

Article

Genealogy of Experiential Frames: Methodological Notes on Arendt

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Abstract: This article seeks to add a new theoretical voice to the tradition of genealogical inquiry in political theory and beyond by offering a re-reading of the thought of Hannah Arendt. Going beyond the letter of her thought, in this article I propose that placing Arendt in the genealogical tradition of inquiry (particularly its Foucauldian strand) helps to make sense of what she was “up to” when she turned to history in her work, especially in the analysis of totalitarianism and the account of modernity presented in *The Human Condition*. I will specifically highlight the historical emergence of “process-thinking” that Arendt traces across her writings. The article seeks to sketch a unique approach to genealogical inquiry that can be taken up by anyone interested in critical analysis of our present age and its politics. Towards the end of the essay, I elaborate this approach methodologically by making a reference to frame analysis. Thus, I articulate a “genealogical frame analysis”, an inquiry into historical emergence of various metaphors and frames that organize our experience of the world. I also highlight the centrality of events for Arendt’s genealogy, as well as its role in a broader set of world-building practices.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt; genealogy; method; history; life; process; critique



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1. Introduction

Genealogy—the problematization of the present through the study of its historical emergence—has arguably become one of the defining methods, or modes of inquiry, in political theory over the last few decades. Originally introduced a century earlier in Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, it was Michel Foucault’s example that inspired scholars to pick up genealogy as a distinct methodology applicable to any area of inquiry. Philosophers, political scientists, international relations scholars, intellectual historians, and others have presented genealogies of various key domains of modern/contemporary politics, including truth and facts, conscience, sovereignty, gender, and “the informational person”—in addition of course to the countless correctives to and expansions of Foucault’s original genealogies of biopolitics, governmentality, discipline, and such (Williams 2010; Poovey 1998; Ojakangas 2013; Bartelson 1995; Repo 2015; Koopman 2019; Dean 1999). Recently, the nature and distinctive characteristics of the methodology itself have also started receiving more attention (Koopman 2013; Srinivasan 2019; Schuringa 2021; Vucetic 2011).

This article proposes to add a new theoretical voice to the tradition of genealogical inquiry in political theory and beyond—that of Hannah Arendt’s. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to the aspiration of the present Special Issue of *Genealogy* of putting different accounts of genealogy into critical cross-interrogation and, one would hope, cross-fertilization. The article has two main objectives. First, to demonstrate that placing her in the genealogical tradition of inquiry helps to make sense of what Arendt was “up to” when she turned to history in her work. The claim here is not so much that all, or even most, references to historical data in Arendt’s work are genealogical in nature. More modestly, I suggest that some of the seemingly questionable claims made by Arendt become more comprehensible when approached genealogically. Second, in addition to clarifying Arendt’s approach to political theory, the to and from between Arendt and the genealogical

tradition can also open up new perspectives for political theorists, philosophers, and others for conducting critical historical analysis. Although I will spend a considerable amount of time commenting on Arendt's writings, the main motivation behind the essay is not to offer yet another interpretation of this or that aspect of Arendt's political thought. Rather, the guiding impulse is to sketch one possible approach to genealogical inquiry that can be taken up by anyone interested in critical analysis of our present age and its politics.

In a sense, the examination of Arendt in relation to genealogy has been a long time coming. The historical elements in Arendt's thought have received increasing attention in recent years, and the link between her thought and that of Foucault has been comprehensively established (Owens 2017; King and Stone 2007; Yaqoob 2014; Braun 2007; Blencowe 2012). Furthermore, Nietzsche was one of the philosophers Arendt read early on in her life, and an enduring presence in her letters, notes, and lectures. Both the German and the English versions of *The Genealogy of Morals* in her personal library are heavily underlined and filled with marginalia. There certainly is a likeness between Nietzsche's investigation of the "conditions from which [. . .] values have sprung" and Arendt's inquiry into the conditions from which our political concepts and practices have emerged (See e.g., Arendt's underlining on pages 155 and 151 (Nietzsche 1956, pp. 151–55)). Loose references to genealogy are not uncommon in Arendt scholarship either (Benhabib 2002, p. 22; Villa 2007; Martel 2010; Kaplan 1995, pp. 126–29; Mantena 2010). A great example is Jacques Taminiaux's essay "The philosophical stakes in Arendt's genealogy of totalitarianism". Interestingly, Taminiaux starts the essay by justifying his title, but focuses exclusively on the use of the word "philosophy", on the one hand, and on the seemingly presumptuous assumption that one can analyze "the philosophical stakes" of work as massive as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* within the range of a single essay, on the other (Taminiaux 2002, p. 423). That Taminiaux does not find it necessary to comment on the usage of genealogy suggests, at a minimum, that using the word in the context of some of Arendt's work makes intuitive sense.

Yet, there is room for conceptual elaboration for readers interested in learning about a specifically Arendtian approach to genealogical analysis. Little attention has been devoted to her relationship with the genealogical tradition, either in the sense of considering the influence of Nietzsche's genealogy on Arendt or comparing Foucault's re-articulation of this tradition to her historical approach. The emphasis of the present article falls in the latter category. My focus lies in elaborating the implicit, latent, potentially fruitful links that may be established between Arendt and the contemporary articulations of genealogy, such as Colin Koopman's work on Foucault. The article involves a de- and recontextualization by inserting Arendt in contact with a tradition she did not explicitly engage with—and as my focus lies on *contemporary* and Foucauldian strands of genealogy, neither could she have. Conceptual interventions of this sort can be likened to experimental gardening, with the hope that the exposure of a plant to a new external stimulus (say, a potent nutriment), instead of causing catastrophic mutations, makes it grow new, strong branches beneficial both for itself and the surrounding environment.

