

**The Paradoxical Liberty of Bio-Power:
Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault on Modern Politics**

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ABSTRACT

For Hannah Arendt, spontaneous, “initiatory” human action and interaction are suppressed by the normalizing pressures of society once “life” – that is, sheer life – becomes the primary concern of politics, as it does, she finds, in the modern age. Arendt’s concept of the social is indebted to Martin Heidegger’s analysis of everyday Dasein in *Being and Time*, and contemporary political philosophers inspired by Heidegger, such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Giorgio Agamben, tend to reproduce her account of the withdrawal of the political in modernity. In this essay, I complicate Arendt’s theory by turning to Michel Foucault’s parallel but diverging understanding of the nature of power in modern society to show, surprisingly, that Foucault’s narrative of the emergence of modern power pictures a society that is more, not less, politicized.

KEY WORDS

Arendt, bio-power, Foucault, Lacoue-Labarthe, modernity, Nancy, pastoral power, the social, rulership.

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1.

In the political thought of Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, modernity is the moment of a new, post-classical totalitarianism (*totalitarisme inedit*). It is best understood, they argue, as the effectuation, installation, and generalization of “the philosophical as the political.” This dream – deriving the political from a philosophical foundation, making of the political regime an expression of philosophical truth – is characteristic, they hold, of the Western tradition of political theory since Plato. The outcome is the simultaneous *domination* of the political, and the latter’s “withdrawal” (*retrait*).¹

By “domination of the political,” I understand Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe to mean the imperative that all human activities find their ultimate semantic coherence within the horizon of the political *under its modern interpretation*. By “withdrawal of the

¹Nancy & Lacoue-Labarthe, “Overture,” *Rejouer le politique*, 15. See also Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Transcendence Ends in Politics,” *Typography*, 228ff.

political,” I understand them to mean that the modern interpretation of the political is an impoverished one. It is impoverished, in part, because it eschews deliberation, or what they (following Aristotle) call “the sharing of ethical and evaluative speech.” The modern interpretation of the political is further impoverished in that it restricts the scope of the political to an exclusively technological, social, and economic framework. From this point of view, politics is the administration of the population, understood as a totality of “human resources” to be preserved, enhanced, and optimized.² Modernity, then, is the effacement of deliberation on the character and significance of human association (*l'être-ensemble des hommes*) by the “total immanence of common life” (*l'immanence totale de la vie-en-commun*). It is a regime in which expressions of differences in what it means to be human are flattened out and obscured by a triumphant, politically legitimated master vocabulary of security, organization, and efficiency.

One source of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's thesis is Martin Heidegger, who finds in modernity the oblivion of being and the triumph of technicity. For Heidegger, the “closure of metaphysics” intensifies a previously concealed “technological thrust” in the Western philosophical tradition, so that questions of organization and administration come to predominate over all others.³ A more immediate source for their idea of post-classical totalitarianism, however, is Hannah Arendt's interpretation of the political

²Nancy & Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le retrait du politique*, 198. Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*.

³See Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” and “The Age of the World Picture” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*.

character of modernity.⁴ For Arendt, spontaneous, “initiatory” human action is suppressed by the normalizing pressures of society once life – that is, sheer life – becomes the primary concern of politics, as it does, she finds, in the modern age.⁵ In this essay, I qualify Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s understanding of the withdrawal of the political by contesting, or at least complicating, Arendt’s account. And to further complicate matters, I shall do that by turning to Michel Foucault’s parallel but diverging understanding of the nature of power in modern society.

2.

For Arendt, the origin and essence of society’s normalizing power is the “traditional substitution of making for acting,” which she articulates through a reading of Plato’s *Statesman*. A second factor is the collapse of the Aristotelian hierarchy of human activities, in which contemplation is highest in rank, and the emergence in its place of individual life as “the highest good of modern society.”⁶

The substitution of making for acting is a temptation, Arendt argues, to which the tradition of Western political philosophy has largely succumbed out of exasperation with the “haphazardness and moral irresponsibility” of political action, which is anarchic, disclosive, revelatory, and unruly in character.⁷ The essential unpredictability of action

⁴See Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le retrait du politique*, 191-192.

⁵See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 38.

⁶Arendt, *Human Condition*, 313-314.

