

Hannah Arendt's Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy

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I do not discuss this modern world, against whose background this book was written.
—Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

In 1957 the former Frankfurt School affiliate Paul A. Baran set out to study economic growth and its effect on the postwar political landscape. The study of capitalism in its present form would be an important task not simply for the field of economics but also, he wrote, for the “fate of humanity.”¹ Working as one of the few tenured Marxist economists in the United States at the time, at the tail end of the Red Scare, Baran put forward a materialist conception of history and maintained that the insights of Marx’s critique of political economy were relevant to the present day.² In *The Political Economy of Growth* (1957) he extended Marx’s critique, asking empirically how the contradictions and crises of monopoly capitalism might open outward, paradoxically, into a less

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1. Baran, *Political Economy of Growth*, ix.
2. Heilbroner, “Marxist America.”

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inequitable horizon.³ A socialist future, Baran contended, could be realized by redistributing capitalism's economic surplus.

Baran's work, along with several other studies of Marx's political economy, can be found in Hannah Arendt's personal library.⁴ Though she claimed to favor theorizing in a mode that refused reference to its historical context, or "background," the present article takes seriously the role that political economy plays in her thinking. The force of this engagement is most apparent in *The Human Condition* (1958), a foundational document of Arendt's political thought, which, like books written by Marxian economists of the time, expressed deep anxieties about productivity, consumption, surplus, and the management of politics by economic logic; topics falling within the remit of what might be called, in present language, "neoliberalism."⁵ While such anxieties—"the unnatural growth of the natural," "laborers without labor," "durability of the world"—were dressed in an unmistakably Arendtian vocabulary, at once perennial- and paradoxical-sounding, they also signal her embeddedness within midcentury critiques of capitalist political economy.

Arendt's investment in these conversations was apparent to her contemporary reviewers.⁶ One saw Arendt's book as addressing, not unlike Baran's, the problems of "waste economy."⁷ Another focused on her challenge to the figure of Marx's laborer.⁸ Both picked up on the strange conceptual line she draws between "labor" and "work." In contrast, recent scholars have often considered *The Human Condition* independently of this context, a view that has had a few enduring consequences, ranging from misunderstanding the character of her political interventions to the clear-cut characterization of her thought as anti-Marxist. Writing two decades ago, Albrecht Wellmer declared that Arendt's critique of Marxist politics "has already become a *locus classicus* and requires no further justification."⁹

3. See Marx's posthumously published introduction to *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, 265–312.

4. Alongside a vast collection of Marx's writings and the writings of classical political economists like Adam Smith, Arendt's collection includes books by Joseph Schumpeter, Thorstein Veblen, Howard J. Sherman, Friedrich Hayek, and Jane Jacobs. Her library is housed at Bard College, and a searchable catalog is available at hac.bard.edu/about/library.

5. On Arendt's thought and neoliberalism, see Leshem, *Origins of Neoliberalism*, 9, which takes *The Human Condition* to be "grounded on a redefinition of the economic human condition as excess." *The Human Condition* is hereafter cited as *HC*. See also Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 31–32. For the latter reference, I am grateful to Samuel Garrett Zeitlin.

6. For more on Arendt's economy, see Azam, "Hannah Arendt et Karl Polanyi"; Klein, "Fit to Enter the World"; Ince, "Bringing the Economy Back In."

7. Suchting, "Marx and Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*."

8. Scanlan, "Man as Laborer, Dehumanized."

9. Wellmer, "Hannah Arendt on Revolution," 207.

Readings of Arendt as an unabashed critic of Marx are tied, if not substantively then rhetorically, to the belief that Arendt's political theory deals with a delimited and elitist idea of "the political." Her preoccupation with action, occurring in an autonomous political realm has, according to some, come at the cost of delegitimizing the social.¹⁰ Her work implies the existence of an ideal, decontextualized political actor and, as a consequence, neglects the realities of actual laboring people.¹¹ Those with Marxist sympathies have been particularly quick to make this critique. They argue that Arendt's contestation of Marx's political economy fundamentally misunderstood the complexity of Marx's conception of *Arbeit*.¹² Hanna Pitkin has written, for instance, that "when Marx says *Arbeit* or *arbeiten* he is just as likely to mean work as labor or both together. Arendt is thus wrong to read Marx as if he had a choice between work and labor and opted for the latter."¹³ Similarly, Bhikhu Parekh says that one of Arendt's "amazing misunderstandings of Marx" lay in her misinterpretation of his concept of labor, which in fact "includes Arendt's three basic activities."¹⁴ More recently, Christopher Holman has remarked, using very similar terms, that "the Marxian concept of labour cuts at once across all three dimensions of the *vita activa*."¹⁵

According to these accounts, Arendt deeply misunderstood Marx's concept of labor. By separating out his *Arbeit* into labor, work, and action, her theory of the *vita activa* missed the point of his dialectical genius; it undermined, through fracture, distinction, and separation—or what Patchen Markell has called the book's "relational architecture"—Western Marxism's orthodox insistence on the totality and synchronicity of Marx's theory.¹⁶ However, taking Arendt's affinity for separation to be a *misreading* of Marx, as so many have done, preempts the possibility of seeing *The Human Condition* as an

10. See esp. O'Sullivan, "Hannah Arendt"; Brunkhorst, "Equality and Elitism in Arendt"; Euben, "Arendt's Hellenism"; Canovan, "Contradictions of Hannah Arendt's Political Thought"; Pitkin, "Justice"; Wolin, "Hannah Arendt"; Jay, "Political Existentialism of Hannah Arendt"; Curtis, "Aesthetic Foundations of Democratic Politics in the Work of Hannah Arendt"; Tavani, "Hannah Arendt"; Rancière, "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?"; and Butler, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street."

11. This line of criticism is carefully traced in Markell, "Hannah Arendt and the Laboring Body."

12. Bakan, "Hannah Arendt's Concepts of Labor and Work"; Ring, "On Needing Both Marx and Arendt"; Zaretsky, "Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of the Public/Private Distinction"; Weisman, *Hannah Arendt and Karl Marx*.