The article proceeds in the following steps. The Section 1 highlights the general character of Arendt's theorizing—an activity taking place between the past and the future—and discusses the various uses of history in her thought and its interpretations. I suggest that the genealogical perspective, as a distinct mode of engaging with history, can complement the more contextualist interpretations (focused on direct influences) of her historical thought. Taking heed of Arendt's theoretical-temporal disposition also helps see the affinities between her thought and the genealogical tradition more plainly, as will become clear throughout the essay. Sections 2 and 3 then provide genealogical readings of Arendt's two major books, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*. I treat these works separately because they offer two complementary models of genealogical inquiry, allowing us to reflect on the links between Arendt and genealogists from various perspectives. In *The Origins*, Arendt's concern was to understand the historical conditions of possibility that enabled the rise of the totalitarian form of government and its constituent elements. The

book is effectively a “subversive” genealogy of the historical circumstances that made total domination possible. *The Human Condition*, in turn, is often read as an ahistorical ontology of human action. Contesting this view, I show how the book can be read as a critical history of the present. It is essentially concerned with metaphorical-conceptual gestalts we use to make sense of the world and their historical development. I trace particularly Arendt’s genealogy of modern process-thinking from the sixteenth century onwards. The final section is a “methodological conclusion”, in which I collect the main threads presented in the previous sections and articulate an original Arendtian approach to critical genealogy. Going beyond the letter of Arendt’s thought, I call this approach “genealogical frame analysis”—a form of history of the present that problematizes prominent frames, ways of organizing experience, by tracing them back to the historical circumstances that gave rise to them. I also highlight the futural aspects of such analysis, linking it to the broader concerns of democratic world-building.

2. Political Theory and the Uses of History

If Arendt’s standing towards Nietzschean genealogy remained somewhat implicit in her work, the more general temporality—and relationship with history—of political thought was something she emphasized tirelessly. In 1946, she described to her former mentor Karl Jaspers the new turn her thought had taken in the United States, where she arrived in 1940. What modest literary existence she had established in the early years in the US owed itself, she suggested, to the fact that she had “learned to think politically and see historically” (Arendt and Jaspers 1992, p. 31). Later, in a 1955 lecture, Arendt defined political theory—her new field of inquiry, after she had distanced herself from “pure” philosophy—as a meeting ground of philosophy and history, the former providing political theorists with concepts and the latter with factual data (Arendt 1955). The idea of political thought or theory as something that is not quite history or philosophy, although closely in contact with both, is something that stayed with Arendt for the rest of her career. It also, I will argue below, gives us the first premonitions on how to link her thought to the tradition of genealogy as a historically informed critique of the present.

A related articulation is to be found in Arendt’s account of thinking in the Preface of *Between Past and Future*—later adapted in her final work, *The Life of the Mind*. In one of her most quoted passages, she draws from a parable of Kafka’s, which describes a protagonist—“he”—and two antagonists, one pressing “him” from behind, the other one blocking the road ahead. “His” struggle, pressed between these two forces, represents metaphorically the temporal experience of the thinking ego (Arendt 1978, p. 202; 2006, pp. 9–12). Instead of time flowing on like a river, the activity of thought perceives it as two adversaries pressing towards the point between them. Arendt explains:

Seen from the viewpoint of man, who always lives in the interval between past and future, time is not a continuum, a flow of uninterrupted succession; it is broken in the middle, at the point where “he” stands. (Arendt 2006, p. 10)

Moreover, because “he” battles both forces rather than passively succumbing to their weight, this break in the temporal continuum is more than a geometrical point—it is a gap, which allows for movement. Thinking functions as a kind of a gravitational field that deflects the forces of past and future slightly off from their original trajectories so that now they meet each other at an angle. The resultant parallelogram of forces can thus be completed by adding a third, diagonal force in the middle. This force, originating in the present, and reaching towards infinity, is “the perfect metaphor for the activity of thought” (Arendt 2006, p. 12).

That history is central for Arendt’s thought is thus rather straightforward. However, when it comes to the question of what kind of role history exactly plays, things become more nebulous quickly. In fact, considering the vast secondary literature, it is “surprising that only recently have political theorists and historians of thought begun to place her historical writings at the center of her work” (Owens 2017, p. 39). The standard reception of Arendt sees her as a theorist of some sort of authentic politics, whose model is derived from

the Ancient Greeks. Although many aspects of this image have become all but obsolete in the secondary literature of the past two decades, it still holds its sway over a significant number of readers. Such an image, notably, does not promise much in terms of providing a model for historiographical inquiry. If the role of the past in political thought is to offer an alternative, a lost golden age, then there is very little actual historical work to be done, not to mention the fact that the whole project appears hopelessly utopian politically.

