

Natality and the Rise of the Social in Hannah Arendt's Political Thought

by

Jeanette Parker
BFA, University of Calgary, 2005

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This thesis focuses on Hannah Arendt's theory of natality, which is identified with the event of birth into a pre-existing human world. Arendt names natality the "ontological root" of political action and of human freedom, and yet, as critics of Arendt's political writings have pointed out, this notion of identifying freedom with birth is somewhat perplexing. I return to Arendt's phenomenological analysis of active human life in *The Human Condition*, focusing on the significance of natality as the disclosure of a unique "who" within a specific relational web. From there, I trace the distinct threats to natality, speech-action, and worldly relations posed by the political philosophical tradition, on the one hand, and by the modern biopolitical "rise of the social" on the other. Drawing connections between Arendt's theory of the social and Michel Foucault's work on the biopolitical management of populations, my thesis defends Arendt's contentious distinction between social and political life; the Arendtian social, I argue, can fruitfully be read as biopolitical.

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Dedication

To Frances Irwin, my mother and the first philosopher to inspire my thinking: your support, love, and immense courage throughout the last few difficult years have taught me the true meaning of gratitude.

List of Abbreviations

Works by Hannah Arendt:

BPF	<i>Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought</i>
CCMS	“The Crisis Character of Modern Society”
EJ	<i>Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil</i>
EU	<i>Essay in Understanding: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism, 1930-1954</i>
HC	<i>The Human Condition</i>
JP	<i>The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age</i>
LWA	“Labor, Work, Action”
LKPP	<i>Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy</i>
LM	<i>The Life of the Mind</i>
LSA	<i>Love and Saint Augustine</i>
OR	<i>On Revolution</i>
OT	<i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i>
OV	<i>On Violence</i>
PP	<i>The Promise of Politics</i>
RJ	<i>Responsibility and Judgement</i>

Works by Michel Foucault:

HS	<i>The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction</i>
SMBD	<i>Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976</i>
STP	<i>Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978</i>
BB	<i>The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979.</i>

Works by Elizabeth Young-Bruehl:

FLW	<i>Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World</i> (biography)
WAM	<i>Why Arendt Matters</i>

Works by Dana R. Villa

AH	<i>Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political.</i>
TMT	“Totalitarianism, Modernity, and Tradition”

Introduction: A Biopolitical Reading of Arendt's Theory of the Social

In the concluding chapter of *The History of Sexuality's* first volume, Michel Foucault famously introduces the concept of bio-power and asserts that this relatively new form of power over human life at the level of the of the species has had a profound impact on virtually all phenomena shaping the “social bodies” of populations from the eighteenth century onward. Bio-power aims at calculating and governing the vitality of whole populations. Foucault describes here, and in greater detail in his *Collège de France* lectures,¹ how bio-power functions in conjunction with other modes of power-knowledge (disciplinary and sovereign) to administer, optimize, or deny “life itself” on a grand scale. Hannah Arendt's earlier assessment of the elevation of sheer biological life to the level of the highest good in the modern era and her critique of the economic administration of the “productive forces” of laboring societies bears a number of significant points of intersection with Foucault's analysis of the biopolitical relations informing (neo)liberal governmentality.² In passages that seem to echo Arendt, Foucault writes that bio-power was key to the development of capitalism, which “would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of

¹ See especially, *Society Must Be Defended; Security, Territory, Population; Birth of Biopolitics*.

² The emergence of the population as a statistical ‘entity’ endowed with a socio-economic life, as Foucault demonstrates, emerges in the 18th and 19th centuries in relation to a changing understanding of the role of the state as a governmental power; the “governmentalization of the state” names a shift in the understanding of politics, whereby the state becomes responsible not only for the defense of its sovereign territory, but also for the directing and taking care of the (re)productive, bodily life of those living within its boundaries. See “Governmentality” in *Power: the Essential Works of Michel Foucault (201-222)*. This governmental taking charge of life by the state, and eventually by the economy ‘itself,’ which Foucault traces in *Security, Territory, Population*, was enabled through the co-emergence of “practices, institutions, and new bodies of knowledge , designed to take care of the physical aspects of human life such as fertility, health, disease, longevity, or morbidity, in order to enhance the productivity of the population as well as its loyalty to the state” (Braun 8).

the phenomena of population to economic processes” (*HS* 141). Much like Arendt, he characterizes the vast transformation in the conceptualization of life arising from the development of biopolitical techniques as “nothing less than the entry of life into history” (*HS* 141).

Biopolitics extends control over populations through demography and statistics, which function at once as forms of knowledge and as techniques of normalization. Arendt’s theory of the social brings together two separate conceptual strands: the social as pervasive conformism, through which individuals and groups behave predictably in accordance with rules and norms, and the social as economic-biological mass of isolated laboring beings, in danger of being stripped of all meaningful difference (Pitkin 177). The connections between these two strands, the social as conformist behavior and the social as economically administered biological life, are not always clearly articulated in Arendt’s writing, and yet the outcome of both is the destruction of the conditions for free political action as she understood it. The potential for free political action, in her view, is not linked to the sovereign will of individuals (or states), but can only manifest itself temporarily and without absolute stability in the context of an active and public “web of relationships.” In order to gain a better understanding of Arendt’s theory of the social, I propose to introduce Foucault’s biopolitical theories as an interpretive lens for reevaluating the significance and the limitations of this important aspect of Arendt’s political thought. This will provide a clearer picture of the place of the social within Arendt’s overall diagnosis of the loss of the public-political in the modern age, and will also point to its overlooked relevance for contemporary political thinkers continuing to grapple with the complex problems of population as Foucault articulates it; Arendt’s

theory of the social, I argue, can be fruitfully read as biopolitical. Arendt offers a nuanced account of dramatic shifts in relationships between (and internal to) the conditions of political humanness, philosophical and scientific evaluations of ‘Man’ as a species, and the dominant approaches, traditional and modern, to controlling the unpredictable elements of human living-together. Normalizing processes aimed at the socio-economic administration of laboring life, in Arendt’s view, are definitive of modern liberal mass-societies and these processes of shaping (de)humanized life also reveal a menacing, “proto-Totalitarian” potential.

By focusing on how the concept of the social serves as a link between Arendt’s two most important works, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and *The Human Condition*, I hope to point out the depth and prescience of Arendt’s understanding of biopolitical power/violence and to identify a few of the many connections between her critical reflections on the pre-eminence of “life itself” in modern (social) politics and Foucault’s insights into the rise of biopolitics. Arendt articulates the subtle differences and interconnections between various “crystallizations” of biopolitics in the twentieth century, including the unprecedented techniques of totalitarian terror.

Some contemporary political theorists, most notable Giorgio Agamben, have begun to acknowledge commonalities between Arendt’s work and the later writings of Foucault, yet these tentative suggestions have not been substantiated by any sustained comparison of their thought. Despite being one of the first and surely the most influential thinkers to make this connection, Agamben does not follow up on it in any detail. The present discussion of the biopolitical aspects of Arendt’s theory of the social is a step in that direction. Agamben’s widely read *Homo Sacer* trilogy of books presents itself as a

follow-up and corrective to Foucault's writings on biopolitics and sovereignty.³ The first book in the trilogy,⁴ *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, begins with this comparison:

Almost twenty years before *The History of Sexuality*, Hannah Arendt had already analyzed the process that brings *homo laborans* [sic]—and with it, biological life as such—gradually to occupy the very centre of the political scene of modernity. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt attributes the transformation and decadence of the political realm in modern societies to this very primacy of natural life over political action. That Foucault was able to begin his study of biopolitics with no reference to Arendt's work (which remains, even today, practically without continuation) bears witness to the difficulties and resistances that thinking had to encounter in this area. (4)

For the most part, I agree with Agamben's interpretation of the most striking aspect of *The Human Condition*: Arendt's views on the entrance of biological life into the centre of modern political affairs and the stifling of action entailed in the ongoing destruction of public-political 'spaces.' I also support his assessment of the remarkable similarities between Arendt's understanding of labor-driven modern societies and what Foucault, later on, terms biopolitics. However, after suggesting this connection, Agamben almost immediately undermines Arendt's relevance for thinking through the complex problems

³ For a helpful clarification of the numerous important conceptual and methodological divergences between Foucault and Agamben's theoretical accounts of bio-power, see Catherine Mills' "Biopolitics, Liberal Eugenics, and Nihilism."

⁴ The trilogy includes: *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1999) and *State of Exception* (2005).

entailed in biopolitical power relations. He asserts that she fails to connect her insights in *The Human Condition* into the centrality of life itself in modern mass democracies with her earlier analysis of “totalitarian power” (a contradiction in terms from an Arendtian perspective). Ultimately, Agamben concludes, Arendt’s failure to make these links explicit shows that her work is “altogether lacking” biopolitical perspective (4).⁵ Against this view, I argue that Arendt *did* make connections between her insights into the terror deployed by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century and the liberal “mass societies” defined by the insertion of life into endless cycles of labor/consumption.

Whereas contemporary commentators, Agamben included, frequently treat *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* as representative of two distinct “phases” in the development of Arendt’s political thinking, my contention is that her theory of the socialization of man-kind is a common thread running through the two books (Young-Bruehl, Kristeva, Beiner). The social is a complex concept that plays an important role in virtually all of Arendt’s writings. Although I limit myself here to a discussion of how the social links Arendt’s two most widely read works of political theory, this concept also holds a central position in her more “philosophical” writings. Arendt’s interest in the problem of the social as an organizing principle for man-kind *qua* living creature/species dates from her doctoral dissertation on the contradictory implications of “neighbourly love” in Augustine’s writings, and extends to her final major work, *The Life of the Mind*. My focus is limited to the concept of the social in Arendt’s mature political thought; I look primarily at *The Human Condition* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, with excursions into selected essays and the two more

⁵ Katherine Braun also calls attention to Agamben’s dismissal of Arendt as a biopolitical thinker (6).

“philosophical” works in order to tease out the most striking biopolitical threads running through her life-long project of understanding the “crisis” of modernity. These two texts, I suggest, share a concept of the social, yet they approach it from two different angles in order to map the configuration of historical and novel elements as they crystallized into two distinctly modern forms of power over life of humans as a species: totalitarianism and liberalism. If *Origins* endeavours to retrace the emergence of totalitarianism as the crystallization of absolute evil, it must be remembered that the “horrible originality” of its two major twentieth century manifestations, Nazism and Stalinism, according to Arendt, resides in the fact that these regimes put into practice the world-destroying *potentials* present in all modern societies (*OT xv, EU 309*). Totalitarianism remained for Arendt a “monstrous,” radically evil, and absolutely unprecedented form of domination, and yet she also insists that these movements did not “invent” anything new, but merely exploited, re-worked, and brought to horrific extremes, the general destruction of free relations, human plurality, and spontaneous action that she took to be typical of modernity as such. *The Human Condition* focuses on the traditional unfolding of power (or rather, fabricating *violence*) aimed at securing “life,” both through the introduction of a model of rule and command into politics throughout the Western tradition, and in the modern age, following the tradition’s collapse, through the techno-scientific capacity to “act into nature.” Read together with *Origins*, *The Human Condition* suggests that what totalitarian regimes share with capitalist liberal-democracies, is a “limitless” concept of progress and an expansive, universalizing project developing out of a deep distrust for everything not “made” by Man. I argue that Arendt’s concept of the social ought to be regarded as a different articulation of the major shifts in power-knowledge that Foucault

explores under the name of biopolitics. Far from lacking biopolitical perspective, Arendt's writings offer crucial insights into the biopolitical character of modernity, which continues to shape the world(s) of the present and the projected future.

The social in *The Human Condition* is conceived as a growing, progressing, devouring "mass" that, "from the middle of the eighteenth century," begins to destroy the 'spaces' necessary for spontaneous political action (39). Politics and human freedom, based in the conditions of natality and plurality, are destroyed together by the "levelling" forces of modern socialization, which reduces all activities to the necessary (unfree) status of labor, "the human body's metabolism with nature"; in modern "laboring societies," no truly active "exchange exists but only consumption" (209). In Arendt's account, the social appears as the strangely de-differentiated (non)space that extends from the collapse of the public and private spheres of activity into one another. The main biopolitical aspect of the social emphasized here is its seemingly automatic functioning as a normalizing nexus uniting individual "behavior" (devoid of the spontaneity characteristic of genuine political action) with the "mass" life of statistically and economically managed populations. Arendt's understanding of the automatic behavior generated when humans are understood as nothing but "specimens of a species" and are conducted (both by themselves and by others) as members of one massive "household," bears a striking resemblance to Foucault's picture of how modern biopolitics operates to provide calculated "freedoms" within the securitizing framework of (neo)liberal governmentality.

In what remains of this preliminary discussion, I will briefly clarify the intentions and questions guiding my comparison between Arendt and Foucault before outlining in

more detail the main chapters of my thesis. Looking ahead, in the first chapter, I revisit Arendt's phenomenological analysis of the human condition within the framework of the *vita activa*, or active, potentially political life. This longer chapter elucidates the distinct temporal and spatial aspects of the three main categories of the *vita activa*—labor, work, and action—in order to open the way for an analysis of the biopolitical implications of Arendt's critique of the social in the modern age. The life at stake in modern biopolitics is clearly not the same as the distinct lives lived by particular historical actors, each with a unique life story made up of memorable, narratable actions (a *biography*). It is rather the abstract, zoological aspect of merely living beings. Arendt's political theory, based in the plurality and natality of distinct human actors, needs to be read as an attempt to counter the world-destroying and potentially life-destroying practices of modern bio-power. At the heart of Arendt's political thought is a call for a renewal of *amor mundi*, love of the world that humans hold in common, and a hope to save the radical newness of each "new beginning" (birth as the source and start of action) from automatic subsumption under the sign of the same process/progress of a non-existent abstraction, "life itself." I begin in this direction by providing a detailed overview and analysis of Arendt's phenomenological recovery of the three main categories of human activity and drawing out what I take to be the overlooked biopolitical implications of this schematization. In Arendt's view, the distinctions between labor, work, and action have been collapsed or confused in various ways by proponents of political philosophy since the inception of the tradition with Plato. Revisiting the three modes of activity and elucidating their distinctive spatial and temporal characteristics will provide a clearer picture of Arendt's critique of tradition. I call attention to her radical rejection of the

imposition of the “world-denying” and universalizing perspective of philosophy onto the realm of politics, which in her estimation is inherently relational and historical. In many respects, Arendt’s investigation into the traditional antagonism between philosophy and politics provides the theoretical foundation for her more familiar critique of modernity as the erosion of public-political ‘spaces’ for action.

Arendt and Foucault on Modernity: Logics of Process and the “Entrance of Life into History”

Arendt’s critique of modernity calls attention to how “history” and “nature” come to be conjoined as massive, seemingly “irresistible” processes through the co-developments of the physical, natural and, slightly later, social sciences—especially economics. Modernity, in her account is characterized by dramatic shifts in emphasis in virtually all fields of knowledge (scientific, historical, social, and political) “from interest in things,” i.e., *what* something is, to “interest in processes,” that is *how* it develops (*BPF* 51). Since the start of the seventeenth, the “the chief preoccupation of all scientific inquiry, natural as well as historical, has been with processes; but only modern technology (and no mere science, no matter how highly developed)... began with substituting mechanical processes for human activities—laboring and working—and ended with starting new natural processes” (*BPF* 51). Arendt’s primary concern is with understanding how this novel situation poses a serious danger to the public practice of politics as such and leads to the widespread condition of “world alienation,” or worse, total isolation, making both spontaneous action and politically grounded judgement difficult, if not impossible. The danger here, in her terms, is that when all attention is

focused on supposedly self-propelling, progressive processes under the basic assumption that “I ‘know’ a thing whenever I understand how it has come into being,” the complex multiplicity of distinct “things” that are in the world, whether they happen to be made by humans or not, including humans themselves, appears to be almost “accidental by-products” of a process in such a way that their existence verges on total superfluity (*BPF* 51). Knowledge of these manifold natural-historical processes, in the modern era, is taken to be the only intelligible basis of political (or rather, social) power and has become the justification for unprecedented forms of violence. The “superhuman” scale of modern processual logics functions to totalize humanity as an abstract whole thus obliterates any view of human particularity, responsibility, or free/contingent action. In other words, modernity’s mass processual logics effectively deny the central aspects of the human condition that Arendt sees as vital to the ongoing practice of politics, and more generally, to the unpredictable new beginnings that shape and give meaning to a shared world.

Foucault’s assertion that bio-power signifies and performs “nothing less than the entry of life into history,” making politics a matter of “survival” as never before, bears a strong resemblance to Arendt’s analysis of the modern reconceptualization of history as *process*, where the natural growth of “man-kind” as a species is believed to unfold in accordance with seemingly automatic, yet hidden “laws of motion.” Although Arendt is far from explicit on this point, she repeatedly implies that this modern techno-scientific ability to “start natural processes,” including what Foucault defines as the biopolitical direction of the newly discovered processes of human populations, forms the common thread linking Totalitarian regimes—where these techniques were taken to unprecedented extremes—and capitalist democracies, where the main aim is to produce easily

governable societies of docile and complacent laborers (*HS* 141,137, *OT* 460-468 & *BPF* 48-63). A comparison of Arendt and Foucault is justified despite their obvious differences since both offer perspectives on what can be looked at as the definitive phenomena of modernity: the biopolitical reconfiguration of the power-knowledge/nature-history nexus and the resulting ability to “capture” life at its seemingly most elemental and *productive* level by “acting into nature.” Both thinkers contest generally accepted “origin stories” that continue to shape the contemporary world and also provide analyses, at once philosophical, theoretical, and historical, of how human life, under these apparently “automated” conditions of natural-historical process, grows vulnerable in unprecedented ways.

Overview of the Thesis Chapters

The primary aim of the present discussion is to revisit Arendt’s salient reflections on the ongoing degradation of the shared public “world” and the unprecedented capacities of modern societies to make human life *superfluous*. What is “conditioned” human life, what does Arendt mean by “world” and “world alienation,” and in what sense can life be rendered “superfluous”? A (partial) answer to these questions is required before approaching larger issues: how does this potential superfluity of human life relate to the rise and decline of modern nation-states, and the differences or similarities between totalitarian regimes and capitalist mass-societies? How does the “rise of the social” (Arendt) or the seeming “naturalness of society” (Foucault) as a novel domain of knowledge and intervention connect to biopolitics, that is, the “statisation” and

securitization of populations? To what extent can Arendt's and Foucault's theories of social "normalization" be read as compatible and how do their concepts of "society" figure into their parallel but divergent accounts of modern State racism?

Clearly, these are incredibly complex questions that deserve substantially more attention than can be given them in the limited space of the present thesis. As a starting point, I focus in the first chapter on Arendt's approach to the shifting meanings of political humanness throughout the Western tradition of political philosophy in order to pose an answer to the question of what is meant by natality and plurality, worldliness and superfluity. These concepts are central to Arendt's understanding of human political life and the breach with tradition that leads into and continues to haunt the modern world. Worldly life, under 'healthy' political circumstances, is guarded, though never absolutely, against superfluity; these concepts, as we shall see shortly, pertain to the relevance of political belonging for *conditionally* human life. They need to be carefully considered before we can turn in the second chapter to explore Arendt's picture of the mass world alienation produced under the *apolitical* conditions of socialized life. In the last half of the second chapter, I come to express in more detail my views on how Arendt and Foucault offer similar, but ultimately incompatible accounts of the modern emergence of *society*, both as a seemingly unified historical subject and as a naturalized object of governmental responsibility. To anticipate, I argue that, although their methodologies and vocabularies differ, both Arendt and Foucault agree that society—or *the* social—has become at once a pseudo-natural "entity" and a "space" for the progressive unfolding of co-productive, seemingly automatic forces and social relations. When society is conceptualized and directed as the "mass" life of the population, the responsibility of

modern governments (both the State and non-state actors) is primarily the provision, defense, and direction of the vital “life necessities” of this growing, consuming, and ‘freely’ progressing social/societal organism. By introducing biopolitics as a lens for reading Arendt’s work, I hope to show that the implicit “link” between totalitarian domination and (neo)liberal modes of government *qua* “social housekeeping” as these are seen by Arendt to be different responses to the “crisis” of modernity, both of which attempt to securitize “life itself” at the level of society/population. Both totalitarianism and (neo)liberalism, though using very different techniques, attempt to alternately eliminate or administer the existential conditions of natality and plurality. But first, before we can consider Arendt’s understanding of the collapse of traditional structures of power and authority and the impacts of this collapse on modern life, it is necessary to gain a clearer picture of Arendt’s conceptualization of the *pre*-modern place of the tradition of political philosophy in relation to political experiences in the West. In her terms, we must first re-examine the “traditional substitution of making for acting” in order to grasp how this mode of securing the space of politics gives way in the modernity to a new, and I argue, distinctly biopolitical capacity for “acting into nature” and starting new, (de)naturalized processes.

The first chapter aims to establish the terminological and conceptual background necessary for gaining a clearer picture of Arendt’s take on these modern developments (or the ubiquitousness of the very concept of development in the modern age). From Arendt’s point of view, life in the modern era is under threat of losing what she takes to be its two fundamental existential-political conditions: *natality*, the capacity to act unpredictably and to start something new, and *plurality*, the spatio-temporal co-existence

of different people, all of whom perceive and act slightly differently in relation to the shared phenomenal world. At the same time, the technological and social “engineering” of life has begun to carry the unpredictability and irreversibility inherent to human action into the realm of “nature,” which was previously understood as *atemporal*, eternal, and unchangeable by Man. This shift to regarding nature, including human life, as a collection of fully knowable, malleable, and potentially man-made processes, endangers not only the shared world made up by human action, but also the earthly life of all species. In a depoliticized and dehistoricized world, where events are increasingly predicted or explained with reference to quasi-natural and seemingly automatic processes, such as the “hidden” laws of the market, the subconscious or instinctual currents guiding human behavior, the dialectical unfolding of class struggle, or even the supposed “evolutionary” superiority of some races over others, Arendt warns that the protective layers of “human artifice” and the fragile “web of human affairs” lose their capacity to offer a meaningful, memorable home for humans as natal and mortal beings. This overview of the main concepts at play in *The Human Condition* is a necessary step towards understanding Arendt’s views on the attempted obliteration or “fabrication” of life’s political conditions, natality and plurality, in the modern age. From there, we will be in a better position to investigate how Arendt’s political phenomenology of the active life throughout history overlaps with Foucault’s genealogical studies on the development of different forms of power over life.

In addition to offering a critical explication of the basic terminological and phenomenal distinctions articulated in *The Human Condition*, an important aim of the first chapter is to elucidate Arendt’s take on the central concept of “world.” “World,” as

Arendt uses this word, is always a relational, temporal ‘space,’ though it is not spatial in the ordinary sense of an abstract, continuous expanse.⁶ Rather, “world” designates the shared living-together of multiple distinct people; it comes about continually in and through the emergence and convergence of each person’s unique existence. Arendt frequently linked this term to the duration between birth and death, that is, the unique life story. Worldly ‘spaces,’ as we shall see, are also constituted through the symbolic unfolding of a shared speech and action, where these closely linked activities can be heard, seen, remembered, and narrated from a variety of perspectives. The relational ‘space’ of the shared world, I suggest, forms the theoretical and ontological foundation of Arendt’s markedly anti-traditional political thought. I briefly situate Arendt’s politicization of worldly life in relation to her training in German *Existenz* philosophy and emphasize the importance of her theory of natality, which suggests that each human life, by virtue of birth into a pre-existing world of human affairs, is endowed with the capacity for endless new beginnings and for spontaneous action. Returning to Arendt’s distinctions between the modes of activity and from there, tracing links between her theory of worldly action and her earlier analysis of totalitarian ideologies (the “irresistible” processes of Nature and History), reveals a distinctly biopolitical dimension to her broader efforts to enable political “facing up to . . . reality” in a world threatened by unprecedented catastrophe (*OT viii*). From there, it will be possible to consider how (and whether) Arendt’s concept of the social intersects with Foucault’s theories of biopolitics;

⁶ Throughout the text, I use single quotations (‘space’) to designate that this is not space as we normally think of it, but space in the sense of *Existenz* philosophy: the relational space of *Dasein*’s “being-in-the-world.” And yet, Arendt’s conception of people as political actors challenges Heidegger’s picture of *Dasein* in relation to the public “They” (*Das Man*). As Elizabeth Young-Bruehl explains, “While Heidegger’s work is weighted towards the future experience of death, Arendt’s, even though it relies upon Heidegger’s time scheme, is equally [or actually much more] concerned with birth, what she . . . call[s] ‘natality’” (*FLW* 76). I briefly discuss the differences between Arendt’s and Heidegger’s work in chapter one. For more detailed analyses, see Villa (*AH*) and Taminiiaux.

Arendt's efforts to disentangle from traditional and modern conceptions the capabilities that potentially define humans as active, conditioning beings will open the way to articulating what I regard as her main contribution to contemporary political thought: an alternative perspective on the rise of biopolitics.

Chapter 1: Hannah Arendt's Phenomenological Analysis of *The Vita Activa*: Labor, Work, Action and the Condition of Natality

... This future man, who the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself. There is no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish such an exchange, just as there is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth. The question is now only whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians.

—Hannah Arendt,
The Human Condition (3).

Hannah Arendt is widely regarded as one of the most important and also one of the least classifiable political thinkers of the twentieth century and the past decade has seen a veritable explosion of interest in her work across (and beyond) academic disciplines. Readers of Arendt are frequently struck by a palpable tension running throughout her political writings; Arendt's courageous project of understanding delves into the most difficult, traumatic, and seemingly unthinkable situations and problems defining the "dark times" in which she lived, while at the same time refusing at every turn to predict doom, provide straight-forward prescriptions, offer simple causal explanations of events, or to give way to the despair so prevalent amongst intellectuals, writers, and philosophers of her generation. Arendt appeals so strongly to contemporary readers, Serena Parekh observes, not only because there is much in her work that resonates with our current political climate, but also, and more importantly, because she "embodies a tragic vision of the world, but one that is thoroughly infused with hope" (7-8). Arendt's belief in the potential for spontaneous action and the power of human

beginnings to renew pluralistic communities and to radically change the course of political events—a belief that should not be confused for naïve optimism—is a common thread running through nearly all of her diverse writings. The human potential to begin and act freely and unpredictably, Arendt names natality. This limitless potential to begin and to interrupt seemingly “automatic” processes, she contends, is linked ontologically to the event of birth. In contrast to mortality, which Arendt sees as the central existential focal point of human life for the tradition of Western philosophy, natality is named the “central category of political thought” since it is the ontological spring of human action and the condition for remembrance in the sense of narratable history:

In the sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity *par excellence*, natality and not mortality may be the central category of political thought, as distinguished from metaphysical thought [which takes death, the final limit of thought, to be the most significant for defining ‘Man’]... Whatever touches or enters into a substantial relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence. *This is why men, no matter what they do, are always conditioned beings. (HC 9)*⁷

The capacity to initiate something new in the world is ontologically linked to natality as human birth, and is present as a potential for action from the first moment of life’s ‘initiation’ (*initium*) into the world.

⁷ Emphasis added.

The tension between Arendt's hope for political new beginnings and the gravity and complexity of her subject matter is often surprising. Arendt's writings deal with a wide array of political, historical, and philosophical issues: the contradictory nature of Christian *caritas* from the perspective of worldly relations in her doctoral dissertation, *Love and Saint Augustine*; the horrors of anti-semitism and imperialism, the failure of universal human rights, and the crystallization of modern racist ideologies in her groundbreaking study, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; the problem of evil and the collapse of personal, moral and juridical standards of judgement in her controversial report of the trial of an SS commander, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; her phenomenology of human worldly life (labor, work, and action) and her biopolitical critique of modernity in the *The Human Condition*; and finally, her reflections on the history of philosophy and the ethico-political significance of mental faculties (thinking, willing, and judging) in *The Life of the Mind*. In all of these insightful works, and in others not listed here, the theme of natality—the unlimited potential of new human beginnings in the world—appears repeatedly, often as an unexpected interruption to the “darkest” parts of her investigations.⁸ Natality frequently emerges in Arendt's texts in a way that interjects a trace of hope into accounts of the seemingly most hopeless situations. Arendt's favourite citation from Augustine's *The City of God*, which for her encapsulated the promise of natality, appears often in her writings in the most unexpected places; “*Initium ut esset homo creates est, ante quem nemo fuit*—That a beginning could be, so man was created,

⁸ A similar point is made by Patricia Bowen Moore: “With Arendt, the experience of natality is elevated to a philosophic thematic; it is *the* inspiration and meaning governing her philosophical and political analysis” (141). However, Bowen-Moore does not clarify how natality factors into Arendt's critique of modernity and her assessment of the elevation of “life itself” to the highest good in “laboring societies.” I hope to address this lacuna to suggest that the primary motivation behind Arendt's excavation of the *vita activa* is to show how natality and plurality, and with them, the capacity for action, are the aspects of the human condition most immediately threatened by biopolitical forms of power over the life “society” as a whole.

before whom nobody was.”⁹ As Arendt explains, this idea means that the freedom to act spontaneously is given with birth. This unusual hope in the potential to begin, to enact the newness which each life *is*, breaks up trains of thought that could easily (logically) lead to despair. And yet for the frequency with which natality appears at crucial turning points in Arendt’s texts, this concept is not without ambiguity and suggests a number of questions. On the most general level, one is tempted to ask, how is it that Arendt, a Jewish phenomenologist trained in German *Existenz* philosophy, a thinker deeply concerned with modern “world alienation” and the plight of stateless people (herself included), and committed to studying the unprecedented catastrophes of totalitarianism, could also be a firm believer in the power of concerted human action and a philosopher of new beginnings? These ambiguities are deepened when one considers that Arendt’s theory of natality, the basis for human speech and action and the ontological cornerstone of her political edifice, is derived from her unusual reading of Augustine of Hippo, a fourth century Catholic bishop and saint regarded as a father of the Roman church. The boundless initiating potential of natality (*initium*) so central to Arendt’s theory is developed from the Augustinian interpretation of *Genesis* whereby the entrance of time into Being is said to coincide with human creation. The earth and all other creaturely life, in this account, were made first, and yet this ‘first’ (pre-temporal) act of life’s creation,

⁹ This quotation from Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* (book 12, chapter 20) appears with slight variations in all of Arendt’s major publications. See, for example: *LSA* 55, *PP* 59, *HC* 177, *OR* 212, *BPF* 167, *LM* vol.2 217. Significantly, this passage also concludes “Ideology and Terror,” the final chapter added to the second American edition of *Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1958 (479). Natality, the “beginning guaranteed by each new birth,” appears as the open-ended conclusion to her major study of the horrors of modern racism, imperialism, statelessness, and mass slaughter. This poignant chapter was based upon an article published in 1953 in *Review of Politics* (Vol15.3, 303-327) and it was around that time that Arendt began using the term natality in connection with Augustine’s understanding of beginning (creation) as the source of human freedom. However, as Stephen Kampowski points out, the coining of this term does not signify a “rediscover” of Augustine for Arendt, as Scott and Stark, the editors of the English translation of her dissertation claim, since it is clear that “Augustine [had] never been completely absent from [her] main writings” (6).

termed *principium*, did not interrupt the supreme oneness of eternity because none of the forms of life ‘first’ created can consciously think of their own birth and death. Only with the creation of humans, endowed with an awareness of life’s natal and mortal limits, did time begin. Being, with the beginning of human life, was for the first time perceptible as worldly becoming. Building on Augustine’s interpretation of the biblical creation story and adapting it to a secular political world view, Arendt contends that natality is what defines humans first and foremost as temporal beings (*homo temporalis*) capable of bringing newness into the world; human birth is not only biological, but is always also historical since “it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself” (*HC* 177). Natality brings together, both physically and temporally, two aspects of Being that remain inseparable for the duration between birth and death: *initium* and *principium*, life as a beginning of human life in time, and the life itself of humans as creatures, at one with the ‘eternal’ cycles of life on earth. In the event of human birth, *principium* and *initium*, the physical appearance of life itself and the beginning of a life story, coincide. Natality, in other words, names the link between physical existence and the actions constituting a life story; with the singular event of birth, the capacity to initiate something in the temporal and relational ‘space’ of the world is also unpredictably (re)newed. Natality, according to Arendt, finds its temporary “home” in the appearance of action in the context of a pluralistic “web of relationships,” that is, the human world already inhabited by distinct others who are fellow actors.¹⁰

¹⁰ The clearest definition of plurality that Arendt provides is the “fact that men [unique actors], not Man [a singular subject or species], live on earth and inhabit the world” (*HC* 7). Whereas natality is considered the “ontological root” of action (*HC* 9), meaning that birth is in a sense anarchic, coming from “nowhere,” plurality is called action’s “human condition,” meaning that natality needs a world to receive it in order for its inherent potential to be activated (*HC* 7-8). This complex relationship will become clearer later in the chapter when we come to Arendt’s interpretation of speech-action and her understanding of the public-political world.

