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THE POLITICAL AESTHETIC OF HANNAH ARENDT:
MODERNITY, JUDGMENT, AND CULTURE

by

QUIXOTE RADIO VASSILAKIS

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2020

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The Political Aesthetic of Hannah Arendt: Modernity, Judgment, and Culture

by

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The plan of this thesis is, first, to interpret Arendt's critique of the modern age. Next, this paper outlines Arendt's reconceptualization of Kant's theory of judgment as the basis for a novel model of the public sphere in light of the conditions of modernity. Finally, this paper explores Arendt's poetics as a means of activating the faculty of judgment in order to reconcile with the modern world. In order to address the political crises of modernity, Arendt develops a political aesthetic alive to the role of narrative and culture in reconstituting political communities. I argue that Hannah Arendt develops a novel political theory that is responsive to our global political context.

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INTRODUCTION

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) was one of the 20th century's major intellectual figures. Arendt, a German-Jew, experienced the trauma of the internment camps and political exile during the 30's and 40's. In the early 1930's, when Hitler came to power, Arendt was denounced by the Gestapo for her work with Jewish humanitarian organizations. She managed to flee to Paris via Czechoslovakia and Switzerland. In 1937, Arendt was stripped of her German citizenship by the Nazi regime, and, when France was occupied by German forces in 1940, she was detained again. By 1941, she had managed to flee to the United States, where she took up residence in New York City. During the war years, Arendt worked as a teacher. Later, Arendt worked as the Managing Director of the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, where she coordinated the redistribution of Jewish cultural works salvaged from the German occupation. In 1950, Arendt received American Citizenship, and, in 1951, she published her landmark work *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt's work was informed by her experiences as a stateless person, refugee, and exile, as Arendt struggled to understand the forces shaping her life.

Unfortunately, the experiences that defined Arendt's life in the twentieth century are very much on the rise. The growing number of stateless persons around the globe is bringing questions of identity and citizenship to the forefront of national and international conversations. A resurgent movement of identity-based nationalism has elected, and in some cases installed governments from the United States to the United Kingdom, from Bolivia to India and Hungary. In light of these trends, Hannah Arendt's work is more relevant than ever.

Very early in the post-war period, Arendt pointed to the dangerous contradictions in national political structures. The problems at the heart of the nation-state as a political unit are current and deadly. As Seyla Benhabib makes clear, "it is the regime of territorial sovereignty of

a supposedly homogeneous nation-state that leads in the first place to practices of denaturalization, discrimination against minority rights, and the disenfranchisement of unwanted ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups.”¹ Therefore, one of Arendt’s positive projects is to develop the outlines for a novel political framework that can guarantee political rights in a post-totalitarian, post-national world. Instead of national citizenship, Arendt conceives of political belonging on a global scale that embraces the widest possible humanity.

Arendt develops a novel reading of Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* in order to theorize a political community in a global context that is based on the faculty of judgment. By de-centering individual political actors and emphasizing the plurality of political opinion, Arendt’s post-totalitarian paradigm eschews national sovereignty for *isonomy*—rule by none—and imagines a political community without the violence of inclusion and exclusion. Instead, Arendt conceives of politics as a web of narrative relationships which we collectively author. For Benhabib, Arendt’s efforts to think against the trends of nationalism and the nation-state make her the ‘political theorist of the post-totalitarian moment.’ In light of the conditions of modernity, Arendt develops a political philosophy that seeks to anchor human rights in a noncognitive, intersubjective faculty of judgment informed by a narrative web.

In chapter one, I argue that the conditions for the rise of totalitarian movements are present in the origins of the modern age. According to Arendt’s analysis of the modern age, there are several processes at work that lead to totalitarianism. However, I focus on the principle of world alienation as the characteristic of modernity that runs like a line from the beginning of the modern age up until the present moment. Motivating the principle of world alienation is a process of accumulation that begins, according to Arendt, in the Reformation and is particularly intensified during European Imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century. This process of

accumulation had the direct consequence of destabilizing political structures which no longer offer sufficient protections for human rights.

In chapter two, I argue that Arendt's interpretation of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is functions as novel approach to reconstituting the public sphere in light of the conditions of modernity. Arendt borrows Kant's formulation of reflective judgment and its appeal to the *sensus communis* in order to work out a political theory that captures and properly conceptualizes the role that imagination plays in our political judgments. In particular, she shows how the public sphere is attuned to imagination and judgment. Arendt's political theory, therefore, accounts for the post-totalitarian landscape in which loneliness and ideology play a much bigger role than liberalism is traditionally accustomed to assuming.

In chapter three, I follow-up on Arendt's retheorization of the public sphere by arguing that narrative, culture, and poetry in particular have a specific potency in responding to the political crisis of the modern age. The productive work of the imagination is required to create new meanings that serve as exemplars for an alienated culture prone to the excess of totalitarianism. For Arendt, free political action is linguistically determined, so we need to pay special attention to developing the kinds of narrative and discursive works that open up the space for action.

CHAPTER 1: CRITIQUE OF THE MODERN AGE

One of the central themes in Hannah Arendt's work is her analysis of the modern age and its political and philosophical consequences. At the center of her analysis is the principle of world alienation which fundamentally alters the existential condition of humanity at the same time as it reorders the political structures that, in part, determine that condition. The reordering of political structures caused by world alienation introduces tensions into the political culture of the West that weaken human rights and fundamentally alter the human condition. In turn, these tensions lead to totalitarian movements that make use of terror and ideology that lead to human beings committing acts of radical evil. While components of Arendt's critique of the modern age are found in the final chapter of *The Human Condition*, her analysis extends into *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she discusses the principle of world alienation in greater historical detail and shows how it ultimately led to totalitarianism. Although *The Human Condition* was written some years after *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, it lays out the principle in more abstract form and connects it to events at the beginning of the modern age while the earlier work focuses on the period of modernity proper—1880's-1914. In this chapter I argue that Arendt's understanding of the existential conditions of humanity and its reorganization through world alienation.

Although Hannah Arendt recognizes the dangers inherent in the modern age, her interpretation of modernity is centered around comprehension and understanding, rather than rejection or acceptance. In interpreting Arendt's analysis of the modern age, I follow Dana Villa in resisting what he calls, following Michael Foucault, the 'intellectual blackmail of the Enlightenment:' "the insistence that one take a stand "for" or "against" bourgeois democracy, enlightenment rationality, and so forth, before delivering the specifics of one's critique."² Arendt's treatment of the modern age is more subtle than any black-and-white position could

capture. As Foucault writes, “one has to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment...; or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape.”³ But even Dana Villa—on the same page—falls into the same blackmail by describing Arendt as “unquestionably antimodern in a broad sense,” even if she “hardly shares the cultural conservative’s wish to return to the premodern.”⁴ By framing their analyses of Hannah Arendt as determining whether she is *pro-* or *anti-*modernity, scholars like George Kateb, Dana Villa, and Seyla Benhabib put Arendt in Foucault’s ‘intellectual blackmail.’ For example, George Kateb’s otherwise penetrating analysis of Arendt’s critique of modernity is simplistically framed as an effort to determine, once and for all, whether Arendt thinks that the modern age, for all its evils, is worthwhile, or if the good is outweighed by the bad. In his essay, Kateb ponders whether the goods of modernity are “only consolation, or could they be positively worthy? Or are they, instead, perversity, disguised evil, depths only a fool could think were heights?”⁵ Equivocating, Kateb concludes that Arendt’s “words comprise the faith of modernity,” but, yet, “how startling is their appearance in the work of this great antimodernist!”⁶ This sort of framing eschews clear-eyed analysis of Arendt’s philosophical project in the hope of determining whether her work can be marshalled in defense of liberal democracy or whether she must be rejected as an illiberal outsider.

On the other side, Seyla Benhabib’s judgement of Arendt as pro-modernity, albeit melancholically aware of both the necessity and impossibility of achieving the aims of modernity, obscures important details in Arendt’s political philosophy. Benhabib is intent on marshalling Arendt’s political theory to preserve the normative values of liberal democracy against their unfortunate perversion in the rise of totalitarianism. She writes

Hannah Arendt did not subscribe to the slippery slope view that totalitarianism was an inevitable growth of Western modernity; in many ways, she regarded it as a total perversion of much that was essential to the Western tradition.⁷

But by arguing that totalitarianism is a perversion of Western values, Benhabib fails to recognize the through line of world alienation from the earliest moments of the modern age to the catastrophes of totalitarianism in Arendt's own analysis. Benhabib's analysis is correct to emphasize the role of contingency in the historical development of totalitarianism in the West. However, it does not reflect Arendt's view to say that totalitarianism was a *perversion of* essential features of the Western tradition. First, because Western modernity is modern precisely *because of* its break with preceding Western traditions. Second, although the history of Western civilization contains a multitude of ideas and perspectives, Arendt recognizes that the political role of the bourgeoisie and imperialism—which paved the way for totalitarianism—are deeply rooted in Western modernity itself as opposed to mere perversions of native Enlightenment values. Ultimately, as I will argue in the second chapter, while these trends were responsible for the rise of the novel system of totalitarian government, I do not follow Benhabib in reading Arendt as melancholically reconciled to the horrors of modernity. Arendt did not see totalitarianism as an *inevitable* or the only result of the growth of Western modernity, but rather as a kind of desert storm that arose from within the core of the modern age to which she does ultimately provide an answer.

Another prevalent interpretation of Arendt's critique of the modern age is that she rejects the conditions of modernity and seeks some sort of return to a premodern condition, whether that's an Ancient Greek polis, Roman *civitas*, or a Christian spirituality. As described by scholar Roy Tsao, those who hold this critique of Arendt, understand her to assess modernity as “a regrettable lapse into an unrealistic and irresponsible nostalgia for the days of Pericles' Athens.”⁸

An example is Margaret Canovan who, for example, writes that Arendt holds up the ancient world as “her model of normal human life from which the modern world has diverged.”⁹ Indeed, Canovan points in the work of Arendt a sense of the ‘oddity’ of the modern world as opposed to the normality of the pre-modern era.

But Arendt does not view the pre-modern world as an ideal to which we should, or even want, to return. Indeed, as Roy Tsao shows, her “critique of modern society is both more subtle, and also a good deal more compelling, than a complaint that we fail to live up to some dated Hellenic ideal.”¹⁰

I read Arendt’s analysis of the modern age in the spirit of Michel Foucault’s understanding of modernity as an ‘attitude’ or mode of relating to contemporary reality that stands “at the crossroads of critical reflection and reflection on history.”¹¹ The attitude of modernity in which I frame Arendt’s analysis is a “critical ontology of ourselves as a historicopractical test of the limits that we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings.”¹² In chapters two and three, I expand on what I understand as Arendt’s positive, or practical, project—the faculty of judgment and the world-creating power of imagination—while chapter one articulates Arendt’s analysis of modernity as revealing the existential conditions that shape the modern human experience. In particular, Arendt’s focus on the principle of world alienation brings out the connection between the existential, or ontological, condition of human beings and the political and social structures we exist within. Arendt develops new ways of conceptualizing the modern person rather than preaching a return to ancient Greek or Christian humanism. By outlining the existential and political conditions of the contemporary human being, Arendt prepares the ground for her positive philosophical project.