A related but more nuanced view can be found for example in Seyla Benhabib's identification—presented in one of the most influential studies of Arendt's political thought—of contradictory tendencies of historiography in Arendt. According to Benhabib, there are two strains of historical thought competing for prominence in Arendt's thought, "one corresponding to the method of fragmentary historiography, and inspired by Walter Benjamin; the other, inspired by the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger, and according to which memory is the mimetic recollection of the lost origins of phenomena as contained in some fundamental human experience" (Benhabib 2002, pp. 95, 123–24). The second strand, then, corresponds to the *Ursprungsphilosophie* aspect limelighted in the "standard reading". When operating in this mode, the claim goes, Arendt tends to look for privileged originary states of phenomena as containing their true essence. She, then, appears to represent exactly the type of historical approach rejected by Nietzsche and Foucault (Foucault 1980, pp. 140–42). The mistake of the standard reading for Benhabib is not that it posits something that simply does not exist in Arendt's text, but that it ignores *other things* that also exist in the text.

Benhabib's reading of Arendt is praiseworthy, but I am not convinced this distinction holds water. On the one hand, it seems to me that there are *more* than two uses of history in Arendt, and more influences than Benjamin, Husserl, and Heidegger. (Benhabib herself mentions Greek historiography. I would add at least Nietzsche and Kant). A lot of important work has emerged recently, locating Arendt in several traditions of historical thought, especially the broader German-Jewish challenges to Eurocentric canons and as a critic of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and the Kojevian Hegel (Curthoys 2010; Keedus 2015; Yaqoob 2014; Vowinckel 2001). Her history of imperialism and mode of storytelling have also been extensively analyzed (King and Stone 2007; Mantena 2010; Cavarero 2000). On the other hand, while Benhabib is correct to identify in Arendt a tendency to look for "origins", the dismissive representation of this practice as "essentialism" is not warranted, as has been also suggested by Sophie Loidolt (Loidolt 2018, pp. 124–26). As I will explicate below, once we drop the idea that the origins represent a "historical truth" of our activities and start treating them in a more genealogical fashion, they appear as key elements in Arendt's critical histories. At times, they may function rather similarly to the Benjaminian fragments. At other times, they operate as starting points for a historical analysis that problematizes current ways of speaking and thinking by showing how contemporary thought is conditioned by its unacknowledged historical entanglements.

In order to tease out Arendt's genealogical orientation, it is helpful to look more closely at the usage of history in her two major books, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* (accompanied by the related essays collected in *Between Past and Future*). Out of these, *The Origins* is usually treated as a model of critical historiography, although not one without its own shortcomings, whereas *The Human Condition* is taken to represent Arendt in her most philosophical, and historically essentialist, gear. While contesting this view, I acknowledge that *The Origins* offers a unique point of entry to Arendt as a critical historical thinker. I will therefore begin with a discussion of her approach in *The Origins*, after which I move to *The Human Condition*, arguing that the book is largely genealogical in its historical orientation.

3. Crystals: Subversive Genealogy in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

The Origins of Totalitarianism is not an easy book. It is long, complex, and makes a lot of bold claims. Ever since it was first published, one of the puzzles has been the relationship between the book's first two parts, Antisemitism and Imperialism, to the

actual analysis of totalitarianism in the final part. Arendt sought to clarify some of these questions by elaborating her “rather unusual approach” in a reply to Eric Voegelin’s critique of *The Origins*, published in *The Review of Politics* in January 1953, and in the essay published in *Partisan Review* as “Understanding and politics” and drafted within a span of 12 months in 1952/1953 (Several iterations of the latter essay have survived, and are collected in the Critical Edition of Arendt’s works (Arendt 2018b)). In these essays, Arendt discusses a set of problems she faced when writing the book. Primarily, and pivotally for our purposes, the problem was that historiography by nature tends towards salvation, and often justification or vindication, of the phenomena described (Arendt 1994, p. 402). Greek historiography was committed to preserving the “glory” of deeds recorded, and the modern science of history tended towards the idea of *Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht* (See (Benhabib 2002, pp. 86–88) for commentary), of subsuming individual acts to the overall process of world history. She noted that histories of anti-Semitism had often navigated this problem by looking at events exclusively from the viewpoint of the victims, with unsatisfactory results (Arendt 1994, p. 402). Arendt herself has been occasionally accused of slipping into a justificatory mode in the description of colonizer experiences in the second part of the book (For a good overview and assessment, see (Samnotra 2019, pp. 565–68)).

These very real dangers of historiographical writing posed a problem for Arendt: “how to write historically about something—totalitarianism—which I did not want to conserve but, on the contrary, felt eager to destroy” (Arendt 1994, p. 402). Straining to find a solution to this problem led Arendt to more general insight about the nature of history as a tool of political analysis and critique, one that was in accordance with the later description of thinking as taking place between the past and the future. In order to fight totalitarianism, one only needed to understand that it is a radical denial of freedom (Arendt 2018b, p. 133). If the goal is to subvert, not only the phenomenon in its current form, but the conditions of its emergence, then a deeper understanding is required. Historical understanding must reconcile us to the world where totalitarianism has become possible so as to make room for (future-oriented) action that builds a world where such dangers are less imminent.

Arendt’s solution to these conundrums was to write a genealogy of sorts—not a *history* of totalitarianism, but its “analysis in terms of history” (Arendt 1994, p. 403). She proceeded by identifying the chief elements that “crystallized” in totalitarianism, and analyzing them “in historical terms, tracing these elements back in history as far as I deemed proper and necessary”, that is, as far as they were still visible in totalitarianism (Arendt 1994, p. 403). To a large extent, her approach can be compared to “subversive” genealogy as a deconstructive articulation of the “linkages, assemblages, and networks” that produce “strange singularities” (Koopman 2013, p. 4). Just as the contingency of various historically emerged formations was a starting point in Foucault’s analyses, it was so in Arendt’s genealogy of totalitarianism. The rise of the Third Reich was not a metaphysical destiny, but something that could and should have been prevented.