13. Pitkin, *Attack of the Blob*, 134.

14. Parekh, "Hannah Arendt's Critique of Marx," 68.

15. Holman, "Dialectics and Distinction," 336.

16. See Jay, *Marxism and Totality*; and Markell, "Arendt's Work."

innovative rereading, a *critique*, of Marx's political economy, rather than a poor interpretation. Indeed, just as Marx saw himself both within and against a legacy of thinkers who grappled with understanding the relation between politics and economics, Arendt, I shall argue, saw herself as contributing to precisely that question.¹⁷

What do we gain by understanding Hannah Arendt as a contributor to the critique of political economy? Seeing Arendt's work within this tradition allows us to understand better the antagonistic forces that shaped her arguments, and the context that contained her concepts. This is with the goal of complicating some of the ways we usually categorize her thought—for instance, as anti-Marxist, philhellenic, or indifferent to economic subjects.¹⁸ Arendt's *Human Condition* was, unfortunately, neither so coherently nor unilaterally constructed; it was the product of a great many different forces that produced a dynamic, multivalent, and sometimes frustratingly opaque, work. Situating Arendt within the context of post-Marxist political economy can mitigate such opacity by tracing the influence of one thematic constellation. Moreover, such an effort can also help us broaden the remit of her thought, seeing how it went well beyond a basic schematization of the "political," and concerned itself with debates—around automated labor, economic surplus, transition to socialism—that continue to inform our present.

This attempt is carried out alongside other, recent retellings that have diversified possible ways of reading Arendt's political theory. Intellectual historians have attended to the timeliness of her interventions in *The Human Condition*, showing her engagement with social problems and her historical context.¹⁹ Political theorists and literary scholars have asked after the book's anomalous conceptual structure, arguing that labor and work are just as important as action to Arendt's political theory.²⁰ Taken together, these studies have effected a shift in the way we see her treatment of "the Social Question," showing that the primacy of the political should not eclipse our understanding of her

17. In the 1960s critical theorists and Marxists would also revisit Marx's critique to understand how classical political economy naturalized historically contingent facts about the capitalist world. See Benanev and Clegg, "Crisis and Immiseration."

18. Such straightforward characterizations sometimes bring Arendt into the fold of democratic or republican theory; see Isaac, "Oases in the Desert"; and Villa, "Democratizing the Agon."

19. For intellectual historical approaches, see Brient, "Hans Blumenberg and Hannah Arendt"; Lazier, "Earthrise"; Yaqoob, "Archimedean Point"; and Simbirski, "Cybernetic Muse."

20. See Markell, "Arendt's Work." For political-theoretical approaches, see Marshall, "Polis and Its Analogues"; and Tsao, "Arendt against Athens."

engagement with broader issues.²¹ This is not to say that her engagement should be simply recuperated; as scholars have pointed out, she often exhibited selective blindness when it came to the civil rights movement and school integration.²²

While material presented here will be of use to ongoing conversations about Arendt's social thought, the aim for now is more preliminary. The following offers a genealogy of Arendt's treatment of political economy, from the years before *The Human Condition* until just after; it takes into account underexplored themes and interlocutors and calls on unexamined archival resources and unpublished writings. Mapping out Arendt's engagement with political economy provides, ultimately, a very different perspective on the interests that underwrite that book.

The first part of this article discusses the status of political economy in *The Human Condition* to introduce Arendt's historical-theoretical exposition of the subject. The second examines the origins of her interest, tracing it back to her reading of Aristotle, Marx, Hegel, and Heidegger and their problematic conceptions of *Arbeit*. The third sees how this philosophical project was brought to bear on problems immanent to midcentury socialist thought and French labor theory in the 1950s, leading to some of the peculiarities of the arguments we find in *The Human Condition*. A historical consideration of the path Arendt's thinking took can show us that it did in fact respond to social and political problems that some critics have berated her for neglecting. In the conclusion, I therefore broach the possibility of seeing Arendt's political thought from an estranging perspective—one that contextualizes her critique of political economy against transformations in Marxist thought in the latter half of the twentieth century.

The Human Condition and the Impossibility of Political Economy

How did Hannah Arendt understand the term *political economy*? In *The Human Condition* it is posed as a preeminent paradox of modern political thought. "Political economy," she reminded us, would have been for the ancients a perversity or "a contradiction in terms" given that they thought that "whatever was 'economic' related to the life of the individual and the survival of the species, [and] was a non-political, household affair" (*HC*, 29). The collusion of *polis* and *oikos*, captured in the very conceptual pairing "political

21. Villa, "'Autonomy of the Political.'"

22. See Owens, "Racism in the Theory Canon." On Arendt's "profound blinders" and antiblack racism, see Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*; on her argument against black education and school integration, see Moten, *Universal Machine*.

economy,” coincided with the dawn of modernity and gave rise to neither a public nor a private realm that Arendt called the social.

“The social” is, famously, a central antagonist of Arendt’s political theory.²³ With its rise, the formerly “self-evident and axiomatic” dividing line that once separated public from private for Aristotle—the common world from the mere maintenance of life—was now entirely blurred (*HC*, 28). The disappearance of a strict division between public and private was, Arendt argued, a “relatively new phenomenon” that coincided with the emergence of the nation-state and the application of its administrative tactics (*HC*, 28). With the rise of the social, or of mass society, Arendt claimed that politics became a matter of organization and “pure administration.” Political communities began to be seen from the perspective of the state in the “image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping” (*HC*, 28).

The nation-state, Arendt wrote, was the political form par excellence of an economically organized “facsimile of a super-human family” (*HC*, 29). Such an argument was nothing new at the time. Indeed, Arendt’s phrasing and argument drew here from the work of the economist Gunnar Myrdal, whose book *The Political Element in the Development of Economic Theory* (1954) argued that economics had evolved into mere *Volkswirtschaft* (“collective” or “social housekeeping” in the text’s English edition). For Myrdal, this mode of thinking presupposed a “collective subject of economic activity” that held common purpose and values; it suggested an “analogy between the individual who runs his family household and society.”²⁴ This analogy was dangerous not only because it abstracted from the fact of social hierarchies, and obscured political reasons for economic inequality, but also because it suggested, concomitantly, a neutral idea of the economy that took itself, following Weber’s notion of scientific thinking, to be ahistorical and *wertfrei*.²⁵

In disavowing the phantasmagoric and unitary society imagined by “political economy,” Arendt alluded not only to Myrdal’s book but also to Marx’s account of liberal political economy. Almost precisely a hundred

23. Much ink has been spilled on what Arendt meant by the concept, with the conclusion that her critique of it is both politically dangerous and conceptually imprecise. See Pitkin, *Attack of the Blob*; Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*; and Bernasconi, “Double Face of the Political and the Social.”

