

2-27-2012

## Arendtian Action and the Camp: Understanding the connection between totalitarianism and politics

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### Recommended Citation

Dethier, Corey (2012) "Arendtian Action and the Camp: Understanding the connection between totalitarianism and politics," *The Undergraduate Journal of Social Studies*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <http://wescholar.wesleyan.edu/ujss/vol2/iss1/1>

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*Arendtian Action and the Camp*  
*Understanding the connection between totalitarianism and politics*

“[T]he success of totalitarianism is identical with a much more radical liquidation of freedom as a political and as a human reality than anything we have ever witnessed before. Under these conditions, it will hardly be consoling to cling to an unchangeable nature of man and conclude that either man himself is being destroyed or that freedom does not belong to man’s essential capacities.”

- Hannah Arendt, “Reply to Eric Voegelin,” 1953

Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* is too frequently read alone. Often considered the most “philosophical” of her works, it combines an Aristotelian project of naming with a critique of modern life—the movement from each category of the “vita activa” [active life] to the next appears as an ascent from the most animal to the most human of actions. This movement has, with some reason, led both Arendt’s supporters and her critics to accuse her of elitism, of seeing the everyday tasks of humans (particularly women, the poor, etc.) as base and the incredible and mythic actions of rulers to be characteristic of the “the good life.” It is certainly not unfair to say that Arendt was most interested in the realm of politics and action. But this interest did not derive from a hierarchical understanding of how people should live—the interpretation that sees Greek agonistic politics as *the* way of life in *The Human Condition* is belied both by the text and Arendt’s own life as a writer and teacher (Tsao 2002, 118).

I intend to show that Arendt’s view of politics becomes much clearer in light of her view of totalitarianism. As others—such as Jeffery Isaac and Margaret Canovan—have argued, Arendt’s interest in the world of action (and the general manner in which she makes her divisions) must be understood in terms of her concern with totalitarianism and developing the type of world in which the unthinkable occurrences of the holocaust could never again be possibility for humans. Once we understand that, the nuances of her understanding of action become clearer, and, importantly, less open to claims of elitism or Grecophilia.

In 1887, Friedrich Nietzsche saw the death of all transcendent values on the horizon. The idea of God was no longer credible in a world of science and modernity; nor, if we were being honest, were those capital letter notions of Truth, Beauty, and Good that had, for so long, given meaning and values to the lives that humans lived (Nietzsche 1968b, 485-86; Nietzsche 2000b, 583). This was no time for fear, for horror at humans without normative bounds in the world—all that he could see was “a new, scarcely describable kind of light, happiness, relief, exhilaration, encouragement, dawn?” (Nietzsche 1968a, 447-48). As Arendt saw it, writing seventy years later, Nietzsche had been horribly correct on the first count: traditional understandings metaphysics and morality were no longer binding considerations for the vast majority of people (Arendt 1968, 338). He had been correct, as well, in seeing the fall of superhuman values as opportunity for something new. But where Nietzsche had seen a new kind of light, Arendt witnessed the new kind of horror realized in the destruction of humanity under systems of totalitarianism.

What Arendt saw in totalitarianism was something qualitatively different from the tyrannies that had come before the modern period. In the past, humans had massacred other humans, they had burnt and tortured other humans, they had flayed other humans until they confessed to crimes. Totalitarianism, in contrast, was incomprehensible even as traditional immorality—humans were not used as means, but reduced to meaningless, faceless items:

The real horror of the concentration and extermination camps lies in the fact that the inmates, even if they happen to keep alive, are more effectively cut off from the world of the living than if they had died, because terror enforces oblivion. Here, murder is as impersonal as the squashing of a gnat. Someone may die as the result of systematic torture or starvation, or because the camp is overcrowded and superfluous human material must be liquidated. Conversely, it may happen that due to a shortage of new human shipments the danger arises that the camps become depopulated and that the order is now given to reduce the death rate at any price. (Arendt 1968, 443)

Totalitarianism aimed, according to Arendt, at denying the status of human to its victims and subjects. Murder was not the only goal; in comparison, that would have been simple, fast, efficient, and predictable because the power-hungry had always murdered their opponents. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* goes to great lengths to contrast this utilitarian criminality with details of the horror of Nazism that were “unnecessary” under any goal of military or political dominance. The tyrant, aiming at uncontested rule, might have executed an entire class of people. The Nazis first used the Jews for propaganda purposes, and only after they had secured Germany did they reach the peak of a systematic dehumanization considered more important than the war effort (Arendt 1968, 420-23). As Arendt argued, “If it were only a matter of hating Jews or bourgeois, the totalitarian regimes could, after the commission of one gigantic crime, return, as it were, to the rules of normal life and government” (Arendt 1968, 424).