Arendt’s metaphor for historical contingency is crystallization. Dissecting the event of totalitarian domination by identifying its constituent element, Arendt emphasized that the elements as such are not the *causes* of totalitarianism, if by causality we understand something resembling a determined process that can be read temporally to both directions once we get all the factors right. Thus understood, causality “is probably an altogether alien and falsifying category in the realm of historical and political sciences”. The ideological substance, the principle of expansion, and many of the practices (such as concentration camps) of totalitarian rule originated in imperialism. These elements, however,

become origins of events if and when they suddenly crystallize into fixed and definite forms. Then, and only then, can we trace their history backwards. The event illuminates its own past, but it can never be deduced from it. (Arendt 2018b, pp. 136–37)

The notion of the event is critical here. From the viewpoint articulated by Arendt, events and experiences in the present make possible the inquiry into the past. The event discloses the multiplicity of past happenings *as the elements* of something subsequent. Totalitarianism, as an unprecedented rupture in the tradition, is the clearest example, but

the same is true for all events. In the German edition of *The Origins*, Arendt writes of the First World War that it cannot be understood as a sum of its causes and motives, but “like all events [. . .] it illuminates not only itself, but its own past and immediate future” (Arendt 2003, p. 559). Even in our private lives, no hope or fear can prepare us for what actually takes place because the actuality of the event always overflows its anticipation in thought (Arendt 2018b, p. 138).

In the locus of understanding, between past and future, the historian and the political scientist (or theorist) work together. The historian’s task is to “analyze and describe the new structure which emerges after the event takes place as well as its elements and origins” (Arendt 2018b, p. 139). The theorist makes conceptual sense of all this, not by subsuming the event to pre-given categories, but by creatively, metaphorically making visible the nature of this new phenomenon. Working as a duo, the political scientist and the historian (as characters, or conceptual personae) provide a historically informed, conceptually strong account of the world as it is today.

Here, we can for the first time take stock of Arendt’s genealogy in relation to the post-Foucauldian genealogical tradition. For both, the roles of the historian and the political scientist merge, or at least operate adjacently. Political criticism moves between analyzing the historical contingencies that brought about the present events and thought-patterns, on the one hand, and experimentally conceptualizing these trajectories and experiences, on the other (See e.g., Rabinow 2009, p. 28). As summarized by Koopman, genealogy “articulates, makes sayable and visible, that is conceptually available, the problematizations of our present” (Koopman 2013, p. 24). What Arendt did with totalitarianism can be compared, at least from this angle, to Foucault’s well-known genealogies of discipline, governmentality, and biopower. What is going on in each case is the dialogue between a critical conceptualization and description of the present, accompanied by a historical analysis that grounds this conceptualization and demonstrates the contingent emergence of present practices. The point here is that the historical analysis that gives rise to these concepts is not a ladder that can be dismissed once the conceptualization is done. Treating the concepts of either Arendt or Foucault as purely philosophical notions whose usefulness depends solely on their “definitions” is to do injustice to them, usually to the point of distortion. What is more, the conceptualization is never really finished in any case. Both writers emphasized the open-endedness of the thought process—its lack of a “principle of closure” (Foucault 2007b, p. 64; Buckler 2011, p. 8; Hyvönen 2014). “All thinking,” Arendt once said, “has the earmark of being tentative” (Arendt 2018c, p. 474). Characteristically, Arendt’s most elaborate conceptualization of totalitarianism—“Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government”—did not appear in the first edition of *The Origins*, but was written in the years following its publication and appended to the second edition.

Another way of approaching the similarities between Arendt and Foucault in the domain of genealogy is to focus on the appropriation of Kant’s critical project that characterized the work of both. I take Foucault to be making a point quite similar to Arendt’s musings on causality when he defines critique as “something that attempts to restore the conditions for the appearance of a singularity born out of multiple determining elements of which it is not the product, but rather the effect” (Foucault 2007b, p. 64). Such analysis of the historical conditions of possibility also defines Arendt’s approach to totalitarianism. We start with the world of appearances, the events facing us, and work our way forward and backward, conceptually and historically, to get a grasp of the conditions of their possibility. These historical conditions include the particular constellation of imperialism, antisemitism, the rise of the bourgeoisie, the fall of the nation-state system, loneliness, and the emergence of masses that Arendt discusses in *The Origins*. They also include the various frames, metaphors, images, and ways of thinking that dominate our way of comprehending the world. This latter aspect will feature more prominently in Arendt’s work after 1951, as we will see in the following sections.

As a genealogy, *The Origins* is defined by a destructive impulse, which is directed at something that most people consider an ethico-political catastrophe to begin with.

This seems to set it apart from most Foucauldian genealogies that are focused on *submerged* problems, questions that are not posed in daily political debates but rather condition them. That said, as I will further suggest in the final section, this difference is deceptive to the extent that *The Origins* also reads as a more general problematization of various aspects of modern politics, such as the rule of economic rationality, the prominence of lonely masses, racism, and the treatment of refugees and stateless people. These issues are not totalitarian in themselves, but more general conditions for its (re-)emergence.