24. Myrdal, *Political Element*, 143.

25. In invoking *Volkswirtschaft*, Myrdal and Arendt implicitly engaged in a critique of Max Weber’s legacy, especially the notion of political economy put forth in his 1895 inaugural address. A copy of Weber, “Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik,” is in Arendt’s personal library.

years earlier Marx had critiqued a free-standing, self-perpetuating idea of “the economy” such as one finds in the writings of classical political economists. To thinkers like David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill, production was “encased in eternal natural laws which are independent of history,” not by historically contingent circumstances or social orders.²⁶ Like Myrdal, Marx criticized the tendency of this ostensibly value-free idea of political economy, which took an abstracted idea of the “population” as the “foundation and author of the entire social act of production.”²⁷ Such an idea of “population” was an abstraction so long as it failed to account for classes, wage labor, capital, and the other factors on which it actually depended. Like Arendt’s insistence on “plurality” as a precondition for politics, Marx contended that the collective population cannot exist independently of its history, independently of the present mode of production and present social relations. “Society,” he wrote, “does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand.”²⁸

Arendt took up Marx’s and Myrdal’s critique of the economist’s tendency toward abstraction. She too argued against the obfuscating vantage point of economic science. The assumption that “men behave and do not act with respect to each other,” she wrote, is the logic that underpins the “modern science of economics, whose birth coincided with the rise of the social” (*HC*, 41–42). Moreover—and in premonition of later Foucauldian concerns about the application of the “economic grid of intelligibility” to social relations—she argued that the field of economics could achieve its scientific character only when humans became “social beings” following certain behavioral patterns in such a way that “those who did not keep the rules could be considered to be asocial or abnormal” (*HC*, 42).²⁹ For Arendt, the social imperative to act uniformly was coextensive with the rise of statistical and scientific analysis. It was not Marx but the “liberal economists themselves who had to introduce the ‘communistic fiction,’ that is, to assume there is one interest of society as a whole” (*HC*, 44).³⁰ The idea of society represented as a singular subject bolstered the scientific character of their generalizing methods and abstracted analyses.

26. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 87.

27. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 100.

28. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 265.

29. Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 240.

30. *Communistic fiction* was a term deployed against systems of thought (German legalism, liberal utilitarianism) that depended on a common metaphysical element, for instance, “will of the state” or “social welfare.” See Myrdal, *Political Element*, 54.

In contrast to the Archimedean vantage point of economic science, Arendt expressly wrote *The Human Condition* from a more intimate perspective: “from the vantage point of our newest experiences and most recent fears” (*HC*, 5).³¹ The prologue goes on to describe a situation wherein the political realm is increasingly governed by economic logic. In addition to the dangers of atomic warfare, Arendt warned of the advent of industrial automation, and with it a new kind of supremacy. More dangerous and “closer at hand” than even atomic weapons was the prospect of a “society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them” (*HC*, 5). Echoing Marx’s critique of classical political economy, Arendt highlighted here how we have fallen prey to capitalism’s logic. It is a logic that has come to dominate the political so effectively that even presidents and kings, in Arendt’s words, are just “making a living” (*HC*, 5).

This phrase suggests that Arendt rethought the critique of political economy beyond traditional narratives about subjection and governance. In the situation she describes, economic power threatens to thoroughly and fully permeate political life; it is not simply the ideology of a ruling class (as it was for Marxian critiques of classical political economy as an expression of bourgeois logic) but now the ideology that comes to rule over all classes. The world, in other words, has made itself in the image of the economist’s theory. In so arguing, Arendt attests to something like the actualization of Marx’s fears about the “real subsumption” of society to capital in the mid-twentieth century and participates in a slew of (principally socialist) analyses of the changes of mid-century political economy amid massive industrial advancements—sometimes referred to at the time as the “Second Industrial Revolution.”³² But crucially, in contrast to many of those analyses, Arendt’s critique of political economy rent asunder the dialectical or emancipatory mechanism that lay at the heart of Marx’s account of political economy.

Consenting to certain of Marx’s precepts while abandoning hope for a socialist future required a careful confrontation with his political economy. It involved constructing, to avoid reproducing the predominance of *oikos* over *polis*, the peculiar theoretical innovations we find in Arendt’s thought. Much like the religious scholar’s struggle with the motivation and historical reasoning behind *Shatnez*—the Torah’s prohibition against wearing fabric that contains a mixture of wool and linen—Arendt scholars continue today to debate the logic

31. On the “affective dimensions” of Arendt’s thought, see Honig, “Lecture Two.”

32. Weiner, *Cybernetics*. For Carl Schmitt’s contemporaneous accounts of cybernetic apparatuses, see Schmitt, *Dialogues*. On “real subsumption,” see *Endnotes 2*, “History of Subsumption.”

that underlies Arendt's division between labor and work. Arendt herself admitted that the distinction was "unusual," unsupported by "historical evidence," and that it appeared in only "a few scattered" and underdeveloped remarks throughout the history of political thought (*HC*, 80). There was little, she added, "either in the pre-modern tradition" or "in the large body of modern labor theories" that accounted for it (*HC*, 80). Yet this rethinking of the relation between political and economic activities was an essential component of her political theory.

Between Arbeit and Herstellen, 1951–1956

Arendt's philosophical engagement with political economy began in earnest in 1952 when, following the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), she won a Guggenheim Fellowship to work on a project called "Totalitarian Elements in Marxism."³³ In the original proposal for this project, Arendt wrote that she would address the ideological origins of bolshevism and thereby "fill the gap" left open by her analysis in *Origins*.³⁴ The latter, she said, had deliberately omitted any discussion of Marxism to emphasize the "unprecedentedness" of totalitarian ideology in Western politics; its novelty was a reason to take totalitarian politics seriously and to deal with it urgently. The new project would, however, provide "the missing link" between the rupture of totalitarianism and the "commonly accepted traditional categories of political thought."³⁵

While she proposed to look from Marx onward, considering his appropriation by totalitarianism, the opposite movement seemed evident in her private writings. Arendt thought from Marx backward in her *Denktagebuch*, her philosophical commonplace book,³⁶ seeing him as an important culminating point in the tradition of Western political thought. In the early 1950s her writings were marked by a cautious admiration for his attempt to work through that tradition. Marx, she wrote, had escaped the trappings of Western political thought by thinking politics beyond its Aristotelian basis—which is to say,

33. Hannah Arendt to Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, "Project: Totalitarian Elements in Marxism," Correspondence, Organizations, Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Washington, DC (hereafter cited as HAP).

34. Hannah Arendt to Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, "Project: Totalitarian Elements in Marxism."

35. Hannah Arendt to Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, "Project: Totalitarian Elements in Marxism."

36. Or, "a journal *of* thought and *about* thought," in Weigel, "Poetics as a Presupposition of Philosophy," 97.

beyond the dependence of the *polis* on the *oikos*. As she wrote in April 1951, the “enormously great and completely buried merit of Marx was to ground the public life and being of humanity in *labor* [*Arbeit*] and not in the family.”³⁷ Whereas for Aristotle public life was free only insofar as it depended on the domestic labor, accomplished in the household, Marx put forth a generalized and expanded idea of labor that “emancipated the political from [dependence on] the family” (*DTB*, 71). However, Arendt would later find that the emancipatory potential of labor, so central to Marx’s argument, was but a false hope.