My interpretation of Arendt's critique of modernity aligns most closely with Dana Villa's, who suggests that Arendt's "critique moves on a explicitly ontological terrain...her critique of modernity focuses on the destruction of the "space of appearances" and the decline of a genuinely *public* reality."¹³ I believe that Villa is correct to understand Arendt's analysis of modernity as a kind of critical genealogy of the human condition. In particular, he writes "it is the resulting inseparability of the ontological and the political that makes Arendt's critique of modernity at once so powerful and so frustratingly *final*."¹⁴ Hence, Villa's reading must be presented in context with the political issue of rights and political belonging. So I acknowledge Seyla Benhabib's interpretation of Arendt as "theorist of minority rights and statelessness, of refugees and deported peoples."¹⁵ One of the central conditions of the modern experience is the loneliness which results the displacement of large groups of individuals from rights-granting political frameworks that brings them together in a common reality, providing them with the freedom to act and speak. Thus, there are several factors at work in Arendt's analysis of the modern age; first, the way in which this mass displacement stems from the destruction of political and cultural communities. But also, how this destruction changes the existential condition of the modern person, contributing to the mass experience of resentment, loneliness, and impotency. Ironically, the isolation and powerlessness of the individual emerges out of the political attempt to emancipate the individual from their responsibility to the political community in order to pursue the unending accumulation of capital.

World Alienation, Expropriation, and the Accumulation of Capital

At the center of Hannah Arendt's philosophical understanding of the human being is the idea of the world, or the worldliness of the human being. The concepts of the world and worldliness

have special definitions for Arendt. Adapted from Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Arendt's use of the concept of the world has an existential meaning that describes the framework which provides individuals with an identity over and above their biological existence as an animal species. The human species derives its humanity as such from its worldliness—in the ontological sense. Margaret Canovan writes that, for Arendt, the world

is the human artifice of man-made objects and institutions that provides human beings with a permanent home. Civilization, which has made man something more than an animal, has consisted precisely in the building of this world, a world of ploughed fields, roads and hedges instead of the open air, of language and culture, communities and traditions, of art, law, religion and all the rest of the man-made things that nevertheless outlive the men who made them and form the inheritance of the human race.¹⁶

The human world is the site that establishes and preserves the linguistic dimension of humanity and is the touchstone for human thought, speech, and action—central categories in Arendt's metaphysics. The world provides a stage for the action and speech of individuals, both actors and spectators, and “an objective frame of reference to test our impressions against reality.”¹⁷ The stable architecture of the world preserves the cultural, legal, political, and religious identity of the individual, serving as a kind of memorial for humanity, a permanent artifice inscribed with the collective memory. For Arendt, the stable edifice of the world is necessary to orient bare human life within legal, religious, and cultural frameworks that provide it with personhood. Thus, the world functions as a kind of horizon within which an individual can interpret their identity and enter into meaningful relations with others. By building and sustaining a world, humanity provides itself with a visible framework for its words and deeds. By taking part in the space of appearance, we keep that world alive and make our mark in it as individuals.¹⁸ However, Arendt's concept of the world encompasses both public and private spheres. Having a private space, a home, or a privately-owned share of the world is a basic condition for human being's worldly existence. Arendt writes that private property, or a privately-owned share piece of land,

“is the most elementary political condition for man’s worldliness.”¹⁹ Taken as a whole, the world encompasses both the private and public realm and is the determinant that shapes the human being’s ontology, that is, their political, legal, religious, and cultural existence.

Importantly, Arendt conceives of politics as a mode of concern for the world whereby the plurality of individuals who share the world decide how they are to act within it. This is an important characteristic of her political theory because Arendt conceives of the political community as having the power to shape the horizon of its collective existence. Politics, for Arendt, is the entirety of the decisions that a plurality of persons make concerning how to the world is to look, what its laws are to be, how they are to live within it, how its resources are distributed, etc. Thus, for Arendt, politics goes beyond self-interest and the individual’s negative right to not be interfered with in the pursuit of its own goals and aims.

Part of the resentment and loneliness of our age is that so many have lost access to political decision making. In fact, alienation from the world is the defining characteristic of the modern age. World alienation, as Arendt describes it, began with the Reformation and crystallized in its development as the modern capitalist economy. The seizure of monastic land and wealth and the disruption of monastic institutions that characterized the Reformation led to the displacement of large populations and a subsequent social and economic reorganization that created the first accumulation of capital. Dana Villa explains that for Hannah Arendt, “the Reformation is significant not because of its contribution to secularization and loss of faith, but because with it began the process of expropriation through which millions ultimately lost their property, their “place in the world,” and became subject to an unlimited, socialized accumulation of wealth.”²⁰ The Reformation, Arendt writes, “propelled Western mankind into a development in which all property was destroyed in the process of its appropriation, all things devoured in the

process of their production, and the stability of the world undermined in a constant process of change.”²¹ For Arendt, the modern age “began by alienating certain strata of the population from the world” by taking away their private property.²² The modern age began with the loss of private property which is the essential precondition of human beings’ political existence. Arendt writes “world alienation, and not self-alienation as Marx thought, has been the hallmark of the modern age.”²³

However, this process is distinguished from past accumulations of wealth by the fact that the labor power and wealth generated by expropriation “fed back into the process to generate further expropriations, greater productivity, and more appropriation.”²⁴ The process of unlimited expansion is, for Arendt, the source of modern capitalism insofar as it created both the original accumulation of wealth and a labor force that could fuel an expanding economy and is based on the notion of process. Arendt writes:

Expropriation, the deprivation for certain groups of their place in the world and their naked exposure to the exigencies of life, created both the original accumulation of wealth and the possibility of transforming this wealth into capital through labor. These together constituted the conditions for the rise of a capitalist economy.²⁵

Arendt makes it clear that this process of accumulation, productivity, and expropriation “remains bound to the principle of world alienation from which it sprang,” and that the process of expropriation and productivity can continue only if “no worldly durability and stability is permitted to interfere,” and “only as long as all worldly things, all end products of the production process, are fed back into it at ever-increasing speed.”²⁶

The process of expropriation—the forcible dispossession of private property—coincides with world alienation. There are two aspects of world alienation that need to be distinguished. First, in massive numbers, individuals lose their private property and therefore their place in the world. The displacement of individuals from their position in the world creates a mass of people

who have no role in society nor even the possibility of participating in political affairs without private property. Some are brought into the process of consumption and production as laborers although many remain uprooted and superfluous as individuals with no role in the economic system, let alone political rights. The second aspect of world alienation is that the world itself, which provides the framework for legal and narrative personhood, fragments as the processes of production and consumption and the unending accumulation of capital push up against the limits of the stable world. The political and cultural structures that frame the world are caught up in the process of expropriation and accumulation. So that even if an individual is not dispossessed of their property, they will still not have a stable public world in which they can move. Arendt writes that

the process can continue only provided that no worldly durability and stability is permitted to interfere, only as long as all worldly things, all end products of the production process, are fed back into it at an ever-increasing speed. In other words, the process of wealth accumulation, as we know it, stimulated by the life process and in turn stimulating human life, is possible only if the world and the very worldliness of man are sacrificed.²⁷

The process of expansion and accumulation necessarily came up against the limits of the human world. The transgression of these limits is inherently connected to the principle of world alienation and the process of modern capitalism from which it is derived. Both aspects—expropriation of private property and the fragmentation of the political world—stem from the process that began with the Reformation, according to Arendt, but continue as the modern capitalist economy.

What marks the expropriations of the Reformation as the beginning of modern capitalism as opposed to previous examples of the accumulation of property is its connection to the notion of process. The operative principle of the modern capitalist economy is the continual expansion of expropriation and accumulation. Such a principle depends on the notion of process. The

original accumulation is tied to the cycle of production and consumption which again prompts further expropriations and eventually requires the assistance of political power and violence beyond the limits of political community in order to repeat the ‘original sin’ of expropriation—the seizure of private property by state or other actors outside of the nation-state. In past societies, the economy was built around the production of goods. The production process relied on the distinction of means and ends. For example, ships were needed to facilitate water-bound activities. In order to construct the ships, certain means were chosen. The process of production was important only insofar as the outcome was desired. Premodern societies wanted the ship; the modern economy wants the process of production itself. The modern age discovered that the end product mattered less than the production process itself. This shift in the nature of wealth accumulation from outcome, or end-driven, to process-driven marks the specifically modern aspect of capitalism. The main effect of modern capitalism is to unleash the ‘sheer natural abundance of the biological process.’

The Bourgeoisie, Imperialism, and the Decline of Political Community

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt explains the interactions between capital and political structures, and their relation to world alienation, through an analysis of the bourgeoisie’s entrance into politics. Arendt argues that what she calls the ‘political emancipation of the bourgeoisie’ intensifies world alienation and the process of capital accumulation with which it coincides. In order to continue the process of expropriation necessary for the accumulation of capital, the ownership class wrests power from civic and democratic institutions. The bourgeoisie enter politics in order to fulfill their “empty desire to have money beget money” because “only the unlimited accumulation of power could bring about the unlimited

accumulation of capital.”²⁸ Under the rule of the ownership class, violence and the unending accumulation of power as a means of capital expansion become the basis of national politics.

Neither violence nor power

had ever before been the conscious aim of the body politic or the ultimate goal of any definite policy. For power left to itself can achieve nothing but more power, and violence administered for power’s (and not for law’s) sake turns into a destructive principle that will not stop until there is nothing left to violate.²⁹

Only through a commensurate increase of power can the dream of unlimited capital expansion become a reality. The bourgeoisie transforms the institutions of the nation-state into a power generating machine, thereby undermining the rights of citizens to secure their freedom in face of the unlimited expansion of power and capital. It was exactly this expansionist approach that introduced a dangerous tension that undermined – and continues to undermine - the legitimacy of the nation-state and intensifies world alienation. Arendt writes that “The inner contradiction between the nation’s body politic and conquest as a political device has been obvious since the failure of the Napoleonic dream.”³⁰ By creating a political structure based on the constant accumulation of power, the bourgeois introduced an inherent instability to the very structures meant to create a permanent and stable home for human beings.

The need to expand the process of capital accumulation leads to this expansion of state force beyond the bounds of the national territory and destabilizes domestic political bodies.

Arendt explains that the limitless expansion of capital and power threatens the stability of the human world and undermines the stability of political frameworks and the ontological realities they support. I quote her at length:

The concept of unlimited expansion that alone can fulfill the hope for unlimited accumulation of capital, and brings about the aimless accumulation of power, makes the foundation of new political bodies—which up to the era of imperialism always had been the upshot of conquest—well-nigh impossible. In fact, its logical consequence is the destruction of all living communities, those of the conquered peoples as well as of the people at home. For every political structure, new or old, left to itself develops stabilizing

forces which stand in the way of constant transformation and expansion. Therefore, all political bodies appear to be temporary obstacles when they are seen as part of an eternal stream of growing power.³¹

The logic of accumulation and expropriation is averse to the stability of legal systems. The stable world into which new human beings enter and find their relation to each other is subsumed under the logic of expropriation and capital. No lasting human community is possible when society is driven by the “self-feeding motor of all political action that corresponds to the legendary unending accumulation of money that begets money.”³² The novel principle of imperialism under bourgeois politics is a dynamic, self-perpetuating process of expropriation and accumulation that feeds itself through the destruction of the human world.