4. The Genealogy of Process-Thinking in *The Human Condition*

The Human Condition is often read as a presentation of Arendt's static ontology of political life. In it, she allegedly gives us her view of the "true", "original", or "authentic" meaning of politics. This interpretation, furthermore, is linked to a reading of her basic concepts—particularly the activities of labor, work, and action—as distinct territories ideally separated by militarized, impenetrable border walls and organized in a hierarchy (expanding Markell's (2011) critique of the "territorial reading" of *The Human Condition*). Many aspects of this reading have been criticized and overcome in recent years (see e.g., Markell 2011; Biser 2013; Ephraim 2018; Klein 2014; Birmingham 2018). The concepts of *The Human Condition*, recent commentators argue, do not organize themselves in a straightforward hierarchy composed of sealed elements. The activities of labor, work, and action are threads in the same fabric, enabling humane life on earth.

Following these critics, this section highlights the historical nature of the book. While no one has ever denied the presence of a strong historical element in *The Human Condition*, the static ontological reading of the book's main conceptual components has led to a somewhat shallow understanding of what Benhabib rightly (but passingly) refers to as its "genealogy of modernity" (Benhabib 2002, p. 22). Proceeding from the assumption that the three main activities of *vita activa* are isolated, unchanging blocs, Arendt's critical history tends to become presented in terms of merely flipping the hierarchy of these blocs. In modernity, according to this reading, labor, the Greek *ponos*, is elevated to the status of our highest, and collectively most pertinent activity, thereby eliminating the distinction between the public and the private, the *zoe* and the *bios*. The resulting corruption of the public sphere is what Arendt calls "the social". If this was all there is to it, the book's contribution to genealogy would be ephemeral. I will argue in contrast that *The Human Condition* is *thoroughly* historical. The basic activities, especially labor, go through vastly consequential transformations during modernity. The emergence of "the social" is entangled with a whole set of new experiences and new metaphoric frames to which modernity has given rise to. As a consequence, the direct application of terms such as *zoe* and *bios* to contemporary conditions makes about as much sense as conceiving twenty-first-century households as one-to-one equivalents of the fourth-century aristocratic *oikos*.

To make room for a genealogical reading of Arendt's argument, I approach her critique of modernity not directly through the notion of the social (which admittedly has its problems), but instead by focusing on the concept of "process" (for an overview of process-thinking across Arendt's writings, see Hyvönen 2016). As a general frame, process/processuality plays a key role in modern scientific understanding of the world, and as such, appears as a timeless truth. Arendt suggests, however, that it rose to its current status through a very specific (contingent) historical trajectory. Here, Arendt's concerns take us right to the heart of what genealogically informed critique seeks to accomplish. By highlighting the emergence of processual understanding of society, history, labor, life, and nature in modernity, Arendt sheds light—in a good genealogical fashion—on the submerged problematizations "within which we presently constitute ourselves", that is, the "historical conditions of possibility of our present ways of doing, being, and thinking" (Koopman 2013, pp. 1, 47). Regardless of our final assessment of the concept of the social, this genealogically informed broader set of concepts elaborated by Arendt is a helpful tool for developing a critical theory of the present.

For Arendt, the trajectory of the modern age can be summarized as the substitution of process for being (Arendt 2018a, p. 296). In the essay “The Concept of History”, this is articulated quite plainly when Arendt writes the following:

The modern concept of process pervading history and nature alike separates the modern age from the past more profoundly than any other single idea. To our modern way of thinking nothing is meaningful in and by itself, not even history or nature taken each as a whole, and certainly not particular occurrences in the physical order or specific historical events. There is a fateful enormity in this state of affairs. Invisible processes have engulfed every tangible thing, every individual entity that is visible to us, degrading them into functions of an over-all process. (Arendt 2006, p. 63)

A major, albeit not the most manifest, strand in *The Human Condition* traces the historical emergence of this type of process-thinking. The critical development on this score turns out to be the rise of capitalism, later followed by paradigm shifts in sciences both natural and historical. As I read Arendt, these issues are linked with each other, if not causally then at least by contributing to the same discursive formation as their historical condition of possibility. Arendt’s genealogy of process-thinking analytically articulates a distinct historical field of sense that unites, and is constituted by, multiple sources of emergence. Doing so, it helps us to critically think about the ways in which current modes of thinking and speaking condition—that is to say, limit and enable—us.

The key here is the conceptual development across different sciences that was initiated in the seventeenth century and culminated in the new sciences and practices of the nineteenth century. What set these conceptual developments in motion, however, was the change underwent by the activity of labor and its role in the totality of *vita activa*. “What were the experiences inherent in the laboring activity that proved of such great importance to the modern age?”, asks Arendt. Why was it that Locke and the subsequent political economists “clung so obstinately to labor as the origin of property, of wealth, of all values and, finally, of the very humanity of man”? Her answer is derived from the novelties brought about by the birth of capitalism:

Historically, political theorists from the seventeenth century onward were confronted with a hitherto unheard-of process of growing wealth, growing property, growing acquisition. In the attempt to account for this steady growth, their attention was naturally drawn to the phenomenon of a progressing process itself. (Arendt 2018a, p. 105)

Faced with new experiences—phenomena that escaped the grasp of received conceptual frameworks—these theorists started looking for metaphors. What they quickly found to be most apt for describing the novel economic-social phenomena were the images of natural processes in general, and the life process and its fertility in particular. Locke’s notion of property as improvement was the first notable approach of this type, and the vocabulary was perfected by Marx. What the tradition of political economy from Locke to Marx has in common, Arendt argues, is the representation of “the process of growing wealth as a natural process, automatically following its own laws and beyond willful decisions and purposes”. Because the process of growth initiated by nascent capitalism seemed endless, the most suitable metaphors were the ones pertaining to the eternal recurrence seen in nature. When it comes to human activities, only labor, human metabolism with nature, is unending and unequivocally necessary for life (Arendt 2018a, pp. 105–6, 110–11).