Arbeit, for Arendt, was a wholly inadequate word with which to think about the essence of a humanity whose basic character was plurality. Prefiguring the centrality of plurality to her argument in *The Human Condition*, she wrote in May 1951, “In the traditional sense, labor itself is wholly individualistic: *one* labors. This is not a concept behind which *humanity* is hidden” (*DTB*, 75).³⁸ Arendt further argued that this isolated and individualistic nature of Marx’s laboring being (*arbeitendes Wesen*) was due to its being “seen and described according to the old Greek model of the fabricator [*Hersteller*],” who is “alone with what he produces; other people appear to him only as an assistant” (*DTB*, 79). The individualistic and instrumentalizing tendencies of the fabrication are therefore taken on by the laborer. She described this process in detail:

The means-ends categories, which are fully appropriate to production [*Herstellen*], are transferred onto the human being during the labor process [*Arbeitsprozess*]. Nowhere is it so obvious and, so to speak, legitimate to consider humanity as a means as in the labor process. This, as it were, is the cardinal sin of labor, which is only fully revealed in the modern organization of the labor-process. When Marx speaks of the liberation of men, he has in mind this producing laborer [*herstellender Arbeiter*]*—*the “fabricator mundi”*—* when he means, in reality, the maker of objects [*Hersteller von Objekten*]. This laborer is, indeed, a materialist, because an entire activity is bound to the material that he works upon [*verarbeitet*]. (*DTB*, 79–80)

Displacing, or transferring, the “means-end” (*Mittel-Zweck*) categories of fabrication onto the labor process makes it possible to think of other human beings as instruments who can be used to fulfill the “ends” of some dominating interest. It becomes possible to confuse and connect production or fabrication

37. Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 71 (hereafter cited as *DTB*).

38. Cf. “Men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (*HC*, 9).

(*Herstellen*) with labor (*Arbeit*).³⁹ This is how, Arendt notes, something like Stalinism could emerge from Marx's thought. Because of the "primary and authentic isolation" of the production process, plurality is foreclosed on, and "the statesman creates the ideal society form to which all other people are used and abused as helpers" (*DTB*, 80). The totalitarian despot, "with the laboring-class [*Arbeiterklasse*] as an instrument, fabricates giant mass-individual, namely humanity" (*DTB*, 80). Labor therefore holds something within it, a predilection for use, that makes it appropriable by totalitarianism.

Arendt's critique of Marx's valorization of labor, her intuition that it was an insufficient organizing concept for politics, history, and the study of the economy, was further confirmed by her reading of Max Weber's economic history of slavery in ancient Greece. After reading Weber's book, which provided historical context for Aristotle's *Politics*, Arendt wrote in her journal: "Whoever labors to procure his own necessities [*ἀναγκάϊος*] is not free," while "whoever labors to procure the necessities of another is a slave. Thus, freedom is only possible as an emancipation of necessity through slavery" (*DTB*, 183). The very idea of freedom in political life not only was separate from but also depended on slave labor in the *oikos*, which freed men from necessity and from the exigencies of social reproduction. This observation then passes over into a consideration of Aristotle's well-known thoughts about the mastery of the *oikos* (*Politics*, 1.1, 1253b), which would be discussed more thoroughly in *The Human Condition*.⁴⁰

Contrary to those who have read her as a straightforward advocate of Aristotelian politics, Arendt was explicitly critical of Aristotle's failure to consider questions concerning the exclusion of slaves from political life.⁴¹ To her dismay, as she wrote in her notebooks, Aristotle considered the composition of "human life" only insofar as it happens in the *polis*, not the *oikos*. In premonition of the *bios/zoe* distinction put forth in *The Human Condition*, Arendt noted that slaves could be said to partake in mere apolitical life.⁴² From this neglect she would conclude that in Aristotle "just as man is governed by neces-

39. The following mostly translate *Herstellen* as "fabrication" rather than "work" for three main reasons: to highlight its relation to manufacture and production, to show its connection to Arendt's contestation of Heidegger's *Herstellen*, and to signal a difference between *Herstellen* and *Arbeit*, which Arendt never fully schematizes but alludes to in *Vita Activa*, as well as in *The Human Condition*.

40. For a more recent exegesis of this passage, see Agamben, *Use of Bodies*. Both Arendt and Agamben cite the historian Jean-Pierre Vernant's account of ancient labor in their discussion of labor in the *polis*.

41. See, e.g., Butler, "Arendt and Aristotle," which argues that Aristotle and Arendt conceived of democracy on the basis of an "exclusionary equality."

42. On Arendt's influence on Agamben's concept of "bare life," see Ziarek, "Bare Life."

sity he can, on his part, become free only through the domination of those who have been subjected to it" (*DTB*, 183). Arendt found that the traditional concept of freedom was defined through the domination and subjugation proper to the *oikos*.⁴³ There was thus no concept of labor as such in ancient times, nor has there been in modern times; labor had always functioned as just a counterconcept or counteractivity to political life. In later years part of Arendt's deconstruction of the Western tradition would be to establish an ontological basis for this activity that did not simply consign it to one moment, one pole, of a dialectical movement toward emancipation.

Arendt's reconsideration of ancient political economy was momentarily put on hold when, in early April 1952, she received a telegram from her husband, Heinrich Blücher, informing her that she had won a Guggenheim award to fund the Marx project. She resumed her research on the totalitarian strands of Marxism quickly thereafter and, only a few days after receiving notice of the award, told Blücher that she had already begun to work on her bibliography.⁴⁴ Correspondingly, the *Denktagebuch* notes begin to focus again on Marx, bringing the insights of the detour through the Greeks to bear on the problematics of his theory of labor. The link between labor and necessity is more explicitly considered at this point and is connected to a critique of Marx's historical materialism. If Marx defined man as a laboring being, "then one cannot but make history into a history of necessity. Just as, as a laborer, man is subject to necessity" (*DTB*, 201). Arendt reiterates that Marx tried overcoming this necessity by construing labor as fabrication, which was, in the first place, possible because "the Greeks themselves still defamed fabrication [*Herstellen*] as labor [*Arbeit*]" (*DTB*, 203).

Marx, Arendt thought, could tie together labor and work because of their original separation from political life in ancient political thought. Her critique of him was a reaction against the depoliticization of these concepts, rather than a straightforward revivification of the ancient Aristotelian conception of the *polis* and its defamation of labor and work. Indeed, it was in direct response to the long-standing tradition of combining these two concepts, and denying them political value, that Arendt inserted a normative and constructive imperative into her exploration of the history of political economy. "It is crucial," she wrote "to find a valid distinction here" (*DTB*, 203). The origins of the befud-

43. See Gines's argument that Arendt's awareness of the oppressive conditions of political life do not necessarily amount to a qualitative change in her position on the necessity of "exclusivity" or "discrimination" to a properly public realm (*Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, 56).