This realization seems to have been the most startling for Arendt: what appeared to have happened, to her, was not the violation of moral law. “Mere” criminality, “mere” murder, would have been understandable and addressable within the old system of values (Arendt 2005, 23). There had been massacres before and there likely would be again. What had happened in the death camps was not amorality or immorality, it was the inversion of traditional moral understanding: the authorities replaced “thou shalt not kill” with the command “thou shalt kill,” and people who had lived for years under the first shifted seamlessly to the second (Arendt 2005, 42). According to Arendt, totalitarianism was a reaction to the same nihilism that Nietzsche had seen, and part of its appeal was the fact that it was able to locate values in a world of people who felt alienated by modernity (Arendt 1968, 227). Nietzsche’s transvaluation of values—which was, after all, a creative and new act—had in fact taken place, but it had replaced the old values

with new ones of unspeakable horror (Nietzsche 2000, 326).<sup>1</sup> As Margaret Canovan explains: “Arendt presents the baffling paradox of a new phenomenon which at one and the same time illustrates human inventiveness and is dedicated to its destruction. Testimony to the contingency of human action, which can bring forth utterly unexpected new things, the phenomenon represents a flight from contingency as individuals turn themselves and others into floatsam and jetsam on the supposedly inexorable current of history” (Canovan 2000, 29).

Totalitarian necessity, in Arendt’s understanding, derives from the nature of its scientific claims. She thought totalitarianism made norms “objective” by submitting them to a type of progressive and procedural “science” of race or class—what became important was not that these norms coincided with the world, but that they correctly followed the correct procedures of norm-creation within the system and were thus stamped with authority and objectivity (Arendt 1968, 385).<sup>2</sup> As she understood, the “scientific” claim that only the proletariat could build a subway was transformed, by the need to be consistent with the science of the movement, into the claim that bourgeois subways needed to be destroyed (Arendt 1968, 458).

Totalitarianism was not primarily concerned with subways, however: Stalin and the Nazis located their values in the characteristics of classes and races, arguing that the proletariat and the Germans were the scientifically chosen people whose characteristics would eventually capture the entire human population (Arendt 2002, 312).<sup>3</sup> As should be obvious, the creation of a single

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps as Nietzsche had foreseen. He seems to understand the possible consequences of transvaluation in both his divisiveness towards the modern reliance on the truth in the third essay of the *Genealogy* and his famous prediction, in the first section of *Ecce Homo*, that “there will be wars the like of which have never been seen on earth before. Only from my time and after me will politics on a large scale exist on earth.”

<sup>2</sup> Her critique, of course, builds directly on Heidegger’s understanding of modern science and its failure to remain beholden to the entities that it describes (see Heidegger 1962, 409-11).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have made a similar point about white supremacy and other forms of modern racism, arguing that “white supremacy is not really about bodies, at least not in any simple way, but rather looks beyond the body at some essence that transcends it” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 34). That there are parallels to Arendt’s critique of modernity within works that understand modern capitalism as the production and reproduction of bodies and subjectivities should be wholly unsurprising.

group identity required eliminating those who were not of the chosen people—the statement “Jews are inferior” could be demonstrated and proven only through the elimination of Jews (Arendt 1968, 385). But it also required ensuring that the chosen people would themselves express the values of supremacy or revolution, the explicit reason behind the creation of the vanguard and, Arendt would argue, was the reason behind the Nazi SS as well (Arendt 1968, 310, 423; Lenin 1975a, 49; Lenin 1975b, 325). For totalitarianism, freedom and individuality were the ultimate enemies of the movement because they denied the necessary connection between who someone is and the values that they must necessarily express (Arendt 1968, 307, 438).<sup>4</sup> Under totalitarianism, as Arendt understood it, every human was made into material of one sort or another; superfluous material was sent to the camps for destruction while material necessary to the progress of the movement (the technicians who demonstrated its truths) worked the fires of revolutionary or racial science until it was no longer needed.