Two things are taking place here at once: the *emergence* of the new capitalist dynamics of labor, and the *impact on broader patterns of thought* of this event (appreciation of labor, rise of process-thinking). The catalyst event of these developments was expropriation, “the deprivation for certain groups of their place in the world and their naked exposure to the exigencies of life” (Arendt 2018a, p. 255). The immediate chain reaction caused by expropriation changed the very nature of labor. It became the first domain that, in the modern imagination, broke free from the “natural” circularity, from the stationary

imprisonment “in the eternal recurrence of the life process” to which it had been tied in all prior societies. Without losing its roots in the biological life process, labor shook off its association with “circular, monotonous recurrence” and was transformed “into a swiftly progressing development whose results have in a few centuries totally changed the whole inhabited world” (Arendt 2018a, pp. 46–47), Arendt (2018b, p. 248) also praises Marx for understanding how decisively labor had changed in modernity.

Arendt explains this growth as being fueled by the energy of life itself, “the sheer natural abundance of the biological process, which like all natural forces [. . .] provides for a generous surplus beyond the reproduction of young to balance the old”. The novelty of capitalism of course was not the exploitation of this surplus as such, but the fact that in the framework of new productive relationships, the surplus was “fed back into the process to generate further expropriations, greater productivity, and more appropriation” (Arendt 2018a, p. 255). In pretty much all other modes of organizing social and biological reproduction, “the growth element inherent in all organic life” is kept in check by counter-processes of decay and the limits of individual consumption (Arendt 2018a, p. 47). Only under the peculiar conditions of modern capitalism does labor feed a constantly growing, limitless process.

Faced with this novel phenomenon, then, the theorists of the seventeenth century and all the way to Marx and the process philosophies of the early 20th century, became fascinated by metaphors drawn from the spheres of nature and life, and hence started thinking increasingly in terms of processes. In this way, to use Benhabib’s formulation, “language is witness to the more profound transformations taking place in human life” (Benhabib 2002, p. 94).

If the roots of process-thinking can be traced to early modern England and nascent capitalism, then, it was the nineteenth century when these developments culminated and the modern concept of process rose to prominence. Intriguingly, the metaphoric language of the political economists seems to foreshadow the later developments of natural sciences—most notably geology after Lyell and biology after Darwin. The theorists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries needed to be selective in their deployment of natural metaphors. Growth and ongoingness were only one aspect of nature, nested within an order that was primarily understood as circular or static. It was only in the nineteenth century that this conceptual tension ceased to exist when all circularity and stability was subsumed into the overall process of population dynamics and species evolution.

As with the first steps in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the link between human societies and nonhuman nature proved decisive in this later instance as well. The Industrial Revolution, fueled by carbon energy, further accelerated the economic growth that had begun to emerge in early modern capitalism. In a recent book, Cara New Daggett further argues that even the seemingly theoretical field of thermodynamics was linked to the imperial and industrial endeavors of the nineteenth century, a project she (following Dominic Boyer) calls energopolitics. The modern concept of energy—presented as a universal process akin to life itself—was born out of an effort to “make the world work”, an aspiration to harness both natural and human energies for efficient use (New Daggett 2019).

Relatedly, Arendt points to the noticeable similarities between Marx’s theory of labor and the more general theories of evolution and development articulated at the same time, and notes that “What all these theories in the various sciences—economics, history, biology, geology—have in common is the concept of process, which was virtually unknown prior to the modern age” (Arendt 2018a, p. 116). In their study of the modern sciences, Stephen Toulmin and June Goodfield summarize as follows:

Before 1750, cosmology, zoology and geology had been three distinct and independent realms of thought, having few problems in common either with each other or with the study of human affairs. By 1900, they were all concerned with temporal processes of familiar kinds. (Toulmin and Goodfield 1982, p. 244)

Such temporal processes range from the natural sciences to the new science of history as it has developed from the eighteenth century onwards, as well as nascent social

sciences and statistics. History, to take one example, became increasingly understood as a grand process of progress—a “a continuing, creative, and eternally unfinished process”, exhibiting a strong continuity with biology (Toulmin and Goodfield 1982, p. 136; Foucault 2003, pp. 224, 190; Arendt 2006, p. 63).