⁷Arendt, *Human Condition*, 220.

stems from “the human condition of plurality,” and so Plato attempts to replace plurality with unity through the practice of *rulership*, or the principle that “men can lawfully and politically live together only when some are entitled to command and others are forced to obey.”⁸ In Platonic rulership, Arendt explains, the *polis* is imagined as a gigantic household organized by a hierarchy of command and obedience. Plato achieves this in two ways. First, he finds the model for rulership over the *polis* in *self-control* or rule over oneself. The reduction of acting to commanding and obeying is in this way rooted in the spiritual constitution of humanity, whose state is simply “man writ large.”⁹ Second, Plato firmly separates knowledge from action, thus making it possible to understand political affairs through the categories of ends and means. Political knowledge is knowledge of what is Good, or Just, and it is established philosophically, not politically. Goodness and Justice are the ends of politics, and the latter is the means by which the former is achieved.¹⁰ With the transformation of politics into rulership, Arendt says, politics becomes the “mastery of the technique of human affairs,” and on that basis the philosopher-ruler establishes the overarching framework that unifies *polis* life. According to the model of Platonic rulership, Arendt concludes, political action is a kind of fabrication, a purely instrumental activity dedicated to the programmed, quasi-automatic execution of “an allegedly ‘higher’ end.”¹¹ It is in this sense that rulership is the substitution of the predictability of making for the spontaneity of acting.

⁸Arendt, *Human Condition*, 222.

⁹Arendt, *Human Condition*, 224.

¹⁰Arendt, *Human Condition*, 225.

¹¹Arendt, *Human Condition*, 228.

The “instrumentalization of action and the degradation of politics into a means for something else,” as Arendt dubiously describes Plato’s achievement, is virtually co-extensive with the mainstream of political philosophy since the ancient Greeks.¹² Modernity and normalization are accordingly something more than that. The turn towards a distinctively modern society of normalization (and not simply rulership) came about, in Arendt’s words, when “life asserted itself as the ultimate point of reference.”¹³ The Platonic and Aristotelian judgment that contemplation is the noblest form of life collapsed with the advent of the modern era, which put contemplation at the service of action. Because this reversal “operated within the fabric of a Christian society whose fundamental belief in the sacredness of life has survived . . . secularization and the general decline of the Christian faith,” individual life is established as the individual life to the *summum bonum*.¹⁴ The Christian celebration of individual life (as the first stage of life everlasting) results in the blending together of the distinct activities of labor, work, and action, and leads to the subordination of each to the morally primary task of securing sheer life.¹⁵

In Arendt’s view, this amounts to the glorification of labor, because labor is the activity essentially devoted to sheer biological survival – as opposed to work, which is dedicated to the fabrication of a human world of enduring objects meant to stand between humanity and nature. As a result, all activity in the modern world takes on the character

¹²Arendt, *Human Condition*, 230.

¹³Arendt, *Human Condition*, 314.

¹⁴Arendt, *Human Condition*, 313.

¹⁵Arendt, *Human Condition*, 316.

of labor – namely, futility, since the actions that secure sheer biological existence engender no enduring objects; instead, the products of labor are entirely used up in their consumption and so must be continually renewed. The modern age succeeds at destroying the prejudice in favor of contemplation that Christianity shares with Greek philosophy. But it preserves Christianity’s celebration of individual life, with a key difference: modernity regards individual life not as immortal, but as a transitory, and merely biological, phenomenon.¹⁶

Modernity, then, signifies a change in the *object* of Platonic rulership. In the modern context, politics-as-rulership applies to the society as a whole, and suppresses plurality, not in order to realize a contemplatively established Good, but rather to optimize biological life. Indeed, it is not even individual life that is targeted, but that of the species as a whole: in the final stages of this development, Arendt says, “individual life” is “submerged into the over-all life process of the species.”¹⁷ The result is “socialized mankind,” a regime in which cooperation grounded in bare biological existence overwhelms “the human condition of plurality” that issues in spontaneous action. This post-political world, “in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance,” is sustained by an endless number of rules, imperatives, habits, prohibitions, and customs, all designed to ensure that the individual conforms to the group.¹⁸ Such a regime “demands of its members sheer automatic functioning” and “acquiescence in a dazed, ‘tranquilized’, functional type of

¹⁶Arendt, *Human Condition*, 319-320.