For Hannah Arendt, bourgeois power politics finds its clearest expression in the theory of the Commonwealth formulated in Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan*. Hobbes’s *Leviathan* accords so well with the aims of the bourgeoisie because Hobbes theorized power as the only stable basis of the Commonwealth. Hobbes is “the only great thinker who ever attempted to derive public good from private interest and who, for sake of private good, conceived and outlined a Commonwealth whose basis and ultimate end is accumulation of power.”³³ Indeed, Arendt writes

Hobbes’s *Leviathan* exposed the only political theory according to which the state is based not on some kind of constituting law—whether divine law, the law of nature, or the law of social contract—which determines the rights and wrongs of the individual’s interests with respect to public affairs, but on the individual interests themselves, so that “the private interest is the same with the publique.”³⁴

The *Leviathan* is not based on any constitutive principle or law except that of the sovereign’s power to protect the private interest of the individual and their pursuit of profit. It is a political philosophy that depends intrinsically on the process of world alienation and the destruction caused by the expropriations of the bourgeois. Hobbes developed his political structure “for the benefit of the new bourgeois society as it emerged in the seventeenth century” although it would

take centuries for his conception to be realized in the form of imperialism.³⁵ And, in Hobbes's view, the overawing power of the sovereign supports and protects the accumulation of capital. No constitution, common good, or political right is given that can justifiably limit the power of the sovereign. For, again, in Hobbes's view, membership in a political community is a "temporary and limited affair" that does not affect the individual in any deep way.³⁶ All common interest is subsumed under the right to pursue individual interest, and each is free to leave the Commonwealth whenever their interest is threatened. The public world with its legal frameworks which are so crucial in orienting new human life are sacrificed to the profit motive, thus preparing the way for totalitarian regimes.

The Break in the Consensus Iuris: From Legality to Terror and Ideology

The hallmark of the modern age, world alienation, begins with the dissolution of the English Monasteries (1536-1540 CE), intensifies with the bourgeoisie's entrance into politics during imperialism (1880-1914), and leads to the emergence of totalitarian governments (1933-1953). Although totalitarianism is a totally novel system of government, it relies on the same principle of world alienation that Arendt traces to the early modern period in *The Human Condition*. The uprooting of massive numbers of people and the destruction of political community, both of which contribute to the emergence of totalitarianism, connect to world alienation. In particular, world alienation leads to the isolation of the individual from worldly community, "that impasse into which men are driven when the political sphere of their lives, where they act together in pursuit of a common concern, is destroyed."³⁷ Even more dangerously, isolation can lead to loneliness where human contact in the private sphere is cut off. Loneliness, which is an outcome of world alienation, is the basic experience of totalitarian movements. At

the same time, totalitarianism fulfills the principle of alienation through its novel structure of government. Totalitarian government does away with the traditional framework of legality—based on the distinction between legitimacy and illegitimacy—that provides a measure of permanence and stability to the world. In the place of legality, which is based on the consent of the governed, totalitarianism introduces a regime based on the terror of executing the law of a movement. Instead of establishing a framework of stable space for human action and motion, totalitarianism uses terror to prevent free movement and achieve the aims of its ideology.

As a system of government and political structure, totalitarianism is a completely novel phenomenon. Rather than recombining traditional forms of government like monarchy, tyranny, etc., totalitarianism arises from the novel experiences of the modern age. It “developed entirely new political institutions and destroyed all social, legal and political traditions of the country.”³⁸ These novel governments complete the process of the modern age by finalizing the break with tradition that characterizes modernity. The change is so complete that Arendt writes totalitarian governments “operate according to a system of values so radically different from all others, that none of our traditional legal, moral, or common sense utilitarian categories could any longer help us to come to terms with, or judge, or predict their course of action.”³⁹ For Arendt, totalitarianism emerges from the crisis in Western civilization which is unleashed in the 20th century.

Understanding the novel system of totalitarianism requires us to analyze the history and trace the consequences of this crisis which I take to be a result of the tensions that world alienation—in all its forms—introduce. These tensions reach a boiling point in the first World War, with the result that more people than ever are alienated from the common framework of humanity. If this interpretation is correct,

then the conclusion is unavoidable that this crisis is no mere threat from the outside, no mere result of some aggressive foreign policy of either Germany or Russian, and that it

will no more disappear with the death of Stalin than it disappeared with the fall of Germany. It may even be that the true predicaments of our time will assume their authentic form—though not necessarily the cruelest—only when totalitarianism has become a thing of the past.⁴⁰

That totalitarianism is connected to the deeper processes that caused the “crisis of our century” reveals two things. First, totalitarianism is not some aberration of German or Russian culture. The seeds of totalitarianism are potentially in any culture that deals with a similar crisis so that any country dealing with the challenges of modernizing—think of India for example, or China—faces similar risks. Under this rubric, the United States is equally vulnerable to totalitarian movements. But, second, totalitarianism is not a time-bound threat. In other words, Germany is not immune to further totalitarianisms just because it witnessed the rise of National Socialism. Germany remains vulnerable to totalitarianism. And, indeed, there is a growing far-right, even neo-Nazi movement in Germany again. No country or culture can rest easy, as Arendt’s analysis shows that totalitarianism is linked to the processes of modernity that the developed and developing world rely upon to enrich themselves and gain domestic prosperity—the accumulation of capital. What’s more, future totalitarianisms may not resemble the Nazi party. It’s imperative that liberal democracies remain vigilant, nimble, and robust, and that they learn the lessons of recent history.

Totalitarianism is a novel phenomenon, but it is connected to the fundamental processes of modernity. In particular, world alienation, the process of expropriation, and the accumulation of capital all contribute to the crisis of modernity. The consequence of the modern age is a mass of lonely, superfluous individuals without access to the world. Private ownership, or at least having access to a private space, is a precondition for participation in politics. But, in order for capital to increase, private property is expropriated, accumulated, and fed back into the cycle of production and consumption at the heart of the modern capitalist economy. The effect is to

uproot individuals from their privately-owned shares of the world in an economic cycle that eventually destabilizes the political structure opposed to the unending movement of capital accumulation. Totalitarian movements, based on terror and ideology, are responsive to exactly these modern experiences. Indeed, the experience of loneliness is at the heart of totalitarian government. Arendt writes that

loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicality, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with the uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all.⁴¹

The rise of totalitarian regimes is really only possible when world alienation has become pervasive and common enough that worldlessness, and the loneliness and superfluousness that come with it, are the overriding experiences in a country or culture. One of Arendt's key insights is that the rise of totalitarian governments, while novel, is based on the modern experience of worldlessness.

The law plays a stabilizing role key role in Arendt's concept of worldliness. In fact, the permanence and stability of the world is a major element in any human framework since it is the purpose of the world to temporally transcend the individual life and place them within a preexisting structure that hems in the absolute novelty of their birth and action. The legal system frames the relationship between individuals in the world, separating and distancing individuals in a way that allows for a plurality of identities and opinions. Arendt writes

Positive laws in constitutional government are designed to erect boundaries and establish channels of communication between men whose community is continually endangered by the new men born into it. With each new birth, a new beginning is born into the world, a new world has potentially come into being... The laws hedge in each new beginning and at the same time assure its freedom of movement, the potentiality of something entirely new and unpredictable; the boundaries of positive laws are for the political existence of man what memory is for his historical existence: they guarantee the pre-existence of a common

world, the reality of some continuity which transcends the individual life span of each generation, absorbs all new origins and is nourished by them.⁴²

In traditional politics law creates boundaries and a stable space within which human action can take place. Totalitarianism, however, changed the meaning of law itself; instead of “expressing the framework of stability within which human actions and motions can take place, it became the motion itself.”⁴³ Under totalitarian regimes, rather than establish stable boundaries between people where action can take place, the law dictates the people’s movements. In order to institute the ‘law of the movement,’ totalitarian governments “explode” the “alternative between lawful and lawless government, between arbitrary and legitimate power.”⁴⁴ Arendt writes, “totalitarian lawfulness, defying legality and pretending to establish the direct reign of justice on earth, executes the law of History or of Nature without translating it into standards of right or wrong for individual behavior.”⁴⁵ Totalitarian governments appeal to the deeper processes that offer totalizing explanations of human behavior so that they “can do away with petty legality.”⁴⁶ The regime’s application of the law “directly to mankind without bothering with the behavior of men” allows “a conscious break of that *consensus iuris* [law by consent] which, according to Cicero, constitutes a “people,” and which, as international law, in modern times has constituted the civilized world.”⁴⁷ No longer are laws instituted to frame human action; rather, the worldly framework negotiated through the political action of the people who consent to it now absolutely dictates how people are to act. Thus, totalitarianism flips the law, applying it to the people as a whole instead of instituting it as a stable structure that they can move within.

The consequence of this reversal of law is a regime based on terror. Terror is the law when “it claims to obey strictly and unequivocally those laws of Nature or of History from which all positive laws always have been supposed to spring.”⁴⁸ Terror is the expression or execution of a deeper, totalizing ideology. In totalitarian government, the “place of positive laws is taken by total

terror, which is designed to translate into reality the law of movement of history or nature.”⁴⁹ The radical and frightening novelty of totalitarianism lies in its commitment to these higher values which transcend the traditional distinction of arbitrary and legitimate power. Arendt writes that

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 suprahuman 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 of the law of Nature.⁵⁰

Totalitarian regimes do not have to establish a new *consensus iuris* since they purport to follow the deeper processes of history and nature—either the Marxist dialectic of the rule of the proletariat or the Nazi ideology of white, Aryan supremacy—which do not depend on the individual’s consent to be true. Terror is the merciless follow-through of these ideologies. So that the basis of totalitarianism is to institute the terror of these ‘laws.’ No individual life is safe from totalitarian movements since the life of the individual is explained in accordance with the higher law of which it is supposed to be merely an instance.

The essence of totalitarian government is terror, but like other forms of government it requires a principle of action. The principle of action in totalitarian government is its ideology. Ideology is not inherently totalitarian although all ideology can potentially be operationalized by totalitarian movements. There are three aspects of all ideological thinking that are operationalized by totalitarian movements. First, ideology offers a totalizing explanation for a *movement* such that past, present, and future events are predicted and explained according the process described by the ideology in advance.⁵¹ Second, ideological thinking is completely independent of experience; it “emancipates” thought from reality and experience “and insists on a “truer” reality concealed behind all perceptible things,” and “requiring a sixth sense” to be

aware of the ‘truer’ reality underlying the experience of our five senses.⁵² Finally, “with a consistency that exists nowhere in the realm of reality,” ideological thinking deduces its conclusions from a given premise through “a kind of logical deduction” that eschews the input of reality.⁵³ The power of ideology in the hands of totalitarian movements is that the “stringent logicity” of ideological thinking acts “as a guide to action.”⁵⁴ The force of ideology is not its particular content—racism or the battle of the classes—but its “inherent logicity” that seizes individuals, the inability of individuals to contradict themselves. Logicity is characterized by ways of thinking that deduced consequences from a premise with strict rigor. We no longer judge freely in accordance with how it seemed to us, but, rather, we think and judge in a way that is consistent with the dogmatically accepted premise. Logicity replaced these communities of worldly meaning with groups whose thinking adhered to ideological premises.

One of the major problems with ideological thinking is that it actually prevents free action. Arendt writes that the “self-coercion of totalitarian logic destroys man’s capacity for experience and thought just as certainly as his capacity for action.”⁵⁵

Post-Totalitarian Future?