All this of course links back to Foucault’s genealogy of modern biopolitics, which draws attention to the fact that humans are increasingly addressed as a biological species, as a mass “affected by overall processes”, such as birth and mortality rates, life expectancy and longevity, level of health, propagation, production, illness, fertility, and so on (Foucault 1990, pp. 136–41; 2003, pp. 242–43). Both Arendt and Foucault trace historically the emergence of new areas of knowledge, such as demography, statistics, and economy that take life processes as their objects (see also Braun (2007) and Blencowe (2012, pp. 106–13) have also argued, the main resonance between Arendt and Foucault relates to an analysis of processes. From my perspective, Braun’s otherwise excellent article unfortunately fails to properly distinguish between modern processes and a politicized *zoe*, and follows Agamben in overemphasizing the violent implications of process-thinking). Foucault’s genealogy of modern governmentality is particularly helpful in filling out some of the empirical blanks of Arendt’s account, such as the role of the eighteenth-century physiocrats in developing a notion of population as “a set of processes to be managed at the level and on the basis of what is natural in these processes”. It was this development, that later helped to open up the conceptual space within which Darwin could carry out the transition from natural history to modern biology (Foucault 2007a, pp. 70, 78). Foucault, on the other hand, does not specifically focus his attention on the conceptual role of processes in the making of these new rationalities, and we must turn to Arendt to understand *this* side of their historical conditions of possibility.

In many respects, Arendt’s genealogy of process-thinking is a problematization that can be seen as politically ambiguous. The modern concept of process is a condition of possibility that can give rise to many different concrete forms. As with biopolitics, many valuable aspects of contemporary societies rely on process-thinking—scientific knowledge (say, about climate change) and effective responses to phenomena, such as pandemics, being the most obvious examples. Arendt also acknowledges that political action, too, has a “process-character”. However, process-thinking in the modern sense is linked to obvious dangers for freedom, meaningfulness, and sustainable politics in the Anthropocene.

First, consider the fate of labor, whose modern glorification Arendt highlights. What is very rarely picked up from Arendt’s argument is that in the end, processes devour labor, too. Mechanized production all but eliminated the meaningfulness of individual use-objects in favor of consumer goods, replacing workmanship with labor (Arendt 2018a, pp. 124–25). Automated and professionally managed labor processes are no different from the natural processes we treat from an Archimedean viewpoint. From that vantage, *all* human activities—labor included—“appear not as activities of any kind but as processes” (Arendt 2006, p. 59; 2018a, pp. 322, 155). Hence,

laboring is too lofty, too ambitious a word for what we are doing, or think we are doing, in the world we have come to live in. The last stage of the laboring society, the society of jobholders, demands of its members a sheer automatic functioning, as though individual life had actually been submerged in the over-all life process of the species. (Arendt 2018a, p. 322)

Such perspective is also reflected in most modern ideologies from liberalism to communism and Nazism, leading—in the worst-case scenario—to an attitude that considers individual human beings as superfluous in comparison to the movement of the process (of history, nature, or economy). As the mention of energopolitics further suggests, these important concerns are today joined by the prospect of ecological collapse effected by economic growth. The modern age tended to consider any efforts to curtail growth as attempts to “destroy nature” or “to destroy the very life of society” (Arendt 2018a, pp. 111–12). Today, we have come to realize that the opposite is true. The question is, whether enough can be done in time to forestall the worst consequences. For our contemporary

ability to think about the human/nature relationship in a new way, taking heed of Arendt's critical genealogy of process-thinking offers some valuable insights.

5. Worn-Out Coins: Genealogical Frame Analysis

The previous sections have discussed Arendt's genealogy of the elements—historical conditions of possibility—of totalitarianism and her critical analysis of the historical emergence of process-thinking in modernity. In this concluding section, I will spin together the methodological strands of these critical histories while locating Arendt in the patchwork of the broader critical genealogical tradition in political theory. Doing so, I will tentatively outline a mode of inquiry I call “genealogical frame analysis”.

Genealogy, as several commentators suggest, is best seen as a part of a broader critical ensemble. It is a crossroads, a rupture between past and future, as Philip Kretsedemas, harking back to a Nietzschean metaphor, puts it. Genealogical analysis *initiates* thought-processes instead of concluding them (Kretsedemas 2017; Koopman 2013, pp. 95, 140; Srinivasan 2019). This description naturally fits the account Arendt offers of thinking itself as being situated between past and future. Thinking, for her, involves a struggle between the past that has made us what we are, and an anticipated, hoped for, feared future. The ability of thought to take part in this struggle is rooted in the present. Political theory “takes its bearings” from the world as it is, from concrete experiences in the present (Arendt 2006, p. 14). It is a form of analysis that proceeds from events, that is sensitive to experiences and their translation into metaphoric concepts and is ultimately concerned with the practices of world-building enabled and disabled by our current ways of thinking.

We already saw in the context of *The Origins* why Arendt emphasizes the role of events in understanding. The past, for her, is not open for purely causal explanations. It is only when the past happenings and developments suddenly come together and take a fixed form that they become open for historical analysis of the present. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt explicitly frames her analysis as a response to Sputnik I and the rise of automation. This centrality of events seems to stand in tension with the idea of genealogy as an analysis of *submerged* problems. Events, after all, are not “submerged” but often very visible, the center of public attention. What is more, whereas the heavy emphasis on submerged problems can make critical genealogists suspicious of common sense, Arendt praises common sense and popular language as indispensable modes of perceiving reality. Popular language often alerts us to events by coining a new word. It is by stubbornly clinging to this “original intuition” that understanding can begin and retain its movement between past and future (Arendt 1972, p. 110; 2018b, pp. 141–45). However, while there are genuine differences of emphasis between Arendt and many post-Foucauldian genealogists, we should also remind ourselves of the fact that the inquiries Arendt conducted as a response to the events of her time hardly offer supposed solutions to the problems raised by the events. On the contrary, her analysis follows exactly the type of genealogical problematization that seeks to show how our current practices are conditioned by presuppositions of which we are not fully aware.