¹⁷ Arendt, 322.

¹⁸ Arendt, 46, 322.

behavior.”¹⁹ The decisive result, Arendt concludes, is that “society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action.... Instead, society expects from its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to “normalize” its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous or outstanding achievement.”²⁰

3.

Foucault agrees with Arendt about the “normalizing” aims of the modern political regime, and he shares her revulsion at its hostility to spontaneous action. But where Arendt sees the growth of an anonymous social pressure to conform for the sake of “life,” Foucault discerns the gradual consolidation of more or less explicit and patterned “technologies of power” devoted to normalizing individuals. Far from eliminating the political – and *contra* the received interpretation of his work – Foucault believes that the spread of this mode of “government” tends to increase opportunities for political action that takes the form of questioning, contesting, and resisting the *status quo*. The basis of this assessment is a different understanding of the genealogy of the “reversal” through which, for Arendt, modernity is ushered in. Foucault regards the political regime characteristic of the modern age not as the straightforward application of Platonic rulership to life, but as a *hybrid* form that combines Platonic rulership with a very

¹⁹Arendt, *Human Condition*, 322.

²⁰Arendt, *Human Condition*, 45. For a vivid evocation of Arendt’s idea, see Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social*.

different “pastoral power” of Hebraic and Christian origin.²¹ “Life,” for Foucault, is not a mere holdover from Christianity, but the site at which two different political practices and principles are cobbled together.

Like Arendt, Foucault finds the deep origins of modernity in Plato’s *Statesman*. The Platonic ruler, he stresses, claims to know the essence of justice, which is expressed in laws that apply to the *polis* as a whole rather than to individuals as such. Rulership in the Platonic sense appeals to a pre-existing order to which the ruler is granted access by reason (*nous*). The ruler rules, accordingly, by means of laws of reason (*nomoi*).²² But where Arendt suggests that the post-Christian regime simply adopts the rational, rule-centered conception of the political offered in the Platonic model (while applying it to life as the *summum bonum*), Foucault complexifies her account by arguing that Christianity refines and reinterprets Platonic rulership. It does this by combining political power, which unifies the *polis* by means of rational rules, with pastoral power, which optimizes the well-being of each member of the community. The latter accomplishes this aim by taking due account of the vagaries of health, morale, enterprise, education, and so on, as they apply differently to different groups and individuals at different moments and in different regions. Pastorship does not formulate general laws aimed at unifying the community. It seeks rather to operate continuously on the everyday life of a community whose members are at once irreducibly individual and utterly interdependent.²³

²¹See Michel Foucault, “Omnes et Singulatim,” in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*.

²²Foucault, “Omnes et Singulatim,” 67.

²³Foucault, “Omnes et Singulatim,” 67-70.

For Foucault, it is in this hybrid form of power that the distinguishing character of our age is to be sought. The combination of rulership devoted to unifying the whole, and pastorship addressed to securing individual life, is embodied in the doctrine of “reason of state.” This doctrine (whose articulation parallels the consolidation of the modern state) articulates the *rationality* of state power – a rationality devoted to both the Platonic implementation of general principles and the acquisition of concrete knowledge of populations.²⁴ Like Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, Foucault has no doubts about the tyrannical character of pastoral power, which, he writes, “could well be qualified as totalitarian.”²⁵ And he shares Arendt’s sense of the paradox that a regime hostile to spontaneous action should have sprung from the elevation of life to the status of the greatest good. Indeed, Foucault stretches the paradox when he shows how modern power absorbs and redeploys the ancient, death-oriented “sovereignty” (rulership) in such a manner as to justify death by putting it at the service of life. Thus, the death penalty comes to be regarded primarily as a deterrent to crime, i.e. an instrument for the protection of life. And during the Cold War, as Foucault observed in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, “the atomic situation” made “the power to expose a whole population to death ... the underside of the power to guarantee an individual’s continued existence”:

If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of a recent return of the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and

²⁴Foucault, “Omnes et Singulatim,” 74ff.

