah Arendt called the rise of the social realm (*The Human Condition*, 1958: 38-49), in which the tasks of serving the needs of the private life of individual citizens comes to occupy the public realm. This seems to be aimed at providing an explanation for the common sense understanding of citizenship and politics under the ordinary. Here, citizenship is understood mainly as something a citizen is entitled to, and uses in order to satisfy his or her private needs. Arendt's position is that with the rise of society, that is, the rise of the household or of economic activities to the public realm, housekeeping and all matters



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pertaining formerly to the private sphere of family have become a collective concern, politics has been reduced to a function of society, and political activity has been taken to be based on social interest (1958:33). Here, politics loses its vitality as the political order takes the form of administration and management of the household economy at a national level, what Arendt calls "collective housekeeping". Here citizens have no significant place in political life except as clients of the state and as recipients of welfare, representing their self-interest in politics through voting.

The modern idea of a national economy administered and managed by the state makes the central political issue in collective life a previously essentially private concern: the maintenance and survival of life in the household and the family. The political order is turned to serve and protect the private interests of individual citizens taken together.

Arendt's view is that the rise of the social meant that "[T]he point is not that for the first time in history laborers were admitted and given equal rights in the public realm, but that we have almost succeeded in levelling all human activities to the common denominator of securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance. Whatever we do, we are supposed to do for the sake of "making a living" (1958: 126). Arendt takes the position that the rise of the "social realm has transformed all modern communities into societies of labourers and jobholders," in the sense that all members of society "consider whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and those of their families" (1958: 46).



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The joy and pleasure in “ordinary” life

The criticism that the market is homogenizing may not be entirely correct in the sense that it is both homogenizing and pluralistic. It is not as if the elimination of the market as occurred in some countries under the socialist experiment would lead to the preservation of plurality.

The prevalence of a certain level of conformism in consumer society cannot necessarily be taken to mean that society has lost its capacity for discrimination, which can be found in many areas of private and collective life and even in consumption itself. In this sense consumption grounds both conformity and discrimination. Conformity itself may not be uniform. While one may conform in one area she may assert independence in another area.

That public political life may be deracinated does not mean that the ordinary life of all individuals themselves is necessarily and equally deracinated. Similarly, if consumerism indicates that the individual in consumer society is undermined in terms of a strong interest in transformation to the level of an active citizen, a description of the lived experience of the ordinary would bring out that even in the absence of a strong public life individuals can live enriching private lives.

Thus, Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self* refers to the dignity involved in ordinary life as follows: “myself as householder, father of a family, holding down a job, providing for my dependants: all this can be the basis of my sense of dignity” (1989: 15) Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* writing about the “modern enchantment with

“small things,” that “has found its classical expression in *petit bonheur* of the French people,” says that “[S]ince the decay of their once great and glorious public realm, the French have become masters in the act of being happy among “small things,” within the space of their own four walls, between chest and bed, table and chair, dog and cat and flowerpot, extending to these things a care and tenderness” (1958: 52). Her explanation for this seems to be that “[W]hat the public realm considers irrelevant can have such an extraordinary and infectious charm that a whole people may adopt it as their way of life” (ibid).

People enjoy their time with family, friends, even the strangers who they encounter on the street for a fleeting moment. At work people discuss topics with colleagues, share each other’s problems, worries, and concerns have coffee together, do things together and thereby derive a sense of satisfaction. There is pleasure in the sense of civility that arises from politeness, from exchanging courtesies and pleasantries in social life.

Everyday mundane existence -- fashion, popular culture, a serious interest diverse types of food, gardening, interests in preserving the environment and in what generally are called hobbies -- all these add to the pleasures and joys of everyday life in however small ways and keep the human spirit of being alive to the world. In the absence of larger involvements it is such small things which keep people going on with their lives on a day-to-day basis. Otherwise, would not life be utterly monotonous, boring and senseless?



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If we agree with Arendt's argument that it is the decay of the public realm that drives people to find solace in "small things," in ordinary life is it possible that the people turn to consumerism under the influence of the media and advertising is also partly if not mainly due to the decline of a public political realm? The political lesson here then would be not to condemn people for their apparent consumerism but to understand what led to the decline of the public realm in modern societies.

What is the basis for consumer culture? Is it the lack of mediation of, of the moderation of desire? The push then for many may not be one of merely seeking comfort, as if all humans are happy to be mere creatures of comfort at the expense of other valuable things in life. Is it possible that consumerism is an occasion that demands the cultivation of moderation rather than something to be controlled politically?

The ordinary is not essentially market driven whereas the allure of the market is always out there, even in a context where consumerism does not hold sway. The market in a broader sense is also the space within which consumption takes place, involving spaces of public gathering such as restaurants, bars, clubs, recreational facilities and festivals. These serve as the locations for "the scene" Alan Blum discusses in *The Imaginative Structure of the City* (2003) as a potential site for the formation of community in contemporary modern society.