The principle of world alienation—tied to the expansion of the modern capitalist economy defined by the idea of process—corresponds to three stages of development in modern social and political structures. The first stage of world alienation is “marked by its cruelty, the misery and material wretchedness it meant for a steadily increasing number of “laboring poor,” whom expropriation deprived of the twofold protection of family and property, that is, of a family-owned private share of the world, which until the modern age had housed the individual life process and the laboring activity subject to its necessities.”⁵⁶ The second stage of world

alienation comes about when “society became the subject of the new life process” as opposed to individual families with a privately-owned share of the world.⁵⁷ While the family was defined by its reference to a private share of the world, “society was identified with a tangible, albeit collectively owned, piece of private property, the territory of the nation state, which until its decline in the 20th century offered all classes a substitute for the privately owned home of which the class of poor had been deprived.”⁵⁸ While the development of national communities somewhat limits the cruelty and misery toward the poor, it does not stop the process of expropriation and world alienation. For Arendt, the promise of the nation-state—collective ownership of the national territory—is a contradiction that cannot provide the laboring poor with the actual property and wealth they need to improve their condition.

The last stage in the development of world alienation is marked by the decline of the nation-state, the transition to a global market, and the substitution of humankind for national citizenship.⁵⁹ In other words, the last stage of world alienation is globalization. This stage presents familiar problems. Arendt writes,

whatever the future may bring, the process of world alienation, started by expropriation and characterized by an ever-increasing progress in wealth, can only assume even more radical proportions if it is permitted to follow its own inherent law. For men cannot become citizens of the world as they are citizens of their countries, and social men cannot own collectively as family and household men own their private property.⁶⁰

The last stage of world alienation sets the stage for the tension between nation-states and globalization. The result of this tension is the inability of human rights laws or mores to protect the mass of humanity from genocide and starvation or to ensure that all of humanity has access to a healthy and safe ecosystem. Human rights are lost somewhere between the political rights of the citizen under the nation-state and the stateless person’s lack of any concrete protection.

Although world alienation is driven by economic, social, and political developments, it also has an impact on the human condition itself. The modern human being is characterized by their “exclusive concern with the self, as distinguished from the soul or person or man in general, and the attempt to reduce all experiences, with the world as well as with other human beings, to experiences between man and himself.”⁶¹ The consequence of “the eclipse of a common public world” is that humanity is no longer anchored in a stable linguistic and political framework that relates them to their fellows and provides them with an identity and story.⁶² Worldlessness results in the isolation and loneliness of bare life—the human being without a legal or worldly identity. Without their narrative or legal identity, individuals become part of a superfluous mass that lacks the protections of basic human rights. They become just biological life. Alienated from the world, individuals are isolated and unable to act together with others, leading to powerlessness. If total enough, the isolation from others intrinsic to world alienation leads to the highest form of loneliness - the absence of space and the room to act and enter into the web of human stories. As Arendt indicates, these ontological changes prepare the individual to take part in totalitarian movements. Arendt cautions us not forget that “the eclipse of a common world, so crucial to the formation of the lonely mass man and so dangerous in the formation of the worldless mentality of modern ideological mass movements, began with the much more tangible loss of a privately owned share in the world.”⁶³ Her analysis of world alienation clearly shows that conditions for totalitarianism and the possibility of radical evil emerge from the processes driving modern capitalism and its attendant changes to social and political structures. Rather than suggest a return to the past, Arendt warns us that the existential condition that lead to totalitarianism are here to stay and that we ought to start imagining new categories, concepts, and collective structures if we are to deal with these changes.

CHAPTER 2: RECONSTITUTING THE PUBLIC SPHERE: JUDGMENT, *SENSUS COMMUNIS*, AND IMAGINATION

In the previous chapter, I argued that one of the major issues of the modern age is the displacement of millions from their homes in the world and the undermining of the stability of the public sphere caused by the unlimited accumulation of power and capital. Driven by expropriation, the process of accumulation undermines the stability of political communities and their legal systems, foreclosing on the possibility of political action, which leads to an existential loneliness ripe for totalitarian domination. Particularly, the domain of legality based on the dichotomy of legitimacy and illegitimacy is completely exploded by totalitarian regimes. My suggestion was that, in light of Foucault's rubric, Arendt's analysis of modernity sits at the crossroads of historical and critical reflection such that she limns the modern existential condition in order to propose points in which new beginnings and opportunities for praxis might be found. In this chapter, I present one of those points, namely, Arendt's novel and imaginative re-reading of Immanuel Kant's theory of judgment as a faculty that accesses and is grounded in an imaginal space of discourse the exercise of which itself constitutes a public that makes possible human praxis. Thus, Arendt's original re-reading of Kant's third *Critique* offers possibilities for free action that were seemingly foreclosed by the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. To make this argument, I focus on Arendt's so-called discovery of Kant's 'hidden' political philosophy—separate from his explicit political philosophy—which she presents in her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. Borrowing from and re-imagining Kant's aesthetic philosophy, Arendt articulates her own political vision centered around the faculty of judgment, the *sensus communis*—a phrase borrowed from Kant indicating an intersubjective sense based on communicability and the cultivation of an 'enlarged mentality' that can reach a 'general

standpoint’—and a productive, creative faculty of imagination. Arendt’s creative re-reading of Immanuel Kant’s aesthetic philosophy, then, provides the basis for a modern political praxis which I will fully flesh out through a discussion of the narrativity of action, the role of culture in politics, the work of the artist, and the poetics that Arendt envisions guiding their work.

Arendt’s appropriation of Kant’s third *Critique* provides a plausible response to the politically dangerous condition of world alienation by theorizing a model for political community that is resistant to loneliness and ideology. In particular, imagination on which Arendt grounds judgment is a world-creating faculty. While the imagination can be a dangerous faculty to exploit in politics, there are important creative dimensions to the imagination that are key to addressing the challenges of the modern age. One of the virtues of Arendt’s political philosophy is that by recognizing the necessity of imagination in the political sphere, she is able to suggest how to establish proper limits for this faculty.

To frame my argument, I focus on two problematics that emerge from scholarly treatment of Arendt’s theory of judgment. The first constellation of issues emerges from the relationship between moral norms, judgment, and action. In particular, George Kateb, Seyla Benhabib, and more recently Charlton Payne have argued that Arendt does not sufficiently ground political action in moral norms. The second constellation emerges from the mode of validity that Arendt assigns to political judgment. Scholars like Jürgen Habermas and Ronald Beiner have argued that by sharply distinguishing the validity of cognitive, truth-claims from the validity of political judgments which are reflective, affective, and intersubjective Arendt opens up a dangerous gap between truth and politics.

While there are several other criticisms made of Arendt’s theory of the faculty of judgment, these two—the moral hiatus and the opposition between truth and politics—are the

most relevant to address in order to support the argument of this thesis since, if left unaddressed, these critiques render Hannah Arendt's theory of judgment implausible. On one side, Arendt's political philosophy lacks sufficient normative justification to ensure that political agents act according to moral standards. On the other side, Arendt's political theory lacks a cognitive foundation based on the criteria of empirical truth. Both of these criticisms miss the motivation behind Arendt's novel political theory. She is not concerned with subordinating morality or science to politics, engaging in some kind of dangerous politicization of facts and morality. Instead, she is attempting to carve out a place for the political and give it its proper position in order to, I would like to suggest, offer a vision for a politics that is capable of preventing a totalitarian future.

Normative Hiatus?

The first set of scholars accuse Arendt of breaking off the connection between politics and morality. Without a basis in moral norm, political action becomes dangerous and can lead to the radical evil of totalitarian regimes. They claim that by formulating her theory of political judgment on the basis of Kant's aesthetic philosophy, Arendt opens the doors for immorality in politics. Or, at the very least, she does not sufficiently theorize the moral norms on which political agents ought to act. George Kateb writes "that the most important element in Arendt's aestheticization of politics is the subordination of morality."⁶⁴ Therefore, Kateb suggests, "those of us who want to keep political life, even in any ideal form, under constant moral scrutiny, will not find Arendt's position morally acceptable."⁶⁵

In a similar vein, Seyla Benhabib rejects Arendt's theory of judgment as providing insufficient moral justification for political action and human rights. Benhabib suggests that

Arendt fails to provide a link between thinking, judgment, and moral considerations. In other words, the subject's capacity for judgment fails to provide a sufficient normative motivation for action. Benhabib considers the figures of Martin Heidegger and Adolf Eichmann. For Arendt, Heidegger is a paragon of thinking and taught Arendt the power of thought. On the contrary, Arendt sees Eichmann as the thoughtless individual par excellence. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt points precisely to Eichmann's thoughtlessness as the root of his evil actions of sending hundreds of thousands of Jewish captives to death camps. From this explanation Benhabib infers that Heidegger, who seemingly possesses an unusual perspicuity and thoughtfulness of the highest order—at least in the estimation of Arendt—would never commit such evil. This inference does not hold up under further scrutiny since *both* Eichmann *and* Heidegger are committed Nazis. Heidegger never revokes his commitment to National Socialism and the Nazi party in particular and contributes to the holocaust with his support of the Nazi regime. Since both Heidegger and Eichmann exemplify evil, the relative thoughtfulness and the capacity for judgment cannot provide a sufficient normative foundation for political actors.

From this irony, namely, that Heidegger follows the Nazi ideology and remains committed to it for the remainder of his life despite being Arendt's model of thinking, Benhabib infers that thinking and judgment do not sufficiently motivate action. Since, if they do, Heidegger would not follow Nazism. Thus, Benhabib concludes, writing

Arendt's skepticism that moral beliefs and principles would ever be able to restrain or control politics in the twentieth century and give it a direction compatible with human rights and dignity, leads to a normative lacuna in her thought. There is a resistance on her part to justificatory political discourse, to the attempt to establish the rationality and validity of our beliefs in universal human rights, human equality, the obligation to treat others with respect.⁶⁶

Benhabib finds Arendt's political model to contain a hiatus, or 'lacuna,' that renders her theory of judgment incapable of offering the kind of rational-moral claims to justify that political actors

respect human rights. In other words, Benhabib writes “Hannah Arendt leaves unexplored the motivational question of how perspicacious thinking and good judgment could be translated into action.”⁶⁷

Echoing Benhabib’s argument, Payne suggests that Arendt’s spectator-focused political theory puts the political agent in a relationship he calls “parergonal” to the *sensus communis* which Arendt assigns as being the guide of action (2011). Payne shows that the political agent inevitably acts from a position that is outside of and unrestrained by the judgment of the community. Charlton Payne suggests that Arendt’s analogy between, on the one hand, spectators and actors and, on the other, ‘taste’ and ‘genius’ in classical aesthetic theory is problematic.

Payne writes

If we argue by analogy that genius and taste can be translated into the political categories agency and community, we are left with a problematic political philosophy in which creative political action is parergonal to judgment, and hence the actor is parergonal to the political community, or *sensus communis*.⁶⁸

For Payne, Arendt’s theory of the agent as ‘genius’ puts the political actor in a parergonal relation to the *sensus communis* and the judgments of their community since the actor, like the genius, does not rely on received taste but uses the creative imagination to develop an original pattern that changes or expands taste.

These criticisms suggest a problematic theorization of the link connecting thinking, judgment, and action, a connection that is central to Arendt’s thesis that the faculty of judgment is the solution to the paradox of modernity. If judgment does not determine action, and action is indeed in a parergonal relation to judgment, then Arendt’s theory of judgment fails to provide a sufficient normative foundation for political action. In other words, spectators think and judge one thing while the actors use a completely different judgment and do something else. This split

preserves the gap in Arendt's political philosophy and leaves a lacuna such that she does not provide a normative justification for human rights.