For Arendt, the question to be answered in the post-war period was how this reduction of people to “superfluous human material” could be avoided. There was no going back to a time in which we, as humans, could trust simply in the values handed down to us by God or reason (Arendt 1979, 313).<sup>5</sup> Instead, what was necessary was to find a way to ensure that “thou shalt not kill” remained a value for all humans, was to discover a way of creating values that would be both human and universal. For Arendt, in other words, freedom and insurance against totalitarian terror could only be guaranteed by using the creative ability of humans to establish a world in

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<sup>4</sup> “Totalitarian society ... is indeed monolithic; all public manifestations, cultural, artistic, or learned, and all organizations, welfare and social services, even sports and entertainment, are ‘coordinated.’ There is no office and indeed no job of any public significance, from advertising agencies to the judiciary, from play-acting to sports journalism, from primary and secondary schooling to the universities and learned societies, in which an unequivocal acceptance of the ruling principles is not demanded.” (Arendt 2005, 33).

<sup>5</sup> “Now if our future should depend on what you say now—namely that we will get an ultimate which from above will decide for us. ... then we are lost. Because this actually demands that a new god will appear.”

which they would not use that ability to destroy themselves (Arendt 1953, 77-78; Villa 2007, 45).

The western tradition of philosophy could not provide this insurance. For the last two thousand years, philosophers from Plato onward had found the good in another world and brought it into this one; very few, if any, of them could be useful in helping to understand how humans might create their own world without the guidance of a supreme authority (Dossa 1989, 13). To demonstrate what a different manner of value-creation might look like, Arendt, like Nietzsche, turned to the Greeks to provide a contrast with the post-Platonic west (Canovan 1992, 67-68; Nietzsche 1968b, 485-86). The Greeks (before Plato) had not conceptualized politics as a way of remaking the world so that it more closely conformed with the world of the forms, but rather as a way of expressing the strength and identity of an individual (Arendt 186-87).

Much as Nietzsche did, Arendt thus turns to the aesthetic self-creational capability of humans—she relentlessly compares political action to performative acting—in order to rescue the possibility of meaning in a nihilistic world (Villa 1996, 87). In contrast to Nietzsche, however, Arendt does not locate this capability solely in the person, instead arguing that aesthetic self-expression relies on both spectators and a human world to interpret and backdrop action—she would say, in other words, that one could literally not speak while alone in the forest, only make meaningless noise (Arendt 1958, 180; Villa 1996, 101).<sup>6</sup> Her emphasis is on the plurality of humans, or the fact that we can only show ourselves when we are with others who are both our equals and differentiated from us (Dossa 1989, 119-20; Villa 1997, 193). Along

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<sup>6</sup> One could speak with one's self, but that is another matter (Arendt 2005, 44; Villa 2001, 272). This may be unfair to Nietzsche, as it should be noted that Arendt's reading of Nietzsche is, at times, questionable and that critics debate both just how far Nietzsche and Arendt differ in their understanding of politics and how justified an Arendtian critique of Nietzsche would be on this basis (see Villa 1996, 80-110, Honig 1993, 528-33, and Isaac 1993, 534-540).

with these others and the world that they live in, we form the public realm, the space in which meaning is made through the action (and interpretation of action) of humans.

The scope of Arendt's public realm is both the most polarizing and the most hotly debated aspect of her work. This stems, in part, from Arendt's use of the Greeks as a foil for the Western tradition in *The Human Condition*; Athens had very strict ideas about what was considered to be public (*i.e.* physical competition, war, trials) and who was allowed into that realm (male property owners), barriers that Arendt may not do enough to break down (Arendt 1958, 192-99). Nor does it help interpreters that Arendt refuses, like Marx and Nietzsche among others, to write down codes of exactly how free people should live their lives. For Arendt, these questions—how we should live, what types of arguments are valid, even what constitutes the public realm—are not the questions for a philosopher or theorist to answer; they are themselves questions to be debated and mediated by people who live together because they are essentially questions of what the values of a community will be (Arendt 1958, 240-43).<sup>7</sup> The active sphere is not a sphere at all—it is not a place, or a series of specific topics, or even a particular “type” of activity. Instead, it is a way of acting and interacting with others as it regards collective concerns (Canovan 1994, 184; Isaac 1994, 159; Calhoun 1997, 251).<sup>8</sup> What is important, in this sense, is that, whether as senators, jurors, or simply compatriots on a subway, we take those who we are plural with each as a free person (instead of as a worker or a white male, etc.) and treat them and their opinions as worthwhile because they are alike to us in both their personhood and their interest in the world (Arendt 1958, 237-43).