A question to raise here from the point of view of the critics however is, whether, in our appreciation of how people find pleasure in the "small things" of life, we are forgetting the world and worldliness, which in turn would lead us to consider how



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preserving worldliness would work in the present moment of humanity. It seems moderns interpret their worldly concern partly through attending, both locally and internationally, to the issues related to gender, to treating women as equals, to the issue of human rights, to the welfare of all peoples, especially women and children around the world, and to taking care of the environment worldwide, to name a few of the major ones. The implication here seems to be that in order to preserve the world and worldliness we first need to raise the living conditions of all human beings around the world to a reasonably good standard. There is a strong notion of care and giving built in to this understanding, one that is manifested in disasters in general around the world the most vivid examples of recent times being the generous support given for the victims of the Tsunami and of hurricane Katrina.

Based on the assumption that the criticism of the ordinary needs to be posited in a more dialectical manner, and in consideration of the fact such criticisms are levelled from the perspective of what is perceived to be the possibility of a strong public life, it is in the next section of this paper that a discussion of a version of the self-understanding of ancient Athenian citizenship is presented.

II Citizenship and the “public world”: the Ancient understanding of worldliness

Hannah Arendt's interpretation of Aristotle's Athens seeks to remind us that, in the self-understanding of the Athenians, the *polis* was more than mere residence for the sustenance of life. Athens for the Athenians referred rather to a public culture that



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manifested itself in the character of its citizens and which made Athens what it was. In the view of the Athenian *polis*, the public was taken to be foundational to collective life and there was a clear separation of the private and the public. The citizens, having attended to the needs of the private, left the private to enter the public.

According to Arendt's interpretation, in Athens the public would have ruled out attending to the needs, desires, and comforts of the private life as a form of the good life. Therefore, they would not have allowed the private to dictate terms to collective life, not because they condemned private life as one without value, but because they believed that private interests, if allowed to assume significance in collective life, would override worldliness. Driven by urgency, since they are bound to the survival and maintenance of life, private interests would override the "love for the world," expected from citizens.

Athenian citizenship, which was understood to be connected to public life, barred slaves and women from entering the life of the *polis*, because in their view women and slaves (by the very character of the lives they lead in Athens) were bound to the needs of ordinary life and thus were not free to attend to the affairs of the world. The belief was that one has to be free from the cares and needs of the ordinary so that private interests which have a tendency to override everything else would not swamp public interest.

City as More Than Mere Geography

For the Athenians, the *polis* meant much more than mere geography of residence. As Arendt puts it, "it is the organization of its people as it arises out of acting and



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speaking together and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be (Arendt, 1958: 198).

If the moderns under the affirmation of the "ordinary" see collective life and the political community as one large household, and if for them the public serves and shields the private, thus blurring the distinction between the two realms, in the minds of the Athenians there was a clear distinction between "the public and the private realms, between the sphere of the polis and the sphere of the household and family, and between activities related to a common world and those related to the maintenance of life." For them, "whatever was economic, related to the life of the individual and the survival of the species . . . was a non-political household affair by definition" (Arendt, 1958: 29). The private thus served the needs of the "ordinary," whereas political life took place in the public sphere of the *polis* away from the private.

In Aristotle's Athens, what was affirmed as the "good life" was the life of the citizen in the public realm outside the "ordinary," free from the necessity to attend to the needs of the ordinary. In this view, the ordinary life of the household and family was devoted to the mastering of "necessities of sheer life," through "labor and work," where it was driven by the "innate urge of all living creatures for their own survival" and therefore "bound to the biological life process" (Arendt, 1958: 37).

If the Greek conception of the public realm required that for entry into the public life as a citizen one had to be free from the burdens of everyday "ordinary" life (Arendt, 1958: 316), then freedom here meant more than simply the freedom from the material



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and physical needs demanded by the ordinary. The idea is that one has to be free from preoccupation with those concerns which pull humans in a direction that stands in the way of their being able to attend to the needs of the common world (Arendt, 1977). Such freedom however, did not mean denying the significance of private life.

Every citizen belonged to both orders of existence, the private and the public. In common with fellow humans, citizens addressed the needs of life in the private life, and in addition, they had a public life, a second life as it were. In the household citizens pursue their private interests, whereas in political life the object is the common world (Arendt, 1958: 33,45).

Public Needs the Private

If in the view of the *polis* the private and the public were strictly separated, they nevertheless had a strong link. It was the responsibility of the private realm to prepare the citizen for entering into the public life, specially by habituating the young into the ethos and giving them what Aristotle called, in the Ethics, the background, and through education (Homer was called the educator of the Hellenes), the private realm prepared them to enter the public life of the *polis*.