Mary McCarthy, in a review she wrote of *The Human Condition* for *The New Yorker*, summarizes Arendt's approach aptly:

the history Arendt collects and analyzes, however, is of a special kind—the history of ideas, but not only philosophers' ideas; common ideas, too, stock ideas, *ideas reflected in behavior and worn by use to the point that they are no longer recognized as ideas at all.* (McCarthy 1962, p. 156. My emphasis)

Whether knowingly or not, McCarthy's reference to the process of wear mirrors a metaphor Arendt had originally used for her project in the application she wrote to the Rockefeller Foundation in 1956. What Arendt envisioned was a “critical re-examination of the chief traditional concepts and conceptual frameworks of political thinking”. More specifically, her aim was to

find out where these concepts came from before they became like worn-out coins and abstract generalizations. I therefore shall examine the concrete historical and generally political experiences which originally gave rise to political concepts. (Arendt 1956; Young-Bruehl 2004, p. 318)

This is the approach encountered above, when Arendt sought to understand the revaluation of labor and the emergence of process-thinking by finding out what were “the experiences [. . .] that proved of such great importance” for modern political economists and theorists. Similarly, in her unfinished final work *The Life of the Mind*, her discussion of the faculty of willing is guided by the question: “what experiences caused men to become aware of their capability of forming volitions?” (Arendt 1978, II, p. 63, 55). For this approach, it is central at each point that new experiences require new words, new metaphors. Thus, faced with novelties, both popular language and the conceptual language of “professional thinkers” reach for new expressions. The task of political theory is to be alert to coinages of its own age, while also tracing our “worn out”, dead metaphors back to their original experiential contexts. Put in a more Foucauldian lingo, new experiences incite problematizations that are then developed in more fixed forms of language use. They are the “events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying” (Foucault 1998, p. 315).

Although Arendt does not quite use this terminology, I find it helpful to think about these fixed forms of language use as “frames”, along the lines of frame analysis. Frames, shortly put, are ways of organizing experience and defining reality. They are metaphors or collections of metaphors, images that determine what is seen and what is not seen. A frame is a metaphor that has been given a fixed, structured position in discourse. Frames channel the process of making sense of events, and regulate our involvement in them (Goffman 1986, pp. 10–13; Butler 2010, p. 10). Frame analysis is often carried out in a fully “presentist” mode, focusing on the active strategies of selection and construction of frames with the intention of affecting the outcome of political struggles or in more microsociological settings. However, it is also a useful way of thinking about the ideas, concepts, and metaphors that condition our practices of making sense, but are no longer recognized as historical.

As analytical tools, frames highlight a level of historical reality that is different from, but obviously related to, the more well-known categories, such as power/knowledge apparatuses. What genealogical frame analysis seeks to uncover is not the power effects of episodic discourses, but rather the reliance on historically emerged metaphoric gestalts of ways of thinking of and perceiving. Yet, the two are clearly connected, and best conceived as supplementary aspects of historical analytics. With the help of Arendtian genealogy here outlined, then, it becomes possible to think of frame analysis as a part of the critical history of the present that traces out “the sedimented concepts, practices and organizations of knowledge and power” with the intention of seeing why it became plausible to build society the way it was built (Rabinow 2009, p. 29; see also Benhabib 2002, p. x). One can very well criticize the use of process frame in present policymaking, for example, by pointing out what it misses in the world. However, our understanding of the allure and the full implications of this framing on reality gains considerable strength when the worn-out conceptual coin of process is traced back to the experiences that originally incited thinkers to start using processual metaphors.

The purpose of such analysis, finally, is not merely to gain knowledge about the past and the present. The point of analyzing something—say, process-thinking—genealogically is not, as Amia Srinivasan has argued, to determine its truth-value. The point is to think critically about the relationship between these representations and our practices (Srinivasan 2019, pp. 140–42): in other words, what kind of world do our representations build—or erode?

To “think what we are doing”, as Arendt (2018a, p. 5) defined in her own approach in *The Human Condition*, is to become alert to the shortcomings and dangers inherent in our hackneyed ways of perceiving our activity. To become aware of the world-building

capacity of our practices of representation is also to redirect our attention from the past towards the future. It is not merely about picturing the world right, but also setting it right—picturing the world anew (Srinivasan 2019, p. 150). In this sense, genealogical analysis is part of a broader set of world-building practices, through which things are brought into view as objects of judgment and democratic debate (on Arendtian politics of world-building, see Zerilli 2016). For Srinivasan, a range of theorists can be conceived of as members of critical genealogy that is sensitive to concerns of worldmaking, from Nietzsche and Foucault to

critics of liberalism such as Charles Mills and Uday Mehta; critics of Eurocentrism such as Edward Said and Chandra Mohanty; feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, bell hooks, Angela Davis, Catharine MacKinnon and Judith Butler; and intellectual historians such as Quentin Skinner and Samuel Moyn. (141–42)

In this essay, I have begun to carve out space for conceiving Hannah Arendt as a member of the same critical genealogical tradition. By urging us to look for the historical experiences that have molded our ways of framing reality today, such an approach gives us a chance to reflect—to stop and think—in the face of a terrifying future.

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