44. Hannah Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, April 11, 1952, in Arendt and Blücher, *Within Four Walls*, 156.

dling labor-work distinction in Arendt's political thought therefore arose from an attempt to think beyond both the Greeks and Marx and, further, to avoid the various consequences that this distinction had wrought politically: the construal of humans as instruments, the impossibility of plurality, and the association of labor with subjugation, slavery, and necessity.

Arendt's distinction was also bound up in a timelier concern about the dangers of industrialized labor conditions. This is made clear by the fact that Arendt's imperative to redress the aporias of philosophical tradition was linked, in the very same entry in the *Denktagebuch*, to a consideration of the rise of machines in the modern laboring process. Shortly after she inserted the cue to think of a distinction between *Arbeit* and *Herstellen*, she wrote that the efficiency provided by machines is deceptive. Such efficiency can make "the efforts easier but does not change anything; the *abrutissement* remains much the same; it can be turned into the *abrutissement* of pleasures or extended into them" (*DTB*, 203).⁴⁵ Even if labor is given the semblance of ease, it remains tied to toil and necessity.

Revealing here is Arendt's strange deployment of the word *abrutissement*, which was likely drawn from Simone Weil's account of her time working in French factories in the 1930s. In a letter to one of her students—published in *La condition ouvrière* (1951), which is also included in Arendt's personal library and noted in the *Denktagebuch*—Weil wrote that her "hours of leisure [*heures de loisir*]" were "absorbed by a fatigue that was almost a brutishness [*abrutissement*]."⁴⁶ Here the meaning of Weil's assessment of factory work is almost identical to Arendt's own deployment of the term and underscores the persistence of labor into the modern age despite the ostensible alleviation of pain from the production process through industrial technologies. *Abrutissement* was also used as the French translation of Hegel's *Abstumpfung*, or "dulling," which first appeared in his posthumously published Jena lectures (1803–6) and later in his *Philosophy of Right*.⁴⁷

Arendt's colleagues Alexandre Kojève and Jean Wahl spearheaded the reception and transmission of the translated texts, prompting the midcentury

45. In French this means, literally, "to return to a brutish state," but it also means "to render idiotic." I wish to thank the reviewer for *New German Critique* for pointing out the connection between Arendt's *abrutissement* and Simone Weil.

46. Weil, *La condition ouvrière*, 21. For more on Weil's concept of labor, see Meltzer, "Hands of Simone Weil."

47. See Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, 100; Hegel, *Systeme de la vie éthique*; and Hegel, *Principes de la philosophie du droit*.

revival of interest in Hegel in France during the late 1930s and early 1940s.⁴⁸ Although Arendt often expressed disillusionment with the Hegelians in her letters to Blücher from France, and did not need to read their translations, her papers show that she was also reading many of the same texts.⁴⁹ Her archive holds detailed typewritten notes on Hegel's *Realphilosophie*, in which she focused exclusively on his discussions of tools, labor, and machines.⁵⁰ Here she quoted Hegel: "In the *machine*, the human being himself sublates [*aufhebt*] this formal activity and lets it labor entirely for him. . . . He does not abolish the necessity of his labor, but merely pushes it out, removes it from nature and directs it."⁵¹ This remains true in the face of the deceptively effortless nature of machine labor, which only in fact *reveals* how truly trapped the human being is within this necessity.

For Hegel, machine labor was not a self-contained process, because it did not lead from the beginning of making a thing until the end. Laborers, Hegel proposed, are therefore isolated from the objects they produce and become "through the abstractness of labor—more mechanical, duller, spiritless."⁵² According to Hegel's political economy, based on an analogy between production and law, this subsumption (*Subsumtion*) of the individual to the general laboring process comes at the expense of rendering mechanical laborers brutish, generating a dependence on their perpetual labor and on the chronic distress of the class that must do such work. It is impossible for the working class to participate in the pleasures and freedoms of civil society.⁵³ To return to Arendt's terminology, the *abrutissement* of the labor process extends into the hours freed by the termination of mechanical labor, which only *appears* to remove its inherent toil and necessity.

48. For more on Hegel's reception in France, see Butler, *Subjects of Desire*; and Kelly, "Post-war Hegel Revival in France."

49. Hannah Arendt to Heinrich Blücher, May 1, 1952, in Arendt and Blücher, *Within Four Walls*, 156–59.

50. The notes are undated but, based on their location next to writings about Marx and writings in the *DTB*, they appear to be circa 1953. See Arendt, Notes: "Hegel, Jenenser Realphilosophie, ed. J. Hoffmeister (Vorlesungen 1803–06)," in "Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel," Speeches and Writing Files, Excerpts and Notes, HAP.

51. Cf. Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie*, §320–21. The edition read by Arendt had in its title a variant spelling of the adjective referring to the city of Jena.

52. Hegel, "Philosophy of Spirit (1805–1806)," 139. For Hegel's political economy, see Ceserale, "Hegel's Notion of Abstract Labor."

53. This comes close to Arendt's assessment of laborers in *On Revolution* (1963). For analysis, see Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 144.

To some degree, Arendt agreed with Hegel's analysis of machine labor and adapted it for her argument against industrial automation in *The Human Condition*. Nonetheless, for the next few years she took a critical stance against the political problems that Hegel had perpetuated in lumping together this necessity with a valuation of creative activity. To Arendt's mind, Hegelian dialectics, which Marx incorporated into his philosophy of history, portrayed the transformation of necessity into its opposite much too simply.⁵⁴ One could not merely *fabricate* one's exit from the necessity of labor by giving it the emancipatory character of work. This would be to ignore the apolitical status of these concepts in the philosophical tradition. But what, for Arendt, was so problematic about the tradition's love for *Herstellen* and its emancipatory capacities? In attempting to discover its originary character, Arendt began to translate *Herstellen* in the *Denktagebuch* as *poiesis*, showing that it had a fundamental relationship to the kind of production that took place in the *oikos*. This translation of *Herstellen* as *poiesis* not only exposes the connection between modern fabrication and the activity of the ancient Greek craftsman but also indicates a strong connection between Arendt's philosophical contestation of tradition and Heideggerian deconstruction or debuilding (*Abbau*).