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<sup>7</sup> “From an Arendtian perspective, the challenge ... is to maintain the link between action and publicity in a context where the institutionalized public sphere is deeply compromised and the definition of what is properly ‘public’ is perhaps the most hotly contested issue of all” (Villa 1997, 201).

<sup>8</sup> It should not surprise us to again hear echoes of Heidegger in this reading of Arendt. As careful commentators have noted, Arendt's realm of the political is the realm of Heideggerian disclosed-ness. Arendt's position could be read as a specific understanding of humans *qua* humans as simultaneously being-in-the-world and being-with-others, characteristics that we can be deprived of (see Bernstein 1997, 162-67; Villa 1999, 76-83).



Understanding the political world this way has two important implications. First, as Roy Tsao has argued, Arendt's conception of action and the public world that it occurs in do not deny workers and laborers (or, for that matter, non-elites generally) the ability to speak and act. Instead, "to have more than a society of laborers—to have a genuinely political public realm—there is no intrinsic reason why everyone might not be a laborer or worker, so long as we are able to interact (and understand our interactions) on a footing independent of our economic function or social status" (Tsao 2002, 118). Arendt is interested in is changing our social relationships so that we treat each other as equals, which is, in her view, both a project—in the sense that it must be strived for—and a decisively political issue (Canovan 1992, 240; Isaac 1996, 61). To put it in another way, Arendt aims for a world in which people are treated equally by their fellows, but to cast this as equal treatment for "the woman," "the laborer," or "the Jew" is counterproductive (and dangerous) in important ways (Arendt 1968, 275, 301).<sup>9</sup>

Second, one of the primary aims of action is the defense of the public realm—or the defense of the human ability to be with others. For Arendt, those who enter the public realm are those who are interested in what is common, and what they have in common is primarily this ability to be together itself (Arendt 1965, 181, 204). As Margaret Canovan has noted, Arendtian politics depends on this existential connection: people "can be united, not because they all think alike in the inner realm of their minds, but because outside in the world they all inhabit the same public space, acknowledge its formal rules, and are therefore committed to achieving a working compromise when they differ. For among people who share a common world of institutions, unanimous conviction is not necessary for practical agreement. Where there is a mutual

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<sup>9</sup> To clarify this point, an Arendt would not reject the ERA or gay marriage laws because they aimed at making certain aspects of our society more equal for a certain subset of the population. What she would have sought to avoid is reducing the supporters (or opponents) of the bill to "women" or "gays" or "Christians" instead of treating them as persons with certain political commitments.

commitment to the continuance of the same public world, differences can be settled through purely political means” (Canovan 1983, 112).<sup>10</sup>

It should be clear at this juncture why Arendt understands action as she does: because she feels unable to turn to traditional morality in her attempt to secure human freedom, she wants humans to instead use their meaning-creating abilities to imbue their interactions with other humans with importance. Her aim includes both institutional considerations and the expressive nature of speech, but what is most important for her is the pluralist nature of community. If totalitarianism is the destruction of human individuality, the reduction of all people to faceless members of a class, then the best and perhaps only way to insure ourselves against it is through a way of living with others that reinforces both their uniqueness and our togetherness with them (Arendt 1958, 57; Arendt 1965, 92, 133-34). “Politics,” in Arendt’s sense, is the part of our lives that we live with others in this manner, both the defense against totalitarianism and the way to overcome the meaninglessness of modern life.

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<sup>10</sup> For the third and final reference to Heidegger, we might rephrase this story in terms of instances of Dasein recognizing both their otherness and the world they share in disclosing as instances of Dasein, and coming together because they are all care about the being of their shared world.

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