Yet, even without considering the generally overlooked Augustinian “origin” of Arendt’s theory of natality, some commentators have pointed out that there is something puzzling about naming birth “itself” the root of human freedom and the *arche* of all human action (Vatter, Birmingham). Why is birth so important to Arendt? As a writer renowned for her rejection of labor as the basis for political change, why would she choose birth—that other form of labor—as a constant theme in her work? Is natality the same thing as “biological” birth? If not, what is the difference, and how exactly does natality enable humans to live freely? On what grounds is it deemed the “condition of remembrance,” the event underpinning and enabling historical accounts (*HC* 9)? These are important questions that have not received adequate critical attention.

It is my contention that natality is the ontological cornerstone of Arendt’s political-theoretical edifice and it is key to understanding her interpenetrating critiques of the Western tradition of political thought, on the one hand, and, on the other, of the breakdown of traditional structures and the biopolitical entrance of “life itself” to the centre of the historico-political sphere in the modern era. In her view, the central unifying characteristic, and also the fatal flaw of this political philosophical tradition is its attempt to eradicate a view of humans as *acting* (natal) beings existing in the plural; in the modern era, both capitalist “mass” societies and totalitarian regimes, though in very different ways, attempt to destroy spontaneous action by taking hold of both the active conditioning capacities and the exchangeable “life itself” of individuals/populations. What Arendt refers to as the “socialization of man-kind,”¹¹ and what I am identifying in

¹¹ Generally, Arendt uses the term “man-kind” (hyphenated) to designate humans as biological species and “mankind” when writing about humans as a multiplicity of singular subjects, “the sum total of human beings” (*HC* 24, note 4). This latter term usually coincides with traditional philosophical conceptions of humans. ‘Man’ is the singular subject corresponding to mankind as a multiplicity or theoretical totality of

light of Foucault's work as biopolitics, amounts to the destruction or regulation of natality's unpredictable potentiality and the (attempted) production, in the emptied-out place of action, of securitized populations capable of nothing besides predictable behavior. The biopolitical regulation of natality and the loss of 'spaces' for meaningful political action amounts to the destruction of freedom in Arendt's specific sense of the term: unpredictable, non-sovereign relations amongst a plurality of actors. Arendt's emphasis on natality as the beginning(s) central to conditional human existence, memory, and political belonging, I suggest, needs to be read against the backdrop of her writings on totalitarianism and her attempts to identify the "proto-totalitarian" elements present in *all* modern societies, including democratic states. Totalitarianism, in her account, aims at destroying a sense of shared reality, and with it, the conditions of action, individuality, and also collective memory. Without directly referencing totalitarian phenomena, she writes in *The Human Condition* that, deprived of the "impact of the world's reality upon human existence," the world would cease to relate people to one another and to the "things" they share in common. Human life, deprived of the power to condition the world and its own existence, is itself mistaken for a "thing"; without natality, the root of action's conditioning power, "things [including living things] would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world" (*HC* 9).

Arendt's almost "obsessive" repetition of Augustine's "*Initium...*" passage, as Miguel Vatter points out, only "gestures towards" the relation natality has to biological life, and perhaps divine creation, but these issues remain unclear since she never submitted natality to a sustained analysis (138). The link between natality and biological

human beings. Neither one, according to Arendt, captures the plurality of human life. I have tried to remain faithful to this distinction, although in some cases, as in the later discussion of Augustine's account of creation, the two meanings coincide.

birth has proven especially difficult to unravel. Natality is defined repeatedly as the “fact of birth,” and yet it is also considered to be *the* definitive event of humanness, setting human lives apart from those of other animals. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt explicitly states at the outset that her subject, the human conditions of active life, is not the same thing as human nature and that even if such a thing as human nature or natural essence exists, it is not knowable from a human perspective; “only a god could know and define it, and the first prerequisite would be that he be able to speak about a “who” as though it were a ‘what’” (10). In other words, to define humans as natural beings, even if one deploys the “most meticulous enumeration” of the sum total of their activities and capabilities, is to perform this fundamental error of taking ‘man’ to be a knowable “thing.” Making such a move, in Arendt’s view, is to refer to an ideal, singular whole—the singular subject and/or the species—and this necessarily overlooks the existential conditions of human particularity as temporal, natal, and active beings. The human condition, thanks to natality and plurality, is never fully formed and this lack of determinacy, embodied in action and reflected by historical narrations, is not natural, but *worldly*. Arendt’s study of the *vita activa*, and especially her theory of action, is focused on the human potential to disclose a distinctive “who” with a narratable life story (*bios*). Her phenomenological approach to conditioned life is aimed at revealing the faults—and the very real dangers—of the biologicistic (and psychological) definitions of man(-kind) that are the starting place of the modern sciences. Not unlike Heidegger, she is especially concerned with interrogating the founding presuppositions of the social sciences since their epistemological and methodological procedures are based almost entirely on performing this transformation of a conditioning “who” into a calculable “what.”¹² So

¹² For a detailed discussion of Arendt’s indictments against modern social sciences, see Peter Baehr’s book:

once again, why claim that freedom is rooted in birth? To most readers, this seems at odds with Arendt's "anti-biologistic" theory of politics. As I hope to show, Arendt conceives of natality as a beginning that is no different from birth, but this event is not simply biological; it is the physical appearance of a distinct "newcomer" into a relational world that antedates and outlasts her existence, and which will be shaped in unknown ways by her actions. Confronted with such spontaneous beginnings/beginners, all scientific (and philosophical) predictions, explanations, and attempted interventions into human behavior fall short. Natality is political because it opens life to the possibility of unpredictable action. Natality is central to Arendt's overall picture of human worldly conditioning and, I argue, to her critique of modern biopolitics.

Natality, as we shall see, is neither purely zoological—it is not the reproduction of "bare life," to borrow Agamben's term—nor is it reducible to nativity, that is, the juridico-philosophical picture of politically "qualified life" life in the sense of being born into a pre-determined subject-position within a sovereign structure (i.e. being born a citizen of a liberal state, an 'equal' bearer of pre-defined rights and responsibilities). Instead, the natal capacity to act, which each newly appearing person *is*, "means that we are never fully determined by powers outside of us, like nature or history, nor from something within us, such as despair and alienation" (Parekh 9). When Arendt writes of natality, she hopes to draw attention to the conditioning potential of birth as the spatio-temporal, symbolic, and relational starting point of a life that will enact many more starting points in the form of words and deeds. Under adequate public-political conditions, these words and deeds become meaningful for others who also speak and act

(equally unpredictably) in response. The unique event of birth is the (pre)condition of spontaneity and difference acted out in the midst of a living web of relationships. Significantly, the intertwining of natality and plurality, human uniqueness and difference, means that we are never fully self-determined as actors, even by our own thoughts and wills. In this sense, natality is a vital concept for Arendt's claim that freedom and power are not the property of individuals. For Arendt, birth is an event of the highest political importance; she argues that since no two human births are the same, no two agents will act or speak in exactly the same way, nor is any person fully self-sufficient since each "newcomer" will rely upon others, not only physically, but to give meaning to her or his words and deeds as long as they live (and also in memory after their death). A closer look at Arendt's analysis of the *vita activa* with a focus on the significance of natality can help to explain her claim that sovereignty, which the tradition holds to be the centre of political order and the height of freedom, is actually an attempt to banish freedom, and with it, unpredictability from politics. Sovereignty, as a function of the singular will, denies natality and plurality, thus making freedom (in Arendt's specific sense of the word) impossible. Natality brings radical newness, contingency, and non-closure into the world, shifting the relational 'space' of politics, and making possible the interruption of seemingly automatic processes.

This chapter is primarily devoted to Arendt's articulation of the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition*; Arendt's re-reading of the Western political philosophical tradition claims that the desire to securitize human affairs by eliminating unpredictable action appears as the common thread running from Plato to Marx. My broader aim is to draw out the biopolitical implications, not articulated by Arendt herself, in her theories of

labor, work, and action, the “fabrication” of life, and the definitively modern destruction of individuality and spontaneity. Before investigating the place of the social in Arendt’s critique of modernity, it is important to look at the major terminological and conceptual distinctions that she makes in *The Human Condition*. This chapter, therefore, stresses the basic elements of this challenging book—especially the spatial and temporal dimensions of the different categories of activity—so that we will be better prepared to understand the significance of the loss of the public sphere and the social administration of “life itself” in the modern world. I begin by reflecting upon Arendt’s unique phenomenological methodology and consider why she focuses so intently on drawing distinctions. I briefly consider her contentious insistence on the need for a firm boundary between public and private realms; this is important for grasping what, in her view, is so very troubling about the modern (neo)liberal shift to a “universal” concept of equality. In the second section, I touch on understandings of the philosophical tradition and the historically tense relationship between the political realm of unpredictable relations and the imposing authority of political philosophy, which generally seeks to unite and direct the space/time of politics. This is followed by a more detailed explication of distinctions between labor, work, and action, starting in the Greek *polis*. The final section of this overview of *The Human Condition* will begin to clarify how Arendt understands the common “world” which conditions and is conditioned by human actions. This analysis of Arendt’s phenomenology of action will then be elaborated through a consideration of the fragile but important link between speech and action as the disclosure of a unique “who” endowed with a narratable life story. In this section on speech as disclosure, I pay attention to how natality and plurality contribute to Arendt’s anti-traditional accounts of

power and freedom based in the non-sovereignty of political actors. These are necessary steps before proceeding (in the next chapter) to explore how Arendt sees the degradation of “shared reality” in modernity as symptomatic of the rise of the social and as a potential precursor of totalitarian crystallizations. Recalling the distinct yet co-dependant relationships internal to the *vita activa*, all beginning with natality, is crucial to understanding what is at stake in Arendt’s overall attempt to recover and defend worldly conditions against the rise of de-differentiated, normalized “mass societies.” *The Human Condition* represents a bold attempt to develop a political theory that respects the radically unpredictable conditions of humanness, and to set these fragile conditions apart from “human nature” by dismantling both traditional and modern (mis)conceptions of humans as a unified *species*.

Arendt’s Phenomenological Method and the Significance of Distinctions

Before turning to look in more detail at the three central categories that make up the *vita activa*, it is worth briefly considering Arendt’s methodology. Although, or perhaps precisely because Arendt’s writing moves by drawing distinctions, her key terms are not always easy to pin down. This is especially true the closer one moves in her conceptual edifice away from the “hidden” sphere of privacy, reserved for labor or contemplation, and towards the public realm, where appearance is what matters. Therefore, questions like “what is natality?” or “what qualifies as action for Arendt?” prove difficult to answer in any straight forward manner. Instead of providing formal definitions of terms and concepts, Arendt develops a theoretical lexicon in which familiar terms take on new and sometimes surprising meanings (Young-Bruehl *WAM* 79). “All

our definitions,” according to Arendt, “are distinctions” and this has to do with the (imperfect) convergence between language and how we perceive distinctness and otherness in the world at any given time (*HC* 176). Through a careful phenomenological tracing of nuanced distinctions, Arendt used her great skill with language to disentangle and illuminate the forgotten meanings of terms and concepts that she felt had been unduly conflated, sometimes with very real and dangerous worldly effects. These conceptual distinctions lie dormant, or are thoughtlessly covered over in our everyday languages, yet they continue to inform perceptions of the world. Simply put, Arendt believed that language is vital to shaping a sense of shared reality; without the sharing of words, our deeds become meaningless and being able to talk about things that appear in the world is key to “think[ing] what we are doing” (*HC* 5). One of Arendt’s major fears is that modern humans, through their techno-scientific practices of starting new ‘natural’ processes, have begun to act in a way that is literally unthinkable for the vast majority of people inhabiting the earth, and yet these processes have the potential to affect, for better or worse, man-kind as a whole. These unprecedented modern abilities to “act into nature” are “unthinkable,” not because they are morally wrong, though this certainly may be the case in some instances, but because they cannot be disclosed to a plurality of agents in language; their representation relies upon codes that increasingly cannot be translated back into forms of speech that could make sense in the midst of a public sphere. The languages of such processes are accessible to “experts” (or computers) only, and even they cannot necessarily “think” about them in the specific sense that Arendt understood the thinking (in)activity: as a solitary and silent dialogue “between me and myself,” in which the presence of other interlocutors is conjured through imagination.

Returning to consider the plethora of distinctions animating *The Human Condition*, it is worth remembering that although Arendt lived much of her life as a stateless person, writing in an intellectual and cultural *milieu* quite different from the Weimar Germany of her university days, her political work remained intimately linked to German existential philosophy. Keeping this in mind can help contemporary readers to make sense of the (sometimes frustrating) fact that simple definitions are rarely something she would readily give (Kampowski 25). As Young-Bruehl notes in her biography of Arendt, her training under Jaspers and Heidegger informs her mode of questioning about the distinct spatial and temporal aspects of phenomena, and this influence is palpable beneath the surface of even her most concrete and polemical political tracts:

Neither Jaspers nor his student ever began the exploration of a phenomenon or concept without spatial tracing. They asked about the place [or displacement] of a phenomenon or concept in the ... explorable world; they asked about the existential conditions which define and are defined by a phenomenon or concept; and they asked how the unknowable, transcendent, and ultimately mysterious realms bordering on the phenomenon or concept could be approached.

Neither Heidegger nor his student ever began the exploration of a phenomenon or concept without temporal tracing. They asked not just about the historical developments, the histories, of phenomena and concepts, but, more fundamentally, about experiences of time, in time, which lay at the sources of phenomena or concepts. Past, present, and

future, not as “tenses,” but as experiences, frame all of Arendt’s books.

(Young-Bruehl, *FLW* 490-491)

Recalling this background can also help us to approach the difficult questions of the meaning of natality and action, questions pivotal to Arendt’s theory of political life.

Arendt’s methodology is phenomenological, meaning that she is concerned with understanding the world as it is perceived and opened to conditioning by self-reflexive (human) beings who exist in the plural. She, therefore, understands the world as a thoroughly relational ‘space’ made available to experience through the communication of a plurality of perceiving human agents. Her approach to distinguishing phenomena and concepts aims at uncovering the (historically conditioned and unstable) spatio-temporal ‘structure’ of her subject matter, active human life, by creating textually a sense of the complex web of shifting relationships that make up the perceptible human world. In Arendt’s writing, as in the realm of human affairs she studied, perception and judgement of distinctions forms the phenomenal basis—which is not to say the “ground”—of meaningful relations.¹³ Arendt’s distinctions are not static; they both separate and relate

¹³ On Arendt’s “conviction of the importance of making distinctions,” see “What is Authority” in *Between Past and Future*. Her emphasis on distinctions is central to her project of “thinking what we are doing” in a post-metaphysical/post-philosophical world, without recourse to universal standards for judgment, while simultaneously questioning the epistemological framework of modern social sciences: “To stress such a conviction seems to be a gratuitous truism... There exists, however, a silent agreement in most discussions among political and social scientists that we can ignore distinctions and proceed on the assumption that everything can eventually be called anything else, and that distinctions are meaningful only to the extent that each of us has the right to ‘define his terms.’ Yet, does not this curious right, which we have come to grant as soon as we deal with matters of importance...already indicate that... we have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaningfulness, so that, short of being condemned to live verbally in an altogether meaningless world, we grant each other the right to retreat into our own worlds of meaning, and demand only that each of us remain consistent within his own private terminology? If, in these circumstances, we assure ourselves that we still understand each other, we do not mean that together we understand a world common to us all, but that we understand the consistency of arguing and reasoning, of the process of argumentation in its sheer formality...[T]o proceed under the implicit assumption that distinctions are not important or, better, that in the social-political-historical realm, that is, in the sphere of human affairs, things do not possess that distinctness which traditional metaphysics used to call their ‘otherness’ (their *alteritas*), has become the hallmark of a great

constellations of concepts that change dramatically when considered from different perspectives, just as in the political sphere, where differences appear that both separate and relate political actors, each with a different perspective on the world they share in common.

The Tradition of Political Philosophy and the Securitization of the Public Realm: the *Vita Activa* and *Vita Contemplativa*

Although it may be commonplace to come across analyses of Arendt's work that name her a "political philosopher," it is important to keep in mind that her phenomenological investigations into the political significance of distinct human activities is actually deeply critical of political philosophy and its traditional categories of thought. Political experience and history, Arendt hopes to show, are never fully contained or defined by political philosophical categories and traditional articulations of power, law, and legitimacy. When talking about politics, Arendt contends, the dominant tendency is to conflate the historical realm of human affairs with philosophical attempts to bound, arbitrate, stabilize, and rule these inherently unpredictable relations. The deep historical tensions between politics and philosophy are of central importance to Arendt's work and form the background to her critique of modernity, which she generally associated with the breakdown of traditional authority and the loss of commonly accepted standards of judgment. The initial question Arendt asks in *The Human Condition*, "What does an active life consist of?" is aimed at recovering the meaning of activities that, from

many theories in the social, political, and historical sciences" (95). It is against this overlooking or denial of 'otherness' in the social sciences and in the realm of political affairs that Arendt's emphasis on drawing distinctions is aimed.

the perspective of traditional political philosophy, and even more drastically since its modern decline, have been conflated and regulated in different ways. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of modern socialized politics is that the regulation of human affairs no longer comes only from ‘above,’ as in the form of a linear chain of command and obedience, but is increasingly a matter of ‘internal’ regulation and automatic behavior. In the modern age, the unpredictability and irreversibility of the action, what Arendt calls the “frailty of human affairs,” has become a source of constant anxiety and modern forms of ‘power,’ to an even greater extent than the pre-modern forms supported by traditional authority, are frequently built out of a will to control and ultimately do away with these conditions of action; in Arendt’s terms, modern ‘power’ is, more often than not, actually the technical application of violence.

The traditional sovereignty of philosophy over politics is significant even now, in a “post-philosophical” age, because this history of domination, in Arendt’s view, lacks clear articulation and yet traditional categories and standards, now decisively emptied of their previous power as compelling “self-evident” truths, continue to affect, both directly and indirectly, how modern political relations are governed, secured, and foreclosed. From the perspective of the Western tradition, “active life” is understood from a perspective ‘outside’ itself, that is, from a philosophical perspective that is incapable of appreciating human plurality. The complex tensions that Arendt mapped between the philosophical way of life lived in relative solitude, *vita contemplativa*, and the active life lived amongst humans, *vita activa*, is extremely profound since it has to do with two radically different and generally incompatible modes of existence with opposing conceptions of what constitutes life’s highest good (Abensour). The contemplative life,

predictably, aims at truth, which is generally conceived as singular, transcendent, and eternal; truth is revealed to the philosopher in solitude and in meditative stillness (*skholia*) and this experience is invariably one of incommunicable wonder (*thaumadzein*). The *vita activa*, insofar as distinct modes of activity are possible, allows ‘space’ for multiple perspectives and conflicting understandings of life’s ‘goods.’ As we shall see, labor, work, and action are set apart in relation to one another thanks to the differences of experience that they make available to humans as active beings. Whereas the *vita contemplativa* values truth above all else, the *vita activa* allows for differences of perspective, and especially within the political realm, differences of opinion (*doxa*) which can be communicated in the form of arguments. Public-political ‘truths,’ in other words, are never immediately apparent, nor are they ever singular/complete, but only take shape in the rhetorical “turns” of language, i.e. in bringing others around to see my perspective on a matter that we share in common. From the perspective of the contemplation, moreover, thinking is concerned with accessing truths that are timeless and eternal, lying beyond the limits of the singular human life, whereas the apparent ‘truths’ of politics are never timeless, but are always situated in a particular “web of relationships” that is temporal and open to change.

This conflict between contemplative withdrawal from the world and participation in worldly relations animates nearly all of Arendt’s texts, beginning as early as her dissertation on Augustine, where she asks about the relevance of human neighbors within a Christian transcendental world-view, which aims at immortality and thus seems to deny the possibility of finding a ‘home’ in the context of temporal, worldly relations. The distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, therefore, has to do with

the paradox of the human ability to think of eternity (or of a Being not reducible to the ontic level of everyday appearances) paired with the condition of earthly life, limited by bodily existence, birth and death. Arendt's political philosophy "never departed from this basic world view—which is both pre-Socratic and Hebraic—that eternity is what we *think*, but it is as 'mortals' that we think it," and in this regard, thinking is always primarily concerned with mortality over the "new beginnings" in the world given by birth (Ricoeur 151). Because mortality opens individual life to the contemplation of eternity, it is the human condition that most directly corresponds to the *vita contemplativa*, whereas natality opens acting life to the temporal space of appearances (plurality) and therefore is the most significant condition for the *vita activa*, and specifically for the experience of political freedom. The important point for understanding Arendt's project in *The Human Condition* is that, from the perspective of the *vita contemplativa* (or, the *bios theoretikos* of Platonic origin), contemplation is regarded as the highest of all human capacities and all other activities, according to this tradition, are seen from this perspective of withdrawal from the world as lacking meaning 'in themselves.' The activities of life are seen from this vantage point as being relevant to the human condition only insofar as they serve the ends of contemplation:

Hence, the *vita activa* was always defined from the viewpoint of contemplation; compared with the absolute quiet of contemplation, all sorts of human activities appear to be similar insofar as they were characterised by the un-quiet, by something negative: by *a-skholia*...non-leisure or absence of the conditions which make contemplation possible. Compared with this attitude of quiet, all distinctions and articulations

within the *vita activa* disappear. Seen from the viewpoint of contemplation, it does not matter what disturbs the necessary quiet so long as it is disturbed. (LWA 29)

When Arendt speaks of the tradition of political philosophy, she is referring to the historical development and impact of this dominant, dominating philosophical perspective on human affairs. For all its various articulations, the political philosophical tradition up to the threshold of the modern age, maintains the contemplative prejudice against action's inherent unpredictability, along with contempt for the 'interrupting' force of bodily necessity. Arendt does not spend much time on exploring the relationship between the two ways of life, the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*, in the context of *The Human Condition*, a distinction which nonetheless "serves to govern the whole of the analysis from above," but instead limits herself explicitly to examining the three main categories of activity, labor, work, and action (Ricoeur 150, *HC* 5). Arendt attempts to recover the specific conditions of these earth-bound and worldly activities from a theoretical perspective free from these lingering political philosophical prejudices against action's unpredictability and resentment of life's physical and existential limitations. In excavating the phenomenal specificity of labor, work, and action, Arendt hoped to lay the foundations for a new approach to thinking political relation and to develop a political theory capable of confronting the complex realities (and losses of reality) of modernity without falling back on the traditional desire to 'overcome' the political as such, i.e., by doing away with the inherent 'frailty' of the human condition extending from its natality and plurality.

One of the central objectives of *The Human Condition* is to demonstrate that from the perspective of the *vita contemplative*, or the solitary and reflective perspective of philosophers, the realm of politics and of human action appears to be chaotic and “immoral,” since political action initially was not regulated or measured by any “transcendent” authority or in relation to the sovereign will. In a letter to Heidegger, to whom her phenomenological approach to worldly relations is certainly indebted, Arendt explains the three interconnected aims of her project.¹⁴ Her first goal is to “uncover where the concept of authority got into politics (i.e. ‘each body politic is composed of those who rule and those who are ruled’), and how the political sphere is constituted differently in different cases.” The second aim, which is most important for the present discussion, is to analyze how, historically and conceptually, the different capacities inherent to the *vita activa*, or the “active life” of humans, have “usually been lumped together,” and how this continues to be the case in more recent political theories. Here, she gestures towards the work of “Marx on the one hand and Hobbes on the other.” For Marx, Hobbes, and their successors (though in different ways) political action has been “understood on the model of production,” whereby social relations are conceptualized as something *fabricated*; this concept of the “making” of political life became especially pronounced in the modern era with the scientific and industrial revolutions, whereby “work became ‘productive,’ and action was [increasingly] interpreted in a means-ends context.” The third objective is to trace the historical developments of command-obedience relations and the politics of “productivity” through a “representation of the traditional relationship between philosophy and politics,” beginning with the “attitude of

¹⁴ All of the following quotations up to the parenthetical page numbers on the next page, in which Arendt outlines her the aims of her project in *The Human Condition*, come from her a letter to Heidegger dated May 8, 1984, published in *Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger: Letters, 1925-1975* (119-192).

Plato and Aristotle toward the polis.” The aim of this historical recounting of the tradition is to show how the two spheres become conjoined into political philosophy and how this tension is transformed and recalibrated in the modern era, with the loss of a transcendental “ground” for law and morality (God) and the advent of a secular scientific world-view, which does not mark an end to the quest for “immortality,” but instead confines it to the immanent, earthly sphere.

Arendt’s interest in the Greek polis, then, has less to do with reclaiming some pre-modern past, but instead aims at tracing (without simple causality) the beginnings of the “tradition,” which she defines as the ongoing *stabilization* of politics as a “unitary” space/time to be measured and controlled by arbiters of transcendental “truth” (120-121). Arendt is sometimes accused of being a conservative interested in preserving the tradition and clinging to the past, with some critics going so far as to accuse her of “*polis* envy.” In my view, Arendt is more accurately read as a post-traditional, post-metaphysical thinker deeply invested in critiquing the traditional and historical self-understandings of the West, not out of any romantic predilection for the past, but out of an urgent desire to develop ways of living politically under the unprecedented conditions of modernity.¹⁵

¹⁵ “Polis envy” is Mary Deitz’s term (“Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt,” 26). Arendt’s critical stance towards the tradition of political philosophy is obvious in all her major publications. Although she was reluctant to explicitly discuss her methodology, support for my claim that Arendt is not attempting to idealize or reclaim the past, but is more accurately read as a post-metaphysical thinker struggling to think through the critical problems of the modern age can be found in one of her rare moments of self-commentary. In the final chapter of the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, she comments that such things as method, “or, worse, ‘values,’” in “such enterprises [as writing] are mercifully hidden” from authors, yet she is willing to offer her “opinion” concerning the “basic assumption” guiding her investigation: “I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in Greece until today. Such dismantling is possible only on the assumption that the thread of tradition has been broken and that we shall not be able to renew it...The loss of [traditional authority] does not destroy the past, and the dismantling process itself is not destructive; it only draws conclusions from a loss which is a fact and as such is no longer a part of the ‘history of ideas’ but of political history, the history of our world.” It is because the loss of tradition leaves a “past, but a *fragmented* past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation,” that this “dismantling process” of thought, endowed with “its own technique” of reevaluating the past and present anew, can become political (211-212).

Security, in her view, is the “end” of politics in a double sense: when politics is (mis)understood as a kind of *poiesis*, that is, as a man-made art form guided by the principles of fabrication, securing the public sphere appears as the ideal outcome governing every decision and also marks the (future) temporal end-point of the political itself. In other words, politics would be deemed “finished” if this goal, peaceful *stasis*, were to be achieved and guaranteed. The *poietic* securitization of human affairs, that is, the desire to make political relations mechanistic and predictable, and the development of techniques to do so, has been at the heart of political philosophy throughout the tradition. To borrow Foucault’s terminology, we could read this as an attempt to articulate the founding premises of the “juridico-philosophical” discourse that will, for centuries, inform and sustain sovereignty.

What the Western political philosophical tradition, from Plato to Marx, has in common—indeed, what binds it together conceptually and historically as a tradition—is the denial of the plurality inherent to human life. This tradition, Arendt argues, begins with “Man,” generally understood as an abstract subject; this concept, Man, is at once singular, referring to the *solitary* thinker or wilful (self-sufficient) actor, and universal, referring to humans as a unified “species.” The tradition of political thought, by focusing on the (*poietic*) singular-universal concept of Man, posits an immutable human nature and thus denies the radical changeability, unpredictability, and creative capacity of human life conditioned by the relational ‘space’ of the world. Arendt’s acting “individual,” therefore, is not the humanist “subject,” a separate and self-same being guided by self-interest and doubting worldly “common sense.” Without being able to fully explore this influence, I would suggest that Arendt’s “individual” is akin to

Heidegger's *Dasein*, that is, a Being that is "thrown" into existence and "disclosed" through language; she conceives of the individual, not as a fully formed "entity," but as a unique being-in-the-world. Arendt accepts Heidegger's critique of humanism and of scientific epistemology, which passes over the question of being, but she rejects the solipsism of *Dasein*, its essential "mineness" as a being-towards-death (*Being and Time*, Div. 2).

Heidegger's philosophy suggests that "authentic" Being can only be accessed as a re-collecting of *Dasein* (in)to itself, as in genuine angst or profound boredom, and that this re-collection calls for withdrawal from "dispersal" in the "everydayness" of the public. Arendt, on the other hand, emphasizes the *plurality* of the world and of the existence of the "who" disclosed as and through being-with-others. This includes the 'internal' plurality of being-with oneself, which appears even in the solitude of thinking as the thinker imagines the multiple perspectives of others who are not present. Instead of focusing on the "mineness" of death, Arendt focuses on natality, the meaningful beginnings that never take place alone; natality (re)orients life towards the public since it indicates that "my" words and actions, and even "my" physical appearance, are never simply "mine" but instead belong to the world of my belonging, so to speak, in a reciprocal relation of conditioning. Natality signifies that the world receives "me" and also gives me "myself," and this "self" is never fully formed so long as "I," a self-questioning person, continues to live in the world.