²⁵Foucault, “Omnes et Singulatim,” 79.

exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population. . . . Wars were never as bloody as they have been since the nineteenth century, and all things being equal, never before did regimes visit such holocausts on their own populations. But this formidable power of death . . . now presents itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.²⁶

The instrumentalities through which the state cultivates the health and vitality of the population, according to Foucault, are the normalizing practices of the “disciplines.”²⁷ These consist of experts who inquire into and debate with one another the basic, average, normal characteristics of the prevailing social reality. The consensus that emerges from this debate constitutes an image of reality that serves to regulate the members of a polity to the extent that they accept it and allow it to shape and delimit their political aspirations and activities.²⁸ (That they will do so is ensured to no small degree by the habit of those engaged in rulership – official legislators and state agencies – of appealing to expert descriptions of reality in explaining and justifying their policies.) Its authority resides in its apparent veracity and relevance, and these are determined, of course, merely by the persuasiveness of the image and of the experts through whose talk it is constructed. The

²⁶Foucault, *History of Sexuality* vol. 1.

²⁷See Foucault, *History of Sexuality* vol. 1, 261-262.

²⁸Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 144ff.

image of social reality created by the disciplines is a purely – or rather, quite impure – discursive construct. It plays an enormously important role in modern societies, which presuppose individuals who are more or less at liberty to govern themselves, and who do so on the basis of their view of the prevailing social reality. The authority of the disciplines is not sanctioned by an appeal to basic principles of justice, or to the decisions of a sovereign political body. It rests on nothing more than the circumstance that those who are empowered to talk about the world find their talk momentarily convincing.

4.

All this suggests the crucial difference between Arendt's and Foucault's understanding of normalizing society. Where Arendt sees normalization as the result of anonymous, informal social pressures to conform, Foucault understands normalization to proceed in a manner that is to a considerable extent "agonistic." The normalizing power of the disciplines, and the governmental rationality of the state that springs up along with it, is on Foucault's account addressed to citizens who are at liberty. Citizens of liberal polities, over whom the rule of law has only limited sway, call for subtler and more devious instruments of control: in those areas where the sovereign's command cannot coerce obedience, the expert's knowledge of reality might normalize. The power of normalization, however, is at bottom no more enduring than the always-contestable appeals to a true description of the individual's relationship to a larger social reality. That means that to the extent that the modern regime embraces life itself as its field of concern and administration, it multiplies the areas of human association that become

open to such contestation. Whereas for Arendt the outcome of a politics centered on life is the reification of politics, the outcome for Foucault it is the politicization of life. The other side of normalization, in other words, is contestation, or, as Foucault sloganizes: “where there is power, there is resistance.”

Drawing on Kant and Baudelaire, Foucault characterizes the activity of contestation proper to post-Enlightenment regimes as “the critical ontology of ourselves and of the present.” The critical ontology of ourselves and of the present is not a theory but rather “an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life.”²⁹ It focuses on ourselves *and* on the present because who we are, and the possibility of transforming ourselves, are conditioned by history. It is an avowedly experimental activity, dedicated to discovering the contingent limits and shifting possibilities of acting and thinking otherwise than we do, very much in the manner of Nietzsche’s “free spirit.”³⁰ The practice of critical ontology, Foucault asserts, might be an occasion for political community. Responding to Richard Rorty’s contention that his critical work does not appeal “to any of those ‘we’s’ whose consensus, whose values, whose traditions constitute the framework for a thought and define the conditions in which it can be validated,” Foucault responds:

[T]he problem is . . . to decide if it is actually suitable to place oneself within a “we” in order to assert the principles one recognizes and the values one accepts; or if it is not, rather, necessary to make the future formation of a “we” possible, by elaborating the question. Because it

²⁹Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” in *The Foucault Reader*, 50.

³⁰Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?,” 46.

seems to me that the “we” must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result—the necessarily temporary result—of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which one formulates it.³¹

Foucault goes on to say that the questions posed by his inquiries make it possible “to establish a ‘we’ on the basis of the work that had been done, a ‘we’ that would also be likely to form a community of action.”³² This “we” is to be brought about by the critical accomplishment of a new sense of one’s relationship to the past that involves undermining accounts of the past that purport to “explain” the present. As Foucault put it in conversation with Duccio Trombadori, criticizing Max Horkheimer and Theodor W.

³¹Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations,” *The Foucault Reader*, 385.