Heidegger's thinking about *poiesis*, which he also translated as *Herstellen*, had a similarly hesitant trajectory. In his early works on phenomenology, he agreed with Aristotle: *poiesis* was an unfree and inauthentic activity. However, his valuation changed with "the turning" of his thought, when he began to see the connection between *poiesis* and world building; *poiesis* was not simply the means to an end but a response to feelings of instability and the illegibility of our surroundings.⁵⁵ This theme evolved in a series of lectures he gave in Bremen in 1949, later published as "The Turning," "The Question concerning Technology," and "The Thing," which Arendt was familiar with as early as 1952 (*DTB*, 195).⁵⁶ In "The Thing" there was an extended consideration of what, ontologically, was contained within the object and of the process of its coming into being, or its fabrication (*Herstellen*). Heidegger took the example of the jug: "Does the vessel's self-support alone define the jug as a thing? Clearly the jug stands as a vessel only because it has been brought to a stand."⁵⁷ This bringing to stand (*stellen*) is the process of fabrication (*Her-*

54. On Arendt's reading of Hegel, see Yaqoob, "Reconciliation and Violence."

55. On Heidegger and *poiesis*, see Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger*, 249–55; and Taminioux, "Reappropriation of the Nicomachean Ethics."

56. She must have read the 1951 version of Heidegger, "Das Ding," or else a manuscript copy that was personally sent but unrecorded in her archive.

57. Heidegger, "Das Ding," 169.

stellen), or of bringing the object into self-support (*Insichstehen*), that “lets the jug come into its own.” Similar themes are discussed in “The Question concerning Technology,” likely read by Arendt in 1954, in which Heidegger explicitly defined *poiesis* as “a producing that brings-forth, that erects monuments, and builds the world: i.e., fabrication or *Herstellen*.”⁵⁸

Nevertheless, in developing her own determination of *Herstellen*, Arendt overturned a central point of Heidegger’s argument. While Heidegger argued that thinking itself was a form of *poiesis*, Arendt argued that one could not conceive of contemplation as *Herstellen*, because *Herstellen* is essentially based, per Aristotle, on a mastery of the necessities of life. To construe contemplation as fabrication was to see thinking as a form of mastery, at a remove from life itself. But “in reversal of Nietzsche and Heidegger,” Arendt asserted that “this distance from life is false: it is based on the mastery of others, which procures that which is necessary for life. . . . It is based on the parasitism of the world, which is produced and ordered by others” (*DTB*, 366). Though she had initially entertained the idea that *Herstellen* was a positive activity, Arendt’s reconceptualization of work, or fabrication, stemmed from a refusal of the tendency to see *poiesis* as a political saving-power. Politics, for Arendt, was not something to be produced, ordered, or planned—like the making of a jug—from beginning to end.

Still, Arendt’s indebtedness to Heidegger’s methodology and framework, particularly his analysis of technology, is unmistakable. In a 1954 letter to Heidegger she even attributed her identification of the tripartite distinction to him. She reported that she had been working for nearly three years on “an analysis of the fundamentally different activities,” which had become confused by the dominance of the *vita contemplativa* throughout the Western philosophical tradition. She would therefore pursue the obscured differences between “laboring, fabricating and acting, whereby both labor and action were understood according to the model of fabrication [*Modell des Herstellens*]: labor became ‘productive’ [*produktiv*] and action was interpreted according to the interrelationship between means-ends.”⁵⁹ This, she wrote, “I could not do (if I can do it) without what I have learned from you in my youth.”⁶⁰ Following Heidegger’s turn (*die Kehre*) from first philosophy to the historicity of moder-

58. Heidegger, “Die Frage nach der Technik,” 21. This translation uses terminology consistent with Heidegger, *Question concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 21. A copy of the first edition is in Arendt’s library.

59. Arendt, “Letter to Martin Heidegger (8 May 1954),” 119.

60. Arendt, “Letter to Martin Heidegger (8 May 1954),” 119.

nity, Arendt around 1953 began to leave behind her reading of the canon and embark on a more immanent consideration of modern labor theory.

These new interests informed her lecture “The Concept of Man as Laborer,” given at New York University in November 1953. In this lecture Arendt tied the importance of recent technological change to her philosophical, genealogical inquiry into political economy. “The difference of our world from all other worlds,” she wrote in her lecture notes, is “technological transformation.”⁶¹ She observed that such transformation entailed the prospect of the end of laboring society, as Marx promised, and inhered in innovations in modern production: “The elimination of pain and effort makes fabrication possible in the form of labor. The transformation of work into labor and of use objects into objects of consumption.”⁶² This transformation meant that the “society of jobholders” would be “unprotected by anything but the force of laboring.”⁶³ They had no common rights beyond the “right to work.”⁶⁴ Here we see how Arendt’s critique of political economy began to form the basis of arguments that later appeared in the prologue to *The Human Condition*.

Beyond Labor and Work, 1956–1958

Arendt’s interest in contemporary political economy was prompted by her preparations for the Walgreen Foundation Lectures at the University of Chicago. The subject of these lectures, according to the request written by political science professor and Walgreen chairman Jerome G. Kerwin in April 1955, “should come within the framework of American institutions.”⁶⁵ At the bottom of the letter is scribbled, in Arendt’s hand, “Labor and Equality in Modern Society.” This is likely, and revealingly, the theme she had originally planned to present. Arendt responded hesitantly, saying that she would have to think it over, since her “field is not American studies.”⁶⁶ Rather, she had been preoccupied “for several years in certain aspects of problems involved in Labor and Equality as well as in their relationship to republican institutions.”⁶⁷ By May

61. Arendt, “The Concept of Man as Laborer (30 Nov 1953)” (lecture notes), Speeches and Writings File, Essays and Lectures, HAP.

62. Arendt, “The Concept of Man as Laborer (30 Nov 1953).”

63. Arendt, “The Concept of Man as Laborer (30 Nov 1953).”

64. Arendt, “The Concept of Man as Laborer (30 Nov 1953).”

65. Jerome G. Kerwin to Hannah Arendt, April 4, 1955, Correspondence—Organizations, University of Chicago, Walgreen Foundation, HAP, 019851.

66. Hannah Arendt to Jerome G. Kerwin, April 17, 1955, Correspondence—Organizations, University of Chicago, Walgreen Foundation, HAP, 019850.