The Public/Private Divide: The Traditional Conception of Freedom versus Necessity

Hannah Arendt's contentious theory of "the rise of the social" warns against the "unnatural growth... of the natural" (*HC* 47) as the most dangerous outcome of the insertion of formerly private affairs into history and politics. Arendt's staunch defense of a firm divide between public and private in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere is problematic for a number of reasons and has received much critical attention, especially from a diverse group of feminist scholars (Butler, Pitkin, Zerilli, Rich, et al.). The exclusion of "the family, wife and children, and slaves and servants" from the public sphere, is a topic upon which Arendt remains markedly ambivalent (*PP* 14). She notes in numerous places that these "internally-excluded" lives that, in her hierarchical schematization of the Greek *polis*, she names *animal laborans*, were necessary for the continued thriving of a public-political 'space,' and yet, because they were confined and defined by re-production and unending labor, and therefore could (or can) not "shine" forth to others, "they were of course not recognized as fully human" (*PP* 14). Arendt's idealized picture of the public sphere seems unapologetic about the exclusion of these "less" human non-citizens, even as it affirms that their lives spent laboring away in private are necessary to the continuity of public, "fully" human life (*HC* 28-37). Clearly, this offends liberal sensibilities and conceptions of ethics that would seek to guarantee equality and inclusion for all. While I am sympathetic to these concerns, this line of criticism generally misunderstands one of the most fundamental insights of Arendt's conception of the political, which, through her re-working of the *praxis/poiesis* distinction, seeks to remove speech-action from teleology of consensus. In her view, political action is not a matter of finding "solutions" or moving towards uniformity of opinion as the ideal outcome and end point of debate. For Arendt, political speech-action

is not about *building* society; human deeds, in her view, “possess no ultimate telos” and can be adequately judged only within the specific relations making up the public sphere as events that “make apparent a specific greatness of their own” (*PP* 46). One of Arendt’s central aims is to contest the liberal-humanist norms of modern mass-societies, where rights are grounded either in one’s legal status as a citizen or in a naturalistic concept of “inalienable” humanness, and to show that rights are, in some sense, always “groundless,” based, not in nature or in positive law, but in mutual recognition. This becomes possible only in the context of a historico-political ‘space’ capable of undergoing the difficult communicative work (or *action*) of accepting, without fully assimilating or stabilizing, particularity and contingency. Rights, therefore, are always conditional upon belonging within a contingent and inherently insecure public sphere; they cannot be granted or secured in advance by any external ‘power,’ either by the laws that regulate sovereign states, or through an appeal to a common nature. The political, in Arendt’s view, cannot begin by claiming something “absolute and valid for all,” but rather, manifests itself as an unending process of mediating the plurality of positions that open up and constitute some view of a “common world,” and that brings about, by retaining differences of *doxa*, a tenuous recognition that “both you and I are human” (*PP* 14).

This recognition, she argues, can only meaningfully come into being between a particular “you and I,” and within the context of our given “We,” a “We” that is transformed and re-established anew in each moment of recognition (*HC* 175-192, *LM* vol. 2, 200). While I do not want to linger here on the topic of the public/private split in

Arendt's political edifice,¹⁶ I would like to highlight that her conception of the public sphere as “a house where freedom can dwell” (*HC* 45), contests traditional definitions of humanness, including the Latin translation of Aristotle's definition—the *animal rational*—a being internally divided between “animal nature” plus some *additional* capacity for speech and reason layered overtop of this pre-given ‘bareness.’ Instead, Arendt hopes to mark human capacity for political action as “decidedly *unnatural*” while at the same time, maintaining that it is not something man-made (Villa, *AH* 49). Political action, and the humanness it precipitates, is conceived as the creation of a non-territorial ‘space’ tentatively secured only by the “fragile” web of human affairs (*HC* 177, 188, 235). Humanness, for Arendt, is not a juridical, natural, or subjective category, but only (potentially) emerges through the worldly activities of speech-action and artifactual production.

The Human Condition, therefore, can be read as an attempt to recover what Arendt took to be the two primary ontological condition of worldly human life, namely natality and plurality. Here, Arendt develops a political theory that at once reworks and hinges upon the Aristotelian distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* in order to ask whether a viable ‘space’ of political speech and action could be *initiated* and nurtured amidst the modern condition of world alienation. In this attempt to develop a viable theory of political action for the modern age, Arendt “wishes to discover a set of criteria that will isolate genuine political action from its various simulacra” (Villa, *TMT* 20) and to draw out the broader implications of the traditional hegemony of the means-ends logic that, in her view, invariably destroys or denies the difference necessary for the unfolding

¹⁶ I return to this issue in the next chapter, where I look more closely at the modern breakdown of this divide and compare Arendt's account of the mass “socialization” of life to Foucault's account of biopolitics and governmentality.

of distinct human capacities. Calling into question the “origins” of the abstract subject/species, Man, and the history of the political philosophical binding together of the singular and the universal, Arendt insists upon plurality as the feature of the human condition that must be recognized and respected in order for politics to take place as a specific category of activity distinguished from the self-consuming processes of labor and the making of a pre-conceived and lasting object through work.

Labor and the Eternal/Cyclical Condition of “Life Itself”: *animal laborans*’ “Metabolism with Nature”

Labor is defined as the activity of living bodies which has no other aim than the self-fulfillment of life processes. Labor is distinct from work and action in that “[w]hatever labor produces is meant to be fed into the human life process almost immediately, and this consumption, regenerating the life process, produces—or rather reproduces—new ‘labor power,’ needed for the further subsistence of the body” (HC 99). It is that part of life which humans share “unconditionally” with each other and with all living creatures; “the human condition of labor is life itself,” as in the automatic and vital processes of consumption, metabolism, growth, and decay (7). Labor is identified with nature and the sheer necessities of life’s biological continuity. In its affinity with natural processes, it has no beginning and no end, but is endlessly repetitive. This affinity with nature, however, does not mean that the “naturalness” of life tended to by labor is somehow “outside” the rest of the human world. Instead, labor provides a sort of buffer

between the world and the “timeless” cycles characteristic of nature, and guards artifactual reality from the “constant threat of overgrowing and decaying” (*HC* 98).

 Laboring leaves no trace, since everything it (re)produces comes from nature and is given over to nature in ever recurring cycles (98). Temporally speaking, labor is at once impermanent, insofar as it produces nothing lasting, and eternal, feeding automatically into itself in a self-propelling cycle. Labor, because of this unchanging, circular quality, is considered *atemporal* since, like natural “life itself,” it is not broken up into definitive beginnings and endings. In contrast to the rectilinear and, in Arendt’s view, definitively human experience of time, marked by recognizable beginnings and endings and punctuated by distinct events, laboring life “remain[s] and swing[s] contentedly in nature’s prescribed cycles” (*LWA* 33). To apply Augustine’s conceptual framework here, it is evident that the life cared for and reproduced through laboring relates humans to all other living things, and also refers (back) to the ‘first,’ pre-temporal creation of the earth (*principium*). In laboring, human life appears and existentially takes upon itself the fact that it is part of earthly life and that humans are just one amongst many ‘species’ of living beings. This mentality associated with labor views human life as no different from the life of any and all other living things, and tends to value life itself as something sacred, demanding protection at all costs. As we shall see, this outlook stands in sharp contrast to the anthropocentrism of fabrication, which presupposes that human life, the life of Man, is always-already at the centre of the *cosmos*. Neither perspective is compatible with action, which values life only insofar as it is the life of somebody, a particular “who” that shares in the conditioned/conditioning power that makes up the shared world.

In order to clarify how the human world is always permeated by natural processes, and how human life is not reducible to either biology or sociality, Arendt deploys Aristotle's distinction between *zoe* and *bios*:

The word "life" ... has an altogether different meaning if it is related to the world and meant to designate the interval between birth and death. Limited by a beginning and an end that is by the two supreme events of appearance and disappearance within the world it follows a *strictly linear movement* whose very motion nonetheless is driven by the motor of biological life which we share with other living things and which forever retains the *cyclical* movement of nature. The chief characteristic of specifically human life... is that it is always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life, *bios* as distinguished from mere *zoe*, that Aristotle said that it 'somehow is a kind of *praxis*.' (HC 97)

Natural life only manifests itself as growth and decay from a perspective within the human world, that is from a perspective that can reflect upon beginnings and endings because of its inherent natality and mortality. For this reason, even life's temporal/ontological limits, birth and death, "are not natural occurrences, properly speaking"; they have "no place in the unceasing, indefatigable cycle" of nature's perpetual movement (98). Arendt's conception of the *zoe/bios* distinction, then, is not absolute or fully articulable, especially not with reference to the decision of a quasi-transcendent sovereign will. This distinction should not be interpreted and redeployed—as it is in Agamben's theory of the coupling/splitting of sovereignty/bare life—as a

binary opposition or duality productive of the human, where man(-)kind is internally split in an irreconcilable way between “bare life” and a predetermined/determining, politically qualified form of life. There is no singular perspective ‘outside’ (or internally-excluded from) the human condition from which such a split could be seen or known, since all human life, insofar as it is temporally located in a world with others—which is to say, because it was born—will be a conditioning presence in the world, and so cannot be truly or fully “reduced” to some abstract, primordial, and fully depoliticized bareness. Natality complicates the Agambian account of bare life’s ban/abandonment within the sovereign structure of the state. Instead, for Arendt, we see that in labor, humans manifest their biological life and consume it, and so are at one with the *zoe* that always mobilizes *bios*, and that is the fecund origin of its potentiality for action. “Natural” things—dogs, trees, but also human bodies, both our own and others’—only grow and die from the perspective of the human world, and the human being, even in solitude, is always aware of the birth, growth, and death that surrounds (and *is*) itself” (98).¹⁷ No human force can fully exclude a life from the human conditions of plurality, world, and temporality once it has arrived and begun in the world as a natal ‘newcomer.’ Although Arendt was the first political thinker to chart the unprecedented forms of dehumanization and growing superfluity of life in the modern era, her concept of natality challenges the notion that life can ever be “reduced,” as though through a linear regression to animal-like infancy, to

¹⁷ Arendt thinks of the relation between *zoe/bios* quite differently than Agamben; from her perspective, because each human life carries its beginning (*initium*) within itself *ontologically*, it is nonsensical to say that humans could be “reduced” to the status of *zoe* (as Agamben claims). Arendt’s use of this distinction suggests that there is not a “natural” core or physical substrate existing prior to/ distinct from the *bios*, or temporal, worldly life. If humans are ontologically set apart from other life as the only temporal, “conditioning” beings, whereas animals are viewed as timeless, fully “conditioned” beings, totalitarian regimes sought to manipulate and destroy this distinction. However, since human life cannot be fully “unconditioned” (its worldly/temporal character is indivisible from its bodily life) the capacity for “new beginnings” could not be fully obliterated; even the extreme degradation of life in the concentration camps “eradicated [spontaneity] to a great extent,” but “never entirely” (*EU* 304).

some primordial, indistinct, and powerless “bareness.” The conditions of temporal existence as she presents them show that humanness is not a pre-established “destiny” and political belonging, because of its unpredictable, contingent, and negotiable meanings, is never totally transparent to theoretical analysis as a structural topos of smoothly reversible insides and outsides, inclusive-exclusions, citizenship or banishment. Because Arendt’s concept of the political is based in natality and the unstable plurality it brings into existence, rather than the death-oriented movement of traditional metaphysics grounding the juridico-philosophical order of sovereignty, her analysis of modern technologies for fabricating and destroying, not only life itself, but life’s distinctive worldly significance, nonetheless remains open to the hope of new beginnings.

With Marx, Arendt agrees that labor can be defined as ““man’s metabolism with nature”” (qtd. 99), and also that labor and consumption feed into and sustain each other. The body of the laborer is not free, but moves in a way that is predetermined and “driven by the needs of the body” itself. However, Arendt parts ways with Marx almost immediately by asserting that the laboring process of providing material subsistence, far from being the first step by which ““men begin to distinguish themselves from animals,”” (qtd. 99, note 36), cannot liberate life sufficiently from the “same circle...prescribed by the biological process of the living organism” in order to qualify it as fully human (98). Counter Marx, for whom laboring is at once the foundation of all human sociality and the driving force behind History, the laboring body, in Arendt’s view, is always *isolated*; the laborer’s toils are at once incommunicable and futile, with no *telos* outside their own “immediately life-bound activity” (110). The living experience of labor is furthest removed from the relational world of action because, in Arendt’s estimation, it is always

mute, confined to the inarticulable sensations of pleasure or pain of labor's rhythms.

Labor's muteness and isolation means that this activity cannot disclose the uniqueness of an actor. Laborers insofar as they are confined to this "function," are defined only by their inherent fertility and ability to care for life itself. In this respect, labor cannot show difference and equality in the political sense, but only the very limited distinctness appearing between members of the same species. This limited distinctness is generally outweighed by the sameness of the basic bodily needs tended through labor, which must be satisfied as the pre-conditions for activity in worldly political life

Unlike the bodies (and specifically the hands) of workers, which are the "primordial tools" used skilfully to make lasting objects (118), the laboring body is cut off from the human world by the very fact that it has no other purpose than to serve as a barrier between that world and natural cycles. Its life literally gets 'devoured' by this activity of 'begetting' more life, and so laborers cannot attain the "second birth" into the public sphere of speech and action (176). This line of argument leads Arendt to the conclusion that labor is not a "human activity," properly speaking, but merely an expression of the "animal" rhythms and cycles that reproduce the conditions for a world to emerge and continue. Humanity does not *create* itself through labor, nor is labor the beginning of the articulation and unfolding of human history, as argued by Marx (and, to a lesser extent, Locke). Instead, Arendt reasserts the Greeks' belief that nothing humans share physically with other life forms, or with one another, should be included in the way "We" (the political "We") think about public life (84).

Although Arendt calls attention to the "lowly" place of labor and laborers in the traditional hierarchy of the *vita activa*—an attitude linked to the resentment of everything

simply “given” and not man-made, including embodiment—she also seeks to accord a certain dignity to the activity of labor as a crucial activity for the continuity of the shared world. Arendt seems at times to share the Aristotelian attitude that everything we share with other forms of life is essentially “unfree,” yet she by no means shares in either the fully fledged “contempt for labor” characteristic of ancient theory or in its modern glorification as the supposedly highest capacity of the species (93). She instead seeks to find out how this reversal of the hierarchy occurred and labor, traditionally the lowest of human activities, in the modern age, came to be regarded as the highest “end” of human life within laboring societies. Arendt hopes to highlight the specific relevance of labor within the *vita activa* as a distinct activity that ought not to be judged by the standards more proper for work, especially *productivity*. She acknowledges that the “‘blessing and joy of labor,’ which plays so great a part in modern labor theories, is no empty notion,” and that even though labor leaves nothing behind, its immediate rewards are “even more real, less futile than any other form of happiness” (LWA 33). The immediate correspondence of labor to the condition of life itself, in Arendt’s view, means that laborers “partake... not only in life’s toil and trouble but also in the sheer bliss of being alive.” Unlike the worker, who is cut off from nature’s cycles due to the de-naturalized character of their ‘material’ and the linear temporality of their projects, *animal laborans* experiences “the blessing of life as a whole...[which] can never be found in work and should not be mistaken for the inevitably brief spell of joy that follows accomplishment” at the end of fabrication (LWA 33-34, HC 140). Despite the apparently destructive, devouring aspect of labor, which, from the standpoint of the temporal world we can see relentlessly wearing down the living bodies of laboring organisms, Arendt points out that,

from a non-human, atemporal perspective, the vantage of earthly life itself—insofar as this can be imagined—it is work, rather than labor that is destructive, “since the work process takes matter out of nature’s hands without giving it back,” while labor is always feeding back in to the same changeless and deathless cycles (*HC* 100, 96). The inherent satisfaction of labor, then, lies in the “quiet confidence” of taking part in “nature’s fertility” and this activity, for all its toil and trouble, is crucial for the continuity of human life (*LWA* 33). Arendt’s attitude towards labor therefore differs considerably from Aristotelian resentment, typical of the *vita contemplativa* generally, for the laborious “necessities” of human life and her views are incompatible with the paradoxical aim of modern labor theories, which seek to “emancipate” mankind from labor itself, leaving time for endless “leisure.” Arendt’s evaluation of labor as the human activity most attuned to the undifferentiated flux of life’s earthly cycles, in my view, does not harbour the Western philosophical tradition’s (masculine) resentment for embodiment, as some feminist critics contend. Arendt hopes to preserve the “bliss” and “satisfaction” inherent in labor as a necessary activity for life’s continuity and to resist the modern meaninglessness of life when *all* activities take on labor-like qualities and consumption is mistakenly viewed as an “end,” ideally without the “toil and trouble.” Arendt’s evaluation of labor as the one irreplaceable activity within the *vita activa* is characterized instead by an attitude of “gratitude for the given,” that is, a humble thankfulness that life is not a human “product” properly speaking.¹⁸

¹⁸ Arendt also discusses the links between natality, remembrance, and gratitude for the given in *Love and Saint Augustine*. Working from a translation of her dissertation made by E.B. Ashton, who had translated several of Jasper’s works, along with the original German manuscript, Arendt heavily revised and re-wrote much of her dissertation in preparation for its publication in English. She never completed this task, and yet Scott and Stark, the editors of the English edition published in 1996, emphasize that Arendt’s return to her earlier philosophical research into the “relevance of the neighbor” influenced her work during the late 1960’s up until her final project, *The Life of the Mind*. In Arendt’s revisions the theme of natality is

As mentioned above, Arendt names those living beings who are fully defined by labor *animal laborans*. She argues that the term “animal” is fully justified, since, as we have seen, humanness is contingent upon appearing and acting amongst others. *Animal laborans* have traditionally been confined to the “shadow realm” of the household (*oikos*), and so, prior to the modern age, were defined as “household inmates,” *oiketia* (HC 86). Arendt argues that the traditional distinction between human citizens endowed with speech (*animale rationale*) and ‘animal’ slave laborers (*animal laborans*) is important and, at least from the perspective of the ancient Greeks, “justified”; “the *animal laborans* is indeed only one, at best the highest, of the animal species which populate the earth” (HC 84-85). With the beginning of the tradition, and the philosophical de-articulation of the *vita activa*—especially in Christian thought—these distinctions between public and private, human-citizen and animal-slave, acting and behaving, are gradually destroyed, until the determination of which “category” one belongs to became a matter only of where one labors (i.e. in the intimacy of the modern single-family household or in ‘public’—both now equally absorbed into society), and whether one is primarily engaged in “private or public business” (84). The important point is that the remnants of both “spheres,” the modern, socialized public and private,

considerably elaborated and strengthened. In discussing the dependency “inherent in the fact of createdness,” and how this is “forgotten” by humans when they organize their existence around desire and craving for mastery over life (*cupiditas*), Arendt writes: “[M]an’s dependence rests not on anticipation and does not aim at something, but relies exclusively on remembrance and refers to the past. To put it differently, the decisive fact determining man as a conscious remembering being is birth or ‘natality,’ that is, the fact that we have entered the world through birth. The decisive fact determining man as a desiring being was death or mortality, the fact that we shall leave the world in death. Fear of death and inadequacy of life are the springs of desire. In contrast, gratitude for life having been given at all is the spring of remembrance.” This form of grateful attachment to life, based in natality, is capable of remembering limitations without striving to control the contingencies of existence or aiming at becoming a self-contained Being. Such an outlook instead recognizes human temporal life as unpredictable becoming; grateful attachment to life as it has been given, in contrast to the future-oriented attitude of craving, aimed at full control of life itself, remembers natality. Grateful remembrance for the sheer, gratuitous fact of having been born, for having begun and for beginning anew in a temporal world for the interval between birth and death “does not depend upon volition, strictly speaking” (LSA 52).

merely *simulate* the Greek model and both forms of “business” take on the quality of *labor* since they are equally a part of the general economy that governs the life of society as a whole.

Work and the Means-Ends Logic of *Homo Faber*

Before moving on to compare the traditional and the modern approaches to securitizing life itself, it is necessary to clarify how Arendt defines the second tier of activity, work. Work, as distinguished from labor, qualifies as a fully “human” mode of activity insofar as it is able to create lasting objects that enter into the world and serve some function. Labor’s futile and fleeting ‘products,’ strangely, are considered eternal precisely because they have no “life expectancy”; laborers are eternal in the sense of an animal species, where each “specimen” is *indifferent* to the world (104,106). The products of work, however, appear to provide their maker with a measure of “immortality” since they actualize a potential specific to the maker’s skills, and thus bring into being an object that (re)presents their uniqueness and their bodily being. This uniqueness is expressed through the indexical traces of the body left on each fabricated object and also becomes evident because each craftsman will have different training and a slightly different interpretation of traditional techniques, and this technical “know-how” (*techné*) changes over time and with the production of each new object. The individual fabricator improves his or her skills with practice, and these skills collectively inform and respond to the worldly standards of judgment of a particular culture. The fabricated object thus contains something of the maker’s physicality, and also of her unrepeatability

experiential knowledge. The apparent uniqueness, first of the object itself and secondarily (indirectly) of its maker, brought into the world through fabrication can be judged and reflected upon by all who may encounter and use the object, and the object is integrated into the “sameness in utter diversity” of the durable common world (57).

The craftsman or artisan, Arendt argues, works in a way that is fundamentally different from the slave, housewife, or other household “inmates” because *homo faber*’s efforts have a definitive *end*. Work is done when the plan is executed and the product, whatever it may be, is deemed finished, not ever quite “perfect,” but ready for its intended use. In other words, work proceeds in a more or less straight teleological (material and temporal) line from a pre-conceived design to a completed object. The fabricator holds an image, in Platonic terms, the *eidōs* or idea of the thing he or she wants to produce; this mental appearance of the object precedes and limits in advance the phenomenal appearance(s) of things. This image remains in mind and guides every step of the fabrication project, from the selection of appropriate materials, the planning of the proper means to the chosen end, and implementation of these carefully considered steps, finally resulting in the finished product. The finished object, in turn, will be judged based on how well it conforms to the ideal/aim that the fabricator had in mind, and which always approximates a generally held understanding of what an object designed for a given use should look and feel like. It is in this sense of approximating generally accepted ideals and delivering for use new things that are distinct from, but related to all other objects available for humans in their circumspective inhabiting of their built environment, that the primary human condition corresponding to work is said to be worldliness (*HC 7*).

Arendt argues that work, in contradistinction to labor, produces the “objectivity” of the world, but this objectivity is dependent upon both labor and action since, on the one hand, the continued (laborious) care for objects protects them from decay and on the other, the speaking, meaning-making capacity of action ensures that the multiplicity of made objects, the whole built environment, can be made intelligible and evaluated from a variety of perspectives. If work introduces objectivity into the world, action is still required to lend the world a sense of shared reality. Again, in contrast to labor, which leaves no *useful* excess, but only ‘biological’ self-propulsion (the need for more labor and more consumption), work introduces objective “durability” into the world. “It is this durability,” Arendt explains, which gives the things of this world their relative independence from men who produce and use them” (*HC* 137).

Work is never entirely independent from labor, but the key difference is that, whereas labor moves in the unending cyclical time of nature, work functions almost entirely as a means-ends logic of reification. What does Arendt mean by reification? In the most general terms, reification has to do with the essential “violence” that is necessary in the fabrication of any lasting artefact; *homo faber*, the solitary and masterful working being, wilfully removes “material” from the cyclical and eternal processes of nature and endows it with a durability, as well as with a definitive, objective status. Here, Arendt reiterates that nature is never “raw” in the sense of something merely present in itself, but only becomes “natural” from a human perspective, that is, when it is taken over by actors working to produce *something*. Prior to the commencement of work, the “materiality” of “natural life” is presupposed and taken as given. *Homo faber*, the human worker, views all of nature in an instrumental light from a perspective within the frame of

a specific, technical know-how. The worker, who may be reliant upon the labor of others, seeks to appropriate and differentiate “nature” for a certain purpose. What distinguishes *homo faber* from *animal laborans* is the capacity to “violate” nature, to “translate” perpetual cyclicity into linear temporality, and to make the “raw material” of natural things (including *animal laborans*) *productive*:

Material is *already* the product of human hands, which have removed it from its natural location, whether in the killing of a life process, as in the case of the tree which must be destroyed in order to provide wood, or interrupting one of nature’s slower processes, as in the case of iron, stone, or marble, which must be torn out of the womb of the earth. This element of violation and violence is present in all fabrications, and *homo faber*, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature. The *animal laborans*, which with its body and the help of tame animals nourishes life, may be the lord and master of all living creatures, but it still remains the servant of nature and of the earth; *only homo faber conducts himself as lord and master of the whole earth.* (HC 139, my emphasis.)

The products of work, therefore, are always constructed through some act of violence, which appropriates and reifies not only “nature’s own eternal presence,” but also the labor of *animal laborans*, who are themselves immersed in “natural” cycles to such an extent that they can be “torn out of nature” and used as “material” (140). The importance of fabrication in the unfolding of the tradition has to do with the way in which, beginning with Plato, political action is gradually replaced by fabrication, such that the political realm is no longer conceived as an “insecure” space of free action, but becomes instead a

projected “end” in a process of wilful making.¹⁹ When *homo faber*’s instrumental attitude towards the world replaces all other outlooks, “everything must be of some use, that is, it must lend itself as an instrument to achieve something else, [until] meaning itself can appear only as an end, as an ‘end in itself’ which actually is a ... tautology” (154). The “tragedy” of *homo faber*’s activity is that “in the moment...it seems to have found its fulfillment...[it] begins to degrade the world of things” (155).

What Arendt calls the modern “victory” of *homo faber* actually bears within it the seeds of the destruction of the fabricated world, since the instrumental logic, where everything fabricated becomes merely the “means” to a new end, leads to infinite regress. The need for new “material,” without the public sphere to establish a non-instrumental *meaning* and to anchor objects in a world, becomes boundless. As Arendt explains, this “victory” (and defeat) is closely bound up with the history of science and the “discovery” of Nature as *a collection of knowable processes*. Nature, including so-called human nature, is now temporally reconceptualized in terms of infinitely progressing, automatic processes. *Homo faber*’s progressing quest for new “material” leads to the acquisition of new knowledge that is automatically fed back into the means-ends world view. In the specifically modern, scientific form of this feed-back loop, the instrumental

¹⁹ Plato is taken to be the “father” of this tradition, since, according to Arendt’s reading of *The Statesman*, the parable of the Cave in *The Republic*, and other texts, he was the first to apply the tropes of *material arts* (and especially weaving) to the public realm of human affairs. Arendt argues that such a “making” of the human world eventually destroys capacities to create and share meaning; when political action is reduced to the status of fabrication, or rather fabrication, with its means-ends logic, is elevated to such a degree, everything existing and also everything that may *potentially* be disclosed, becomes automatically inserted into and instrumental “totality.” See Arendt: *The Promise of Politics*, 27-39, *Between Past and Future*, 78-81, HC 220-230. It is interesting to note that Foucault offers a very different reading of Plato’s *Statesman*; for him, this dialogue represents an interrogation and rejection of the theme of “pastoral power.” This interpretation appears in the context of establishing that this theme of the shepherd/sheep relationship did not originate with the Greeks, but was a Hebraic theme that would become especially important in the development of Christianity, and eventually in secular forms of governmentality. See *Security, Territory, Population*, lecture six.

appropriation/reification of nature is identified with the scientific experiment, where “knowledge” becomes both a *product* and a *means* of shaping nature:

Even more decisive [than the paraphernalia and instruments] was the element of making and fabrication present in the experiment itself, which produces its own phenomena of observation and therefore depends from the very outset upon man’s productive capacities. The use of the experiment for the purpose of knowledge was already the consequence of the conviction that one can know only what he has made himself, for this conviction meant that one might learn about those things...by figuring out and imitating the processes through which they had come into being... The experiment repeats the natural process as though man himself were able to make nature’s products. (*HC 295*)

In other words, nature, viewed as both the object and product of scientific experimental knowledge, comes to be regarded as “material” in a new, re-doubled sense; nature ‘itself’ is no longer distinguished from the scientific representations and reifications of its processes, and therefore can be taken up and used to fabricate future nature-knowledge in a technically improved way. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries nature as material (in the older sense of supposedly ‘raw’ resources), experimental knowledge, and instrumental technicity—the general, generalizing know-how of making something *for* something—are gradually fused together in a grand narrative of “universal” progress. *Homo faber*’s traditional mistrust for the *given* aspects of life, that is, for everything not man-made in accordance with a pre-established plan and purpose, still informs the general world-view of modern techno-science. Mistrust and resentment for both nature

and the contingencies of human action continue to characterize the dominant outlook of fabrication, now melded together with science and technology. According to Arendt, *homo faber's* desire to preserve the self-willed mastery over material that is central to the activity of making, forms the unspoken basis of modern science and its "great promise" to "liberate" mankind from the toils and sufferings of the human condition (associated equally, from *homo faber's* perspective, with labor and action). The science of the nineteenth century, which gave rise to a concept of "scientific genius," saw the elevation of *homo faber* to a central position, presiding over "life," and also (at least potentially) making it.

The experimental knowledge of modern *homo faber* is no less instrumental than the logic of appropriating/making objects had been in the past, but the "shift of emphasis in the history of science from the old questions of 'what' and 'why' something *is* to the new question of 'how' it came into being," Arendt argues, has incredibly important political consequences, since it ushered in a new conceptualization of nature as something dynamic, permeable, and makeable. If, in the nineteenth century, "no responsible scientist would have dreamt of the extent to which man actually is capable of 'making' nature," this shift from "why" to "how" implies that the actual objects of knowledge can no longer be things or eternal motions but must be processes, and that "the object of science, therefore, is no longer nature but history, the story of the coming into being of nature or life or the universe" (295-296).

Natural sciences developed into historical disciplines long before the nineteenth century, but it was during this time that the new organizing principle of "nature," not as something fixed, but as a dynamic *process* open to human intervention, took on new

significance; this new “scientific” conception of a penetrable, changeable, and dynamic nature spread to other fields of knowledge, including economics and politics. The historical and the physical sciences began to concern themselves with the making of natural processes:

Nature, because it could be known only in process which human ingenuity, the ingeniousness of *homo faber*, could repeat and make in the experiment, became the process, and all practical natural things derived their significance and meaning solely from their functions as an over-all process. In the place of the concept of Being, we now find the concept of Process. And whereas it is in the nature of Being to appear and thus disclose itself, it is in the nature of Process to remain invisible, to be something whose existence can only be inferred from the presence of certain phenomena. (*HC 296-297*)

The processual nature of the new objects of scientific knowledge, which originally made sense within the instrumental production process of *homo faber* (i.e. “natural” processes could be discovered and imitated as means to ends), eventually leads to a reversal of categories of the means-ends, or rather made obvious the internal tautology of instrumental logic, whereby each ‘finished’ object becomes a new means. In other words, whereas the scientific interest in natural processes began with the “insistence upon considering everything as the result of fabrication,” including experimental knowledge, the “exclusive emphasis the modern age placed on [processes] at the expense of all interest in the things, the products themselves,” is quite new. The new view of a dynamic and changeable (historicized) nature, which took everything to be a “production process

or development,” actually “transcends the mentality of man as a tool maker and fabricator.” This is because the “technical applicability” of this knowledge is now immediately regarded as a mere by-product of the greater “natural” processes themselves (297). *Homo faber*’s mechanistic worldview undergoes a radical transition with this “discovery” of nature *qua* process, leading to a reversal of means and ends in scientific discourses.