³²*Ibid.* Foucault prefers communities of action that take form temporarily around questions that do not derive from a pre-existing consensus, but that are powerful enough to attract the interest of others. His attraction to this idea of community accords with what Jean-François Lyotard has to say about the nature of the contemporary aesthetic public sphere: “if the [art]work is strong . . . it will produce people to whom it is destined. It will elicit its own addresses” (Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, 11).

Lyotard’s approach, in its turn, chimes with Martin Heidegger’s idea that the artwork “cannot itself come into being without those who preserve it” (“The Origin of the Work of Art,” 191-192). (It is noteworthy, from a Heideggerian point of view, that Lyotard equivocates on the issue of whether the artwork “produces” or “elicits” its public.) The essential point for Foucault and Lyotard is that the common denominator of aesthetic communication and political life is their deeply experimental, improvisational stance.

Adorno's reliance on an account of history "already written and valorized, and that they presented as an explanatory background":

... I have never felt fully satisfied with the results reached by others in the field of historical research. Even if I have referred to and used the many historical studies, I have always tried to conduct at first hand the historical analyses in the fields that interested me. I think instead that when they make use of history, they reason thus: they think that the work of the professional historian furnishes them with a kind of material foundation on which to construct the reasoning of this or that theoretical, sociological, psychological, or other type of problem.³³

For Foucault, on the other hand, it is just this distinction between explanatory background, and "sociological" (or political) phenomenon, that his work strives to blur and undo. Thus, although in one sense Foucault accepts the Vicoian and Rousseauian proposition that "man is made by man," he adds immediately that there can be no "fixing a rule of production, an essential term, to this 'production of man by man'."³⁴ This is because:

... in the course of their history, men had never ceased constructing themselves, that is, to shift continuously the level of their subjectivity, to

³³ Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 125.

³⁴ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 121.

constitute themselves in an infinite and multiple series of different subjectivities that would never reach an end and would never place us in the presence of something that would be “man.”³⁵

Or as Arendt puts it, making only a slightly different point, “men not Man inhabit the earth.”³⁶

5.

In sketching this approach to modern political criticism, Foucault is appealing, paradoxically enough, to the quintessentially Kantian strategy of “the public use of one’s reason,” which Kant had defined as “the use which a person makes of it as a scholar before the reading public.”³⁷ The critical ontology of the self and the present thus relies on what Arendt identifies as the faculty of judgment: “critical thinking, while still a solitary business, does not cut itself off from ‘all others.’ To be sure, it still goes on in isolation, but by the force of imagination it makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is *potentially* public.”³⁸ The space of *potential* publicness is created by enlarging one’s reason, taking into account the opinions of others not by slavishly

³⁵ Foucault, *Remarks on Marx*, 121

³⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 37.

³⁷ Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?,” in *Kant: Political Writings*, 54-60.

³⁸ Foucault, “Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations.”

following them but by imagining the world from their point of view.³⁹ It is within this space – the space of the potentially public – that Foucault situates his own practice. Or perhaps it is better to say that it is to the clearing of such space that Foucaultian critical ontology is dedicated. Foucault thinks that *this* space *has* grown – again only (but at least) potentially – to the precise extent that the governmental rationality of bio-power has extended its reach. Such is the paradoxical outcome of the attempt to exercise power under the condition of liberty.

To be sure, the political contests arising out of Foucaultian critical ontology are unable to meet Arendt’s standard of authentic political action, namely “greatness.”⁴⁰ Foucaultian struggles are by definition staked on what it means to optimize “life.” It would appear therefore impossible for them to reach the level of Pericles’ convincing the Athenians to change their minds about what it means to be Athenian (to repeat an example Arendt gives in *The Human Condition*). That sort of action not only yields a new interpretation of what it means to be human, but enables the actor to enter “the storybook of history” primarily *as* a reinterpreter. For Arendt, nothing less could count as authentic political action. But that does not mean, even on Arendt’s terms, that resistance to power staked on life is not significant and important in its own right. Such contests lead us to question what we are making of ourselves by mingling problems of power, life, government, subjectivity, and liberty. At the very least, they promise to preserve an openness to the political, even in Arendt’s elevated sense of the word.

³⁹See Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*.

⁴⁰Arendt, *Human Condition*, 198.

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