67. Hannah Arendt to Jerome G. Kerwin, April 17, 1955.

22, however, she had accepted the invitation, proposing that the title of her lecture series would be based on a quote from Locke, “The Labor of our Body and the Work of our Hands.”⁶⁸ Ultimately, in February 1956, she changed the lecture series title to “Vita Activa.”⁶⁹

Around this time, and in keeping with “the frame of American institutions,” Arendt began to read and annotate assessments of American automation.⁷⁰ One such article, published after her lectures but before *The Human Condition* appeared, was written by Geoffrey Ashe in the *New Leader*, a magazine supported by the Socialist Party of America.⁷¹ In line with socialist political economy at the time, Ashe declared that automation would reverse the “curve initiated by Taylor and Fordism,” whereby the “deprivation of pride and craftsmanship” led workers to seek fulfilment in the “debauches in automobiles and television sets.”⁷² The “upgraded workers of the Age of Automation” would be responsible, well-occupied, and balanced men.⁷³ The worker would no longer feel degraded by factory labor, given the new capacity to exercise different skills and judgments. In so saying, Ashe echoed Lenin’s admiration for industrial advancement, which argued that an even more rationalized version of Taylorism would bring about the proletariat’s control of social production.⁷⁴ Such attitudes stood in stark contrast to Arendt’s Hegelian-inspired critique of machines and their inherent dehumanizing qualities.

Arendt’s archives, particularly a file titled “Labor,” also show her interest in German conversations about automation. Along with the piece by Ashe, she clipped an article by Max Pietsch that took a far more skeptical view of the new

68. Hannah Arendt to Jerome G. Kerwin, May 22, 1955, Correspondence—Organizations, University of Chicago, Walgreen Foundation, HAP, 019855. This would also be the title of one section of *The Human Condition*. Two months later Arendt puzzlingly asks to change this to “The Labor of Man’s Body and the Work of his Hands” (Hannah Arendt to Jerome G. Kerwin, July 22, 1955, Correspondence—Organizations, University of Chicago, Walgreen Foundation, HAP, 019843). Locke, and his relationship to Aristotle’s idea of labor, was the subject of one of Arendt’s 1955 lectures at the University of California, Berkeley, titled “History of Political Theory.” See Arendt, “Locke, John,” History of Political Theory, Subject File, Courses, HAP.

69. Jerome G. Kerwin to Hannah Arendt, February 20, 1956, Correspondence—Organizations, University of Chicago, Walgreen Foundation, HAP, 019840.

70. For exegesis of her relation to American automation, see Simbirski, “Cybernetic Muse.”

71. Arendt, “Geoffrey Ashe—Automation,” in “Labor,” Speeches and Writing Files, Excerpts and Notes, HAP.

72. Ashe, “Automation and the Worker,” 14.

73. Ashe, “Automation and the Worker,” 12.

74. On the interconnections between industrial management and scientific socialism, see Scoville, “Taylorization of Vladimir Ilich Lenin.”

English term.⁷⁵ The article's author, wary of the radical changes that automation would bring about in the workplace, later wrote a book on how to properly manage an automated workplace to ensure the dignity of the workers' labor.⁷⁶ This was only a milder version of those hesitations expressed at the time by other German critics, who took a more pessimistic attitude toward technology and industry. This included not only Frankfurt School members like Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse but also Arendt's first husband, Günther Anders, a theorist of postindustrial technology at the time that she was researching automation.⁷⁷

Arendt's interest in automation was undoubtedly informed by the German critique of technology and the high point of American automation in public discourse, but its most sustained influence was expressly French labor theory. Arendt voiced this debt to Kenneth W. Thomson of the Rockefeller Foundation in a 1956 letter in which she requested funds for the *frais de voyage* to attend a colloquium, "The Thought and Work of Marx," at the Cercle Culturel de Royaumont. This was a private intellectual club located in a grand Cistercian abbey in a secluded, forested area just north of Paris.⁷⁸ After Thomson replied skeptically, wanting to know more about the colloquium's "relevance to the problems with which you are concerned," Arendt explained that her interest in Marx had come from her earlier Guggenheim project, which had quickly expanded outward and "could not be restricted to a mere discussion" of him.⁷⁹ Arendt's studies had now broadened to consider a more holistic view of "the problems of labor and work," for which the "field of French scholarship is especially significant."⁸⁰ Since she was about to give a series of lectures on just these topics at the Walgreen Foundation, she wrote that she would particularly "welcome a discussion with Marx-scholars . . . in case I should be able to go."⁸¹ Such a group of scholars would have included Alain Robbe-Grillet,

75. Arendt, "Die Automatische Fabrik—Rheinischer Merkur (Jan 1956)," Excerpts and Notes, HAP.

76. See also Pietsch, *Automation und Unternehmensverwaltung*.

77. Anders, *Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*; Marcuse, "Some Social Implications of Modern Technology." In the mid-1950s Anders penned several articles on automation; he and Arendt had discussed his book in their correspondence; and she later referenced it in *The Human Condition*. See "Günther Anders an Hannah Arendt, Wien, 20.2.1956," in Arendt and Anders, *Hannah Arendt—Günther Anders*, 62–63; and *HC*, 150n13.

78. Hannah Arendt to Kenneth W. Thomson, April 1, 1956, Correspondence—Organizations, Rockefeller Foundation, HAP.

79. Hannah Arendt to Kenneth W. Thomson, April 7, 1956, Correspondence—Organizations, Rockefeller Foundation, HAP.

80. Hannah Arendt to Kenneth W. Thomson, April 7, 1956.

81. Hannah Arendt to Kenneth W. Thomson, April 7, 1956.

Martial Gueroult, and Arendt's acquaintances Jean Wahl and Alexandre Koyré, all members of the Cercle Culturel de Royaumont that year.⁸²

Indeed, Arendt's papers show that she had been interested in a particular legacy of French labor theory for some time, reading the works of thinkers such as Georges Sorel.⁸³ Sorel, a Marxist syndicalist, identified the problem of the centrality of labor decades before Arendt recognized the need for a distinction. As she wrote in her notes, quoting his book *D'Aristote à Marx* (1894), "Aristotle defined man as a reasonable and social animal," but today the moderns far surpass his thinking, "for the word *travailleur* comprises the two expressions of being alive and being reasonable; we say that man is a social laborer (*travailleur sociale*)."⁸⁴ In the modern age, Sorel argued, the ontological and social basis of the human being was located, inordinately, in his capacity to labor.

As did Arendt's, Sorel's account of labor passed from Aristotle to Marx. He similarly came to recognize that the figure of the *travailleur* or *homo faber* replaced the Aristotelian model of man as a social and rational animal, and was equally apprehensive about the tendency to see mechanization as a liberation from labor. This liberation, for Sorel, would produce a dangerous valorization of labor. Warily anticipating increasing automation, he wrote that labor, once "disengaged by the machine from its ancient muscular servitudes, will acquire a sovereign and spiritual nobility."⁸⁵ However, he added, in a now familiar valorization of creative activity, that the "existence of an artificial environment (*milieu artificiel*)" was a barrier to the threat posed by industrial society and the alienation, or disengagement, of humanity from the machine. This artificial milieu, a concept taken from the sociology of Émile Durkheim, was defined as the "work of associated men" who have created it out of "whole cloth and then superimposed [it] on nature."⁸⁶ In demonstrating the ability of a coalition of workers to temper nature, the artificial milieu was therefore seen by Sorel as "the fundamental condition of our liberty."⁸⁷

82. "Dépliant de présentation, 1957," Cercle Culturel de Royaumont—Archives numériques, www.royaumont-archives-et-bibliotheque.fr/opacwebaloes/images/paragraphes/BHIG/bi1957.pdf.