No longer is *homo faber* the “master” of a fully appropriable (static/timeless) nature, but rather the servant and “expert” of natural processes (dynamic/temporal). Modern *homo faber* interacts with processes, but does not fully determine them, and this shift has to do with the modern scientific ‘world’ view which fully combines nature and history, while regarding both as “superhuman” processes, invisible and unchangeable unless one has access to “special knowledge” of their “secret” movements; “[p]rocesses, therefore, and not ideas...[or] models... of the things to be, become the guide for the making and fabricating activities of *homo faber*” (HC 300). The trouble here, again, is that these processes are fundamentally abstractions which have come to take the place of the symbolic reality precipitated through human speech-action. This will become clearer as we proceed to look at Arendt’s theory of action, but for now, I hope to point out that the specifically modern dangers for the world and the political realm of human affairs that arise with these “superhuman” processes have to do with the fact that these processes, due to their sheer scale and unspeakable complexity, cannot meaningfully appear in a humanly comprehensible way, either in the ‘mind’s eye’ as images/ideas, or in the shared ‘space’ of the public sphere. At the same time, these massive natural-historical processes, from the nineteenth century onwards, have been accepted as guiding

'laws' for governing the massified life processes of human societies, and have taken on a seemingly irresistible force and momentum of their own.

This (partial) account of Arendt's understandings of labor and work, and the traditional collapse of this distinction, accompanied by the substitution of making for acting, helps to make sense of the capacity of modern societies, both liberal and totalitarian, to make life superfluous. In the former, this occurs through the breakdown of the *polis/oikos* distinction and the production of a society of *animal laborans*, and in totalitarian regimes, through the total collapse of means-ends logic paired with a self-destroying and "monstrous" form of fabrication focused on the controlled obliteration of life in the name of "superhuman" processes: the ideological manifestations of Nature and History. I will return to look at Arendt's views on the degradation of the common world and the growth of superfluity in the modern age in more depth the following chapter, but first it is crucial to provide a basic account of Arendt's theory of action, which takes the ability to begin something new amidst the relational 'space' of the world to be the most politically significant and potentially powerful of all human capacities.

The Significance of Action: Unpredictable Appearances

Instead of asking, "what *is* action for Arendt?" and seeking a formal definition, a more promising approach is to ask questions that remain in keeping with Arendt's own methodology. So for instance, we can ask: how is action experienced and how does it appear? What are the distinguishing spatial and temporal features that allow it to be recognized as action? How does action condition the world and how is it limited by the

‘space’ in which it appears and receives its meaning? What, or rather, *who* is a political actor? Of course, a full and thorough response to these general questions is beyond the scope of the present discussion, but it is possible here to offer a basic sketch of Arendt’s theory of action. If nothing else, a cursory exploration of these questions can provide a clearer picture of what, in Arendt’s sometimes perplexing terminological framework, does *not* qualify as political action.

As a post-metaphysical thinker, Arendt begins her investigation into the dynamics of active political life with the assumption that “everything that is must appear and nothing can appear without a shape of its own” (*HC* 173); in the case of action, this distinct appearance in the world is indivisible from the acting person herself. While action has or *is* the potential to individuate actors, it should be noted from the outset that the appearance in action of a distinct agent, the “who” of any retelling of events, is utterly ephemeral and never unitary, even while the actor is still alive. This has to do with action’s temporality; it always appears in the present and, like life itself, it leaves nothing tangible behind:

Life in its nonbiological sense, the span of time each man has between birth and death, manifests itself in action and speech, both of which share with life its essential futility. The doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words [unlike work] will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word is passed. (173)

Words and deeds cannot appear if one is in isolation, thrown into a position where he or she is no longer capable of (re)turning to the company of a plurality of others who make up a world together. The distinctive appearance of action, because it coincides with the

appearance of the one(s) who act, always depends upon the presence of others who will witness, narrate, and interpret the event, carrying its memory forward into the future. Action in isolation is impossible since words and deeds have no independence or substance of their own.

Words and actions are even less durable than labor's unitary 'product,' life itself, and even in the presence of others, their meaningfulness cannot be fully secured or guaranteed. Paradoxically, this inherent insecurity and the failure to arrive at a final meaning of action's unexpected appearance is the pre-condition for the generation of political power, which emerges only when the fragile conditions of plurality are left intact. Action takes place in the midst of a temporally unfolding world. Indeed, it is the absolute novelty of action that provides the 'space' of the world existing in-between humans over time the unpredictability that makes (non-unitary) historical awareness possible. The word, "interest," in modern politics has come to signify the individual or collective will, what one person or a group—often a whole population—is said to desire and *work* for, yet Arendt points out that this derives from a very different political concept: *inter-est* as the being-in-between of the world, "which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together," while simultaneously providing enough 'space' for distinctions to appear and take on meaning through action (182). Each unique performance of action appears only once. Without spectators, action leaves behind no trace in the world. For this reason, the unique "who" disclosed in action is not to be confused with *something* like a subject endowed with identity properly speaking. Identity connotes a selfhood that is essentially self-contained, fully intelligible, and that remains the same over time. Identity is a being-oneself that is generally understood to be stable,

which therefore involves a permanent, fully revealed, and immediately comprehensible difference from all others. The actor, in Arendt's phenomenology of appearances, is not defined by a categorical identity, nor does he or she remain self-same over time. The "who" disclosed in the moment of action is unique only insofar as his or her words and deeds present someone who has never existed, spoken, or acted in an identical way.

One important consequence of the condition of acting into a pre-existing world, where the agent disclosed in action does not achieve a singular identity, is that actions are also not fully interpretable with reference to intentionality, the projecting force of the will. Arendt frequently states that actors do not and cannot fully know what they do when they act, and this is partially because the one who acts cannot herself see or know how she appears from the perspectives of others; "this disclosure of 'who' always remains hidden from the person himself—like the *daimon* of Greek religion who accompanies man throughout his life, always looking over his shoulder from behind and thus only invisible to those he encounters" (*HC* 179, *LWA* 40). Each new performance relies upon others to carry on or to narrate what actors initiate if the unique "who" that they present is not to fade into "oblivion." This means that actors are not self-contained, self-identical beings, but are themselves reliant on the memory and narration of others to provide their words and deeds with some (retroactive) sense of meaning and consistency. It cannot be overemphasized that this disclosure of the natal actor is a matter of appearances, that is, it concerns what one actually does and the impact it has on the relational "web" in which one lives. In other words, what matters for action in the context of the public sphere is not primarily something preceding action, such as the cognitive or wilful formation of thoughts or volitions. Action does not have an identifiable "cause." The political aspect

of action, therefore, is not what one wills or thinks of doing, aspects of “personal psychology” that may be (mis)interpreted as the hidden origin of action, but only what actually happens and how it is perceived. What is disclosed in action, in other words, is not some pre-existing, “true” self, but an appearing “who” that is not fully known to any one actor, including the person herself.

Action and freedom, in Arendt’s view, coincide so fully that there can be no such thing as “unfree” action; if coercion, command, violence, social pressure, or a combination of these are the cause of some ‘act,’ it does not qualify as action. There are three main conditions that must be met if action, in Arendt’s specific sense of the term, is to be possible: first, political action is free only insofar as it is not based on precedents (as in carrying out orders or behaving in accordance with norms), second, it is not determined by teleological projections (as in fabrication), and third, if its initiative is not reducible to survival or biological necessity (the driving forces of labor). Action is something unexpected and radically unpredictable and, because its root is the “unconditioned” event of natality, its spontaneous appearance in the world cannot be readily pinned down, defined, or rendered easily intelligible. Action, from the perspective of the already-inhabited world of humans existing in the plural, appears as utterly unique and at first, may be incomprehensible since it cannot be immediately fit into the pre-existing social, moral, or legal frameworks that over-code the sense of shared reality springing from political relations. Significantly, the principle of newness (*novitas*) presented to the world in action, because it is linked to the natal uniqueness of the actor, cannot be adequately explained in terms of analogy, probability, or causality:

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins...The new always happens against overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected of him, and that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this, again, is only possible because each man [and woman] is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. (*HC* 178)

Action is a kind of “miracle” because it defies statistical laws of probability and has the capacity to interrupt processes which, from the passive and homogenized perspective of laboring mass-society, would otherwise appear to be necessary and automatic.²⁰ The new beginnings actions initiate into the world are radically *sui generis*, and therefore cannot be subsumed under any universally applicable rules or properly evaluated according to moral standards of judgement (Kampowski 27).

Action is first and foremost a worldly activity, though clearly not in the same way as fabrication, because it is the only one of the triad of activities making up the *vita activa*

²⁰ On the “miraculous” because radically unexpected and inexplicable nature of new beginnings, see also the concluding section of “What is Freedom” in *BPF*: “Every act, seen from the perspective not of the agent but of the process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatism it interrupts, is a kind of ‘miracle’—that is, something which could not be expected. If it is true that action and beginning are essentially the same, it follows that a capacity for performing miracles must likewise be within the range of human faculties. This sounds stranger than it actually is. It is in the very nature of every new beginning that it breaks into the world as an ‘infinite improbability,’ and yet it is precisely this infinitely improbable [newness] which actually constitutes the very texture of what we call real” (169).

that finds its “end in itself.” The *ateleological* character of action is a complex issue that I will come back to, but for now, suffice it to say that action, unlike labor and work, can find its worldly significance only in the company of distinct actors who witness one another’s existence, and these complex relations of active being-together are not constrained or defined by utility. “Making does not leave the result open,” whereas action, if it is to be truly free, can and must “leave the result open, thus leaving room for other persons to act as well” (Kampowski 36). Because of this dependency on the presence of others who, with respect to each other, are co-actors and/or spectators, action’s ‘defining’ condition is human plurality. Action without plurality, Arendt claims, is not only impossible, but also unthinkable, because even thinking relies upon the (prior and future) experience of worldly belonging—it is a sort of internalized plurality continued in a silent dialogue “between me and my-self,” a self who never really appears as ‘one’ except in action.²¹ For Arendt, the coming together of unique actors who appear to one another and who act *with* one another is the very substance of politics (*HC* 180). Politics respectful of the human condition entails remaining open to the plurality of distinct perspectives that appear and are shared through unique and unpredictable words

²¹ Under radically de-humanizing conditions of totalitarian domination, even the ‘inner’ plurality of thinking becomes impossible and enforced isolation prevents the ‘return’ to the world of whatever thinking does occur. Totalitarianism destroys both the public world of pluralistic relations and also the solitary ‘space’ of thought and imagination, the pre-conditions for reflexive judgement. In “Ideology and Terror,” Arendt writes: “Loneliness is not solitude...In solitude, in other words, I am ‘by myself,’ together with myself, and therefore two-in-one, whereas in loneliness, I am actually one, deserted by all others. All thinking, strictly speaking, is done in solitude and is a dialogue between me and myself; but this dialogue of the two-in-one does not lose contact with the world of my fellow-men because they are represented in the self with whom I lead the dialogue of thought. The problem of solitude is that the two-in-one needs others in order to become one again: one unchangeable individual whose identity can never be mistaken for that of any other. For the confirmation of my identity [which is never entirely ‘mine’], I depend entirely upon other people; and it is the great saving grace of companionship for solitary men that it makes them ‘whole’ again, saves them from the dialogue of thought in which one remains always equivocal, restores the identity which makes them speak with the single voice of one unexchangeable person” (*OT* 476). See also the first volume of *The Life of the Mind* and the brilliant chapter on Socrates in *The Promise of Politics* (5-39) for reflections on the political and ethical significance of thought as a “two-in-one” that maintains contact with plurality.

and actions. Although (or because) political actors can never occupy a fully 'neutral' position, nor can they see the totality of perspectives at once, the continuity of the public sphere requires a careful effort never to act fully "for" or "against" any one position, but to protect the plurality that shapes the world unpredictably. This means that there can be no final consensus, nor is arriving at full agreement the 'aim' or political speech-action. Following Aristotle, Arendt argues that it is primarily to take part in the public "sharing of words and deeds," and not for the sake of achieving any other purpose, such as guaranteeing sheer survival or securing material comfort, that people are drawn to found and sustain political communities (HC 197). The tradition of political philosophy, characterized by the desire to securitize life itself and to regulate the unfolding of human affairs as though political life were a technically constructed artifact with an objectively knowable reality, has in common with modern, post-traditional "mass societies" the tendency to violently foreclose the 'space' of political relations, replacing public-political power with a generalized feelings of helplessness and fear. Both are characterized by the inherently violent substitution of *poiesis* for *praxis* and the application of a means-ends logic to the public-political realm, which subsequently loses its definitive political condition, human plurality. This substitution of making for acting is grounded in a philosophical, and later, a generalized societal attitude of resentment for the inherent limitations of life as it is given to humans, that is, as natal and mortal beings capable of unpredictable action. This will become clearer in the next chapter, but first, it is important to clarify how Arendt conceptualizes the 'space' of action and the sense of reality generated in the public sphere. We will then be in a better position to consider the vital importance of language for action and to explore Arendt's claim that it is only through

the disclosive power of speech that actors can take on and deliver their natality to the world.

Action and the “Space of Appearance”: Reality and the Public Sphere

The public sphere and a sense of reality that political actors hold in common co-constitute and condition one another. In many ways, “public” and “real” are near synonymous adjectives for Arendt, since what lends any existing person or thing its realness in the phenomenal world is the fact of its appearance. But existing aspects of the world, in order to be *realized* in this “common sense” way, have to be perceived, not by one person, but by a plurality of people, none of whom look at the appearing person or thing in exactly the same way. The description of the public sphere as a “space of appearances” comes early in *The Human Condition*, even before Arendt’s explication of the three modes of activity. This anticipates the significance of action as the disclosure of natality, which requires the initial differentiation between the private realm and the public. Considering the public as first and foremost a “space of appearances” allows for a broader conceptualization of politics than traditional political theory would normally allow, since this ‘space’ is not reliant upon formal structures or rigid organizational principles, but rather potentially springs up spontaneously between people wherever they constitute a web of relationships. As Paul Ricoeur points out, in the course of *The Human Condition*, multiple terms are introduced to refer to this public ‘space,’ all of which illustrate a subtly different perspective on the condition of political life: “public realm, space of appearances, web of relationships, disclosure of who” (155). All of these terms

overlap in their significance without being fully exchangeable, and like political actors, their differences become operative in relation to one another. The concept of the public sphere as a “space of appearances,” introduced early in the text in contrast to the “hiddenness” of privacy, only becomes operative much later “when the explication of the concept of disclosure leads to the consideration of the ‘web of relationships’ in which each human life displays his or her own story” (Ricoeur 155).

Action, under the right political conditions, constitutes a ‘space’ that appears in a way that exceeds the tangibility of the built environment. The objective world takes on a shared sense of reality for humans only to the extent that they come together in speech and action to constitute a shared space of appearances that is capable of “transcend[ing] both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use” (*HC* 173). Political organization, in Arendt’s view, is neither a territorial state-structure posited as necessary for sheer survival, nor is it a massive project of socio-economic fabrication aimed at attaining security in the name of society, but instead is identified with the free and fleeting ‘space’ that springs up between people wherever they get together to talk and to engage in some enterprise, the outcome of which—thanks to the plurality inherent in their being-together—remains unpredictable. Political reality as a “space of appearances” comes about as a shift in the shared appreciation of a web of relationships that is already there. The relational web precedes political reality, but it is not “material” in the sense we have explored. Although it is “somewhat intangible,” it is “no less bound to the objective world of things than speech is to the living body” (183). If the “web of relations” refers to the fact of sharing experiences and reflecting upon them in language, a being-together that, in one way or

another every one alive takes part in, the “space of appearances” is specifically political and not everyone takes part. This political ‘space,’ however, is no more tangible or material than the pre-existing relational web—it *is* a relational web—yet this ‘space’ has one subtle but important difference: those who appear there as political actors are concerned explicitly with the relations *themselves* as they affect the shared world. Worldly reality, therefore, is indivisible from the ‘space’ constituted in and as the networks of meaning unfolding between speaking actors:

The space of appearances comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized. Its particularity is that, unlike the [fabricated] spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men... but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever. (*HC* 199)

If freedom is to flourish, Arendt contends, political actors must accept the unpredictability and contingency that comes with plurality. The reality of the public sphere is something other and something more than the material objectivity of the world engendered by the products of work, and it is only where life necessities and basic material wants have been provided that the public sphere emerges as “a house where freedom can dwell” (*HC* 45). Unlike the modern state, which Arendt and Foucault agree

involves a historically specific linking of sovereign power with a clearly delimited spatial construct—the formulation (and violent enforcement) of sovereignty over territory—the public sphere of the *polis* is taken by Arendt to be exemplary of a ‘space’ of power that is not a sovereign spatialization in this territorial sense. The physical delimitations of spaces were clearly important in the legal ordering of the Greek city-state and, with Agamben, Arendt understands the Greek *nomos* as the juridical tracing of “thresholds” delimiting the public sphere. *Nomos*, understood as man-made laws standing in contradistinction to *physei*, or given natural order, formed a boundary around the city itself, thus setting apart citizens from the “barbarians” outside the walls. Within the city walls, *nomos* also governed the physical spacing of dwellings and enforced the firm dividing line differentiating the public from the private, thus assuring that the “internally-excluded” *animal laborans* remain confined indoors as “household inmates” (*oiketia*). However, unlike Agamben, Arendt emphasizes that these boundaries were not truly political since law-making was not considered a political activity. These legal/spatial boundaries, instead, were understood as “pre-political,” set into place, not to secure the political space as a sovereign order (as Agamben’s interpretation of *nomos* would have it), but to “provide some protection against the boundlessness of action” (*HC* 191)²². Arendt’s apparent acceptance of the Greek understanding of such boundary formations and founding exclusions as “pre-political,” and therefore *non*-political is clearly problematic, but the important point for our present consideration of the meaning of action is that, for

²² In the context of discussing the importance of the public/private divide for the Greek city state, Arendt writes: “The law was originally identified with this boundary line [between the city and its exterior and between one household and another], which in ancient times, was still actually a space, a kind of no man’s land between the private and the public, sheltering and protecting both realms while, at the same time, separating both from each other. The law of the *polis* [*nomos*]... retained [this] original spatial significance. The law of the city state was neither the content of political action... nor was it a catalogue of prohibitions, resting, as modern laws still do, upon the Thou Shalt Nots of the Decalogue. It was quite literally a wall... This wall-like law was sacred, but only the enclosure was political” (63-64).

Arendt, the public meeting place of the ancient Greek (pre-)polis, prior to the rise to authority of traditional rulership, is exemplary of a worldly 'space' of freedom.

Arendt, counter Agamben—and perhaps most modern political theorists—does not assume that violence (as a function of sovereignty) is the origin and necessary sustaining principle of political power. This assumption that violence is necessary to politics, and justified with reference to the aim/end, just as breaking eggs is necessary when making an omelette, is based on the traditional conflation of making and acting (*BPF* 139). When politics is mistakenly thought of in terms of fabrication, violence appears as one, and surely the most important, 'political' *technique* to be directed at will as a means of regulating the realm of human affairs, and, in the modern era, aimed specifically towards the grand project of "making history" (*PP* 70-80). Arendt insists that political action need not harbour within itself a "hidden" core of violence, nor does accumulation and control of the means of violence result in more power. Power cannot be possessed or accumulated, and it is not generated through violent means, let alone through the accumulation of the instruments of war. Arendt's anti-violent conception of political power rests on her theory of action as a category distinct from fabrication. The distinction between power and violence corresponds to the distinction between action and fabrication. Arendt holds that power is generated in and as the coming together of actors. Power is not an accumulation of the 'strength' of individuals, a strength that in theories of sovereignty is generally presupposed, but has to do instead with the relational in-between of plurality, which coincides temporally and spatially with the appearance of actors. Violence is associated with the instrumentality of fabrication, whereby relations are broken up and re-ordered in a *teleological* line. When fabrication takes the place of

action, the force of a singular will is aimed at ‘making’ the realm of human affairs in accordance with a pre-conceived model.

Violence and power, according to Arendt, are entirely mutually exclusive and incompatible.²³ In sharp contrast to political theories that assume power is based in the monopolization and direction of the means of violence, usually by the state, Arendt contends that violence is actually a way of covering over the impotency that occurs when plurality is destroyed and political relations are secured from ‘above,’ as in sovereign structures of rule. Arendt’s belief that power is not only *not* related to the capacity to rule over others, but is actually impossible within relations of domination, provides a way of thinking about political freedom without presupposing or reinforcing sovereignty (and some “originary” violence) as the necessary structuring principle for the political, juridical, territorial, and relational origin/organization of power. Arendt’s *polis* “is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be” (*HC* 198). The *polis* is important to Arendt, not as an ‘ideal’ to be recovered or imitated, but simply because she “held that the pre-Platonic Greeks, the first theorists of action, understood that action depends not on organized or legislatively created spaces for action, or on political organization or government, but simply on people coming together to share words and deeds” (Young-Bruhl, *WAM* 89).

²³ See the section entitled “Power and the Space of Appearances” in *The Human Condition* (199-207) and also Arendt’s important book written in response to the student uprisings of 1968, *On Violence*. The broader significance of this distinction between power and violence will be elucidated towards the end of this chapter and expanded in the next, where I consider how Arendt’s analysis of “the substitution of making for acting” opens up new ways of understanding modern totalitarianism and biopolitics.

It is impossible, therefore, to talk about political action as Arendt understands it without at the same time saying something about the space (and time) of the *world* conceptualized as a “space of appearances.” In Arendt’s phenomenological approach to human activities, the world is the frame that both relates and separates people to/from one another, the past and future, and their physical surroundings. Worldly reality refers to the power of communication and mediation generated between people in their plurality of inter-relations and its primary condition is that enough ‘space’ exists between people that actions and events can be perceived from multiple perspectives at once. The ‘space’ of the world relates and separates people because it inter-ests them. Significantly, this condition is not met within the private realm, where intimacy, subjectivity, and necessity rule out differences of perspective and opinion. This is why Arendt emphasises that the traditional contempt for the private sphere has to do with the *privation* of the worldly reality experienced in both despotism and labor:

For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everyone sees and hears from a different position. This is the meaning of public life, compared to which even the richest and most satisfying family life can offer only the prolongation or multiplication of one’s own position. The subjectivity of privacy can be prolonged and multiplied in a family, it can even become so strong that its weight is felt in the public realm; but this family “world” can never replace the reality

rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators. Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered know and see sameness in utter diversity, can worldly reality truly and reliably appear. (*HC* 57)

The sense of reality that acting brings into the world depends upon the other activities (labor and work) to give it a “home,” yet it transcends the conditions that shape these activities; reality, in the specific sense of what appears in public, is certainly not the same as the sheer givenness of life (the “indifferent” life tended to by labor and appropriated as “material” by work) nor is reality to be confused with the decisively unnatural totality of the products of fabrication.

Work, with its useful technologies and instrumental rationality, stabilizes life by providing objectivity, the basis for some sense of identity. Identity belongs to the things that appear and “withstand” time without changing, and humans, “their ever-changing nature notwithstanding,” may experience a sense of identity themselves through their daily engagement with fabricated things (137). “Without a world between man and nature,” Arendt writes, “there is eternal movement but no objectivity,”²⁴ and this binary opposition between “man” and “nature” as supposedly unitary categories, makes sense only from *homo faber*’s perspective (*HC* 137). For modern *homo faber*, as we have seen,

²⁴ Arendt’s Eurocentrism is certainly problematic; she frequent comments that so-called “primitive” societies cannot know political freedom because they have not built a sufficiently permanent material world. See, for example, her reading of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in *OT*. This is an issue that needs further study since these prejudices contradict Arendt’s more central aims of debunking modern racist ideologies and contesting discriminatory social and political practices. In Arendt’s defence, it should be noted, the theory of natality means that all people, including those with cultures and worlds distinct from European “civilization” (the lasting, now globalized product of Roman trinity: authority, tradition, religion), surely have the potential to act. The problem is that Arendt doubts the capacity of non-European ways of “living together” to recognize and protect this capacity in an adequately “worldly” way.

these categories of being(s) are reconceptualised as by-products of knowable and makeable processes, and through the integration of scientific experimentation and technological innovation, living things can be progressively optimized and put to ‘better’ use. Under these conditions, the worldly objectivity and durability formerly provided by work becomes increasingly threatened as every activity takes on the (privation of) qualities associated with labor.

Reality, in the sense of a relational in-between (*inter-est*), although it makes the apperception of lasting, tangible things possible, itself lacks identity and objectivity since it is the temporally unfolding “space of appearances” in which things and people can be viewed (or heard) from multiple perspectives at once. The experience of reality shared between people is not secured or guaranteed by anything outside itself, such as a “common nature” of all humans, but only comes about and remains in existence for as long as actions—the newness of natality— appears and remains perceptible from a plurality of perspectives (57). The important point when considering the significance of action in the context of the *vita activa* is that neither the living abundance supplied by labor nor the objectivity produced by work are capable, either on their own or in relation to one another, to bring into being a sense of shared reality, and with the destruction of the many aspects in which the world presents itself to a plurality, there can be no genuine politics (58).

Deprived of access to a ‘space’ of worldly reality, human life is also deprived of a sphere to actualize its natal potential for speech and action; in Arendt’s terms, such a life is “superfluous,” which means that life cannot be meaningful “in-itself.” With the loss of the public sphere, action’s unpredictability and boundlessness are replaced with the sheer

“functionalism” of the social, conceived as one massive family. Arendt’s analysis of how reality and the “space of appearances” come under threat, though in drastically different ways, in both totalitarian regimes and liberal mass-democracies will be the topic of the next chapter. For now, what I hope to emphasize is that, with the loss of reality temporally, temporarily provided by a “space of appearances,” actions have no ‘space’ to unfold and natality cannot be articulated. Deprived of access to a ‘space’ where one’s actions, words, and opinions can appear and matter to a plurality of others, human life cannot take on the unique distinctness given by participating in multiple relations of co-conditioning. With the loss of the world as a public ‘space’ where objectivity and reality support or supplement one another, the capacity to act is lost, and with it, the closely connected capacities of remembering, thinking, and judging are also paralyzed. Without a pluralistic public sphere capable of simultaneously relating and ‘spacing’ people through the sharing of speech and action, the appearance of others in society suddenly takes on a threatening, spectral quality:

The public realm, as the common world, gathers us together and yet prevents our falling over each other, so to speak. What makes mass society so difficult to bear is not the number of people involved...but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them. The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic *séance*, where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer

separated but would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible. (*HC 52*)

To anticipate my later discussion of the rise of the social, this has much to do with Arendt's assertion that the government of modern "mass societies" is animated and enabled by a generalized spirit of fear.

Speech and the Disclosure of the Agent: Natality, Plurality, and World-Creation

Recalling that "all our definitions are distinctions" and that while speaking, "we are unable to say what anything is without distinguishing it from something else," sets us on the right path towards gaining a clearer understanding of the close link between speech and action in the context of the *vita activa*. According to Arendt, political action entails the ability to differentiate, not only things but *ourselves* and action is the specific mode in which we, as humans take on our own "distinctness" in relation to other people in the world. This distinctness "taken on" in the moment of speech-action is something that did not exist before and that is not properly our own since its existence coincides with its appearance (or utterance) into the world, and yet it is this capacity to take on and receive distinctness in unique and unpredictable ways that (always imperfectly) defines us as human actors. In the most general terms, this means that action, the differentiating activity *par excellence*, can itself only be apprehended insofar as it can be distinguished and remain distinct, not only theoretically but also in political practices, from the other main categories outlined above: labor and work. More importantly, Arendt's emphasis on

distinctions as they pertain to the appearance of humans as unique agents in the world suggests how intimately linked action is to language, and specifically to public speech.

At the very beginning of the first chapter on action in *The Human Condition*, Arendt focuses on how speech and action reveal the “unique distinctness” of actors, and this is key, in her view, to what defines humanness; humanness is not something essential/natural, but emerges in and over time as the life of a particular someone, disclosed through the unpredictable events, words, and actions that unfold in relation to the world into which he or she happened to be born. To elucidate the meaning of this “unique distinctness” taken on through action, it is worth quoting Arendt’s explanation at length.

Human distinctness is not the same as otherness—the curious quality of *alteritas* possessed by everything that is and therefore, in medieval philosophy, one of the four basic universal characteristic of Being, transcending every particular quality...Otherness in its most abstract form is found in the sheer multiplication of inorganic objects, whereas all organic life already shows variations and distinctions, even between specimens of the same species. But only man can express this distinction and distinguish himself, and only he can communicate himself and not merely something—thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear. In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.

Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not as physical objects [or as members of the species] but *qua* men [and women]. (176)

This important passage suggests that the ability to express and reflect upon the unique distinctness manifested in speech-action is the only thing conditionally distinguishing human life—or rather, *lives*—from the merely distinct organic life in which humans also share. In other words, humans are not ontologically or automatically different from other animals or life forms, but they are endowed with an ontological *potential* for (self-)differentiation intimately linked to the disclosive power of language: natality.

Action temporally and linguistically enacts the unique differences between actors which literally did not exist before. It *presents* a difference between a uniquely-distinct human life and the merely distinct aspect of (atemporal) life itself that only exists for the duration of the action's performance. Therefore, it is apparent that the human-animal difference in Arendt's view is not so much an unchanging ontological "abyss" (as Heidegger saw it),²⁵ where both humans and animals are (pre)conceived as opposing yet unitary categories, subdivided internally into multiple "specimens" or individuals.

Instead, natality brings the potential to make visible and communicable the temporally conditioned, living difference between humans and *themselves*, which Arendt names plurality. In other words, plurality is not only the mere objective fact of the presence of others, nor is it a calculable (social) "sum total" of their perspectives, but rather plurality

²⁵ On the "abyss" extending between *Dasein*'s being-in-the-world and the relatively "impoverished" worldly existence of animals, see Heidegger's lecture series, "The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude."

refers to the differences of (self-)articulations that are conditioned by the presence of others with distinct vantage points, voices, and (re-)presentable experiences. The linking together of natality and plurality requires the sharing of both physical appearances and disclosive speech.

