When approaching the question of the role of the state in education from the perspective of Arendtian thought, two problems present themselves. First, Arendt never formulated any comprehensive theory of the state of her own, even if she devoted a lot of attention to the shortcomings of the nation-state order that emerged in Europe between the two world wars. Second, some of the most distinctive ideas of her writings on education centers on the need for education to be conservative, non-political in character and kept apart from the world of politics. This may seem controversial in relation to contemporary debates on education. Recent attempts, however, to construct an Arendtian theory of the state provide some additional arguments for her insistence on the importance of keeping education non-political and sheltered from the world of politics.

Departing from Arendt’s analysis of the decline of the nation-state order of interwar Europe, Volk (2016) argues that Arendt – despite lacking a pronounced systematic theory of the state – may be considered as a thinker of political order. He argues that “her thoughts highlight the importance of a durable, stable and free political order in and through which political struggle, debate and ‘acting with one another’ can happen, appear and be experienced”. In other words, for Arendt, the primary role of the state becomes that of guaranteeing, what Volk calls, an order of freedom. He goes on to argue that such political freedom, in Arendt’s view, is about creating a situation where men may have the opportunity of making the experience of “having the power to act politically”. In order to be able to perpetuate such an experience of freedom, a corresponding institutionalized political order is required.

Freedom, for Arendt, is intimately connected to man’s ability to act. In her essay “What is Freedom?” she writes: “Men are free […] as long as they act, neither before, nor after; for to be free and to act are the same” (BPF 151). Furthermore, in Volk’s reading of Arendt, political action can only be considered legitimate when it is conducted in the mood of “acting with one another”, or, in other words, when it takes into account the fact that human coexistence is defined by plurality. From this, Volk concludes that, for Arendt, the state’s primary function is to provide a legal order capable to ensure and to perpetuate such rules in the execution of political opinion and decision-making. Political freedom cannot exist outside such an order because it can only flourish where the ability to act is guaranteed by others. The law is a central medium by which to express such a guarantee and to stabilize man’s ability to act. The role of the state, thus, is to establish a space in which political “acting with one another” is possible and human plurality can be politically expressed and experienced. The space of appearance made possible within such an order of freedom is, for Arendt, what constitutes a common world shared among men through speech and action. However, according to Volk, Arendt’s conclusion is that the modern state, as a form of political organization, is unsuitable and incapable of realizing this order of freedom. This is because the idea of the nation and national sovereignty, as understood by Arendt, in themselves exclude the very idea of political freedom based on human plurality.

Roy Tsao (2004) has argued that for Arendt, “the rights conferred with membership in a formally organized political community are themselves indispensable for living a fully human existence, so much so that to lack them is to be deprived the very basis for human dignity”. Within the idea of a nation-state, however, a tension arises between two conflicting principles. The state, on the one hand, derives its legitimacy as the supreme legal institution for the
protection of all inhabitants of its territory, members and non-members alike. A nation, on the other hand, denotes an exclusive community composed of only those who belong “by right of origin and fact of birth”. Within a political community characterized by these conflicting principles, there is a constant risk for what Arendt called “the conquest of the state by the nation”, meaning that nationalist movements may take control over the constitutional government and thereby promote the idea that only nationals have access to equal rights within the nation-state. As the will of the nation became superior to the rule of law, the nation-state lost it legitimacy as a system of rule, since it no longer represented all those present on its territory. Consequently, within the order of the nation-state, the rights of man transformed into the rights of citizens, resulting in the exclusion of everyone not included within a nationally defined community. As a result, the excluded, or stateless, peoples of Europe lost not only their citizenship, but also their human rights and became what Arendt referred to as rightsless. For Arendt, to be rightsless is to be denied the most basic human right, that is, the right to have rights at all, and to belong to an organized political community. In other words, the failure of the nation-states to secure the rights of all those living within their territories resulted in a situation where large numbers of people were in fact denied a distinct place in the world as they were deprived of the possibility of participating in a common world constituted through human activities, especially speech and action. For Arendt, this means that they were expelled from humanity itself because “a life without speech and without action has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men” (HC, 176). The idea of national sovereignty is thus incompatible with the Arendtian concept of freedom. She writes,

“Under human conditions, which are determined by the fact that not man but men live on the earth, freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they cannot even exist simultaneously. When men wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organized groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will, be this the individual will with which I force myself, or the “general will” of an organized group. If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce” (BPF 163).

From this, one might argue that Arendt’s insistence on the non-political character of education becomes easier to understand. One major reason for why Arendt claims that education must not be political has to do with the risk that a politicized education may turn into indoctrination and thereby jeopardizing not only human plurality, but also the promise of natality, something that, for Arendt, constitutes the very essence of education. Efforts to use education in order to provide new generations with pre-formulated ideas of an ideal future only succeeds, according to Arendt, in denying them their own future role in the body politic. In Arendt’s view, “it is the very nature of the human condition that each new generation grows into an old world, so that to prepare a new generation for a new world can only mean that one wishes to strike from the newcomers’ hands their own chance at the new” (CE: 174). The concept of natality, in other words, embodies the potentiality of action, the possibility of every human being to introduce new beginnings into an old world. Therefore, it becomes a fundamental task for education to preserve this newness by protecting the child from the public world of politics until it is properly prepared, by way of education, to engage with it through speech and action in the context of human plurality and freedom.

This need to protect the newness of children is at the heart of another of Arendt’s key arguments for claiming that education cannot be political. It concerns the fact that she understands education as the “institution that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at
all” (CE:185). Consequently, schools are places where new generations are prepared for entering the world without having to leave the safety of the private sphere of home. As a result, education takes place within the structure of this private sphere, characterized by authoritarian relationships between teachers and students or adults and children, fundamentally different from the equality characterizing Arendt’s ideas of the free political world of the already educated. This is because in education, we assume responsibility for both the life and development of the child and for the continuance of the world. Therefore, it is the role of educators to act as representatives of the world to the young and to assume responsibility for it although they did not themselves make it and may for different reasons wish it was other than it is. Arendt claims that “exactly for the sake of what is new and revolutionary in every child, education must be conservative; it must preserve this newness and introduce it as a new thing into and old world, which, however revolutionary its actions may be, is always, from the standpoint of the next generation, superannuated and close to destruction” (CE 189). Because the world is inhabited by mortal men, it must, for its survival, be “constantly set right anew”. Through education, we may secure the possibility of such processes of setting right. However, as Arendt’s claims, “our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look” (CE 189).

If the role of the state, then, is to create and uphold an institutionalized order of political freedom, capable of securing men’s rights to a common world where they may appear in speech and action in a context of human plurality, it must protect the non-political character of education. In “What is Freedom”, Arendt argues that the state is a product of acting men and that it is dependent on the continuing actions of its members for its survival. The potentiality of action, of new beginnings, is manifested in the human condition of natality, which is the very essence of education, making education essential for the survival of the state. However, if nationalistic sentiments, or other political ideologies, are allowed to transform education into an instrument for the implementation of an already decided utopia, the promise of natality, of the human capacity for new and unforeseen beginnings are at risk. If this is the case, political freedom and thereby the very idea of a common world based on human plurality is in danger. In other words, from an Arendtian point of view, it is for the sake of political freedom itself that the primary role of the state in education must be to shield it from the world of politics and to maintain and protect its non-political character. From Arendt’s point of view – and it may seem controversial in relation to contemporary educational debates – in order to create and uphold a public political world of freedom, the conservative character of education must be protected.