The second problematic around which scholars have focused their criticism is the distinction in Arendt's political theory between truth and judgment, or opinion. Arendt understands politics as the exchange of opinions based on non-cognitive, intersubjectively valid judgments, but critics worry that Arendt's choice to ground politics on opinions which are based on something other than objectively valid truth-claims leads to a dangerous groundlessness of political opinion. Jürgen Habermas, for example, holds that for Arendt political "practice rests on opinions and convictions that cannot be true or false in the strict sense."⁶⁹ In other words, for Arendt, practical decisions and action cannot be disputed through argumentation and rational discourse. I quote Habermas at length:

If, by contrast, "representative thought"—which examines the generalizability of practical standpoints, that is, the legitimacy of norms—is not separated from argumentation by an abyss, then a cognitive foundation can also be claimed for the power of common convictions. In this case, such power is anchored in the de facto recognition of validity claims that can be discursively redeemed and fundamentally criticized. Arendt sees a yawning abyss between knowledge and opinion that cannot be closed with arguments.⁷⁰

Habermas here is concerned that by basing her political theory on the faculty of judgment's capacity for producing intersubjective political opinion and eliminating the objectively valid truth claim from political discourse, Arendt loses the ability to distinguish ideology from fact. Sharing Habermas's concern, Ronald Beiner see Arendt's distinction as "an idiosyncratic and arguably perverse account of the relationship between judgment and truth."⁷¹ Beiner's main concern is that Arendt seems to frame her discussion of the distinction between political judgment and truth in such a way that the validity of truth claims is *anti*-political. For Beiner, like Habermas, Arendt's "extreme dichotomization" between truth and politics leads her to

undermine the political significance of her theory of representative thought and the enlarged mentality that grounds the *sensus communis*.⁷² Without a re-convergence of truth and judgment *at some point* the enlarged mentality of the *sensus communis* could lead to dangerously ideological conclusions.

I argue that these criticisms fail to capture the significance of Arendt's political philosophy. In particular, their rebuttals miss the larger point that Arendt is trying to make, namely, that Arendt is looking for a political formula that is capable of shoring up the worldliness of human beings. Just as the modern age is characterized by world *alienation*, Arendt sees judgment and ultimately imagination, as world-*creating* faculties. By returning to Arendt's texts, particularly her *Lectures* and her essays *Truth and Politics* and *The Crisis in Culture*, and recent scholarship, I reconstruct her arguments for a political community explicitly based on the world-creating power of imagination.

Hannah Arendt's *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* offers an original reading of Kant's 'hidden' political philosophy. Arendt's *Lectures* explain how the faculty of reflective judgment can open up a public sphere that re-establishes a link between political spectators and actors thereby addressing one of the problems of world alienation in the modern age. The political role of the faculty of judgment is at least two-fold. First, reflective judgment opens up a space of genuine intersubjectivity. Second, the faculty of judgment provides a normative guide for political actors in the form of ideas, or schemas of the imagination, that have what Arendt calls 'exemplary validity.'

In making my argument, I follow Linda Zerilli in suggesting that judgment is a "political question about how we, members of democratic communities, can affirm human freedom as a political reality in a world of objects and events whose causes and effects we can neither control

nor predict with certainty.”⁷³ Resisting the criticisms of Habermas and Beiner, Zerilli writes “Our ability to come to terms with what is given (that is, the past that can be neither forgotten nor changed) in a way that affirms a nonsovereign human freedom (that is, freedom that begins in political community, not outside it) can only be achieved through a critical practice of judgment.”⁷⁴ Zerilli suggests that in light of novel, and disruptive events, judgment “involves the creation of coherence and meaning that does not efface contingency and thus freedom.”⁷⁵ Furthermore, in direct opposition to the loneliness of “the subjectivism of modernity, Arendt’s turn to aesthetic judgment is based on what she calls the fundamental, if mostly denied, reality of the human condition, namely, plurality.”⁷⁶

Zerilli writes “Politics involves the exchange of arguments in the sense of opening up the world that has been disclosed to us through language, our criteria or concepts... This opening up is nothing other than the poetic, rhetorical, and world-creating capacity of language.”⁷⁷ Importantly, Zerilli understands that for Arendt, the capacity to open up a world through language “is dependent on the faculty of imagination.”⁷⁸ However, Zerilli writes

Arendt declares imagination (rather than reason or understanding) the political faculty par excellence—once again, much to the dismay of her critics—but she never explains why foregrounding imagination is crucial to her own account of political judgment as a non rule-governed practice... This failure to specify the productive character of imagination in aesthetic and political judgments has consequences for how we understand Arendt’s famous account of “representative thinking.”⁷⁹

I follow Zerilli’s arguments up until this point. I agree that judgment is an absolutely central faculty in Arendt’s political philosophy and that the exercise of judgment through discursive exchange does depend on the world-creating faculty of imagination to open up a common space in which such discourse is possible. However, in claiming that Arendt does not specify the productive character of imagination, Zerilli overlooks Arendt’s theorization of the storyteller and poet as engineers and creators of the imagination.

Arendt's Political Analogy: Genius and Taste

One of the criticisms of Arendt's theory of political judgment is that she does not provide sufficient justification for the norms according to which the actor acts. I think this is wrong. To make my point, I look at Arendt's reading of the relationship between actor and spectator through the lens of her appropriation of Kant's discussion of genius and taste. Ultimately, the actor, like the genius, is subordinated under the taste of the spectator, not with the sufficient norms of morality, but as the necessary condition of meaningful action. Arendt identifies this necessary condition as Kant's 'transcendental principle of publicness.' That is, the deeds and words of the actors rely on the judgments of the spectators as their condition of possibility.

Regarding the issue of spectator and actor, Arendt suggests that Kant "did not understand the issue as we understand it."⁸⁰ Kant does not have a view of politics that can be workable for us today. He lived in the Prussian state when all political action was taken by the government. Any autonomous action taken by the subjects of the Prussian king would have been considered sedition. The same can be said for the actions of the French subjects overthrowing the monarchy and establishing a republic— or even more dramatically the slaves of Haiti overthrowing the French monarchy to establish a republic and become citizens. So, the kind of political action we think of today was not on the table for Kant. Any political action by subjects in, say, Haiti or France, is immoral in his view since it is the *sovereign* who has the right to act, not the subjects in the commonwealth. Thus, for Kant, the relationship between the spectator and actor is antagonistic. While the spectator approves of the Haitian or French revolutions, the actor cannot morally condone overthrowing the sovereign

However, Arendt writes “In Kant, the story’s or event’s importance lies precisely not at its end but in its opening up new horizons for the future.”⁸¹ But the story of the actors in Haiti could never last or pass down to future generations without spectators who find the events meaningful. Agents’ participation in the public realm—political action— “offers a lasting source of meaning to human affairs, for the deeds and speeches of speaking and acting men can be gathered into a story that, when retold, allows their human intelligibility to become visible.”⁸² For Kant, opening up novel horizons of possibility for humanity creates a sense of purposiveness, but cannot inspire similar actions since morality forbids it.

But Arendt’s reading of Kant actually goes further than this to uncover the hidden link between spectators and actors. In order to resolve this gap, Arendt considers his claim about the relation of genius to taste as a way to reconsider how the political actor ought to relate to the political spectators. The point here is not that political actors *are* creative geniuses, but rather that political agents stand in a similar relation to political spectators as geniuses stand to their audience. Through an analysis of the relationship between genius and critic, Arendt uncovers Kant’s hidden political philosophy.

For Arendt, the horizons of possibility that an event open up are more than just purposive, the meaning that spectators create is one of the preconditions for action. Arendt makes this clear in lecture ten of *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. She writes that although “we are inclined to think that in order to judge a spectacle you must first have the spectacle—that the spectator is secondary to the actor; we forget that no one in his right mind would ever put on a spectacle without being sure of having spectators to watch it.”⁸³ The spectators are the condition of possibility for political action. Spectators are so important politically in part because “The deeds of the actor are as in need of the judgment of the spectator

as those of any other performer.”⁸⁴ Political action, whether bad or good, relies on the spectators. Arendt suggests that genius is subordinate to the audience and critics.

As we saw, the critics and audience make the public space through which the work of the genius is possible in the first place. Spectators establish this public space. However, as Linda Zerilli notes “Spectator is not another person, but simply a different mode of relating to, or being in, the common world.”⁸⁵ In every genius is a critic. Both spectators and genius have to have taste. That is, every genius has already developed a sense of taste. The genius must have taste in order to make their products understood to the public. In fact, the capacity of taste is a precondition for creating. In other words, genius relies on the intersubjectivity of taste.

Producing a work of genius requires communicability:

The faculty that guides this communicability is taste, and taste or judgment is not the privilege of genius. The condition *sine qua non* for the existence of beautiful objects is communicability; the judgment of the spectator creates the space without which no such objects could appear at all. The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not by the actors or the makers. And this critic and spectator sits in every actor and fabricator; without this critical, judging faculty the doer or maker would be so isolated from the spectator that he would not even be perceived.⁸⁶

Now, taste provides an immediate sense of discrimination which serves as a guide for genius. Arendt writes “only taste and smell are discriminatory by their very nature and because only these senses relate to the particular *qua* particular...the it-pleases-or-displeases-me is overwhelmingly present in taste and smell.”⁸⁷ Thus, the spectators determine the work of genius through the approbation or disapprobation of taste. Taste guides communicability in that what pleases the genius will please the audience. But how is it that the distinctly private experience of pleasure associated with taste and smell can serve as a criterion for the *public* sphere which is governed by sociability and communicability?

Arendt writes “The solution to these riddles can be indicated by the names of two other faculties: *imagination* and *common sense*.”⁸⁸ The imagination is a solution to the riddle of taste in that it allows an image or object to be *re-presented* in the mind in addition to the views and opinions of others—common sense. Arendt writes “Kant calls this “the operation of reflection.””⁸⁹ The object must please in its representation, not in its immediate sensuous presentation. Only when the object of our senses is represented through imagination can the private approval of taste become the public approval of judgment. Once an object is represented in imagination it becomes subject to ‘common sense.’ Arendt writes “Kant was very early aware that there was something non-subjective in what seems to be the most private and subjective sense.”⁹⁰ This explains the nature of guilty pleasures. We take a private, subjective pleasure in something, but we are ashamed to admit this publicly because we are simultaneously aware that such a pleasure is not approved of by an audience at large. Representation is a key moment in showing how Arendt actually does formulate the criteria for judgment in a way that gives it a non-cognitive, affective validity which is also intersubjective and communicable. The operation of reflection creates an opportunity for an instinctive, discriminatory pleasure or displeasure which is also determined by a non-subjective sense. Thus, judgment is an immediate affective impression that remains universally communicable.

Before exploring the operation of judgment in greater detail, I want to shift the focus from a discussion of genius, taste, and critics to actors, judgment, and spectators in order to make the political relevance of judgment clear. Just as a discriminatory affect guides the genius, a communicative affect guides the political actor. The nature of this discriminatory affect is different for the political actor who is a natal agent than it is for an artistic genius.