For the ancients, while mastering the necessities of life in the household was necessary for both life and the good life, politics was never for the sake of life. From



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the perspective of the members of the polis household life exists for the sake of the household life in the polis (Arendt, 1958: 37).

The desire to keep the political realm free from being dominated by the concerns of the ordinary was guided by an understanding that believed there was a conflict of interest between the two realms, as each had specific needs. While the private realm of the ordinary was concerned with life, the concern of the public realm was with a common world that ought to last beyond the life of individual citizens. For the ancients, entering political life in the public realm meant one had to take up common interests which stood in direct opposition to the private interests of the ordinary (Arendt, 1958: 24). While the household is focused on the maintenance of life and the survival of the species, political organization is interested in the world that lasts beyond the life of individual citizens, and the transit of generations through it.

The Greek idea that politics has to be free from any activities related only to the needs of the ordinary means that admitting private interests as collective concerns into the public realm corrupts political life by undermining its attention to the concerns of the common world, which are beyond the concerns of the ordinary (Arendt, 1958: 37). It is for this reason that slaves and women, who spent their lives restricted to the activities in the household which served the ordinary, together with others whose occupations tied them to the ordinary, did not qualify to enter the public world. The understanding here is that humans create and preserve the common world only in their efforts to move away



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from the concerns that have to do with the “ordinary,” that is in speaking and acting together with fellow citizens.

The *polis* or the city, then, being much more than the mere geographical place in which citizens reside, took as a part of its essential character the specific form of the space that grounds a vibrant political realm, the public world, a space preserved for citizens’ active participation in the activities of the common world (Arendt, 1958: 13).

Thus the ancients perceived the public world of the *polis* as the space where citizens convened in pursuit of the “good life” of action and speech, and talked incessantly to each other, aiming for mutual persuasion regarding the concerns related to collective human affairs within the common world outside the “ordinary.”

In ancient Athens, to be reckoned a citizen one had to be engaged in the activities of public life, a life that brought distinction and therefore honour to citizens. Citizenship was honoured and the citizen was one who was willing to take risks and devote time on behalf of the community to engage in activities for the common good, rising above the necessities of the ordinary life. The public realm is also the space preserved for excellence where greatness can show itself (Arendt, 1958: 48-49). In participating in public life by striving for excellence among fellow citizens, a citizen could distinguish himself from all the others and potentially achieve greatness and thereby live in the memory of others.

The ancients considered life in the public realm of the *polis* to be, potentially, highly memorable. However, the life of the household, which attended to the needs of the



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ordinary was eminently non-memorable, and hence was considered futile in comparison to the life of the public world. It is a public realm that considers committing to memory the greatness achieved by its citizens, and looks on as valuable, those activities that would give its citizens the opportunity to actively participate in the life of the polis and thus potentially to live in the memory of others. For the ancients, immortality was not a question of eternal life in the Christian sense, something one possessed simply by virtue of being a human being. Immortality needed to be achieved: one might live in the memory of others, and thus overcome the futility of a life that left nothing memorable or valuable behind. But this notion of immortality itself depended upon the existence of a particular kind of public world (Arendt, 1958: 17-21,314).

It is less as an ideal and more as an anti-thesis that helps place the self-understanding of the ordinary in perspective against the alternative understanding of the life of the citizen, that the orientation of the ancient Greeks was presented above in order to examine how they attended to the plurality of ordinary life.

They lived at a time when a public realm was instituted in which citizens were wealthy enough (or even if not wealthy were able by virtue of their occupations) to free themselves from the burdens of having to attend to the needs of ordinary life, and so could enjoy the freedom of public life by attending discussions focussed on the common good. For these citizens, social life and the political life were the same. Women and slaves were excluded because their lives were tied to attending to the needs of the life of



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the ordinary. Foreigners, like today in almost all countries in the world, were also excluded.

The City as Public Culture

Accordingly, the essence of a city like Athens does not lie in the space of residence it provides to its citizens to engage in activities related to production and consumption but in the public culture of the city, the location that nourishes a strong sense of citizenship and gives an identity of its own to its citizens and therefore to the city. This is an idea that Arendt sums up in the following manner: "Wherever you go, you will be a polis: these famous words expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost anytime and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly" (Arendt, 1958: 198-9).

In the Arendtian interpretation, the strong city or the *polis* is a political phenomenon that comes into being wherever citizens are active, hence the recognition by the Greeks of the essential character of its citizenry as the *polis*-creating orientation to the public spirit: "Not the Athens, but the Athenians were the *polis*" (Arendt, 1958: 195). This self-understanding of the Athenians together with another memorable saying that comes to us from Athens, "If Athens was destroyed it will be rebuilt somewhere else,"



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expresses the conviction that for the Athenians, the *polis* signified not merely a geographical location but a public culture that animated a particular type of citizen.

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