If language can be used to create relations of distinctness between terms, this distinctness can say something about the otherness (*alteritas*) between merely existing things, which is to say that language, in some sense, ‘humanizes’ Being by breaking it up and bringing it in to a temporal flow of spoken or written words (or thoughts). But what brings this differentiating power internal to language to life, so to speak, is that language reveals something more than the ‘content’ of what is said; its meaning also relies upon the fact that there is a distinct someone who speaks. Spoken words disclose the speaker because, in speaking publicly, he or she manifests natality. Speech individuates agents thanks to its ability to make apparent, not only the “otherness” between existing things rendered in terms that can be understood in their (conditional) distinctness, but because it is the medium through which a distinct “who” can appear and take on a distinctness that is utterly unique and unrepeatable. Action, in its close bond with speaking to and relating with others, makes possible the disclosure of who actors are in the moment of initiating something in the world. In speaking, actors disclose themselves to the world, not as interchangeable things/subjects, but in terms of “who” they are (or were) in the world as natal beginners:

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and the insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This

insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative. (176-177)

Significantly, although this insertion into the world is initiated by natal beginners, without being forced to do so by those already present whose company we wish to join, how this beginning act will be received and interpreted remains beyond the conscious control of the one who starts to act. In initiating something new, the actor “comes out of hiding” and is disclosed as one “who” acts, but this “disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this ‘who’ in the same manner he has and can dispose of his other qualities” (179). The qualities and skills that a person possesses as his or her own and can “dispose of” at will, that is, by consciously deciding how best to use them, thus projecting them into the future, are those same aspects of individual identity deployed in fabrication. They belong to a person when he or she *makes* something of him or herself. But the acting “who,” because whatever he or she initiates will be taken up and responded to by a plurality of others, cannot possibly know what the outcome of this beginning will be. In action, the “who” disclosed is not in wilful possession of whatever he or she initiates as though it were a familiar “material” at his or her disposal.

Because initiating something new takes place in an always-unfinished “web of relations,” action sets of chain reactions that are infinitely complex and which cannot be

perceived or controlled by any one actor who participates in the unfolding web. Here, it is helpful to recall the two-fold structure of human existence according to Augustine outlined (appropriately) at the beginning of the chapter, and upon which Arendt bases her theory of natality. We are now, I hope, in a better position to understand the significance of Arendt's favourite lines from Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, which she cites in *The Human Condition* shortly after the passage above: "that there be a beginning, man was created, before whom there was nobody" (177). Natality refers *at once* to the corporeal fact of birth—to one's "naked...physical appearance," given to all living things (*principium*)—and to all the subsequent appearances, words, and actions that birth makes possible in the course of any given human life, which is lived from the start in a relational world. It is through appearing in public and exposing to view and in words the beginning which he or she *is* that any living, acting, speaking person can "respond"—though never with full self-knowledge—to having been born into a world where others were already present. By accepting to appear in the world as an acting and speaking being, the natal 'initiator' of an action is, without explicitly knowing it, responding to the "primordial" question addressed to "every newcomer" when he or she enters the world, a question posed in multiple forms and asked by numerous interlocutors: "'Who are you?'" (178). The mysterious givenness of birth brings the natal "newcomer" into relation with a plurality of distinct others in the world, but it is only by being drawn into a conversation with these pre-existing others, a structure of reciprocal address which requires sufficient 'space' to unfold, that the newcomer can enter in to this delicate web of relationships and deliver his or her initiating power (back) to the world. Without this relational answering or 'filling in' of the question addressed to the newcomer through the (re)turning of

nativity to the human condition, there could be no “We” in the political sense because nothing new could happen. Any worldly web of relationships that emerges, if deprived of openness to the appearance of nativity in its midst, would simply fade out of existence over time as, one by one, each person within the particular web confronts his or her own mortality. Here, it becomes apparent that the web of relationships linking nativity and plurality is an “in-between” in another sense: it is the temporal overlapping of distinct lives that, although they begin and end at different times, come together in the ‘space’ of the world, and share part of the durations given between birth and death. Each person’s life comes into a world where others are already present and it departs leaving others behind; the temporal overlap or coming together in the world of contemporaries’ lives means that people condition each other and their shared space of appearances. But the world transcends and outlasts the life-spans of those currently present together on earth, and the power of narration to disclose the agents of action allows the living to keep company, so to speak, with those who have come and gone before they were born, while also making possible another, immaterial sort of immortality that they can aspire to be part of: historical remembrance.

Significantly, Arendt’s adaptation of Augustine’s account of creation is not altogether faithful. She modifies his narration of man-kind’s coming into being in one major way. Human life, in Arendt’s view, only exists in the plural, even from the moment of human creation (*initium*). Building on Augustine’s interpretation of the ‘twin’ creations, *principium* and *initium*, as we have seen, Arendt bases the human capacity to begin on the fact that birth. As the beginning in time of human life, nativity is the ontological (pre-)condition for the continuity of history. Arendt follows the saintly

philosopher in asserting that time becomes perceptible, which is to say that time comes into existence, with the beginning of human life because only humans, supposedly, are temporally self-aware of beginnings and endings. This is why “history, in contradistinction to nature, is full of events” and in each action life’s “initial beginning is reaffirmed” (*BPF* 170). Clearly, the “initial beginning” affirmed in action, in Arendt’s political theory, relates more directly to the co-incidence of the physical-memorable event of birth into the world than to the act of divine creation. More importantly, in sharp contrast to Augustine, Arendt stresses that plurality and natality came (or come) into the world together. Augustine’s reading of *Genesis* is centred on the absolute singularity of the first man (Adam), created alone as a totally singular being; this event brought into a pre-existing and eternal universe/earth a form of life radically distinct from (and superior to) all other non-sentient, “creaturely” life. Arendt rejects this interpretation of *Genesis*, focused on the aloneness and singularity of the first and only man; she points to another version of the biblical creation story in which two distinct people, one woman and one man (Eve and Adam) were said to be created at the same time. In all of her major works containing the often repeated “*initium*” passage to explain the significance of natality as an unlimited potential for new beginnings, Arendt also cites this alternate version of *Genesis*—retained in 1:27: “male and female he created them”—and emphasizes the simultaneous appearance together of two distinct people at once. Thus, in Arendt’s reading, natality and plurality coincide and activate one another as a world-creating, or in her theologically inflected terminology, *procreative* power. To my knowledge, no commentator on Arendt’s action theory has yet explored the interconnection between these two references to the biblical creation story, Augustine’s “*initium*” and *Genesis*

1:27. Taken together, these passages are used to illustrate the spatio-temporal and ontological link between natality and plurality, the simultaneous coming-into-being of earthly existence and the world-creating potential of human life. This alternate version of the Eden story, ignored by Augustine, which tells of the creation of humans, not one at a time in linear succession, but rather as natal (singular) beings *in the plural*, is clearly important to Arendt's understanding of the world and of humans as active conditioners of their relational existence. In the opening pages of *The Human Condition*, she writes:

[I]n its most elementary form, the human condition of action is implicit even in Genesis ("Male and female created He *them*"), if we understand that this story of man's creation is distinguished in principle from the one in which God originally created Man (*adam*), "him" and not "them," so that the multitude of humans becomes the result of multiplication. Action would be an unnecessary luxury, a capricious interference with general laws of behavior, if men were endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model, whose nature or essence was the same for all and as predictable as the nature or essence of any other thing. (8)

This variation on the creation story, in which not Man, but 'men'—or, more accurately, a man and a woman—come to inhabit the earth together, is important for understanding Arendt's qualified appropriation of Augustine and her claim that natality is the basis of freedom. If, as Augustine believes, human life was created with one man, existing in isolated singularity in radical distinction to animals, which were created as multitudes "all at once," then mankind is nothing but the temporal repetition of this first appearance of a singular being, and all subsequent men are (fallen) variations on the same original

model. Humans, or at least the male ones, in Augustine's view, are *naturally* and universally set above the "species character" of animal life by virtue of being multiplications of this first, singular being, 'Man.' This account casts man(-kind) as God's most perfect, but unfinished fabrication. Humans appear as being(s) who imperfectly (temporally) mirror God's Being unfolding in time, reflecting Being as becoming in the singular time of each mortal life. Unlike non-sentient creatures, they are endowed from birth with a singular identity which, throughout the ages amounts to an unchanging and inviolable nature. Augustine wants to emphasize that only human creatures, at birth, "depart" from God's eternity, and for the duration of their life on earth, remain separated from the 'true' eternal life that awaits them after death. The truth of man's being is the singularity of 'his' immortal soul, which relates him to the radical 'before' and 'after' of eternity (beyond the limits of birth and death), and indirectly to all other humans who also contain this same hidden core, their singular relation to God. In other words, for Augustine, human differences as they actually appears in the world are deceptive since all humans share the same eternal substance with God, but from the temporal-human perspective, animated by difference, this true, eternal 'core'—the singular relation of the soul with God—remains hidden, both between human others and from each individual, so long as they are alive. The best way back to the "radical before" of eternity is withdrawal from the temporal world shared with others and the turning of one's love towards God alone (*LSA*). But what Arendt hopes to emphasize in her re-interpretation of Augustine is that human life is never "singular" in the sense of being automatically above or apart from other living beings, nor is the transcendental oneness of eternity what matters for human living-together in the in-between of the temporal

world. With this seemingly slight adjustment to the Augustinian creation story (i.e. paying attention to the version he, following Paul, ignores), a “difference,” she notes, “that indicates much more than a different attitude to the role of women,” the significance of human life on earth appears in an entirely new aspect; it is the world of human relations that now appears to give life its unique (un)disclosed significance, not a world-renouncing and solitary “quest” for the eternity that is supposed to lie in the radical beyond, transcending life’s given limits. For her, natal/plural humanness means that people are neither modeled after a unitary ideal, Man, nor are they totally defined by the natural/eternal cycles of (re-)production and expiration, birth, survival, and death in their non-historical, ‘biological’ aspect.

Even if one man were to be “created,” and not born, in perfect isolation, he would not be fully human in Arendt’s sense of the word, since there would be no *world* to receive, condition, and be conditioned by his words and action. In isolation, without so much as the potential to act, the gift of natality would be stillborn. This version of the creation story, where humans from the start of time appear, not only to/for God as his singular creature(s), but in relation to one another (“them” and not “him”) is much more in accordance with Arendt’s picture of how humans, between them, are capable of generating a world of their own conditioning, which develops historically in a way that is not natural or automatic. As we have seen, Arendt’s understanding of the human conditioning of the world means that world-creation is not an intentional act of fabrication, nor is it a necessity that we must (grudgingly) accept and make the best of. When a worldly web of relations does emerge, its activity is not a matter of appropriating a pre-existing natural or god-given material (the material of human life) and intentionally

reshaping it in various ways in order to better meet human wants and needs.²⁶ Because humans are not themselves a sort of fabrication, based on one model, whether divine or natural in origin, that is essentially the same, they are able to create worlds together that spring up as temporary “islands of security,” which never are secured entirely since their power of protection is rooted in relations of plurality, and therefore does not establish or impose a system of rulership supposed to be universal and valid for all. Such impermanent islands, which offer some respite from the fact that, in human affairs, the “unexpected can be expected,” are something more, something other than the sum total of fabricated things, and this is thanks to the linking up of natality and plurality that takes place in action.

Plurality, as the primary condition for human action, allows for freedom precisely because no one person born repeats the life of any other, nor does anyone, thanks to the world they encounter, remain unchanged from birth to death. Natality signifies that birth is the ontological pre-condition for acting *into* this world and initiating something new (the distinctly temporal power of worldly procreation, given to human life as it appears, *initium*). In human life, *principium*, unconditioned “life itself” and *initium*, the radically unpredictable conditioning of uniquely distinct lives, coincide in and as action. *Initium*, in

²⁶ Arendt’s reflections on this same passage from *Genesis* in *The Promise of Politics* support my interpretation of its significance in context of *The Human Condition*. In the course of arguing that the tradition of political thought has tended to overlook or wilfully destroy the condition of human plurality, and with it, the world-conditioning power of humans as acting beings, Arendt writes: “The plurality of men, indicated in the words of Genesis, which tell us not that God created man but ‘male and female created He *them*,’ constitutes the political realm. It does so, first, in the sense that no human being ever *exists* in the singular, which gives action and speech their specifically political significance, since they are the only activities which not only are affected by the fact of plurality, as are all human activities, but are altogether unimaginable apart from it.” She then goes on to link the belief in the creation of man in the singular to the traditional tendency to substitute making for acting and the colonization of the political realm by the general contempt for plurality of the *vita contemplativa*: “It is possible to conceive of a human world in the sense of a man-made artifice on the earth under the condition of the oneness of man, and Plato indeed deplores the fact that there are many men rather than one man living on the earth...Plato conceives this ‘one’ in the speechless and actionless end of thought, which is the perception of truth as the supreme possibility of measuring up, so to speak, to the oneness of the ‘idea’ of God” (61).

Arendt's reinterpretation of the Augustinian creation story, signifies that the "miracle" of life is that humans are not fully determined beings, but come into a relational world where their words and actions can condition their space of appearances and each other in radically unforeseeable ways. The two-fold yet coeval principles of human life as it is given, *initium* and *principium*, Arendt hopes, cannot be easily divided, even under the worst imaginable conditions, since having-been-born, having-appeared, having-spoken, like all human actions, are irreversible events that retain some measure of worldly reality so long as human beings can reflect upon their (past) beginnings and spontaneously initiate new ones. Natality is the root of action, and also the condition(ing) source of non-unitary historical awareness. This is why Arendt names action the "supreme capacity" of human life.

Arendtian actors, therefore, are not defined primarily as living bodies endowed with laboring potential, fabricating "masters" of nature working at a distance from the world, or even as the abstract citizen-subjects of liberal democracies, each (pre)supposed to possess a 'natural' and innately equal power of their own. None of these figures are capable of taking into account or revealing the paradoxical simultaneity of equality in utter difference that Arendt names plurality. The distinctness recognizable within plurality and disclosed (though never stabilized) through action, is not conceptually the same as the difference/singularity of individuals within a multiplicity; it is, rather, a performative uniqueness of the natal being who, insofar as she acts, can be regarded as distinct from all other people who ever have been or will be born.

Plurality originates and is sustained by the appearance of natality in the public sphere and this convergence is the condition of possibility for meaningful life (*bios*), that

is, a life of *somebody* that can be seen and narrated by others. Recalling the difference between *poiesis* and *praxis* is helpful for understanding Arendt's distinctive conceptualization of *bios* as biography. A life of action (*praxis*) is not wilfully made, nor is it imaginable as a finished, useful thing with a singular form. Instead, words and deeds disclose the unique existence of an actor in such a way that multiple stories can be told about him or her, and these narrations re-present someone who is no longer present but who nonetheless has not entirely passed from the world since the act of story-telling (or historiography, more generally) keeps their actions open, literally *re-presentable*, for future retellings. Such a narratable life has no definitive aim or governing ideal (or *eidos*, as Plato would say) that would determine its course or define its 'use.' Jacques Taminiaux, in the course of his thought provoking study of Arendt and Heidegger, offers a helpful analysis of the significance of the distinction between *poiesis/praxis* as it pertains to the former's conception of an active, acting life as one capable of becoming the subject of narrations:

[B]ios as *praxis* does not owe its meaning to a pre-ordained meaning that oversees everything and of which this life would be the implementation after selection of the adequate means. Unlike *poiesis*, the life of someone does not lend itself to this clear-cut distinction of end and means. Because this life is intrinsically relational, it owes its meaning to the relations that constitute it, to its way of taking them upon itself, favoring them or moving away from them. (34)

Nativity is what enables each person who is born to begin acting in such a way that their unique appearance may become part of historical memory and remain open to future

reinterpretations. The main point to hold on to is that each action is radically unpredictable, both during and after the actor's own lifetime, and therefore the individual, no matter how strong the force of his or her will, is never fully in control of the outcome of his or her deeds.

Conclusion: Situation Action in the *Vita Activa*

The distinction between labor and work, as we have seen, depends upon an appreciation of the difference between two realms of experience, or two different but inter-penetrating ways of being, each with its own conception of the "highest good," a distinctive temporality, and with defining spatial movements. *Animal laborans*, above all else, value life itself and their "toils and troubles," as well as their bodily "blisses," are conditioned by the needs of life's physical continuity. *Homo faber*, above all else, values utility and the world, from this (self-)projecting, singular perspective, appears primarily in terms of an object-oriented means-ends logic, which is potentially boundless and destructive since fails to locate meaning beyond the fabrication process itself, even in community with other humans. As we have seen, *homo faber* regards others, not in terms of "who" they are, but in terms of "what" they are, where this "what" is always defined primarily in terms of use. From this utilitarian perspective, only two basic categories make sense; people are either material to be used towards an end or users of finished products (HC 154-159). *Homo faber's* temporal experience also differs in a decisive way from that of *animal laborans*: labor is cyclical/eternal, not breaking from the undifferentiated time (or timelessness) of earthly life as a whole, whereas work is

linear/teleological, marked with beginnings and endings capable of breaking up the processes of nature to fabricate a world of things that satisfy specific wants. Spatially, labor provides a safe-haven where care for the individual body and, indirectly, the life processes of the whole human species are looked after. In relation to the human world, the private sphere of labor is actually a non-space, closed off from view and from the reality contingent upon the presence of a plurality of perspectives. Labor concerns the incommunicable experience of each and every living body's "metabolism"; it is what humans share in total sameness, or, at best, with the very limited distinctness of living "specimens," and so, in Arendt's view, it cannot be "fit" into the public world where only uniquely distinct, articulable and memorable appearances matter. Work, in contrast, provides an "objective" realm that stabilizes human life by constructing a durable "home for mortal men" (*LWA* 39).

The two modes of activity, labor and work, rely upon each other in various ways. What they have in common, besides their relationship of co-dependence, is that they both seek a way to overcome the inevitability of death. Labor does this through the reproduction of species life, which will potentially continue in the same eternally recurrent cycles. Work strives to overcome death from within the human-temporal world; death, from this perspective, is the 'end' of the self as an individual, which is properly called mortality. *Homo faber* seeks an earthly immortality through the production of an artificial environment made up of unique things that promise to retain a trace of their maker, at least until future laborers fails to maintain them and they are worn down by use. Both labor and work, we are told, contain an element of natality insofar as both are begun by someone who is herself a beginner, and therefore, even these activities will unfold

with some measure of unpredictability and difference. However, it should be clear by now that both the cycles of labor and the projects of work move more or less predictably, one in a loop and the other in a straight line towards a goal; the spatial and temporal unfolding of both activities are inherently prescribed, though in different ways. For this reason, neither one can adequately disclose “who” someone is with reference to his or her distinct natality. Labor, which involves the self-propulsion of isolated bodies, reveals our fundamental sameness, and at best, the distinctness of humans as “specimens,” but never discloses uniqueness. Work, although it leaves behind a trace of a unique person’s bodily strength and technical mastery over materials, reveals the maker only indirectly. Indeed, one of the key aspects of work is that the finished objects it produces take on a sort of “life of their own” and their objective quality exceeds and outlasts the fabrication process itself. *Homo faber*, as a unique person, if their finalized work fulfills its intended function, will be eclipsed by the objects she or he leaves behind. Even the work of art, “the most intensely worldly” and least useful of all fabricated things, can only reveal the maker indirectly. Significantly, the less ‘natural’ the material taken up to produce the art form, and the closer it is to the spoken word, as in poetry and drama, the more revealing it potentially is of the distinctness of the maker/author, but even then, and especially in the case of poetry, the work will retain a closer relation to thought than to action (167-169).

In reviewing these distinctions between the first two categories of activity, labor and work, the meaning of action in the context of Arendt’s *vita activa* is already becoming apparent. One possible formulation, which hints at the unique self-justificatory condition of action as an end in itself, would be to say that the meaning of action is that

action's meanings are utterly unpredictable. Paul Ricoeur, commenting on the closely knit inter-relationships between the triad of terms, observes that "the category of action and its close link...to speech" is already anticipated in the distinction between labor's "futility" and work's "durability":

It's only when this distinction is preserved that mortality itself reaches its tragic meaning: to be born is to gain access to a world of durability instead of merely coming into the midst of the deathless [and birthless] repetition of nature; and to die is to recede, to pass out of the durable world. It's within a humanized world that man is born and dies. For the same reason, the span of time between birth and death deserves to be called *Bios* and no longer *Zoe*. Life, then, is full of events 'which ultimately can be told as a life story, establish a biography.' (154)

From these remarks, it is clear that action, too, has its own spatial and temporal distinctness that potentially sets it apart from both labor and work, and also from the purely automatic and habitual activities characteristic of socialized behavior. It is the multi-layered in-between 'space'/time of the (re-)telling of stories. Narration links the present with the past and the future. Story-telling is capable of retrieving in memory and words the past-present or presence of actions, drawing them into the 'now,' and this recollection simultaneously propels these presented-pasts into the future since the recounted events may potentially be returned to again and again in subsequent narrations, none of which will be exactly the same.

By now, it is clear that the public-political world as Arendt understands it is not merely defined as the collective satisfaction of life-necessities, aimed at optimizing life

itself, nor is it something calculable as the totality of man-made of things (or processes), governed by the internally self-destructive logic of utility. Action brings into being a world in-between people that is not static or durable; neither human actors nor the world their actions spontaneously precipitate are properly apprehensible as something(s) of human making (*poiesis*). Lives of action (*praxis*) are not the product of fabrication, and this means that humans, insofar as they are political beings, do not originate or derive power from a singular source, whether that origin point it conceived of as God, nature, or ‘Man’ as a self-mastering, sovereign being. Humanness arises as conditional relationships and this is why the Roman saying, *inter homines esse*, “to live” is to “be among men” (equals), for Arendt, is an accurate reflection of how political reality arises as a speaking-acting convergence of a specific plurality, a temporary yet powerful “web” (7).

Ricoeur’s reflections are clearly aimed at capturing the mentality of *homo faber*, for whom life in the “humanized world” appears as a kind of “tragedy” since it sets limits on his mastery over his *own* life. The moment *homo faber*’s work is done and her unique product is returned to the world for use, there is invariably a loss of the sense of control over self and nature that was experienced in the forward-moving, self-projecting activity of making. Fabrication relies upon individual strength and skill, the ability to deliver finished objects to the world, but experientially, it is *internally* governed by the (always self-divided) mental faculties. It is enabled by a specific type of cognition, as in the mental conception of the idea (*eidos*) that will guide the making process and stand as the standard for judgement once it is finished, and it is commanded by the will, which must be reconciled with itself through the making of decisions on how best to achieve the intended project. Both of these mental functions guiding fabrication seek a form of self-

satisfaction, and *homo faber* (mis)conceives of freedom as final perfection of all his projects, which is to say, a full actualization of his personal (imagined and willed) potential as a self-made being. *Homo faber*, although his activity is conditioned by worldliness, actually hopes to escape the world into self-sufficiency (Arendt would sometime use the example of Defoe's shipwrecked character, Robinson Crusoe to illustrate this fantasy, mingled with paranoia, of being a self-sufficient and singular man in a self-made world, responsible to nobody). At the core of *homo faber's* outlook on the world, centred always on the "tragedy" of his own being, we find once again what Arendt termed "resentment for the given" and a deep-seated desire to overcome mortality and transcend the conditioning power of the world. However, it is now apparent that what is resented from this perspective is not only the "natural" world, perceived as a pre-given totality of "material," but also the humanized, temporal world of plurality, speech, and memory. *Homo faber* would like to see the whole world as his own creation, but the fact of his inevitable demise leads to a potential self-questioning, one that reveals the significance of others who can witness and remember the events of each life in a way that no fabricator can predict or master. This aspect of the world, conditioned by plurality, speech, and memory is the 'space' of action. Action, the unique appearance of words and deeds, in Arendt's phenomenology of political humanness is ontologically rooted in natality and receives its meaning thanks to plurality. This means that 'my' life story is not my own and I do not have foreknowledge of how my actions will be received, judged, and narrated; 'I' am not the author or proprietor of my appearance, and without the presence of others with whom I am conditionally linked, and who can tell stories about me, this 'I' would lose all semblance of consistency. I/t would become meaningless.

Natality, taking the initiative to begin something new, appears temporally as the double principle of individuation *and* of re-collection; it enables the life of the actor to take on unpredictable meanings in the midst of an always unfolding “web of relations” that will be altered irreparably and uncontrollably. What, for *homo faber*, is experienced as a “tragedy,” the loss of self-mastery that inevitably comes with (re-)insertion into the world, from the perspective of political actors, can be appreciated as a sort of “miracle.” Correlative to labor’s futility and work’s durability, action is characterized by an inherent “frailty,” that surprisingly, is the spring of non-violent political power.

Natality, initiating new life into the midst of an already inhabited world, is the political pre-condition of human worldly relations. Whereas mortality, the ultimate limit of a singular life, individuates ‘Man’ and stands in the individual’s future as the final mysterious disappearance, natality orients life in and towards the world, opening it to the radical contingency, beyond sovereign control, that Arendt claims is the condition of freedom. The tradition of political-thought retains the prejudices against action, plurality, embodiment, and unpredictability that originate in the solitary experience of thinking and willing, activities proper to the *vita contemplativa*. When imposed upon the messy realm of human affairs through various techniques of rule, these attitudes have the effect of conflating the conditional, conditioning distinctions in-between that are apparent (matters of “common sense”) within the shared reality of the *vita activa*. This amounts to the destruction of political relations free from violence and a foreclosure upon the ‘space’ required for the natal “who” to appear. Being born initiates the condition of potential freedom, but the natality given with birth needs a human world to appear at all and the world needs newness—newcomers and new events—to take on and sustain its historical

and present reality. The solitary will directing fabrication is incapable of willing backwards, and natality, free from the (self)projection of the will, links life to the past through memory, retaining in stories the condition of having-begun in the world as somebody in a particular place and time and into a web of relationships which constantly shifts and exerts on each natal being an uncontrollable conditioning power. Natality brings the newcomer into a relational ‘space’ between birth and death, and for so long as she lives in a world with others, the “primordial question,” “Who are you?” will be posed time and again in an infinite number of ways, conditioning all her actions as not fully her ‘own,’ but as part of a shared world. Because natality brings us into contact for the duration of our brief “sojourn” on earth with a plurality of others who also act, no human life is man-made, nor is a sovereign will capable of finally (de)humanizing life. This means that we are potentially free because, from birth, no one exists alone and no one is self-sufficient.²⁷

This sketch of the most basic features of *The Human Condition* provides a sense of the relational conditions of action in the *vita activa*. I have been suggesting that, by reframing spontaneous action as the “highest human capacity,” Arendt’s attempts to challenge traditional political philosophical definitions of ‘Man,’ which in her analysis, are shown to position thinking and willing—aspects of the *vita contemplativa*—above public-political capacities. The vital aspect of political life that Arendt sought to call

²⁷ Stephan Kampowski explains this point eloquently in his discussion of Arendtian actions as *interaction*: “[H]uman plurality is indeed a *condition* of action, i.e. it sets certain parameters and imposes certain limits. Of all the conditions under which life is given to man [*sic*], human plurality perhaps most indicates to the human person that he is not self-sufficient but that he is a dependent being. It is the condition of human plurality that mercilessly demonstrates to man his dependence and lack of sovereignty. Because we never act alone, we can never be sure of the consequences of our actions; we cannot foresee what will be their results nor can we ever undo what we did in case the results do not please us. Our actions, which are new beginnings, take place in and create a web of relationships, so that others too may respond to our actions by their own actions, which are unforeseeable” (215).

attention to and to elevate in status is precisely the aspect that, in the context of traditional political philosophy, has been the most despised feature of human affairs in general: action's inherent unpredictability.

The inherent unpredictability of action, rooted in natality's *initium* and actualized through life-long exposure to plurality, amounts to a freedom from sovereignty or non-sovereign freedom that each actor can respond to in one of two ways; freedom can be met either with "gratitude for the given," expressed by actively taking on the "naked fact" of being thrown into existence and starting something new, or freedom can be met with deep resentment, manifested as a wilful effort of fabrication that ultimately aims at transcending life's conditioning limits and becoming a self-made, self-sufficient, and therefore *worldless* being. Resentment for the given, as noted, is a refusal to reconcile oneself with either the supposedly "natural" limitations that come with embodiment mingled with an animosity towards the power generated unpredictably in human relationships, since the non-sovereign "web" of the world cannot be controlled by any one actor or comprehended from a singular perspective. In the concluding pages of the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, written long before Arendt had worked out explicitly her phenomenology of active human life, she explains this existential choice posed to each newcomer, who will invariable be conditioned for the duration of their life by the freely given and paradoxically empowering limitations of the world into which they appear:

The alternative to this resentment, which is the psychological basis of contemporary nihilism, would be a fundamental gratitude for the few elementary things that indeed are invariable given us, such as life itself,

the existence of man and the world. Neo-humanists, in their understandable yearning for the stable world of the past when law and order were given entities...have confused the issue, which is the choice between resentment and gratitude as the possible modern attitudes... In the sphere of politics, gratitude emphasizes that we are not alone in the world. We can reconcile ourselves to the variety of mankind, to the differences between human beings...only through insight into the tremendous bliss that man was created with the power of procreation, that not a single man but Men inhabit the earth. (*OT* 438-39)

It is this former attitude of resentment that Arendt diagnosed as typical, not only of the tradition of political thought, but also, in reconfigured and intensified forms, of the world-destroying efforts of modern (proto-)totalitarian movements. And yet gratitude for life's limits enables political actors to reconcile themselves with the reality of their situations, to accept newness and distinctness without striving for full identification with or assimilation of others, and to approach differences between people as they appear, not with fear and hatred, but with an attentive hopefulness that remains rooted in human conditioning relations.

Now that the major terminological and conceptual elements of Arendt's phenomenology of political life have been established, the following chapter will turn to look more closely at Arendt's critique of modernity and trace how the traditional "substitution of making for acting" has been transformed in the modern era into an unprecedented capacity to "act into nature," which goes hand in hand with the

biopolitical elevation of life itself to the status of the “highest good” in modern societies.

Chapter 2: The Rise of the Social and the Biopolitics of Population: Arendt and Foucault on the Modern Securitization of 'Life Itself'

One may be surprised that the apparent uselessness of our disguises has not yet been able to discourage us...But before you cast the first stone at us, remember that being a Jew does not give any legal status in this world. If we should start telling the truth that we are nothing but Jews, it would mean that we expose ourselves to the fate of human beings who, unprotected by any specific law or political convention, are nothing but human beings. I can hardly imagine an attitude more dangerous, since we actually live in a world in which human beings as such have ceased to exist for quite a while now; since society has discovered discrimination as the great social weapon by which one may kill men without any bloodshed...It is true that most of us depend entirely upon social standards; we lose confidence in ourselves if society does not approve us; we are—and always were—ready to pay any price in order to be accepted by society.