Reflective Judgment

Arendt appropriates Kant's theory of reflective judgment as a centerpiece in her larger vision for a renewed space for praxis in modernity.⁹¹ As an original appropriation and re-reading, her discussion of reflective judgment does depart from Kant's. For Kant, Arendt writes, judgment consists of "two mental operations": "the operation of the imagination," and "the operation of reflection."⁹² Arendt continues: "this operation of imagination prepares the object for "the operation of reflection." The imagination is "the faculty of having present what is absent" that "transforms an object into something I do not have to be directly confronted with but that I have in some sense internalized, so that I now can be affected by it as though it were given to me by a nonobjective sense."⁹³ The transformation that occurs through representation is an important step in how human beings make sense of the world:

By making what one's external senses perceived into an object for one's inner sense, one compresses and condenses the manifold of the sensually given; one is in a position to "see" by the eyes of the mind, i.e. to see the whole that gives meaning to the particulars.⁹⁴

The imagination fits us into the world. Imagination lets us 'see' an object in our 'mind's eye' and by so doing, we can orient that object within the broader world.

The second operation—the operation of reflection—is the activity of judging what appears in the mind's eye.⁹⁵ Reflection produces an immediate feeling of approbation or disapprobation that "is discriminatory by definition: it says it-pleases or it-displeases. It is called taste because, like taste, it *chooses*. But this choice is itself subject to still another choice: one can approve or disapprove of the very fact of *pleasing*: this too is subject to "approbation or disapprobation."⁹⁶ In other words, we are aware of whether or not the pleasure we find in reflecting on something is one that we approve of or not. Hence, there are two levels of reflection in Arendt's theory of judgment. The first level of reflection happens in the immediate approval

or disapproval of what the witnessed and lived experience. However, the second layer of reflection comes when the lived experiences are all “afterthoughts;” “only later, in reflecting on it, when you are no longer busy doing whatever you were doing, will you be able to have this additional “pleasure”: of *approving* it. In this additional pleasure it is no longer the object that pleases but *that* we judge it to be pleasing.”⁹⁷ But what is the approval or disapproval of the second level based on?

The second level of reflection is what relies on the *sensus communis* and is the key to guiding the political actor. Arendt then quotes Kant:

By “*sensus communis*,” ... must be understood the idea of a communal sense, i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (a priori) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment.⁹⁸

Arendt writes

By using the Latin term, Kant indicates that here he means something different: an extra sense—like an extra mental capacity (German: *Menschenverstand*)—that fits us into a community...It is the very humanity of man that is manifest in this sense.⁹⁹

Arendt illuminates this point by quoting Kant:

Under the *sensus communis* we must include the idea of a sense *common to all*, i.e., of a faculty of judgment which, in its reflection, takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of all other men in thought, in order, *as it were*, to compare its judgment with the collective reason of humanity...This is done by comparing our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man, by abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our judgment.¹⁰⁰

This comparing of judgment happens through language, and one of its core qualities is the ‘enlarged mentality.’ The *sensus communis* is “what judgment appeals to in everyone... In other words, when one judges, one judges as a member of a community.”¹⁰¹ Thus,

an ‘enlarged mentality’ is the condition *sine qua non* of right judgment; one’s community sense makes it possible to enlarge one’s mentality...imagination and reflection enable

impartiality that is the specific virtue of judgment. Arendt writes that “Kant stresses that at least one of our *mental faculties*, the faculty of judgment, presupposes the presence of others.¹⁰²

This extra mental capacity is what allows our representations to be communicable. In the reflective operation of judgment, we are able to represent to ourselves the viewpoints of others. The capacity to know other viewpoints is the “representative thinking” or the enlarged mentality. Arendt writes that “communicability obviously depends on the enlarged mentality; one can communicate only if one is able to think from the other person’s standpoint.”¹⁰³ Hannah Arendt’s appropriation of Kant’s notion of the *sensus communis* is a kind of political imaginary that anchors the spectator’s reflective judgments in a public, discriminatory affect:

Judgment, and especially judgments of taste, always reflects upon others and their tastes, takes their possible judgments into account. This is necessary because I am human and cannot live outside the company of men. I judge as a member of this community and not as a member of a supersensible world.¹⁰⁴

For Arendt, a compact which should inspire action and, thus, join spectator and actor, is effected when everyone requires of everyone else that they *enlarge their mentality*, and reach attempt to reach the most general standpoint in their reflections:

This compact, according to Kant, would be a mere idea, regulating not just our reflections on these matters but actually inspiring our actions...this idea becomes the principle not only of their judgments but of their actions. It is at this point that the actor and spectator become united; the maxim of the actor and the maxim, the “standard,” according to which the spectator judges the spectacle of the world, become one.¹⁰⁵

In other words, Arendt’s reading of Kant reveals that there is a regulative idea which both actors and spectators follow. The regulative ideal of the expanded mentality yields a ‘categorical imperative’ for action, namely, “Always act on the maxim through which this original compact can be actualized into a general law.”¹⁰⁶ This maxim is the basis on Kant’s notion of world

citizenship, such, if we adopt the maxim of enlarged mentality a “violation of rights in one place is felt throughout the world.”¹⁰⁷

Exemplary Validity

In order to work, the faculty of judgment needs schemas of the imagination. The chief difficulty with judgment, Arendt writes, is that we ‘think the particular’ with the faculty of judgment, “but to *think* means to generalize, hence it is the faculty of mysteriously combining the particular and the general.”¹⁰⁸ To solve this problem, Arendt looks for what she calls a *tertium comparationis*, which is a common property, the possession of which gives two distinct entities a point of comparison.¹⁰⁹ In this context, Arendt is looking for the point of similarity in the deeds of the actor and the judgments of the spectator. Through her analysis of Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Arendt offers two possible solutions. The one she finds most interesting is the idea of “*exemplary validity*.”¹¹⁰ This is how Arendt describes exemplary validity. Each object we recognize in the world has a particular concept that describes the object and allows us to recognize the object in the first place:

this can be conceived of as a “Platonic” idea or Kantian schema; that is, one has before the eyes of one’s mind a schematic or merely *formal table* shape to which every table somehow must conform... This exemplar is and remains a particular that in its very particularity reveals the generality that otherwise could not be defined. Courage is *like* Achilles, etc.¹¹¹

The regulative idea that guides both spectator and actor, the image or schema that the thinking person holds up in their mind as a guide for judgment, has exemplary validity. These exemplars, the go-carts of judgment are based on imagination.

Arendt discusses the notion of exemplary validity in her essay *Truth and Politics*. There, she connects exemplary validity with the productive imagination by explaining how poets and

story tellers are able to make examples out of the events of the past in order to influence present and future action. “unlike the schemata, which our mind produces of its own accord by means of the imagination, these examples derive from history and poetry, through which, as Jefferson pointed out, an altogether different “field of imagination is laid open to our use.””¹¹² This field of imagination is creative and productive.

Czobor-Lupp expands on the political significance of imagination for Arendt. She shows that Arendt conceives of the imagination as having both positive and malign influences. She argues that for Arendt, imagination, which starts off as a necessary part of political thinking, judging, and acting is also conducive to totalitarian forms of domination. Czobor-Lupp argues that, ultimately, the modern condition of world alienation requires a theorization of the creative imagination. This situation, she writes,

Requires the expansion, recreation, and alteration of public horizons of commonality—what Arendt calls the world, the cultural objects that give durability to the fluidity and frailty of political actions. As understood by Arendt, the world is not something abstract, but an expression of the visual, audible, and tangible positioning and orientation of individuals. Keeping such public horizons in existence requires a perceptive and sensible imagination, which guarantees that individuals’ *sense* of contact with reality and with other human beings will not atrophy. At the same time, the refashioning of public spaces requires the imaginative ability to see reality differently, in ways that facilitate the creative and meaningful dialogue of images and experiences, of narratives and memories.¹¹³

In other words, responding to the modern crisis of world alienation requires a reconstruction of the world through imagination without allowing this imagination to swing into a totalitarian escape from reality.

In particular, the faculty of imagination has to have its limitations in an objective reality shared with other human beings. The limitations for the political use of imagination must be the factual world. Tyner reasons that in light of the imagination’s role in mediating judgment and action, Arendt ties the faculty to a sense of objective reality. He writes

What makes Arendt's conception of imagination unique, though, is that it is bounded to reality. We do not simply conjure up any image of a new world that strikes us and then act in light of that fantasy. Rather, we imagine a new world that bears a close enough resemblance to the world that exists in reality to guide our actions within limits. These limits are important, for Arendt, as it is only by acknowledging limitations that we avoid actions that descend into excess and needless destruction.¹¹⁴

Without this anchoring, the use of imagination can develop dangerously unhinged exemplars that lead to deranged action. Tyner points to Arendt's essay *Truth and Politics* and *Lying and Politics*. In those essays, Tyner writes, Arendt argued for the proper boundaries of imagination in politics where the use of imagination to picture the world otherwise is limited by our sense of reality and the shared world of objects. For Arendt, the severing of the connection between the reality of the shared world and imagination is both a condition of totalitarianism and a consequence of world alienation. With Arendt, Tyner suggests that the possibilities of the imagination and the effect that these possibilities have for political action must be tempered with community sense and the objective standards of the common world.

There's an important connection between Tyner's and Lederman's arguments in that the limitations to imagination—the objective, factual world—can be derived from the judgments of the spectators *outside* of the public sphere in order to inform the judgments of the spectators *inside* of the public sphere, namely, those spectators who are actually involved in the political activity of exchanging and shaping opinion. Thus, the limits to the imagination that Tyner speaks of must be limned by the artists, scientists, historians, philosophers, etc. who develop their opinions from a distance outside of the public sphere.

CHAPTER 2: ARENDT'S POLITICAL IMAGINARY

In the last chapter, I argued that the faculty of judgment is the basis of Arendt's vision for reconstituting the public sphere around the imagination. In this chapter, I argue that narrative plays a crucial role in Arendt's political judgment. One of the main claims in the previous chapter is that judgment has the capacity to guide action through the use of exemplarity. That action benefits from the exemplarity of the imagination depends on the fact that, in Arendt's view, action is necessarily narrative. Additionally, one of the central aspects of judgment is its communicability. Judgments are communicable because human action is necessarily linguistic, and therefore lends itself to being communicated. At least for these two reasons, the narrativity of action is necessary to understand Arendt's theory of judgment. Narrative action and judgment have a reciprocal relationship in so far as judgment frames and imbues actions with meaning while action provides the raw material, so to speak, for the judging spectators. At the same time, the way in which judging spectators, particularly when they work as poets and story tellers, understand and weave stories into meaningful wholes determines a certain narrative framework within which human beings can insert their own narrative actions.

The importance of narrative action and the stories that they produce for judgment underscores the importance of culture and artists in particular. The artworks and taste that is cultivated and preserved in culture is essential for constituting the *sensus communis* and exercising the faculty of judgment. In addition to culture, the process of reification that artists undertake is crucial for enriching the public imagination. In Arendt's political theory, artists play a key role by creating the artworks that open up the world. In particular, Arendt focuses on poets and writers as important figure because their work with language has a direct impact on the

narrative frameworks which spectators use to inform their judgments and within which agents act and disclose their stories.

Just as political structures have been damaged by world alienation, culture and artworks have been degraded in similar ways. In particular, the process of consumption and production intrinsic to modern capitalism turn the worldly artwork into an object for use—philistinism—or, what is perhaps worse, consumption—mass culture—thereby diminishing the power of the artwork to open up a world.

What I show in this chapter is that in the public realm constituted by judgment, while we can inform our judgments through an appreciation of trusted truth tellers, the determination of judgment comes down to competing narratives. Therefore, Arendt focuses on the role that literature has in creating these narratives for ourselves, and also the way in which narratives can help inform our judgments by enlarging our sense of and appreciation for the reality of the other. In a sense, narratives, and poetic language in particular, humanize a deeply alienated world and help us reconcile to the reality of crises in the past, present, and future.

Narrative Action

Stories provide insight about what the world is like and how we are to live in it, thereby determining the judgments we make concerning the world. Likewise, political judgments take place within a web of stories that allow spectators to represent relevant features of reality. Stories, both fictional and historical, are essential in forming political judgment. Narratives provide the necessary schemas for the operation of reflection.

What we do in politics is persuading others of our judgments by communicating stories that open up new ways of ‘seeing’ in imagination. For Arendt, narratives frame reality, creating a

horizon of meaning within which judgment and action is possible. Narratives are constructed through storytelling and preserved in culture, but they originate in human action. Arendt calls the reality of speech and action that goes on between human beings the “web of human relations.”¹¹⁵ In order to contribute to a narrative web, political action requires a public space of appearance constituted by judging spectators. For Arendt, the public realm of judging spectators provides the “the revelatory character without which action and speech would lose all human relevance.”¹¹⁶ Therefore, political action always occurs within a linguistic horizon. Speech is necessary for political action. Arendt writes,

Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject, as it were...Speechless action would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words.¹¹⁷

Action becomes political and meaningful only insofar as it takes part in a culture’s framework of stories and narratives. As Allen Speight writes, the narrativity of action rests on its ability to “be revealable within a *world* of shared public space which has resilience and vulnerability.”¹¹⁸ For Speight, Arendt’s political action depends on its *disclosure* through speech, that is, the communicability of judgment. Arendt writes that:

The disclosure of the “who” through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact.¹¹⁹

Arendt’s viewpoint was that all human life can be told from beginning to end as a story, and this is the pre-political and pre-historical condition of human life.¹²⁰

The role of the spectators and the poets who look back on the stories of the actors is crucial in making sense of the human story. The role of artists in Arendt’s theory is to reify their

‘backward glance’ through history in order to condense from this vision an artwork that has ‘exemplary truth,’ or ‘exemplary validity,’ which can serve as a kind of maxim for political actors. The artwork is a condensation of the human story that helps inspire and guide who we are. Explaining the relationship of actors to the spectators, Arendt writes that

Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants. All accounts told by the actors themselves, though they may in rare cases give an entirely trustworthy statement of intentions, aims, and motives, become mere useful source material in the historian’s hands and can never match his story in significance and truthfulness...Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and “makes” the story.¹²¹

For Arendt, the full narrative of a life is bound up with the perception of the storyteller, historian, or poet.

The Role of Culture in Politics

The importance of culture for politics is more than just the care for a stable political world; culture creates the *sensus communis* that grounds the judgment that guide the actor. In a sense, the culture or story telling is crucial to the capacity for collective political action. Human narratives depend upon the stable political world, but also on the work of the poet who brings into language the kind of representations that shape understanding and judgment. The words of the poet, in Arendt’s view, seem to be directly contrasted with the shallow ‘officialese’ that Eichmann spoke.

In particular, Arendt articulated a poetics of reconciliation in which art has the power to transform the fragmented, alienated, modern, human world into a meaningful space of appearance through the process of reification. For Arendt, poetic work is needed to form the political imaginary that frames the *sensus communis*. Communities form around cultural products

insofar as artworks elicit aesthetic judgments that connect spectators, who are part of an intersubjectivity, in communities of taste that ground subjective, universal judgments. The worldly artifice of culture forms around the spaces of appearance wherein meaningful political action can take place. The key to the significance of imagination, language, and poetry in Arendt's larger project of understanding the basis of political community is her theory of 'narrative action.'

We saw that, Arendt's view, politics is analogous to the theatre: there are actors and there are spectators. In Arendt's perspective, an aesthetic—or cultural—foundation is necessary for political community in general, and vice versa. The political dimension of life needs artists for their world-creating capacity, while political actors are needed for the spectators. It is artists who—through the process of reification—are the first to create that worldly dimension of the public sphere, where spectators can come around an objective entity.

In particular, the work of the poets has a role in reconciling with our specifically modern form of loneliness where the individual has been cut off from common sense and lives in a state of 'worldlessness.' For Arendt, the poetic object creates a relation between human beings in that the artwork is an independent entity that two or more people can come together and recognize in its sameness. The poetic use of language is capable of making the world a suitable stage for acting. Hence, in Ian Storey's words, Arendt sees the role of the poet as laying down the groundwork, or 'grammar,' for action, particularly political action. By changing the cultural imaginary, the poet, Arendt claims, shapes the narratives that determines important judgments about our political actions.

Artists and Artworks

In *The Crisis in Culture*, Arendt states why the difference between art and culture is important in terms of understanding what culture is and what its relationship to politics is. I agree with Margaret Canovan when she writes that “Arendt’s quasi-cultural approach to politics is the source of many of her most illuminating insights.”¹²² For Arendt, culture is connected with the way in which the common world is cared for, preserved, and judged. Arendt explains culture as the development of “nature into a dwelling place for a people” and “taking care of the monuments of the past.”¹²³ Hence culture is the preservation and care for the living space wherein human action and speech develops. Arendt traces the notion of culture to the Roman civilization:

Culture, word and concept, is Roman in origin. The word “culture” derives from *colere*—to cultivate, to dwell, to take care, to tend and preserve—and it relates primarily to the intercourse of man with nature in the sense of cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation. As such, it indicates an attitude of loving care and stands in sharp contrast to all efforts to subject nature to the domination of man.¹²⁴

This attitude of loving care, cultivation, and preservation is a crucial counterpoint to the world alienation that is caused by the unending accumulation of modern capitalism. What’s more, this Roman attitude is essential to the worldliness on which the political realm rests. It is in culture that we construct and care for the space of appearance where these poetically transformed events conspire. Human beings raise objects from the process and cycle of use and consumption into the elevated sphere of culture, where it takes on a meaning that extends beyond its use and its value as a commodity or consumable.

Specifically, culture is associated with the taste for and the appreciation of the works created by artists, poets, musicians, and philosophers, “not in those who fabricate beautiful things, that is, in the artists themselves, but in the spectators, in those who move among them.”¹²⁵

Arendt understands “by culture the attitude toward, or, better, the mode of intercourse prescribed by civilizations with respect to” beautiful and monumental objects.¹²⁶ The Ancient Greek attitude to art and philosophy was developed within the bounds and limits of political judgment. In this sense, culture requires judgments of taste. Arendt’s analysis of the nature of culture as the right use of judgment in the Ancient civilization led her to ask whether “taste belongs among the political faculties.”¹²⁷ Arendt’s hypothesis that it does is supported by her conception of judgment as grounded on a *sensus communis* which is cultivated through association with others who have previously developed their taste.

Now, artworks and the artists who produce them are distinct from the culture of which they are a part and to which they contribute. Whereas culture has an affinity to politics in the faculty of judgment, art, insofar as it is a mode of fabrication, is an apolitical activity for Arendt—even if it is necessarily informed by taste. For Arendt, the “fabrication of things, including the production of art, is not within the range of political activities; it even stands in opposition to them” because it is a utilitarian activity that “always involves means and ends.”¹²⁸ In art production, the final product determines everything in the process—materials, people involved, actions—is justified by the end to be achieved.

For Arendt, there has long been an opposition between culture and politics in that they both prescribe opposing ways of relating to the world of appearance. Arendt frames the opposition between culture and politics in this way:

A conflict between the political and the cultural can arise only because the activities (acting and producing) and the products of each (the deeds and the works of people) all have their place in public space. The question to be decided regarding this conflict is simply that of which standards should in the end apply in this public space created and inhabited by people: the standards common to acting, or else to producing; those that are political in the basic sense of the word, or those that are specifically cultural.¹²⁹

What Arendt is suggesting is that the work of *homo faber* is a necessary basis for creating the political realm, but the attitude of the *homo faber* must be distinguished from the human actor whose freedom is existentially essential. If society were to privilege fabrication and artifice over the free speech and deed of the human agent, the humanity of our species would be lost. I argue, further, that culture archives and memorializes the deeds and words of public actors in a narrative, or history. For Arendt, the ability to inscribe public memory in the common world creates a necessary horizon of meaning that is fundamental for the capacity to judge.

However real the conflict between culture and politics, culture has another important role that does not conflict or oppose political action. This is the power of world making. For Arendt, culture is a process that lifts artworks out of the realm of use and consumption. Arendt explains the nature of artwork and how it becomes art, writing that not only are artworks not being consumed like consumer goods, or used up like objects of use; they have to be lifted out of this process of use and consumption altogether; they must be explicitly sealed, so to speak, against the biological necessities of human beings. This may happen in various ways, but culture in the specific sense is only found where it does happen.¹³⁰ Lifting the object out of the process of consumption and production that is bound up with world alienation is what is most powerful about Arendt's view of culture.

Artworks create a space or a stage for human beings to come together into a 'space of appearance.' Artworks are crucial in creating the durability of the human artifice and establishing standards of objectivity. According to Arendt, artworks are the most durable objects in the human world because they rise above the logic of the market and the cycle of consumption when they are preserved within in a cultural institution like a museum. Among the things that give the human artifice the stability without which it could never be a reliable home for men are a number of objects which are strictly without any utility whatsoever and which, moreover, because they are unique, are not exchangeable and therefore defy equalization through a common denominator such as money...By the same token, it must be removed from the exigencies and wants of daily life, with which it has less contact than any other thing.¹³¹

For Arendt, the condition of worldliness depends on the durability of the human artifice that serves as its material infrastructure. In order to develop a world, we have to erect a permanent place in it. This is what allows us to escape from the life process and establish a public space that outlasts the life of the individual. This is the role of the artwork. As Arendt writes:

From this viewpoint, the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that—in contradiction to the Heraclitean saying that the same man can never enter the same stream—men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table.¹³²

Artwork has even survived its separation from religion, myth, and magic. Arendt writes:

Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to the use of living creatures, a use which, indeed, far from actualizing their own inherent purpose—as the purpose of a chair is actualized when it is sat upon—can only destroy them. Thus, their durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages.¹³³

An artwork is essentially a reification of the needs, wants, and feelings present in human thought. This internal content must undergo a process of reification whereby it is transformed into a material process. Arendt describes the process of reifying thought and feeling in this way:

Thought is related to feeling and transforms its mute and inarticulate despondency, as exchange transforms the naked greed of desire and usage transforms the desperate longing of needs—until they are fit to enter the world and to be transformed into things, to become reified. In each instance, a human capacity which by its very nature is world open and communicative transcends and releases into the world a passionate intensity from its imprisonment within the self.¹³⁴

For Arendt, “the specific productivity of work lies less in its usefulness than in its capacity for producing durability.”¹³⁵ While all products of *homo faber* have an objective, public appearance that can be judged according to their worldliness as opposed to their use value, artworks are specifically intended to be a purely worldly phenomenon. However, Arendt writes that we need

the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all. In order to be what the world is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech.¹³⁶

Political action needs a durable home in which its memory can be inscribed in the human artifice and made durable. This making-durable is exactly the work of the poets.