—Hannah Arendt, “We Refugees” (JP 65)

Contemporary critics of Hannah Arendt’s political thought have taken issue with her theory of “the social” and her critique of the administration and fabrication of the processes of “life itself” in the modern era. For Arendt, modernity is marked by “the rise of the social,” which is understood as the “unnatural growth of the natural” into the centre of political life (HC 47). The rise of the social designates the progressive breakdown of the divide separating the private sphere of economics (*oikonomia*) from the public sphere of political action, and the emergence of the economy as a sphere for governing the “mass” life processes of populations (HC 38-73). At the same time, the socialized life of modernity is characterized by a dramatic accentuation of individualism, where the category of self-interest is accepted as essential to the smooth functioning of society as an abstract whole, that is, as one big national (and increasingly global) “household.” The primary feature of the social in Arendt’s analysis is the substitution of predictable, calculable behavior for unpredictable, spontaneous political action; statistical knowledge plays an important function in governing the seemingly automatic processes of modern

societies. Under conditions of socialized life, humans relate to one another and behave as though they were individual members of “one gigantic family,” extending ultimately to include the entire species, “man-kind” (HC 39). This has the effect of negating difference and closing off public ‘spaces’ where the genuinely new can appear and be perceived from a wide array of perspectives. In Arendt’s terms, the social grows and progresses by subsuming the most important conditions of political life, natality and plurality, absorbing unique relations under a distinctly modern conception of equality (and freedom) that is located on the level of life itself; she argues that the “constant growth” of the social, “whose no less constant acceleration we can observe over at least the last three centuries, derives its strength from the fact that *through society it is the life process itself which in one form or another has been channelled into the public realm*” (HC 45, emphasis added). In other words, the social is biopolitical.

The social, appearing almost always in this substantive form in Arendt’s now classic works of political theory, stands in sharp contrast to politics as she defined it: the two terms, the social and the political, are irreconcilably opposed. Arendt’s uncompromising opposition between the social and the political, since the 1990’s has, been the target of various efforts at deconstruction. Such efforts at deconstructing this opposition have primarily been the work of American liberal feminist scholars. Some have pointed to the odd, even “monstrous” independence of the social as a sort of devouring entity in Arendt’s writing and attacked it as a “blob-like,” “incoherent” aspect that must be “excised” if her political thought is to retain any relevance for contemporary theory (Pitkin); others have drawn on Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theories of the feminine to reinterpret the Arendtian social sphere as a “return of the abject,” identifying

Arendt's animosity towards progressive socialization as a "masculinist" fear of all things bodily (Moruzzi)²⁸; still others have taken issue with Arendt's insistence on the political significance of the public/private divide, interpreting this (accurately, I think) as a sign of a more general "reluctance" to accept the modern victory of liberal equality, and labeling her (in my opinion, unfairly) an "essentialist" (Benhabib). These are just a few examples of how Arendt's theory of the social has been criticized for its apparent incoherence, its lack of systematicity, and beyond that, its outright contempt for modern economic and "behavioral" sciences (*HC* 45). From the perspective of liberal-leaning scholars working in contemporary social sciences, these are, no doubt, fair criticisms of Arendt's avowedly non-systematic phenomenological methodology, which relies not so much on timeless "essences," as Benhabib claims, but on a particular conception of perceptible and communicable "experiences" available to a plurality of agents.²⁹ Arendt's diverse writings are far from coherent on the matter of the social and its outgrowths—society,

²⁸ It is interesting to note that Kristeva, in her excellent portrait of Hannah Arendt as a figure of "feminine genius," is generally much more generous in her assessment of the theory of the social than Moruzzi, who deploys Kristeva's famous work on abjection to attack Arendt's social/political distinction. Kristeva certainly has some qualms with Arendt's "diatribe against a society that is consumed by the economy," especially concerning Arendt's seemingly low estimation of the political significance of intimacy and of the forms of desire (in contrast to 'need') originating in the private realm, but overall, she commends "Arendt's bold critique of ... 'society'" (Kristeva 161). Earlier in her book, in the context of discussing Arendt's reclaiming of the Aristotelian distinction between *zoe* and *bios* by articulating active life in terms of a narratable *biography*, Kristeva attempts to conceptualize natality in terms of maternal-feminine love. Kristeva interprets natality as a "passageway between *zoe* and *bios*, between physiology and biography" (47); she even goes so far as to claim that human "life as Arendt understood the term, is either feminine life or nothing at all" (48). In my view, Kristeva makes a similar mistake to Agamben by equating *zoe* with (unconditioned) "physiology" and *bios* with (fully conditioned) humanness and assuming that these are separable. Both Agamben and Kristeva assume that physical, "bare" life somehow precedes or exists apart (as something primordially hidden) from worldly conditioning, as in the state of the infant destined for subjectivation. Of course the implications of this common error are very different for the two theorists: Kristeva wants to celebrate the "feminine" sacred/secret of *zoe*, while Agamben seeks the eschatological "overcoming" of the distinction and *the* human entirely. As we saw in the previous chapter, Arendt's reinterpretation of Augustine aims at contesting the idea that *zoe* (or *principium*) precedes *bios* (or *initium*); as far as human life is concerned, the two *appear* simultaneously. This is why humans, from birth onward, are said to be at once conditioned and conditioning beings with no existing (appearing) common nature or *telos* governing their relational becoming.

²⁹ On the significance of the category of "experience" in Arendt's political theory, see Patchen Markell's essay, "The Experience of Action" in *Thinking in Dark Times*.

sociality, socialization, sociability—and yet these are central to how she thinks of the modern decimation of the *vita activa*, or active political life and the spread of the modern condition of “world alienation,” a “twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self” (6). Despite its apparent lack of systematic cohesion, Arendt’s theory of the social is key to appreciating the continued significance of her broader analysis of the decline of public-political ‘spaces’ of freedom. In Arendt’s terms, the normative (self-)regulation and conformity of opinion pervasive in the social amounts to a loss of the shared sense of worldly reality vital for political relations to begin and unfold. Theoretical endeavours to do away with the social in Arendt’s work invariably also do away with the specificity of political experiences that she sought to differentiate from their various modern simulacra. Arendt’s project of recovering the political, as argued in the previous chapter, was aimed not at idealizing the past or returning to pre-modern concepts and standards. In sharp contrast to the pervasive image of Arendt as a nostalgic conservative suffering from “*polis* envy,” I have argued that she worked to dismantle the remnants of the Western tradition, opening the past and the present up to new forms of political understanding; her primary hope was to develop a non-universalizing political theory rooted in the human conditions of natality and plurality, and to recover the promise of new beginnings in a post-totalitarian world, a world still threatened by the possibility of further crystallizations of terror.

Although Arendt never herself used the term “biopolitics,” the present discussion works in the direction of bringing Arendt and Foucault into conversation since it is my view that both theorists offer differently articulated but generally compatible “histories of the present” (Foucault’s phrase) that, together, can shed new light on the unresolved

aporias of modern power over life. Arendt and Foucault were both devoted to understanding one of the deeply troubling problems of modernity; both asked how, in the modern era, the biological life of humans as a species came to be increasingly subjected to novel forms of power-knowledge, such that the massified life of society appears as an object of governmental control. Society, through the development of techniques for administering the life of populations, became at once the quasi-natural “material” and the “highest good” to be produced. At the same time, distinct human lives are inserted into demographic categories, made intelligible as part of a large scale, quasi-natural life process, and exposed as never before to techniques of securitization and administration that potentially render them superfluous. Despite the fact that these two great political thinkers grapple with convergent sets of political, philosophical, and historical (or historiological), questions, no sustained attempt has been made to connect their work or to draw their thinking into critical dialogue.

However, the striking similarities between Arendt’s and Foucault’s views on the conjoined preeminence and superfluity of life in modern politics have not escaped the notice of contemporary commentators. As mentioned previously, Giorgio Agamben launches the broad-sweeping reinterpretation of the Western tradition of sovereignty that he carries out in his influential *Homo Sacer* books by identifying Arendt and Foucault as the first thinkers to grasp the significance of the radical changes occurring in modern forms of power over life, changes which his theoretical project reframes in terms of the sovereign “exception” and biopolitical “capture” of bare life (*nuda vita*) in a progressively growing juridico-philosophical structure of ban/abandonment. After making this tentative connection, however, Agamben claims that Arendt fails to link her

analysis of the modern elevation of species-life to the centre of the social-political sphere in *The Human Condition* to her ground-breaking investigations into totalitarian techniques of dehumanization. Without supporting this claim, he abruptly concludes that Arendt's work exhibits an overall "lack" of biopolitical perspective (*HS* 4). Although I do not intend to engage in detail with Agamben's contentious political theory of the dialectic between sovereign power and bare life in the present context, I do aim to challenge his general claim that Arendt failed to make connections between her analysis of totalitarian movements and the rise of laboring life to the centre of the depoliticized 'public' sphere in non-totalitarian mass societies. Both forms of government, market-oriented liberal democracy and the unprecedented, "radical evil" of totalitarian terror, in Arendt's view, arose out of the same historical break with tradition and the reevaluation of previously unquestionable political philosophical categories marking the start of the modern era.³⁰

Having examined in detail the phenomenological categories of human activity that Arendt sought to disentangle in *The Human Condition* and provided a clarification of the ontological principle of natality as the root of action, I now want to turn to Arendt's

³⁰ In the course of outlining the scope of her project in the introduction to *The Human Condition*, Arendt differentiates between the modern age and the modern world: "the modern age is not the same as the modern world. Scientifically, the modern age which began in the seventeenth century came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century; politically, the modern world, in which we live today, was born with the first atomic explosions. I do not discuss this modern world against whose backdrop this book was written...The purpose of the historical analysis...is to trace back modern world alienation, its twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self, to its origins, in order to arrive at an understanding of the nature of society as it had developed and presented itself at the very moment when it was overcome by the advent of a new and yet unknown age" (6, my emphasis). From these introductory remarks, it is clear that society, the slightly older 'root' of the modern world's "mass society," or, in Arendt's terms, "the social," is of central importance to Arendt's project and it is for the sake of arriving at this understanding of the modern era, and beyond that, of the modern world, that she undertakes her phenomenological analysis of "those general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself has not changed" (6). If one takes these comments seriously, then *The Human Condition* must be read as what Arendt called a "thought experiment," devoted to "gaug[ing] the extent of society's victory" and testing theoretically the extent to which the progressive socialization of "man-kind" as a species (i.e. biopolitics) in the modern era has transformed the previously relatively stable conditions of human life: "life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth" (*HC* 45, 11).

valuable critique of modernity and her understanding of the socialization of life on a massive scale. The last chapter provided a picture of Arendt's understanding of human worldly conditioning and of how relational webs potentially give rise to a shared sense of political reality through the linking of speech and action, natality and plurality. There, I also explored how the phenomenon of political action is only possible in the context of a somewhat stable, but never fully secure "space of appearance" capable of being regarded and talked about from a plurality of perspectives; only if these conditions are met can the life of an actor as a unique "who" take on political relevance and historical/narratable meaning. I emphasized that this worldly 'space' is thoroughly relational and speech plays a vital role in its initial appearance and nonlinear continuity; active participation in this ongoing political 'creation' (distinct from *poiesis*) therefore, may be supported by labor, care for life's necessities, and work, the fabrication of a material/artificial environment, but genuine political action is not reducible to these activities. Both labor and work move in predictable patterns—cycles and projects, respectively—that can be carried out in relative independence from speech. Only action is an "end in itself" since it has no predictable aim or end beyond (re)presenting the web of relations, which is to say, the human world itself. Therefore, no human being, insofar as he or she appears in the world as an actor, can *be* a fully formed "end" in themselves, but instead, each actor relies upon their relations with a plurality of others to give their unique life its conditions, its meanings as a biography. We are now in a position to approach the second half of the questions posed at the beginning: what does Arendt mean by "world alienation," and in what sense can life be rendered "superfluous"? How does her theory of the "rise of the social" compare to Foucault's analysis of the "naturalness of society" in the biopolitical

milieu and to what extent can their analyses of large scale processes of “normalization” of social behavior or conduct be read as compatible? What is the significance of population for the biopolitical administration of “societies of security” (Foucault) as compared to “laboring societies” (Arendt)? I argue that Arendt’s distinction between the social and the political, as incompatible as it admittedly is with liberal values, remains one of the most important aspects of her analysis of the modern condition. The social cannot be “excised” from Arendt’s political thought without losing what, in my view, is her most relevant contribution to contemporary political thought: a rich and nuanced analysis of the *biopolitical* character of modern power-knowledge.

The social is a complex and widely misunderstood concept, or rather a dense knot of concepts in Arendt’s political thought that can be elucidated by reading it in conjunction with Michel Foucault’s theory of biopolitics. It is my contention that the odd personification and seeming “incoherence” of the social in Arendt’s major texts becomes slightly less “blob-like” if one reads her analysis of “organizational devices of social housekeeping” (*HC* 38) as an earlier and somewhat less sophisticated version of what Foucault termed “apparatuses of security,” which have been devised and implemented to govern the ‘free’ circulation of life in the biopolitical *milieu*. Biopolitics for Foucault is a distinctly modern form of power that “takes control of life and the biological processes of man-as-species” (*STP* 247). This account, I suggest, clearly resonates with Arendt’s picture of modern socialization: the re-definition of labor as “productive” and the rechanneling of the living “surplus” of labor’s cycles into the public realm, now reconfigure as a household to be governed, and finally, set ‘free’ from despotic rule to follow the automatic ‘laws’ of its own progressive functioning. In this chapter, I aim to

show that although Arendt and Foucault develop very different terminological and conceptual frameworks, both present a similar picture of the co-developments of the modern state and of “political-economy”: economy and state are initially united as the limited/limiting “art” of governance modeled on the household (*oikos*). Once these were reconfigured in relation to sovereignty with the discovery of the mass, aleatory processes of population/society, economy and governmentality are, to a certain extent, ‘freed’ from administrative control and wilful (sovereign) intervention. In Arendt’s terms, with the development of normalized laboring societies, the traditional “substitution of making for acting” is drastically reconfigured and gives way to new modes of “acting into nature” that no longer can be adequately explained in terms of the means-ends logic of fabrication.

Counter Agamben’s dismissive view of Arendt’s biopolitical insights, Kathrin Braun has convincingly argued that the numerous intersections and striking affinities between Arendt and Foucault have not yet been thoroughly investigated, and yet these underexplored connections are strong enough to justify reading “Arendt as a theorist of biopolitics *avant la letter*” (7). Braun and a hand full of other authors have begun over the last few years to trace connections between Arendt’s critique of modernity and diverse theories of biopolitics, relating her work to that of Agamben, Roberto Esposito (Duarte, Vatter), and, in my opinion, much more promisingly, to Foucault’s (Allen, Dolan). Braun focuses on the commonalities between Arendt and Foucault in terms of their similar conceptions of the temporal structures of modernity to argue that both identify the shift towards modern “processual temporality” as decisive for the development of biopolitical power over life. She argues that Arendt “goes further” than

Foucault to counter biopolitical power in that her theory of natality offers a non-biopolitical conception of politics linked to a “weakly” messianic conception of time (presumably distinct from Agamben’s “strong” messianism) embodied in natality: the temporality of the interval. André Duarte’s essay on the problem of violence in Arendt’s political thought also makes a strong case for reading *Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* as closely linked analyses of the biopolitical and inherently violent character of modern politics. Duarte argues that importing the non-Arendtian category of biopolitics into her major works enables a better appreciation of the links, not made explicit by Arendt herself, between totalitarian dehumanization and the endemic violence of market-oriented mass democracies. In Duarte’s analysis, the Arendtian figure of *animal laborans* is recast as a ‘barely’ human being on the brink of becoming Agamben’s *homo sacer*, that is, a totally de-humanized life capable of being killed without this death counting as a transgression of any law. Although I have some hesitations about this recapitulation of societies of Arendtian *animal laborans* as populations of Agambian *hominis sacer* in the making, my own reading of Arendt’s theory of the social generally supports and builds upon these efforts to interpret Arendt’s prescient critique of modernity in light of more recent insights into biopolitical power relations; both the processual concept of time and the biopolitical links between *The Human Condition* and *Origins of Totalitarianism* will be important to the present discussion. However, my investigation will be focused around the specific question of the meaning of the Arendtian social as it relates to Foucault’s recently published lectures on the modern discovery of population as a means for governing the living processes of society.

I agree with Braun's view that Arendt's political thought has much to offer continued efforts to understand the biopolitical aspect of modern forms of power. Arendt's specific contribution pertains to the continued ability of her work to "open up an additional dimension of understanding in regard to biopolitics, one that refers to a debatable but also inspiring existentialist...layer in her thought"; Arendt's existential analysis of the relational conditioning of human life, Braun argues, "presents an alternative way of conceiving temporality, politics, and life that has the potential to take us beyond the spell of biopolitics" (7). This worldly conditional potential to *act differently*, opened to view in Arendt's political thought, is rooted in the capacity for new beginnings given to the world as natality. And yet, I hope to show that Foucault's genealogical exploration of the emergence of the population as simultaneously a discursive field and a quasi-natural mass of socio-economic and biological processes, 'free' to move within certain predetermined limits, in another sense, "goes further" than Arendt's theory of the social to account for how individual conduct and mass processes come to be conjoined and progressively normalized. In my view, Benhabib's observation that Arendt, throughout her treatment of the social in *The Human Condition*, "presupposed that such normalizations occur without explicating the social mechanisms of the exercise of power, or the microphysics of power, which make such normalizations possible" is generally accurate, but I do not follow her in taking this as an adequate reason for dispensing entirely with Arendt's diagnosis of the rise of the social or with her analysis of the loss of political freedom characteristic of modern mass societies (26). In other words, although I agree that Arendt's insights concerning the socialization of life in modernity can be clarified and "supplemented" by situating them in relation to "more

comprehensive treatments of the [power] dynamics of modern societies,” such as those offered by Foucault, in contrast to Benhabib, I do not think that her theory of the social is in itself “implausible” or “untenable” (26, 138-166). Instead, I suggest that Arendt’s specific phenomenological approach to understanding the social character of modernity can be drawn upon to “supplement” Foucault’s and others’ biopolitical theories in return.

Current attempts to understand biopolitical (de)humanization with reference to a seemingly total and straight-forward reduction of humans to “bare life” could benefit from a serious reconsideration of natality—instead of remaining fixated on the traditionally central category of mortality—as the primary condition opening life to human conditioning power and also making it vulnerable to biopolitical apparatuses aimed at securing its inherent unpredictability. Arendt’s work shows that the initiative to begin given with natality means that human acts are potentially capable of disrupting the smooth functioning of biopolitical apparatuses and bringing about the emergence of alternative, unforeseen manifestations of political power. However, Arendt’s hopefulness is called into question by Foucault’s work on shifting discourses of population, which suggests that through neoliberal techniques of government, the unlimited natal potentiality of human life has (perhaps) actually become the basis for biopolitical regulation since the initiatory capacity for freedom creates a “surplus” by “living and more than just living, living and better than just living” (*STP* 334). Natality, in other words, when viewed from a Foucauldian biopolitical perspective, is the condition most in need of economic appropriation and governmental regulation since it is this creative potential given with birth that introduces humanness as something seemingly “more” than biological life; natality, recast in the uncanny light of the social, is what *makes*

human life “productive,” while simultaneously presenting the possibility of a radical spontaneity that, for the good of society as a whole (i.e. without ‘space’ for plurality), necessitates securitization in advance.

In addition to contributing to the project of bringing Arendt and Foucault together, I also aim to demonstrate that Arendt’s multilayered theory of the social is a common thematic nexus linking her two major works, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*. Arendt’s analysis of modernity can be clarified by considering some of the interconnections between these, her most widely read works. These two books differ dramatically in their tone and method of analysis, and, on the surface, their subject matter. For this reason, contemporary commentators frequently treat these texts as representative of two distinct phases in the development of Arendt’s political thinking. However, I suggest that her theory of the socialization of man-kind is a common thread running through the two books. Although these two texts emphasize slightly different aspects of the social due to the important differences between the forms of government they explore (including feudal monarchy, modern imperialism, the rise and decline of nation-state sovereignty, and, of course, totalitarianism in the former, and classical *polis* life through to capitalist mass society in the later), the main concept nonetheless remains consistent. In *The Human Condition*, where Arendt first directly thematized the social, she emphasizes its economic, “massifying” and laboring-biological aspects, whereas in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, the social is more closely linked to earlier conceptions of “high society” as an exclusive elite. The concept of the social in this earlier text is defined less by economic/biological life itself—at least not on the surface—but more by the strong social demand and desire to belong that shaped the particular world view of the

“parvenu,” and excluded from society non-conformist “pariahs.”³¹ In both books, however, the social appears at the advent of modernity as a progressive “massification” of human life. The social promotes (or necessitates) conformist and thoughtless behavior from its members and destroys the worldly “in-between”—literally, the relational *interest* in the world held in common, as opposed to sheer self-interest—that Arendt saw as the necessary pre-condition for political relations to appear, to receive the newness given by natality, and to establish unpredictable conditioning power.

Taking a closer look at the significance of the social in Arendt’s political thought also reveals the depth and subtlety of her interrogation of modern transformations in power relations and technological practices centered on the large scale life processes of populations that, in the decades following her death, have come to be studied under the rubric of biopolitics. For both Arendt and Foucault, the shift in the orientation of political power-knowledge towards managing living populations was a decisive turning point in the governmental technologies of the modern state. With this transformation, the economic sphere was endowed with a new life of its own, so to speak, and the former self-consciously artificial modes of government based in strategic logics and aimed at constructing and maintaining a co-limiting balance of power between states—the practices of fabrication typical of *raison d’État* —gave way to an apparent “resurgence of nature” embodied in the seemingly *automatic* functioning of ‘free’ market relations. Whereas Foucault explores the emergence of the population as the focal point of power

³¹ Pitkin points out these two “disparate roots” of the social, i.e. “the conformist, or parvenu, social and the economic, or biological social,” and claims that they are combined (or confused) in *HC* (177). Benhabib makes a similar observation, except she identifies *three* concepts of the social in Arendt’s thought: the economic, the mass/biological, and a third term to describe the aspect of the social conformism dominant in *OT*: “sociability” (23). I have not adopted this term because of its heavy Kantian connotations, which in my view, are at odds with Arendt’s analysis of the complex process of transformation of 18th and 19th century “high society” into 20th century “mass society.”

through a detailed account of its discursive and practical genealogy, showing how novel biopolitical “apparatuses of security” function to transform and intensify (preceding) disciplinary and sovereign power-relations, Arendt, instead, looks at the dangerous tension between the natural-historical “overgrowth” of life in the social and the residual desire to secure, stabilize, and *make* mass-life function in prescribed ways. Arendt links the emergence of population as a focal point of power (and violence) to the tendency to collapse distinctions between different modes of human activity, such that the capacity for spontaneous action and reflexive judgment become nearly impossible.

The Human Condition, as we have seen, focuses on the traditional unfolding of power (or rather, fabricating violence) aimed at securing both the necessities of life provided by labor and the unpredictable unfolding of political action, the realm of human freedom. Read together with *Origins*, this book suggests that what totalitarian regimes share with capitalist liberal-democracies, is a concept of limitless progress and an expansive, universalizing project developing out of a deep distrust for everything not made by Man. Although totalitarian regimes and capitalist mass societies share nothing definitive on a morphological level, both spring from the “groundless” ground of modern crises as violent responses to unprecedented forms of uncertainty and insecurity. These modern governmental regimes deploy different techniques, but both aim to overcome the uncertainty inherent in political relations. Both are driven progressively forward towards some ideal of mastery that confounds political philosophical rationalizations and actively extends beyond even the means-ends logic of fabrication, which is nonetheless retained as a means of justification. In (neo)liberal mass societies, this takes the form of socio-economic and scientific manipulations of large scale processes aimed at securing the

thresholds of deviance and contingency, whereas in totalitarian regimes, processes are ideologically endowed with a life of their own and techniques of terror are aimed at re-making both reality and nature in accordance with their ‘laws’ of movement, advancing society towards a final obliteration of the “frail” existential conditions of human life.

Arendt’s theory of the “rise of the social,” and of social housekeeping bear a remarkable resemblance to Foucault’s closely intertwined theories of biopolitics of population, on the one hand, and liberal economic governmentality of on the other. Without being able to provide a comprehensive analysis of their many connections here, I will first clarify Arendt’s view of modernity and the relations of modern “crises” to the loss of traditional structures of authority and unquestionable/transcendental rule. I will then turn to look at her theory of the social as it is developed in her two major works, revisiting first Arendt’s most direct analysis of the rise of the social in *The Human Condition* and mapping how the social relates (or fails to relate) to the other key phenomenological categories of activity and spatio-temporal concepts explored in the previous chapter. This more detailed analysis of the social can be read “backward” into *Origins of Totalitarianism*, in order to test how Arendt’s later phenomenological interpretation of the economic-biological organization of life processes in non-totalitarian mass societies corresponds to the (less systematic) discussions of social antisemitism and social conformism in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. From there, I will briefly consider a few important points of intersection between Arendt’s work and Foucault’s lectures. In the final section, I suggest that her thinking does not go as far as Foucault’s to explain the “quasi-naturalness” that stretches between population and society. Read in relation to Arendt’s analysis of the life and world-destroying potential of totalitarian terror, we can

see that “one central purpose of *The Human Condition* is to remind us that freedom’s preservation demands a relatively stable human artifice of the sort totalitarianism makes impossible,” and yet the political securing of life must leave sufficient ‘space’ for the reception of unconditioned new beginnings and for movement into and out of the “harsh light” of the public sphere (Villa *TMT* 190).³² The *Human Condition* makes only brief reference to totalitarianism, but it does provide an important clarification of how Arendt conceptualized the philosophical and political developments that gave rise in the modern era to the incredibly hubristic slogan that guided the “unthinkable” violence of these regimes: modern *homo faber*’s belief that, since Man is master and maker of the universe, “everything is possible” (*OT* 459).

Modernity as “Crisis” and the Breach with Tradition

³² Arendt’s analysis of the social is not only aimed at rediscovering the significance of the public-political sphere and the conditions for the experience of free action. She was also concerned about the loss of the distinct “shelter” offered by the private sphere that, with the rise of the social, is also de-specified and replaced by a hyper-subjective form of dependency and ‘unreal’ intimacy. On the harshness of public ‘light’ as a threat to the fragile, (sacred?) status of private bonds, Arendt writes: “Since our feeling for reality depends utterly upon appearance and therefore upon the existence of the public realm into which things can appear out of the darkness of sheltered existence, even the twilight which illuminates our private and intimate lives is ultimately derived from the much harsher light of the public realm. Yet there are a great many things which cannot withstand the implacable, bright light of the presence of others on the public scene; there, only what is considered to be relevant, worthy of being seen or heard, can be tolerated, so that the irrelevant becomes automatically a private matter[!]. This, to be sure, does not mean that private concerns are generally irrelevant; on the contrary...there are very relevant matters which can survive only in the realm of the private. For instance, love, in distinction from friendship, is killed, or rather extinguished the moment it is displayed in public...Because of its inherent worldlessness, love can only become false or perverted when it is used for political purposes such as the change or salvation of the world” (*HC* 51-52). As Arendt’s dissertation on Augustine hints, Christian charity (*caritas*) would fall into this category of love that is “falsified” through being universalized and directed towards the political (colonial) aim of universal conversion. *Caritas*, when it took on its institutional/doctrinal form within the Roman Church, was aimed at encompassing each and every member of a projected ‘total’ humanity, where all people born are viewed equally (without difference) as creatures of God and sinful descendants of Adam, and therefore as virtual “neighbors” in need of salvation and pastoral protection. In this sense, Christian *societas*, although structurally very different from modern society, anticipates the capacity to incorporate and govern human life as though all people were members of “one big family.” See *LSA* 125.

How does Hannah Arendt understand modernity as a temporal, political, and existential condition? To what extent does she conceptualize the modern condition as a “break” with the dominant Western political and philosophical tradition, and how does she arrive at her understanding of the emergence of the totalitarian regimes of the mid-twentieth century as distinctly modern phenomena? These questions can be clarified by considering the concept of the social as it functions as a ‘vital’ link between the phenomenological study of human activities and political relations offered in *The Human Condition* and her influential investigations into the incredibly complex historical and political interconnections between antisemitism, imperialism, and totalitarian movements in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Before turning to look at these texts in more detail, however, I first want to make some general observations concerning Arendt’s approach to understanding modernity in relation to the tradition of political thought.

Modernity is characterized by Arendt, first and foremost, by the progressively growing state of “world alienation” arising out of a complex loss of traditional boundary formations, values, and standards, formerly believed to be rooted in a transcendent source/origin. In the years of research and teaching between writing *Origins* and *The Human Condition*, Arendt became increasingly interested in the relation, if any, between traditional political philosophy and what she still regarded as the absolutely unprecedented “evil” of totalitarian terror, which she identified with totalitarian regimes’ (belief in their own) power to make humanity as a virtual whole superfluous. In the early 1950’s, she began looking more seriously into the problem of “the missing link between the unprecedentedness of our present situation and certain commonly accepted traditional

categories of political thought.”³³ Arendt was not seeking causal explanations for totalitarianism, nor was she hoping to uncover some inner logic working itself out in the course of Western history. She was critical of theories, such as those then coming out of the Frankfurt school, that attempted to interpret modern consumer societies as the outcome of a singular, dialectical-historical process. Arendt was reluctant to cast modern mass alienation as a direct result of an identifiable, pre-existing inner tension or hidden potential within the political philosophical tradition, or within history ‘itself’ that was somehow revealed in the modern era, culminating in a (singular) state of crisis. Instead, Arendt’s first-hand experience of the disempowering and de-personalizing plight of stateless people, demographically categorized, displaced, or exterminated, not as people but as populations, moved her to reflect upon the first half of the twentieth century as a time of multiple, particular crises, each potentially having different links to the loss of tradition. Collectively, however, these multiple crises taking place in the modern era culminate in extreme uncertainty and a decline in the power of public-political relations to generate worldly meanings for human life.

In approaching the problems of the modern era, Arendt resisted the call to “recognize that there must be a state of crisis underlying the many crises in almost all fields of human endeavor,” and insisted that in, trying to understand the crises of the past and present, “[p]articular questions must receive particular answers”(CCMS 113).³⁴

³³ This is from Arendt’s proposal for a grant from the Guggenheim Foundation for a project on “Totalitarian Elements in Marxism” (qtd. in Villa, *TMT* 192). She received the grant in 1952, but the book was never completed. However, the research conducted during this time clearly informs *The Human Condition* and *Between Past and Future*. This research perhaps most directly influenced the lectures and essays leading up to *The Human Condition*, published in 1994 as *Promise of Politics*.

³⁴ Arendt made this comment in the context of an address at a colloquium in 1966 on the theme of “The Crisis Character of Modern Society.” She suggests that, although the colloquium had not been able to identify such an “underlying crisis” that could bring together all the multiple crises that were discussed, she did not judge it to be a failure. This candid address reveals much about how Arendt thought of the “crisis character”

Arendt worked to link specific modern events, conditions, and crises to the internal contradictions within the Western political and philosophical tradition, on the one hand, and to the historical tensions between contemplative and political ways of life on the other, while at the same time avoiding attributing to these traditional/historical tensions any simple causality or explanatory value. In other words, she avoided identifying unitary origins that could be said to lead directly (logically) to certain outcomes. With Dana Villa, I agree that to interpret Arendt's critique of political philosophy as though "she saw some mysterious inner logic working itself out in the course of the sequence from Plato to Marx," or to see her views on "totalitarianism, modernity, and the tradition as fitting snugly within the confines of the genre of *Geistesgeschichte* is to do her a great disservice" (TMT 180-181). As Arendt explains in a letter written in 1951 to her friend and former teacher, Carl Jaspers, the unprecedented capacity of totalitarian terror to eliminate human spontaneity, perhaps has links to traditional (plurality-resenting) attitudes, but there is no way in which this tradition can be "blamed" as though it were the direct origin of historical events or human acts:

I suspect that philosophy is not altogether innocent in this fine how-do-you-do [the "radical evil" of totalitarian terror] Not, of course, in the sense that Hitler had anything to do with Plato. (One compelling reason why I took such trouble to isolate the elements of totalitarian governments was

of modernity; after the passage quoted above, she continues: "[I]f the series of crises in which we have lived since the beginning of the century can teach us anything at all, it is, I think, the simple fact that there are no general standards to determine our judgments unfailingly, no general rules under which to subsume the particular cases with any degree of certainty [this echoes her *LKPP* and the unfinished third volume of *LM* on Kant's *Critique of Judgement*]. The crisis has often been defined as a breakdown of such rules and standards, and this not because we have become all of a sudden so wicked as no longer to recognize what former times have believed to be eternal verities, but, on the contrary, because the traditional verities seem to no longer apply. In the words of Tocqueville, since the past ceases to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in darkness."

to show that the Western tradition from Plato up to and including Nietzsche is above any suspicion [though Marx, it seems, is another question]). Instead, perhaps in the sense that Western philosophy had never had a clear concept of what constituted the political, and couldn't have one, because, by necessity, it spoke of man the individual and dealt with the fact of plurality tangentially. (166)

One of the primary aims of Arendt's life-long project of understanding³⁵ was to call into question diverse accounts of political history that, in one way or another, construct and rely upon structurally consistent, teleological progressions/projections or meta-narratives of "world-history."

Historiographic practices that trace logical-causal narratives, Arendt warns, tend to reproduce the denial of plurality—of multiple perspectives on reality—inherent in (proto-)totalitarian movements and thus work to perpetuate, or worse, to justify un-free and de-differentiating worldly conditions. Close to the end of *The Human Condition*, in the context of a strikingly contemporary sounding section devoted to the (biopolitical)

³⁵ Arendt was careful to differentiate between the always-incomplete project of "understanding," which remains linked to the self-questioning existence of the individual thinker, and scientific "knowledge" which can be accumulated and applied: "Understanding, as distinguished sharply from having correct information and scientific knowledge, is a complicated process which never produces unequivocal results. It is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world... It is the specifically human way of being alive; for every single person needs to be reconciled to a world into which he was born a stranger and in which, to the extent of his distinct uniqueness, he always remains a stranger. Understanding begins with birth and ends with death" (*EU* 307-308). This difference between understanding and knowing appears to correspond to the gap between philosophical "truth," which is incommunicable and has no definite purpose beyond itself, and "information," which informs technical practices of fabrication. See Arendt's letter to Mary McCarthy, August 20, 1954: "Truth... is always the beginning of thought; thinking always result-less. That is the difference between 'philosophy' and science... Thinking starts after an experience has struck home, so to speak" (*Between Friends* 24). As Serena Parekh observes, Arendtian understanding "can be further contrasted with, 'thoughtlessness—heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of "truths" which have become trivial or empty,' which for [Arendt] is one of the 'outstanding characteristics of our time'" (Parekh 5, citing *HC* 5). Socialized conditions exclude the possibility, not only for spontaneous action, but also for developing understandings through non-instrumental thought and communication.

elevation of life itself to the “highest good” in modern societies, Arendt comments on the difficulty of thinking politically about modern life without falling back automatically on the authority and rational force of philosophical categories: “Tempting as it may be for the sake of sheer consistency to derive the modern life concept from the self-inflicted perplexities of modern philosophy, it would be a delusion and a grave injustice to the seriousness of the problems of the modern age if one looked upon them merely from the viewpoint of the development of ideas” (313). Therefore, in seeking connections between specifically modern phenomena and traditional categories and structures that, in the modern era, had already been emptied out of their previous “unquestionable” authority, Arendt was interested in “dismantling” the remnants of this tradition, which continue to hold sway over social life in the form of thoughtlessly accepted norms and conventions, and over political life in the form of resentment for plurality, unpredictability, and the limitations of life itself (*LM* 211-212).

These residual elements, if thoughtlessly accepted, hinder new attempts to act and think politically in light of modern “realities.” At the same time, however, Arendt points out that often conventions and social “mores,” devoid of any real political power, are the only things standing in the way of violence and catastrophe (which obviously still continue to occur), and yet the neutralized behavior of social relations is a poor substitute for genuine political power, which in her terms, is radically opposed to violence (*EU* 315, *PP* 41). In my view, what makes Arendt uniquely important to contemporary political thought is that she engaged in a very different sort of investigation into the history/historical self-consciousness of modernity than many political theorists of her (and our) era, one capable of opening up avenues to begin the deceptively simple and

incredibly urgent task of “thinking what we are doing” (*HC* 5). Villa once again makes an important observation: for Arendt, “*Contra* Marcuse, Horkheimer and Adorno, and some postmodernists [here, I would add, biopolitical posthumanists such as Agamben]... totalitarianism is not a trope for the modern age, nor the culmination of an epoch that was always already nihilistic” (*TMT* 190).

By interpreting the social as a distinctly biopolitical concept stretching between Arendt’s analyses of totalitarianism, on the one hand, and of modern liberal democracies on the other, I do not intend to contradict her central and most firmly held view concerning the nature of totalitarian terror; totalitarianism remained for her a radically unprecedented phenomena and all efforts to understand it, she argues, must begin with a refusal to provide straight-forward causal explanations or to interpret it as simply a variation on other forms of oppression or domination. The multiple crises of modernity, in Arendt’s view, are by no means understandable as a unitary or consistent “crisis” with an underlying cause or identifiable logic, and yet, in questioning multiple, particular *crises*, she was consistently concerned with both the political-historical and the existential implication of an expansive, alienating condition developing out of a profound historical, epistemological, and political breach with traditional (*Traditionbruch*)³⁶: the social. The significance of this dramatic and irreversible breach with tradition and the modern, progressive socialization of humans as a species will become clearer as we proceed to look at the *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* and to situate these texts in relation to Foucault’s work on the biopolitical management of populations. The selected two of Arendt’s major works present complex critical responses to the multiple

³⁶ For more on Arendt’s understanding of the political, philosophical, existential, and ethical implications, of the modern loss of tradition, see Antonia Grunenberg’s “Arendt, Heidegger, Jaspers: Thinking Through the Breach in Tradition.”

modern crises affecting “almost all fields of human endeavour.” Both aim, though in different registers, to elucidate the challenging contradictions and devastating political consequences of living in a world in which neither generally valid standards and rules, traditionally deriving their power from commonly held beliefs in immutable truths, nor the communicable, “common sense” experience of worldly reality, can any longer be relied upon to guide judgments and orient actions. The mass sense of (false) security offered by the social as Arendt understood it appeared—and continues to appear—in the modern era as simultaneously a ‘cause’ and a tempting ‘solution’ to the uncertainty and displacement arising out of the historical degradation of public-political relations and the widespread loss of worldly (real) ‘spaces’ for natality and plurality to meaningfully connect.

The Rise of the Social in *The Human Condition*: distinguishing Behavior from Action

Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, emphasizes throughout that genuine action (*praxis*) is inherently unpredictable and unfolds temporally in web-like chain reactions thanks to the human condition of plurality. These chain reactions, under the right worldly conditions, have the power to take off in such a way that they exceed the initial intentions of whoever initiated any one act. The outcome(s) of action cannot be fully known in advance and they do not conform to the projective will of any one actor within the relational web in which action takes place, nor does action produce anything definitive beyond the “space of appearances” itself. The non-sovereignty of political actors, identified with their existence within a pre-existing plurality and the linked impossibility

of foreknowledge concerning the chain reactions set off by whatever they may begin, in Arendt's political theory, is the condition of freedom; "[a]ction, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as predictable effect on the other" (*BPF* 151). Sovereignty and freedom, according to Arendt's very anti-traditional understanding of these concepts, are so entirely incompatible that "they cannot even exist simultaneously," so that "[i]f men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce" (*BPF* 164-165). This renunciation of sovereignty, that is, the giving up of the projective force of the individual will—the singular driving force behind the fabrication process—is the pre-condition of acting in concert with others. Collectively, action's free unfolding between a plurality of agents generates political power free from both constitutive and instrumental forms of violence. Action, unlike fabrication (*poiesis*) is not teleological or guided by any internal or external "laws of motion." Arendt argues that the tradition of political philosophy can be interpreted historically as a series of attempts to contain action and to limit the power of people acting in concert. This consistently takes the form of an inherently violent and wilful making of the political sphere, which (mis)conceives political bodies as fabricated things in such a way that human relations can be secured from outside/above and subjected to various forms of rule. That is to say, politics in the sense that we have come to understand the term through the categories of the Western tradition is actually deeply depoliticizing since the origin and source of its 'power' to securitize "human affairs" derives from a substitution of making for acting.

In the modern era, the collapse of tradition and of the unitary authority of sovereignty gives way to a further depoliticization and de-activation of human relations.

Arendt names this transition “the rise of the social” and links it to the development of forms of government based in technological control and mediation, not only of distinctly human life, but of the mass processes of life itself. The “decisive” apolitical characteristic of modern society, she argues, is that, “on all its levels, [it] excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household. Instead, society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (*HC* 40). The conflation of the modes of activity, labor, work, and action, along with their distinct spheres of experience, public and private, in the modern socialized world, ceases to be merely a conceptual confusion arising out of the traditional privileging of thought over action. Instead, without the standards of tradition keeping action in line, the loss of possibilities for different types of activities becomes a lived reality. What traditionally had been considered the lowest human activity, labor, in modern societies, becomes the primary activity of all people living in organized “national households,” such that all activities take on the labor-like quality of cyclicity indistinct from the large scale processes of species life. This near total collapse of distinctions extends not only between the (already confused) categories of active human experience, but also between public and private life. In my view, Arendt’s treatment of the loss of public and private spheres in the modern era is a far more complex issue than many commentators of her work acknowledge; it has to do not so much with the former “contents” of the private sphere entering into public, so to speak, as with a specifically modern form of “administration” of life at the species level.

Arendt's attempt to re-articulate the *vita activa* of temporal worldly life in *The Human Condition* is guided by a pair of seemingly simple questions: "What does an active life consist of?" and "What do we do when we are active?" (LWA 29). The need for recovering the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa*, as noted in the previous chapter, extends in part from the historical tensions between active human life, especially political life, and the plurality-denying perspective of traditional philosophers. The irreconcilable abyss of perspectives separating the *vita activa* (or *bios politikos*) and the *vita contemplativa* (or *bios theoretikos*) is the primary tension, gestured towards but left underdeveloped in *The Human Condition* itself, to provide the underlying structure for Arendt's phenomenological recovery of the three main categories of activity with which we are now somewhat familiar: labor, work, and action. The hierarchy between these two ways of living—the traditional assumption that "contemplation is of a higher order than action, [and] that all action is actually but a means whose true end is contemplation, as Arendt demonstrates, informs the traditional philosophical discourses responsible for guiding the political history of sovereignty (LWA 29).

Political philosophical discourses found the means to securitize human affairs by importing into political relations the linearity and teleological organization proper to fabrication, thus enforcing the perspective of the *vita contemplativa*, with its plurality-denying hierarchy of contemplation over action. Without this traditional, hierarchical authority perpetuated throughout the Western tradition, politics as we have come to know it, that is, as a system of *rule* sustained and based in the activity of law-giving, could not have developed. Politics, in other words, long before the multiple crises of modernity dissolved the foundations of the tradition, had already ceased to be primarily the sphere

of free (unpredictable) relations between a plurality of actors appearing and speaking to each other as at once equal and uniquely distinct. Instead, politics came to be thought of and defined by non-equal relations of command and obedience, ruler and ruled, and this definition held firm in political reality until the threshold of the modern age, which Arendt situates historically in the seventeenth century.

The tradition of political thought, however, is not to be confused with political-historical reality as it is experienced by actors, but rather, from its beginning with Plato, the tradition functioned to “insulate” itself against the “changing circumstances and unstable affairs of acting men” by re-defining and legitimating politics in terms of rulership and power in terms of sovereignty. In Arendt’s view, the juridico-philosophical tradition of sovereignty did not function to totalize reality or eliminate freedom entirely; instead, what held it together as a tradition was its capacity to perpetuate its authority as a “great power of exclusion,” where the legitimacy and intelligibility of power (rulership) was believed to extend from an ultimate, eternal source existing beyond/above the messiness of plurality:

This insulation shown by our tradition ... against all political experiences that did not fit into its framework—even if these were the experiences of its own direct past, so that its vocabulary had to be re-interpreted and the words given new meanings—has remained one of its outstanding features. The mere tendency to exclude everything that was not consistent developed into a *great power of exclusion, which kept the tradition intact against all new, contradictory, and conflicting experiences*. To be sure, the tradition could prevent these experiences neither from occurring nor from

exerting their formative influence... Sometimes this influence was all the greater because there was no corresponding articulate thought to serve as a basis for argument or reconsideration, with the result that the content [of this excluded yet formative experience] was taken for granted. (*PP* 47, my emphasis)

And yet the conflation of work and action within traditional political thought and sovereign rule is not the only concern of *The Human Condition*. Arendt's investigation into the traditional colonization of politics by categories, rules, and laws derived, not from the experiences of human plurality and free action, but from the singular, world-denying perspective of the *vita contemplativa*, is not primarily concerned with recovering pre-modern ways of living, but instead hopes to foster understandings of the present capable of countering the thought-defying crises of modernity and the de-humanizing condition of world alienation. In contrast to political theories that seek to either celebrate or overcome the modern loss of transcendent foundations, Arendt hoped to develop a political philosophy without recourse to universal, stable grounds that would nonetheless be capable of standing up to the unprecedented and complex realities of the modern world. "Arendt's focus," in other words, "is on understanding how a common, shared reality might be possible within the modern world view," and this implies reconfiguring political relations of difference and equality without enforcing or thoughtlessly reproducing a form of social sameness that actually destroys differences of perspective and produces conformity, subjective isolation, and predictable behavior (Parekh 5).

Modernity, as noted, is marked by the breakdown of the previously unquestionable, exclusionary structures of sovereign authority that had been rooted in

transcendentalist political philosophical discourses capable of evaluating and safeguarding (violent) power's legitimacy. In beginning to examine Arendt's critique of modernity, it is important to keep in mind her claim that the tradition of sovereignty in the West, prior to rise of modern forms of government, is already deeply depoliticized in the important sense that plurality and the experience of action are subsumed under the supposed 'inner' freedom of the singular will paired with the self-resignation of obedience (*BPF* 164). Arendt contends that politics in the modern era is characterized by a radical shift in its epistemological frame of reference and in its governmental logic: the traditional authority of the command-obedience model proves inadequate for the full securitization of human affairs and a new form of governance, modeled on techniques imported from the sciences, becomes the norm. The wilful and inherently violent substitution of making for acting continues, though without the former stabilizing power of tradition; deprived of a commonly held faith in the singular/transcendent source of sovereign authority, political power lost its former ground and monolithic stability. Traditional authority, up until the end of the modern era, still retained elements of its coercive force, but without common faith, no real power could be sustained, and yet the means-ends logic of fabrication not only remained intact, but actually grew in power with the development of the modern state as a substitute for the lost (or questionable) transcendental ground of (older manifestations of) sovereignty; such instrumental logic, the modern state discovered, itself proves a useful discursive tool for providing justifications for the violence implicit in its governmental "art." When, from the seventeenth century onwards, the foundations of governmental power, authority, and morality became doubtful, the tradition's historical "power of exclusion" was also

evacuated and it became possible for “subterranean stream[s] of European history,”³⁷ previously existing in the margins of political life, to rise to the surface and to explode into the midst of the political scene with an unprecedented dynamic force that proved virtually incomprehensible in relation to pre-existing rules and standards of judgment. But the loss of traditional power and the dramatic uncertainties of the modern age, Arendt contends, were countered with intensifications of violence and by the development of new governmental logics.

Arendt begins the section of *The Human Condition* entitled the “Rise of the Social” by equating the “emergence of society” with “social housekeeping” (38). This intimate, if not identical, relation between “society” and the economy of the household should not be interpreted as merely a “blurring of the borderline between private and political,” but rather entails a drastic shift in the logic of government that has “changed almost beyond recognition the meaning of the two terms for the life of the individual and

³⁷ In the preface to the first volume of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, “Antisemitism,” Arendt writes that the “crystallizing catastrophe” of totalitarianism cannot be adequately explained by identifying “origins” because “nearly all elements that later crystallized in the novel totalitarian phenomenon... had hardly been noticed by either learned or public opinion because they belonged to a subterranean stream of European history where, hidden from the light of the public and the attention of enlightened men, they had been able to gather an entirely unexpected virulence” (xv). This conception of the threat posed to political life following the decline of traditional authority by “subterranean streams” of history, the historical-political “elements” that the tradition had functioned to exclude as unintelligible, is closely connected to Arendt’s observation, following Montesquieu, that only the façade of the previous authority structures, embodied in social customs, mores, and habitual behavior, continues to keep some “semblance” of order alive. And yet the events of the last century prove that mere social customs cannot protect the human world against totalitarianism or the loss of freedom in laboring societies. The expression, “subterranean streams,” likely derives from a passage of Goethe’s. See “The Tradition of Political Thought” in *Promise of Politics: After* citing a passage from *L’Esprit des lois*, Arendt comments: “What Montesquieu feared is that only customs were left as stabilizing factors in eighteenth-century society and that laws which, according to him, ‘govern the actions of citizens,’ thereby stabilizing the body politic as customs stabilize society, had lost their validity. Not quite thirty years later, Goethe writes: ‘Like a big city, our moral and political world is undermined with subterranean roads, cellars, and sewers, about whose connection and dwelling conditions nobody seems to reflect or think; but those who know something of this will find it much more understandable if here or there, now or then, the earth crumbles away, smoke rises out of the crack, and strange voices are heard.’ Both passages were written before the French Revolution, and it took more than 150 years until the customs of European society finally gave way and the subterranean world rose up to the surface, its strange voice heard in the political concert of the civilized world. It is only then, I think, that we can say that the modern age, beginning in the seventeenth century, actually had brought forward the modern world in which we live today” (41).

the citizen” (38). Arendt’s insistence that the elimination of the public/private divide in modern societies is “not merely a matter of shifted emphasis,” i.e. the elevation of the status of privacy, but pertains instead to the socialization of life as a “whole,” resonates with Foucault’s claim that, whereas sovereignty has traditionally been “exercised within the borders of a territory, ...security is exercised over a whole population” (*STP* 11). Although Arendt’s concept of the social comes close to Foucault’s properly biopolitical concept of “population,” it ultimately remains tied to an older understanding of population as a “multitude” of subjects inhabiting a given territory.

The administered life of society, Arendt argues, functions through the hyper-individuation of people as self-regulating “specimens” who behave unquestioningly in accordance with norms. Such unthinking, normalized behavior is mobilized primarily by self-interest rather than concern for the world held in common. It tends to conform automatically with the expectations and projected interests of society as whole; clearly, the social individual behaves as someone (something?) very different from the non-sovereign, natal “who” that appears, speaks, and acts unpredictably in the agonistic public realm. The social is also responsible for amalgamating these individuated “specimens” within the generalized life of “one gigantic family,” man-kind (*HC* 39). Although society is organized like a household, where all members would be equal in their submission and obedience to the patriarch, the uniformity of opinion is “enforced by sheer number”; they require no despotic ruler to keep them in line, but are rather organized and guided by a “kind of no-man rule” (40). This no-man rule assumes its power to regulate society, this nobody,” through the assumption of “one interest of society as a whole in economics” (40). With this, comes a further degradation of action

into *behavior*; society “impos[es] innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to ‘normalize’ its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement” (40). Arendt describes the social as an ambiguous ‘non-space’ where all life moves in predictable and calculable patterns, and all people become “exchangeable” (41); social life is no longer securitized (only) by an authority positioned outside/above, as with sovereign forms of rule, but is instead ruled by the “invisible hand” of economy (42,44), which is to say that the quasi-natural processes and behaviors that (re)produce it, propel it, and stimulate its growth, now glide along automatically.

Behavior is intimately related to “modern equality,” which “equalizes under all circumstances,” absorbing various social groups and eliminating difference. This new form of equality, which cannot account for individual difference, goes hand in hand with the “modern science of economics” (41-42):

It is the same conformism, the assumption that men behave and do not act with respect to each other, that lies at the root of the modern science of economics, whose birth coincides with the rise of society and which, together with its chief tool, statistics, became the social science *par excellence*. (42)

Arendt identifies the rise of the social with the fields of power defined by economic and “behavioral” sciences, their concern with calculating “social forces,” and also with the emergence of *statistical* knowledge as a tool for regulating behavior. She hints that this form of knowledge is directly linked to the capabilities of modern states to purge society of “deviants” or “dying classes” in the name of “life necessity” (42-43).

The Discovery of the Archimedean Point and “Acting into Nature”

The substitution of making for acting that had informed traditional forms of sovereign rule, in the modern era, is supported and gradually comes to be dominated by novel techniques of “acting into nature” endowed with the techno-scientific capacity to interpret, regulate, and even initiate large scale quasi-natural processes. ‘Free’ from the fetters of tradition, society, it seemed, could be engineered and perfected, thus eliminating the uncertainty, ambivalence, and threatening difference that had previously been neatly categorized, contained, or excluded within the bounds of traditional order. In other words, at precisely the time that fabrication of the political realm became actually possible, not just on the level of authoritative discourses and rules coming from ‘above’ and excluding from view the undesirable aspects of plurality, but in lived (pluralistic) reality, the nature of the governmental activity began to shift. The modern era’s governmental techniques and logics of state (*raison d’État*) aimed at the full calculation and fabrication of political reality, Arendt contends, opened the way for new forms of governmental interventions and actions that take as co-actors, not humans in their plurality, but large scale quasi-natural processes. Modern *homo faber*, despite (or precisely because) of the massive leaps in technological abilities experienced during the industrial revolution, cannot fully escape the human “frailties” of also existing as an acting being. Fabrication, as we saw in the previous chapter, is redirected in the modern era towards producing technically applicable knowledge of processes. Fabrication, in other words, has become an activity directed, not towards making worldly, durable things with some apparent and tangible identity, but towards influencing and beginning large

scale ‘natural,’ historicized processes. Experimental knowledge of such processes, which is indivisible—literally immediate—in relation to the technical manipulation of these processes, becomes the primary ‘object’ of fabrication. With this shift away from worldly use-objects and towards seemingly endless processes, the means-ends logic that had formerly governed *homo faber*’s activity reveals its internal groundlessness. For all the new-found technical mastery of the modern era, the fact that action’s “man-made” processes are no longer confined to the human world introduces into the fabrication process unforeseeable consequences that confound the calculations and projections informing world-building projects, thus opening up an unintended (and generally unacknowledged) element of action in the centre of this dangerous engineering activity.

The development of the modern scientific world view and of the notion of scientific “objectivity” as a supposed non-subjective, universally accessible perspective on nature played an important role in the gradual eclipse of transcendence and the transition towards governmental techniques and rationalities focused on the mass processes of socialized life. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies three main events that mark the threshold of the modern age and which determine its characteristic condition of world alienation. These three historical events are: first, the European “discovery” of America and the exploration and colonization of the earth; second, the Reformation’s “irremediable split of Western Christianity”; and third, an event which, of the three, went the least noticed, but which nonetheless set off momentous processes of epistemological discovery and transformation: the invention of the telescope and the development of a new science that considers the nature of the earth from the viewpoint of the universe” (248-249). Arendt emphasizes that these are not properly modern events as

these have come to be known since the French Revolution since “[n]one of them exhibit the peculiar character of an explosion of undercurrents which, having gathered force in the dark, suddenly erupt,” nor can and they “be explained [or used to explain] any chain of causality” (248). However, in her view, these three events can be interpreted as having initiating overlapping sets of transformative “continuities” that have contributed to shaping, and which continue to inform, modern world alienated conditions (248).

Without being able to consider the significance for Arendt’s analysis of the rise of the social of all three events, I want to focus briefly here on the third, the development of modern “universal” science, in order to get a better grasp of how she conceptualizes modern world alienation as an outgrowth of socialization.

In the context of investigating the significance of Galileo’s discovery of the telescope and “man’s first tentative steps towards the discovery of the universe,” Arendt discusses the complex historical replacement of traditional standards by scientific ones and emphasizes that the newly authoritative status of modern scientific empiricism, paradoxically, belies a general doubtfulness in the capacities of the human senses and an intense mistrust of embodied perception to access the true reality of things in the world (*HC* 249, *BPF* 49). Appearances in the sense of what becomes available to the bodily senses, with this epistemic shift, come to be regarded suspiciously as misleading fictions, or as mere surfaces containing a hidden, ‘real’ core that requires scientific experimentation, and often the application of highly specialized technologies, methods, and interpretive codes, in order to force it into view. Arendt links this pervasive spirit of doubt in the senses, epitomized by the belief that humans can only know what they themselves have made, to the paradoxical self-negation demanded by empirical

objectivity. If, as Galileo describes it, the scientific experiment is ““a question put before nature,”” than scientific objectivity in the modern sense demands that ‘man,’ the scientific observer *absent* himself from nature and look at it as though from outside (cited in *BPF* 49). This strange self-neutralization from the scene of the experiment necessitated by modern standards of scientific objectivity reveals a drastic shift in the significance of the questioning of nature. In the non-standardized, natural (proto-)sciences of the early modern era, such questioning had been pursued as a form of self-questioning: to ask questions of nature, prior to the modern age, was ultimately aimed at understanding mankind’s place as (created) beings inhabiting an earth and a universe with a natural and divine order. Above all else, it aimed at finding signs of the similarities and inter-relatedness of all things as created entities with a designated place in an orderly universe. “All events,” Arendt explains, “were considered to be subject to a universally valid law in the fullest sense of the word, which means, among other things, valid beyond the reach of human sense experience (even of the sense experiences made with the help of the finest instruments), valid beyond the reach of human memory and the appearance of mankind on earth, valid even beyond the coming into existence of organic life and the earth herself” (*HC* 263). Valid, in other words, because all events were considered to be subject to divine law, a law built into nature and only imperfectly penetrable through correct deployment of human reason. Early modern natural sciences hoped to glimpse signs of the universal order, yet always indirectly and within the humble limits of the human faculties. The attitude of (fully) modern sciences towards the nature in question is a far cry from the humble (self-)questioning of the earlier natural sciences. Nature,

including human nature, is now thought to be fully penetrable in its entirety, graspable through techno-scientific experimentation and the calculation of processes.

This shift in the (self-)questioning aims of science is evident in the modern conception of objectivity, which presupposes that it is possible to remove ‘man,’ the experimental questioner, from a limited, earthly position, and strives to assume a position ‘outside’ what is being observed; “the confusion in the issue of ‘objectivity’ [is] to assume that there could be answers without questions and results independent of the question-asking being” (*BPF* 49). The application of objective standards raises a number of complicated problems when the detached, self-neutralizing perspective is applied in sciences that take as their object humans themselves (especially problematic in Arendt’s view is the modern transformation of history/historiography into a science).³⁸ Clearly, the modern scientific study of human life, following the decline of belief in divine order and a singular/transcendent origin, starts with a radically different conception of humanness, as well as of nature and the universe.

Arendt links the modern development of the empiricist, self-absenting vantage point to the Western scientific quest, initiated at the start of the modern age, to occupy a quasi-transcendental “Archimedean point,” the unmoving center of the universe. In the modern age, scientific knowledge underwent a radical shift from (Copernican) heliocentrism to a “centerless,” totally relativized view of the world and the universe (*HC* 263). No point of reference is thought to remain stable; biological life, the earth, and the

³⁸ As noted, in *The Human Condition* Arendt limits her discussion to the “modern era,” leaving aside for the most part an analysis of the “the modern world, in which we live today” (6). The present discussion of “acting into nature” as an activity definitive of the our modern, biopolitical present, brings together the last chapter of that book with Arendt’s later essays in *Between Past and Future*, where these techno-scientific capacities are discussed in greater detail. On this point, see especially “The Concept of History, Ancient and Modern” in *BPF* (41-90).

universe are all re-thought in terms, not of *what* they are (ontologically/taxonomically), but in terms of progressive movements, relative fluctuations, and developmental processes. This drastic transition from a centered to a relative, centerless, and processual cosmological view enables the possibility of seemingly contradictory assumptions being equally valid depending upon the chosen point of reference. In other words, the reference/starting point for observing any phenomena, always conceptualized as part of a larger process, can be shifted at will, thus yielding entirely different yet equally true results. This transformation in the epistemology and cosmology of modern sciences, when turned back on the human relational and historical world, has incredibly far reaching and potentially dangerous political and existential effects, both for human life and for earthly life in its (newly universalized) totality. Reconceptualized in terms of biological processes, earthly life itself takes on a whole new relevance. Arendt explains:

Without actually standing where Archimedes wished to stand..., still bound to the earth through the human condition, we have found a way to act on the earth and within terrestrial nature as though we dispose of it from outside, from the Archimedean point. And even at the risk of endangering the natural life process we expose the earth to universal, cosmic forces alien to nature's household.

...It [general relativity]...signifies that we have moved the Archimedean point one step farther away from the earth to a point in the universe where neither earth nor sun are centres of a universal system. It means that we no longer feel bound even to the sun, that we move freely in the universe, choosing our point of reference wherever it may be convenient for a

specific purpose... Only now have we established ourselves as “universal” beings, as creatures who are terrestrial not by nature and essence but only on the condition of being alive, and who therefore can overcome this condition not in mere speculation but in actual fact. (*HC* 262-263)

The scientific quest for an objective and universal “pure vision,” a view from nowhere and everywhere all at once and capable of taking in nature, history, and all of Being from a disembodied perspective beyond the earth, ultimately leads to the discovery of the Archimedean point in Man(-kind) him/its self as a *universal* subject/species capable of acting into nature as if he/it (the neutralized scientific subject) were above/outside it. The Being sought, clearly, is no longer believed to exist outside of human space-time, the *eternal* One, the origin and end point of human temporal life, but is reconfigured in scientific discourses as the *infinite* (because relative) and centerless space-time of processes that encompass all of life and, through experimental means, becomes accessible to human knowledge, which is now believed to be potentially limitless.