Arendt's Political Poetics

In particular, Arendt thought that poetry, as a form of cultural activity and product, could 'intervene' in the imagination that grounds the *sensus communis* and challenge the bourgeois conception of the world as a society of laborers by introducing new possibilities. In order for the *sensus communis* to form the basis of a political community capable of making political judgments, we need to develop a language capable of transforming the bare facts of life into events and actions imbued with a larger meaning. With understanding, human beings comprehend their place in the world and establish permanence through meaning that transcends the span of individual lives. Understanding, for Arendt, is not merely instrumental; it is a process of creating meaning by which we "reconcile ourselves to reality" and "try to be at home in the world."¹³⁷ Further, "the result of understanding is meaning, which we originate in the very process of living insofar as we try to reconcile ourselves with what we do and what we suffer."¹³⁸ Only understanding can make our political struggles meaningful and "prepare a new resourcefulness of the human mind and heart" (UP 310).

One way of understanding the role of culture in politics, for Arendt, was through the political function of poetics. Language, and poetics in particular, can be a potent source of political world-building in a world alienated era. Ian Storey argues that Arendt developed a

political poetics that centered on an irreconcilable, but crucial, tension. The tension was between, on the one hand, a preservative poetics of memory that seeks to valorize the great and terrible deeds of human kind in everlasting cultural works; and, on the other hand, a disruptive poetics of re-inscription that seeks to re-inscribe invisible people back into the public space of appearance. For Storey, Arendt's claim is that language in particular develops a grammar that provides the "conditions of action, both the meanings of actions themselves and the rich interconnections (and the richer and more scandalous the better) between each appearance of action and every darkened corner of its world."¹³⁹ Thus, "action may reveal the agent's *daimon* but, as action, that *daimon* remains a mere fact until it becomes a poetic fact."¹⁴⁰ This squares with Arendt's theory of action as intrinsically linguistic or tied to speech and narrative.

Jana Schmitt expands on the theory of the role of language in world building, and its subsequent facilitation of politics. For Schmitt, language is there to 'reconcile us with reality'; language has a disclosing power that imbues our reality with meaning. Schmitt's thesis corresponds to what Storey saw as one half of the tension at the heart of Arendt's political poetics, but Schmitt supports Czobor-Lupp's and Storey's argument by confirming that Arendt understood culture to be a contribution to the maintenance of reality. For Schmitt, the crisis of world alienation is that "our transcendental abandonment has left us with no higher authority than that of the meanings we create."¹⁴¹ Language can illuminate "small bits of reality. Like appearances, words disclose themselves and, in doing so, disclose the "before unapprehended relations of things." This is crucial for understanding how poetic language informs the imagination, a faculty with world-creating powers, in a way that is necessary for creating the discursive meaning we need to maintain a democratic politics.

Poetic language in particular aids our grasp on reality because it defies conventional usage.¹⁴² Poetic language in particular is one path to social and political meaning during the modern crisis of world alienation. Schmitt goes on to write that “both the “everything is possible” of totalitarianism and the “everything can be proven” of techno-scientific world alienation describe conditions in which possibility overturns contingency in the sense that a belief in total possibility disregards the expressions of difference that constitute reality.”¹⁴³ It is Schmitt’s contention that poetic language allows us to resist the kind of ideological thinking that totalitarianism relies on. Furthermore, Schmitt argues that for Arendt, “two different modes of conciliation have to be distinguished in thinking through the contingencies of world-building after 1945.”¹⁴⁴ These two modes of conciliation are forgiveness and reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

The first chapter gave an overview of Hannah Arendt's analysis of modernity and its effects of humanity. I argued Arendt's point that world alienation shaped the political conditions of the modern age. In the second chapter, I showed how Arendt used the third *Critique* to develop a novel response to the political crises of modernity through her theory of political judgment. I then argued that a correct estimation of Arendt's novel political theory requires an understanding of her appreciation for poetry. If we take her theories of art and culture seriously, then she seems to advocate for a view of the political that sees the language arts as having greater power to shape our political judgments than is usually assumed.

The connection that Arendt draws between world alienation, expropriation, and capital accumulation has great analytic value in thinking about the rise of modernity and capitalism. However, in my view she leaves out a set of events involving the most important fact of expropriation and capital accumulation in the modern age: slavery. The trans-Atlantic slave trade and the creation of slave economies in the West Indies utterly revolutionized and enriched European society at the expense of the unprecedented world alienation of African societies. Tens of millions of Africans were expropriated and turned into labor power in horrific fashion. A number of scholars have argued that enslavement, specifically of Black Africans, was the foundation of modern capitalism. Other scholars see the role of African political movement and enslavement as so central to the Atlantic world that they coined the term 'Afro-Modernity' to reflect the absolutely central position of Black labor and struggle to the intellectual development of the modern age. Despite her emancipatory discourse, her deep analysis of racism and imperialism, and her focus on human rights, Arendt's work reflects a blindness to the experience of Black people, and African Americans in particular. Not only did she completely overlook and

underestimate the role of slavery, but in her work *On Revolution*, she completely writes out the role of slavery and Black Americans during the American revolution. She falsely paints American as a prosperous society without any mention of the central role that slavery played in the American economy for the majority of its history.

Notes

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- ¹ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, xix.
 - ² Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 174.
 - ³ Foucault, *What Is Enlightenment?* 9.
 - ⁴ Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 174.
 - ⁵ Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*, 150.
 - ⁶ Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*, 183.
 - ⁷ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, xlvi.
 - ⁸ Tsao, *Arendt Against Athens*, 98.
 - ⁹ Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, 80.
 - ¹⁰ Tsao, *Arendt Against Athens*, 98.
 - ¹¹ Foucault, *What Is Enlightenment?* 38.
 - ¹² Foucault, *What Is Enlightenment?* 47.
 - ¹³ Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 174.
 - ¹⁴ Villa, 174.
 - ¹⁵ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, xix.
 - ¹⁶ Canovan, *The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt*, 81.
 - ¹⁷ Canovan, "Politics as Culture," 181.
 - ¹⁸ Canovan, 183.
 - ¹⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 253.
 - ²⁰ Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 190.
 - ²¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 252.
 - ²² Arendt, 253.
 - ²³ Arendt, 254.
 - ²⁴ Arendt, 255.
 - ²⁵ Arendt, 254.
 - ²⁶ Arendt, 256.
 - ²⁷ Arendt, 255-256.
 - ²⁸ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 137.
 - ²⁹ Arendt, 137.
 - ³⁰ Arendt, 128.
 - ³¹ Arendt, 137-138.
 - ³² Arendt, 137.
 - ³³ Arendt, 139.
 - ³⁴ Arendt, 139.
 - ³⁵ Arendt, 141.
 - ³⁶ Arendt, 140.

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- ³⁷ Arendt, 474.
³⁸ Arendt, 460.
³⁹ Arendt, 460.
⁴⁰ Arendt, 460.
⁴¹ Arendt, 475.
⁴² Arendt, 465.
⁴³ Arendt, 464.
⁴⁴ Arendt, 461.
⁴⁵ Arendt, 462.
⁴⁶ Arendt, 462.
⁴⁷ Arendt, 462.
⁴⁸ Arendt, 461.
⁴⁹ Arendt, 464.
⁵⁰ Arendt, 461-462.
⁵¹ Arendt, 470.
⁵² Arendt, 470-471.
⁵³ Arendt, 471.
⁵⁴ Arendt, 472.
⁵⁵ Arendt, 474.
⁵⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 256.
⁵⁷ Arendt, 256.
⁵⁸ Arendt, 256.
⁵⁹ Arendt, 257.
⁶⁰ Arendt, 257.
⁶¹ Arendt, 254.
⁶² Arendt, 257.
⁶³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 257.
⁶⁴ Kateb, "The Judgment of Arendt," 122.
⁶⁵ Kateb, 122.
⁶⁶ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 193.
⁶⁷ Benhabib, 192.
⁶⁸ Payne, "Kant's Parergonal Politics," 246.
⁶⁹ Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," 225.
⁷⁰ Habermas, 225.
⁷¹ Beiner, "Reading 'Truth and Politics,'" 123.
⁷² Beiner, 125.
⁷³ Zerilli, "We Feel Our Freedom," 162.
⁷⁴ Zerilli, 162.
⁷⁵ Zerilli, 162.
⁷⁶ Zerilli, 165.
⁷⁷ Zerilli, 166.
⁷⁸ Zerilli, 173.
⁷⁹ Zerilli, 174.
⁸⁰ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 61.
⁸¹ Arendt, 56.
⁸² Beiner, *Political Judgment*, 13.
⁸³ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 61-62.
⁸⁴ Beiner, *Political Philosophy*, 16.

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- ⁸⁵ Zerilli, “We Feel Our Freedom,” 179.
- ⁸⁶ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 63.
- ⁸⁷ Arendt, 66.
- ⁸⁸ Arendt, 66.
- ⁸⁹ Arendt, 67.
- ⁹⁰ Arendt, 67.
- ⁹¹ In “Judging Human Action: Arendt’s Appropriation of Kant,” 139-140, Robert Dostal writes “through her analysis of judgment Arendt means to make final sense of the social and political, action and thought, history and human experience—themes that occupy her entire *oeuvre*.” While Dostal is unsatisfied with Arendt’s reading of Kant, he does make clear that her unorthodox reading is intended as part of her own original political philosophy.
- ⁹² Arendt, 68.
- ⁹³ Arendt, 67.
- ⁹⁴ Arendt, 68.
- ⁹⁵ Arendt, 68.
- ⁹⁶ Arendt, 69.
- ⁹⁷ Arendt, 69.
- ⁹⁸ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:294, 174.
- ⁹⁹ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 70.
- ¹⁰⁰ Arendt, 71.
- ¹⁰¹ Arendt, 72.
- ¹⁰² Arendt, 74.
- ¹⁰³ Arendt, 74.
- ¹⁰⁴ Arendt, 68.
- ¹⁰⁵ Arendt, 75.
- ¹⁰⁶ Arendt, 75.
- ¹⁰⁷ Arendt, 75.
- ¹⁰⁸ Arendt, 76.
- ¹⁰⁹ Arendt, 76.
- ¹¹⁰ Arendt, 76.
- ¹¹¹ Arendt, 77.
- ¹¹² Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 244.
- ¹¹³ Czobor-Lupp, *Imagination in Politics*, 69.
- ¹¹⁴ Tyner, “Action, Judgment, and Imagination,” 523.
- ¹¹⁵ Arendt, 183.
- ¹¹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182.
- ¹¹⁷ Arendt, 178-179.
- ¹¹⁸ Speight, “Arendt on Narrative Theory and Practice,” 116.
- ¹¹⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184.
- ¹²⁰ Arendt, 184.
- ¹²¹ Arendt, 192.
- ¹²² Canovan, “Politics as Culture,” 190.
- ¹²³ Arendt, 213.
- ¹²⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 208.
- ¹²⁵ Arendt, 213.
- ¹²⁶ Arendt, 213.
- ¹²⁷ Arendt, 215.
- ¹²⁸ Arendt, 215.
- ¹²⁹ Arendt, 187-188.
- ¹³⁰ Arendt, 190.

¹³¹ Arendt, 167.

¹³² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 137.

¹³³ Arendt, 167.

¹³⁴ Arendt, 168.

¹³⁵ Arendt, 172.

¹³⁶ Arendt, 173.

¹³⁷ Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 308.

¹³⁸ Arendt, 309.

¹³⁹ Storey, "The Reckless Unsaid," 891.

¹⁴⁰ Storey, 891.

¹⁴¹ Schmitt, "Hannah Arendt's Fatherless Thought," 527.

¹⁴² Schmitt, 527.

¹⁴³ Schmitt, 531.

¹⁴⁴ Schmitt, 533.

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