One implication of this modern relocation, or more accurately, the progressive dislocation and expansive multiplication of the universal centre(s) is that all human activities and behaviors, existentially speaking, are equally reconfigured, not as activities at all, but as processes that can be viewed from an objectively removed vantage point and therefore, like all earthly/natural processes, can be acted upon, technologically altered, and ideally, fully made by humans themselves (*HC* 322).

Paradoxically, with this reconceptualization of life as dynamic and changing over time on both the micro and the macro levels, the biological processes of the living bodies of organisms, slow evolutionary transformations of species, etc., the concept of *life*

undergoes a dramatic hypostatization; life itself is no longer thought of as the distinct life of some specific “creature,” some-body, whether human or animal, with its designated and unchanging place in the given order of creation, but comes to be abstracted from living entities themselves. Modern life is no longer thought of as (only) the given, pre-determined and relatively unchanging cyclicity of the natural order, experienced by humans as labor, but now ‘appears’ to the universalizing gaze of the sciences as one homogeneous meta-process that contains and explains all living things as biological organisms, each driven and determined by infinite layers of processes. In order to understand life itself, in other words, it becomes necessary to look beyond/beneath the ‘surface’ of what appears and to use experimental techniques to force into view smaller and smaller, deeper and deeper, levels of hidden life-processes, down to the level of organisms’ genetic makeup, and potentially deeper still.

The important point in the present context is that both objectivity and reality, with this drastic epistemic shifts in the sciences towards totally relativized and processual reconfigurations of space, time, life, history, etc., all take on radically different meanings within the political realm of human relations. The political realm itself in the modern era has been emptied out of meaningful speech-action between non-sovereign actors to an extent that far exceeds the traditional restraints defining subjects within the command-obedience model of rule. Political life, reframed in terms of the social-economic relations of populations to be governed, has equally become an object of scientific (experimental) knowledge open to processual interventions. This broad-reaching transformation, Arendt argues, impairs the political dimension of worldly relations, making thinking, judging, and acting difficult, if not impossible for the vast majority of people.

The capacity for action, surely, has not been fully eliminated in modern societies since it is ontologically rooted in the event of human birth as a temporal-relational beginning, and yet the modern shift from the traditional technique for restraining action (or simply excluding it from discourses of sovereign power) to the modern techniques of “acting into nature,” such that whatever action is allowed is directed towards starting new natural processes, means that not everyone can act. Now, only a very limited number of people are able to partake in action as it has been re-defined in the context of the modern scientific (anthropocentric) world view: those with the technical “know how” to access, interpret, and influence large scale natural/universal processes. “The capacity for action,” Arendt contends, “at least in the sense of releasing processes, is still with us, although it has become the exclusive prerogative of the scientists [including social scientists: anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, demographers, economists], who have enlarged the realm of human affairs to the point of extinguishing the time-honored protective dividing line between nature and the human world” (324). Under these conditions, the capacity for action finds no ‘space’ for actualization in the human world, but rather is channelled into this distinctly modern form of universal-processual intervention. This new, specialized form of action, significantly, still poses as fabrication insofar as there is still a strong belief in human mastery over the natural/universal processes “unleashed.” The still-predominant belief in predictable outcomes, however, is a fragile thing since acting into nature bears the same inherent “frailty” as action limited to the relational human world. In other words, such unworldly action is equally, or actually much more drastically irreversible and unpredictable than action restricted to the worldly level of human affairs. Inevitably, modern techno-scientific acting into

nature sets off chain reactions that extend well beyond what the initiator(s) of the action could possibly foresee. Such activity of starting or acting into natural/universal processes affects complex webs of relations that are no longer primarily human. The frailties inherent in human action are intensified since this novel capacity to shape large scale processes has been severed from the meaningful exchange of language between all actors, human and non-human alike, who may be involved in the progressive unfolding of its movement.

This has the implication that worldly action's self-given remedies, promising and forgiveness, can offer no genuine security or retroactive remediation against the unintended and often incredibly destructive outcomes of acting into nature. The problem of acting into nature is made even more complex and dangerous by the fact that the frailties of the human condition so resented by the political philosophical tradition—the inherent unpredictability, contingency, complexity, and irreversibility of what we do when we act—have been forgotten or covered over by the confluences of distinct modes of activity, and by the loss even of the divide between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*:

The tradition never lost sight of the tragic element of all action, nor failed to understand, though usually in a nonpolitical context, that forgiving is among the great human virtues. It was only with the sudden and disconcerting onrush of the gigantic technical developments after the industrial revolution that the experience of fabrication achieved such an overwhelming predominance that the uncertainties of action could be forgotten all together; talk could then begin about “making the future” and

“building improved societies” as though one were talking about making chairs or building houses. (*PP* 58)

The greatest danger of modernity, according to Arendt, is not the fact that the authority of tradition has been lost, but rather that, with the further modern breakdown of distinctions and the progressive homogenization of life, there may be almost no relational worldly ‘space’ left in between the seemingly irresistible movements of natural(ized) and universal(ized) mass processes that would be capable of providing some sense of shared reality and significance for humans as mortal and natal beings. Without access to a worldly space of appearances, a ‘space’ in which to share in meaningful, memorable speech and action, there is nothing to protect or distinguish human lives from the self-destructive logic of fabrication, on the one hand, and the futility of endless cycles of labor and consumption on the other. And acting into nature (as we are perhaps now being forced to realize) for all its efforts to secure, improve, and re-design natural/universal processes, creates incredibly complex and often devastating problems that no amount of human technical ability will be able to ‘fix.’ Indeed, by redeploing the very same sorts of acting-‘fabricating’ methods in efforts to (re)gain mastery over chain reactions that acting into nature has set off, attempts to resolve these complex problems tend to give rise to yet further unintended disasters.

Philosophically speaking, the main problem with acting into nature, as far as Arendt is concerned, is that thought and action appear to have parted company at the very historical turning point when traditional rules and standards of judgment ceased to provide a solid ground for understanding and imposing limits upon what humans can actually do; in our post-traditional world, the “trouble is only—or as it seems now—that

while man can *do* things from a ‘universal,’ absolute standpoint, what the philosophers had never deemed possible, he has lost the capacity to *think* in universal, absolute terms, thus realizing and defeating at the same time the standards and ideals of traditional philosophy” (*HC* 270). Politically, this split between thinking and acting goes hand in hand with the loss of access to worldly (non-natural and non-universal) ‘spaces’ for most people to act. This has to do, in part, with the dramatic change in the significance of objectivity and reality in the modern age. Objectivity is no longer understood to mean the definitive attribute of things and people as they come to be known through perceptible appearances in the world. As opposed to the quality of things accessible to the human senses and capable of being fit (through opinionated exchanges of non-specialized, everyday language) into a public “common sense,” objectivity has instead become identified with the scientific perspective of detachment from both earth and world. Reality, likewise, is no longer understood as the conditional, conditioning in-between of worldly appearances or as the sensual yet plural “reality rising out of the sum total of aspects presented by one object to a multitude of spectators,” all of whom, despite the articulable differences between their individual perspectives, can agree that there exists something “self-evident” between them that all present can perceive in common (*HC* 57). Reality in the modern sense is believed to reside beyond the grasp of the bodily senses and outside the reach of everyday language and experience. It is thought to be uncovered only in the form of ‘raw’ data extracted from supposedly pre-existing, non-appearing processes by experts applying scientific techniques of experimentation.

In the modern world, conditioned by the unprecedented techno-scientific capacities of elite actors, we are, Arendt warns, making a grave mistake by failing to

“think what we are doing,” since acting into nature is a radically different and even more life threatening activity than both fabrication and action as we know them within the bounds of the human world. The bounds being transgressed through acting into nature are not (merely) moral or legal—these traditional categories, in the modern world, no longer hold and are not Arendt’s primary concern—but rather, are properly understood as *political* in her specific sense of the word because they have to do with the worldly conditioning power of humans as acting, judging, mortal and natal beings capable of reflecting on and speaking about the earth and the world(s) they inhabit. Threatened by these unthinking and generally incommunicable actions, disguised as fabrications and carried out by “experts,” is nothing less than the human capacity to act spontaneously, as opposed to merely behaving in automatic, de-personalized, and socially prescribed ways.

Here it is important to recall that reality, understood in the specifically political sense of what appears to a plurality of spectators, implies that something or someone is disclosed and that this appearing thing or person presents some sense of “sameness in utter diversity” to those who together (con-sensually) perceive it (*HC 57*). “Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity,” Arendt argues, “can worldly reality truly and reliably appear” (*HC 57*) Significantly, the meaning of any given disclosure, because it can be verbally expressed and debated by particular people inter-ested in a perceptible appearance, speech-act, or event, always retains some element of undecidability. The meaning of any disclosure, made possible through appearance in the presence of a plurality of spectators, is conditioned by the ‘internal’ differences of multiple perspectives and significations which resist totalization. The meaning of disclosive events is never automatically or fully determined. The

incompleteness or non-homogeneity of disclosure is especially apparent if what is disclosed in reality is not a merely distinct thing, but an agent, a unique “who” capable of announcing or reflecting on him or herself in words, of initiating new relational-linguistic chain reactions, establishing new webs of relations, and becoming the subject of stories. But modernity is characterized by a drive towards equalization that amounts to the elimination of the ambivalence and (self-)difference inherent in the condition of plurality. Such difference(s), presented in action, as we have seen, are held open to the future through the linguistic exchange of story telling, the activity of weaving narratives out of recollections of actions witnessed in the past. The application of the modern scientific gaze to humans themselves—that is, the drive to at once fully *comprehend* and *make* the life processes of individuals, societies, populations, and ultimately, the species as a whole—demands the incorporation, assimilation, and, when ‘necessary,’ the violent obliteration of differences.

Human differences, with their potential for always-incomplete (meaningful) disclosure are now reframed as threatening *otherness* since they present resistance to the totalizing objective gaze/project definitive of modern *homo faber*’s life-fabricating perspective. As differences that appear in and through speech-action, human uniqueness cannot be fully grasped within the generally incommunicable, universalizing gaze and specialized codification of the sciences. One of Arendt’s most important phenomenological-political insights is that the new and disclosive differences appearing in the midst of plurality cannot be calculated, nor can the unfolding of human relations be fully understood beforehand in terms of probabilities, risks, interests, profits, side-effects, etc. From the perspective of governments reliant on scientific access to (hidden) reality

through objective (universalizing) calculations of quasi-natural social, economic, and biological processes, real worldly differences (in the political sense), if they appear at all, can be regarded as nothing but a menace, an unknown variable threatening the overall processual equation of fabricating society. Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's critical analysis of modernity resonates in several respects with Arendt's. He argues that "the typical modern practice, the substance of modern politics, or modern intellect, of modern life, is the effort to exterminate ambivalence: an effort to eliminate everything that could not or would not be precisely defined... The other of the modern state is the no-man's or contested land: the under-or over-definition, the demon of ambiguity" (7-8).³⁹ Societies constructed as and through processual (infinite) conceptions of social 'realities' rely for their expansion and survival—indeed, the two concepts have become virtually

³⁹ Arendt's influence is evident throughout Bauman's *Modernity and Ambivalence*. This exemplary passage is also cited by Serena Parekh in the context of her chapter on the "Paradox of Human Rights" (17). Tracing the links between Bauman's arguments and Arendt's discussion of the failure of universal human rights in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Parekh writes: "The drive to erase ambiguity and difference in modernity was of the gravest consequence for one particular European minority, the Jews. For the architects of modernity [i.e. of modern societies], there were two simultaneous drives that aimed at ridding society of difference. The first was a political impulse to uniformity, to make everyone 'equal before the law.' While such legal egalitarianism meant that, at least in principle, discrimination against Jews was eliminated, it also meant that Jewish privilege was destroyed; the cultural autonomy and communal authority that Jews had enjoyed [at least in some parts of Europe] and which had sustained their identity was erased. The other drive [according to Bauman] was cultural: a relentless project to extirpate differences in values, life-style, customs, speech, and public demeanor... [I]t was a drive to make all cultural values and styles into those endorsed by the modernized elites. The result of these two tendencies was that the Jews of Europe were compelled, at all costs, to assimilate, to remove their otherness, and consequently, the ambivalence they brought with them" (17). Bauman argues that these two modern impulses, one cultural and one political, forge a co-constitutive relation between *assimilation* and *rightlessness*, such that difference (otherness) must be either absorbed or obliterated. Bauman's analysis is generally compatible with Arendt's, except that in the place of the "cultural" dimension, Arendt refers to the *social* pressures to assimilate, conform, and do away with the complex ambivalence of Jewish cultural distinctness. The important difference between culture and the social in Arendt's terms, is that whereas each person is born into a given culture, and in some sense can be said to "belong" to this culture, cultural customs, relational practices, and traditions exert conditioning influences without ever fully determining "who" one might become as an actor, while social belonging, in contrast, demands conformity and predictable behavior to such an extent that action and uniqueness are not allowed to appear. This is why the demand for social belonging can function, at least outwardly, to negate cultural differences and to relegate distinctness to the realm of the "personal." In modern (neo)liberal societies, those differences which are deemed tolerable are recast (rebranded?) as a matter of "life style choice," devoid of significance for the public realm. For a discussion of some limitations to a comparison between Arendt and Bauman, see Finn Browning's "Comparing Bauman and Arendt: Three Important Differences" in *Sociology* (vol. 45, Feb. 2011, 54-69).

indistinguishable—on the development of governmental techniques for neutralizing and incorporating difference. Such (social) techniques function to disallow ambivalence, that is, incomplete disclosure, and to keep whatever otherness remains unassimilable at a “tolerable” distance. This assimilation and equalization of difference, paired with the defensive exclusion and obliteration of threatening otherness—those elements of the population (the “national household”) that cannot be smoothly incorporated, precisely defined, or made productive—are the key functions of what Arendt names “devices of social housekeeping” (HC 38). The rise to authority of modern scientific universalism, with its process-oriented (re-)configuration of life and the cosmos forms the epistemological and technical backdrop for the modern ‘fabrication’ of societies and poses a major threat to the conditions for both spontaneous action and for worldly political belonging.

The perspectival universalism or “earth alienation” of scientific objectivity, over time, has contributed to a widespread condition of social world alienation. The simplest definition of world alienation is *privation* of world experienced under the (negative) condition of isolation, where webs of communication wither, pluralistic relationships cannot form, speech cannot be shared in a way that generates power, and the disclosure of the natal “who” in and through spontaneous action cannot take place. World alienation amounts to a breakdown of a common sense of shared reality, where meaningful relations give way and life—not only physical life, but the potentials for natality to appear and take on unpredictable, narratable meanings—becomes precarious since no worldly power can be relied upon to protect it against superfluity. The distinctly modern (dis)appearance of some lives as superfluous, as we shall see shortly, is closely tied to the socialization of

man-kind as a species and to the world alienated loneliness experienced in mass societies; superfluity is the condition of being deprived of a place in the world that would enable one's opinions to matter and one's actions to take on public relevance. Superfluity is the lonely condition of the de-personalized "masses" of people excluded from full integration into normalized modern society, and, to a lesser extent, it refers to the emptying out of meaningful exchanges and political action with modern society itself, that is, as pacified and 'productive' national/global economies.

Of the three events identified by Arendt as marking the threshold of the modern age and contributing to the development of modern world alienated conditions, the rise to authority of the modern scientific world view has perhaps had the greatest impact. In relation to the other two events, the impacts of the rise of scientific objectivity were felt relatively late, and yet, in Arendt's view, from the start of the twentieth century onwards, this epistemic shift towards the unworldly perspective of modern sciences has come to surpass the other two events in terms of its relative significance for human political and existential conditions in the modern world; these effects, she speculates, have exceeded not only the "enlargement of the earth's surface, which found its final limitation only in the limitations of the globe itself, but also [what then was] the still apparently limitless economic accumulation process" (250). The natural-historical processes discovered and "released" into the world by acting into nature—for now the difference between nature and history is radically blurred—have "constantly increased in momentousness as well as speed" (250). The modern repositioning of the relative centre(s) of the universe in the objective gaze of Man as an observer in the modern sciences eventually enables humans, at the end of the modern era itself, to become 'fabricating' actors in relation to large scale

processes. The transition from early-modern, natural to modern, objective sciences, capable of universalizing and understanding life processes as though from ‘outside’ the earth, had a profound influence on the world alienated social conditions of the modern age. This is because modern sciences (in)form both the technological and socio-economic drive to master ‘nature’ in its newly conceptualized, processual totality as material for fabrication, including the incorporation of the laboring processes of life itself.

But a further transition from modern universalizing sciences to our present, “truly universal” sciences, which are capable not only of fabricating ‘out’ of nature but also of “import[ing] cosmic processes into nature” and “re-creat[ing] life,” Arendt contends, marks a second turning point between the modern age and “the world we have come to live in,” a world determined not by the predictability of fabrication, but by the boundlessness of acting into nature (268-269). In some sense, this further shift represents a realization of the fabricating aims of the modernity:

Only we, and we only for a few decades have come to live in a world thoroughly determined by a science and a technology whose objective truth and practical know-how are derived from cosmic and universal, as distinguished from terrestrial and ‘natural’ laws, and in which a knowledge acquired by selecting a point of reference outside the earth is applied to earthly nature and human artifice. (*HC* 268)

It is the development of this further capacity for actual, active intervention into natural/universal processes, marking the end of the modern age and the birth of the

modern world, that makes the biopolitical taking hold of the biological *and* active (re)productive processes of species-life possible as never before.

Political Exclusion and Social Survival in *The Origins of Totalitarianism: Antisemitism and Social versus Political Belonging*

The specific threat to freedom presented by the social as Arendt understands it is that its normalizing and securitizing functions necessitate the elimination of unpredictable action by closing off public ‘space,’ making it impossible for people to appear and speak to one another as unique actors within a relational “web” of people who are equal in the political (real, apparent) sense, i.e., where the equality-in-difference of actors is not automatically presupposed, fully secured from ‘outside’ the political realm, or rooted in any conception of natural/biological sameness. The socialization of life processes in modern mass societies does not automatically or necessarily lead to totalitarian forms of domination, but it does jeopardize the worldly, political “space of appearances” that would be capable of guarding against it; “[w]hat prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world,” Arendt contends, “is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions... has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century” (OT 475).

Deprived of a space of appearances where their actions could be witnessed, remembered, and responded to by others who are equally actors, people also lose a sense of their own identity, or more accurately, a basic sense of personhood. In Arendt’s view, a sense of selfhood never comes from ‘inside,’ but can only be given, though always imperfectly and insecurely, through meaningful relations within a living plurality.

Counter the subjectivism and privileging of introspection of modern philosophy, which Arendt sees as a sort of fatal flaw spanning “Descartes and Hobbes...up to the recent phenomenological existentialism and logical...positivism,” Arendt holds that “a Self, taken in absolute isolation, is meaningless” (*HC* 272, *EU* 180). Since humans can only act and speak with others, any philosophy, political or otherwise, that begins by presupposing the subject/Self is bound to forego the conditional reality that presents the ‘self’ as relational and active, natal and plural. Beginning with plurality as the condition for meaningful life enables Arendt to better approach the modern predicament of world alienation, which is not, “as Marx thought,” primarily alienation from the self (*HC* 254). Rather, something like “self-alienation,” or in Arendt’s terms, lack of judgment, a strange mixture of self-doubt and self-centeredness, is symptomatic of the broader condition of world alienation. With the rise of the social and the spread of alienated “loneliness” comes a general loss of faith in the reality of a shared world. Forgotten by the world and neglected even by each other, world alienated and superfluous people also forget everything that is not of immediate concern to their own survival. Natality is blocked because “one chief characteristic of the modern masses,” is that, out of necessity (real or imagined) “[t]hey do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imagination, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself” (*OT* 351). In other words, the world alienation of the social makes people incredibly susceptible to ideological thinking, since the compelling “language of prophetic scientificity,” or any logically coherent theory that claims to explain and predict virtually everything, will

precisely “correspond to the needs of the masses who have lost their home in the world” (OT 350).

Totalitarian “terror,” in Arendt’s analysis, replaces human laws and institutions with the ‘law’ of sheer, biological process. Terror is not a means to an end, or rather it only poses as such in the early phases of totalitarian movements; terror “is needed to realize, to translate into living reality, the laws of movement of History or Nature” (EU 341). So, far from being “lawless,” like other forms of tyrannical rule, where power is seen to be “oppressive” because it lacks juridical legitimacy, Arendt argues that totalitarian regimes manufacture reality in accordance with processes that are placed “above” human laws:

It is the monstrous, yet seemingly unanswerable claim of totalitarian rule that, far from being “lawless,” it goes to the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation, that far from being arbitrary it is more obedient to these superhuman forces than any government ever was before, and that far from wielding its power in the interest of one man, it is quite prepared to *sacrifice everybody’s vital immediate interests to the execution* of what it assumes to be the law of History or the law of Nature. (OT 461)

“In the interpretation of totalitarianism,” Arendt argues, “all laws have become the laws of movement” (OT 163): this “overcoming “ of positive law, promises infinitely more security than any man-made juridical systems since it claims to “make mankind itself the *embodiment* of the law” (OT 462, my emphasis). This inversion of law, where instead of enforcing the relatively stable, man-made structure set in place to provide security to

human affairs, 'law' becomes a dynamic *process*, recasting humans as "specimens" of a universal, natural-historical species to be pushed forward towards some pre-destined final actualization/completion. This shift "means in fact that nature is, as it were, being swept into history [and] that natural life is considered historical" (OT 463).

Socialization implies that individual life and interests are automatically privileged over the worldly in-between of political relations, which makes the generation and exercise of genuine political power, as opposed to cycles of violence and retaliation, nearly impossible. Arendt argues that deprived of a sense of reality and lacking the courage to step out of the shelter of our social lives and our intimate circles, modern *animal laborans*, in the name of safety and security, in fact perpetuate radically insecure conditions since. Arendt reminds us that the totalitarian regimes of the last century have clearly illustrated that, against the ubiquitous life and self-centred attitude of the modern atomized individual, "who in the midst of the ruins of his world worrie[s] about nothing so much as his private security, [and is] ready to sacrifice everything" in the name of protecting his own life, or the life of his immediate relations, "nothing prove[s] easier to destroy than the privacy and private morality of people who th[ink] of nothing but safeguarding their private lives" (OT 338). The memory of techniques of terror, which build their ideological dynamism out of the uncertainty of modern world alienated conditions, remains palpable in the background of Arendt's analysis of the rise of the social in *The Human Condition*; it inform her position, which stands in clear opposition to the liberal push to do away with the social/political distinction once and for all. By insisting on the continued relevance of this distinction, Arendt reminds us that to act politically requires the courage, rendered unthinkable under socialized conditions, "to

leave the security of our four walls and enter the public realm.” Such distinctly political courage, rooted not in resentment or self-interest, but springing from a spirit of *amor mundi*, especially in this de-realized and incredibly violent age, proves “indispensable because in politics not life but the world is at stake” (*BPF* 156).

Population versus Populousness in Foucault’s Lectures

We are now in a position to look more closely at how “the rise of the social” in Arendt’s analysis of modernity can be linked to a few key aspects of Foucault’s lectures in *Security, Territory, Population*. I argue that Foucault’s more sophisticated understanding of “population,” both as a *statistical artifact* and as a naturalized field of power-knowledge informing societies of security reveals certain limitations to Arendt’s theory of “the social” as an “overgrowth” of natural processes. Like Foucault, Arendt argues that the discovery and development of techniques and sciences aimed at the incorporation of all members of society into the population, and *visa versa*, was decisive for the development of the modern nation-state, with its (racist) ideal of “homogeneity of population and its rootedness in the soil of a given territory” (*HC* 256). “Statistical uniformity,” she writes, “is by no means a harmless scientific ideal” (43). She suggests that the “normalization” of behavior is closely related to the way in which society conceives of its members in terms of statistical “deviations and fluctuations” (42). The statistical knowledge informing governmental practices of social fabrication is criticized by Arendt as a “mathematical treatment of reality” since it relies for its validity upon the presence of “large numbers of people [over] long periods of time;” the “law of large numbers” as applied to politics or history, “signifies nothing less than the wilful

obliteration of their very subject matter” (43, 42). Arendt comes close here to picturing the population in the Foucauldian sense, and yet she still thinks of population merely in terms of “great numbers” of people inhabiting a given territory. She seems to be suggesting here that the growth of population (in the sense of “more people”) is actually the cause of social and behavioral conformity to trends that statistical knowledge merely “discovers.”

The unfortunate truth about behaviorism and the validity of its “laws” is that the more people there are, the more likely they are to behave and the less likely to tolerate non-behavior. Statistically, this will be shown in the levelling of fluctuation. In reality, deeds will have less and less chance to stem the tide of behavior, and events will more and more lose their significance, that is, their capacity to illuminate historical time. (*HC* 43)

If differences appear to be lost in the statistical “law of large numbers,” Arendt suggests, it is only because differences have (already?) been destroyed in reality; Arendt does not consider *how* statistical knowledges function to normalize people/populations, but instead seems to say that this type of knowledge is ‘correct’ in the empirical, representational sense. In other words, unlike Foucault, she does not distinguish between discourses of population and the quantitative fact that there are “more people”; the relationship between the science of statistics and “everyday living” remains ambiguous, but Arendt seems to blame “greatness of numbers” for social normalization (43).

Both thinkers assert that Nature reappears in an uncanny light through the mass phenomena of populations, and this becomes the (pre)condition for the appearance of society as a unified and abstract ‘entity’ with common interests and immediate *needs* (in

the biological sense) for securitization and defense. Apparatuses of security are essential to the convergence of modern “arts and sciences” of governing, according to Foucault, in that they enable an appreciation of fluctuation, processes, and circulations, as well as a *calculating* connection between power and reality that is not fixed by the juridical-disciplinary system. Arendt’s “devises of social housekeeping” and Foucault’s biopolitical “apparatuses of security” both appear to be formative of the naturalization and generalization of the concept of “society.” Both Arendt and Foucault develop these concepts in attempts to clarify what is novel in modern strategies of governance devised over the last three centuries to deal with “the problem of the treatment of the uncertain, the aleatory”; within their overlapping critiques of modernity, both thinkers seek a political way to understand and counteract biopolitical “form[s] of normalization specific to security” (*STP* 11). Whereas Foucault seeks to address in historical and political terms the “correlation between the techniques of security and population,” which in his estimation “seem[...] to be different from the disciplinary type of normalization” (11), Arendt’s analysis of the social sees normalization as the “outgrowth” of the collapse of distinctions, which brings about a paradoxical counter-pluralistic “equality” of (de-)humanized life (41).

Conclusion

Arendt’s view of the “unnatural” expansion of the natural in and through social housekeeping does not distinguish between a pre-existing nature and what might be called the *nature-effects of society* created through the “discovery” of population that are

carefully traced by Foucault. Although both arrive at similar conclusions regarding the modern “constitution” of society and of economy through the “organization of the life process itself,” (*HC*), Arendt’s view of the naturalness of the social differs in a crucial way from Foucault’s more sophisticated explanation of the “re-appearance” of the naturalness of society (*STP* 349). Whereas Arendt deals in experiential-phenomenal distinctions between different spheres of life and activity, Foucault goes further than Arendt to contextualized this “re-appearance” of historicized nature (or the re-appearance of naturalized history), situating it within actual practices of government and state, subject-formation and conduct. For him, this complex phenomenon of nature’s seeming (re-)appearance is not the “release” of a pre-existing (ontological/cyclical) Nature, but instead is inscribed within the epistemological-discursive field of population. Foucault’s work shows that the governing of “the living” as a population does not so much “release” nature but actively *constitutes* “a whole domain of processes that we can call, *up to a point*, natural” (*STP* 349), my emphasis). This calls into question Arendt’s view of the “unleashing of natural forces” into the public sphere, and also hints at how her different realms of activity become intelligible only through a specifically modern concern for “conduct.”⁴⁰

What Arendt’s concept of the social misses, but Foucault’s concept of population highlights, is how this apparently returning “nature” is itself (re)produced and *posited* through a historically specific set of techniques, practices, and “apparatuses of security”

⁴⁰ In the ninth lecture of *STP*, Foucault identifies a major transformation in pastoral power that occurred during the sixteenth century (in relation to the Reformation and Catholic Counter Reformation), when pastoral power ceased to be concentrated in the hands of ecclesiastical authority. As the responsibility for “conducting men” started to be transferred from Church to state, the “problem of conduct” gives rise to discourses concerned with the proper “spheres” of activity. He suggests that this pastoral problematic, the “fundamental problem of conduction/conducting” oneself and others, “begins to establish the opposition between public and private in this period,” and the “public domain... what will later be called the political domain” is defined out of this concern with specifying forms of conduct (230).

that stitch together the “socialized” life of the individual and the species. This is not a “perversion” of nature, but a statistical production and reproduction of a naturalness which coincides with the constitution of a governable society, the socialized life of humans as a species. Foucault’s work demonstrates how the population’s aleatory processes re-appear as natural and self-regulating, as in the bodily flux of a living organism that maintains its own “homeostasis” without outside intervention. He links this to the shift from governing as an *artificial* regulation and optimization of “relations of forces” through *raison d’État* to liberal, “*lasser-faire*” governmental approach of the *économists*, for whom society and state appear as “natural phenomena” (350):

Naturalness reappeared, but it is a different naturalness...[T]his is not at all the type of naturalness as that of the cosmos that framed and supported the governmental reason of the Middle Ages...It is a naturalness that is opposed precisely to the artificiality of politics, of *raison d’État* and police. It is opposed to it, but in quite specific ways. It is not the naturalness of the processes of nature itself, the nature of this world, but processes of naturalness specific to the relations between men, to what happens spontaneously when they cohabit, come together, exchange, work, and produce [...]. That is to say, it is a naturalness that basically did not exist until then, and which, if not named as such, at least begins to be thought of and analyzed as the naturalness of the social. (*STP* 349)

This re-appearance of nature in a socialized form produces the effect of ahistorical, ontological naturalness that has become ‘necessary’ for the unhindered circulations and (supposedly) ‘limitless’ growth of the capitalist economy, where all of life moves in

according with the 'laws' of the market. Counter Arendt's understanding of society, then, where the "biological life" flooding history issues from the breakdown of carefully maintained distinctions between human and animal, public and private, Foucault shows how the active, spontaneous principle of human life, something close to Arendt's "natality," has actually become the basis for biopolitical regulation, since this initiatory capacity for freedom creates a "surplus" by "living and more than just living, living and better than just living" (*STP* 334). Individual and spontaneous action, including communication, has itself been "securitized," since it is this "social excess" that enables the "insertion of freedom within governmentality," and provides the "element of freedom within the field of governmental practice that has now become imperative" (*STP* 353). In the biopolitical *milieu* of governable life, where "things and men" *must* equally be 'free' to circulate, or else face elimination as the superfluous excess of society, population appears as a natural "given"; it is the statistically naturalized processes that make up the substratum of the social and open life itself to normalizing strategies that go beyond the juridical rule of sovereignty and the disciplining of individual bodies.

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