83. See also Arendt, "Reflections on Violence"; and Finlay, "Hannah Arendt's Critique of Violence."

84. Arendt, "George Sorel d'Aristote à Marx: Avant-propos par Edouard Berth, Paris 1935 [*sic*]," in "Labor," Excerpts and Notes, HAP.

85. Arendt, "George Sorel d'Aristote à Marx."

86. See Alexander, *Antinomies of Classical Thought*, 251.

87. See Alexander, *Antinomies of Classical Thought*, 251.

This passage conjures up Arendt's famous conception of the "human artifice," which also acts as a barrier between humanity and nature.⁸⁸ As she defined it in *The Human Condition*, the "human artifice" was also the product of human work and its drive toward world building. Through this work the human "is engaged in a constant process of reification, and the degree of worldliness of produced things, which all together form the human artifice" (*HC*, 96). Though the similarities are striking, they cannot be fully explained by the suggestion that Arendt was uncomplicatedly adopting Sorel's vocabulary. While she adapted this phrase in *The Human Condition*, and in the *Denktagebuch*, Arendt would not have agreed that the "human artifice" was *the* fundamental condition of liberty, which for her would have instead relied on its relation to a free public realm.⁸⁹ As we have seen, fabrication for Arendt was never a sufficient substitute or a genuine mode of politics—one could not substitute making for acting.

Belief in the primacy of making was, however, central to French labor theory at the time. It was in direct contrast to the predominance of this belief that Arendt crafted her critique of *homo faber*. Arendt's archival notes show that she took this lineage of labor theory seriously and includes typewritten summaries not just on *D'Aristote à Marx* but also on *Les méfaits des intellectuelles* (1914), by Sorel's student Édouard Berth, and on *L'évolution créatrice* (1903), by his teacher, Henri Bergson. One of Arendt's aims in articulating a new concept of *homo faber*, or the working person, would be overturning the assumption that this activity was a preeminent bearer of political potential. Moreover, it would challenge Bergson's claim that humans are humans insofar as they had the capacity to make things. In fact, Arendt noted that the origins of her term *homo faber* were adapted from Bergson's coinage (*HC*, 305). Adaptation was necessary, she wrote, given that Bergson's insistence on fabrication as the essence-giving activity of humanity "could easily be read as a case study" of how modernity began to value making over and above thinking.

Against *Homo sapiens*, Bergson wrote in *Creative Evolution* that humanity was characterized by its boundless intelligence. Humans invent; our capacity to use "tools to make tools" could "vary indefinitely."⁹⁰ This same emphasis on the working essence of humanity would be picked up

88. This brings up Arendt's philosophical anthropology. See Curthoys, "Ernst Cassirer, Hannah Arendt."

89. Though some have argued that Arendt is less antifoundationalist and more institutionalist than previously imagined, see Waldron, "Arendt on the Foundations of Equality."

90. Arendt, "Henri Bergson—L'évolution créatrice (1948)," in "Labor," Excerpts and Notes, HAP.

by Berth and brought toward more radical political purposes. Taking Sorel's concept of the *milieu artificiel* even further, Berth would write in *Les méfaits*, in a passage that Arendt quoted in her notes, that the modern city must reestablish itself "like cement" around its "labor institutions [*des institutions de travail*]."91 In this new kind of city, nearly an inversion of the Aristotelian *polis*, "the exigency of labor [*travail*] would flourish from the heart of men."92 The grounding of political life on the capacity to labor, even the necessity of labor, was to be just as problematic for Arendt as she found Aristotle's and Marx's models to be.

This promise of a future city founded on emancipated labor was carried from Sorel into midcentury socialist political economy in France. This came at a time when Marxism was being revised in two different, though intersecting, directions. On the one hand, Sartre and others approached Marxism philosophically, primarily as existentialists.⁹³ On the other, there were more empirical or social approaches, a line begun by figures like Henri Lefebvre before the war, and then picked up again by a group of writers associated with the journal *Arguments* (1956–62), who attempted to refute the predominant philosophical traditions of Cartesianism and Bergsonian vitalism.⁹⁴ Against the subjectivist basis of those theories, they took sociological approaches to the problems of the day, though they too drew inspiration from existentialism. They believed that Marx's economic concept of alienation from labor was not sufficiently adjusted to deal with the problems of technological society.⁹⁵ This adjustment would require detailed empirical inquiry into contemporary laboring conditions.

In the latter, empiricist camp were the sociologists Georges Friedmann, a board member of the Cercle Culturel de Royaumont and researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, and his colleague Pierre Naville. Both were preeminent voices on postwar postindustrial labor conditions, and both had deep ties to the Communist Party as well as a background in surrealist politics.⁹⁶ After the war, their studies drew from the new research into factory conditions in the United States and across Europe. But, as we have seen with

91. Arendt, "Édouard Berth—Les méfaits d'intellectuels [*sic*]," in "Labor," Excerpts and Notes, HAP.

92. Arendt, "Édouard Berth—Les méfaits d'intellectuels [*sic*]."

93. McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*, 337; see also Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*.

94. Stivale, "From Heterodoxy to 'Counter-discourse.'"

95. McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*, 337.

96. "Le *Traité de sociologie du travail* qu'il dirige en collaboration avec Georges Friedmann consacré son rôle éminent dans la recherche universitaire, dont il participe plusieurs années aux instances dirigeantes." Tréanton, "In Memoriam"; Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France*.

Paul A. Baran, this quantitative method was undergirded by a primarily normative political motivation. On the one hand, they hoped to revise Marx's categories, which were admittedly confusing at times. "Marx often equates notions of labor [*travail*], 'means,' 'general,' 'socially necessary,' 'abstract,' etc.," Naville wrote in *La vie de travail et ses problèmes* (1954).⁹⁷ The task for Naville was to render these terms comprehensible and to subdivide Marx's categories of labor on the grounds of empirical inquiry, showing how his terminology could be backed up by sociological research.

On the other hand, these kinds of thinkers explicitly carried out a study of laboring conditions to prepare the way for socialism. "The place and function of labor and the laborer in an economy and society evolving towards socialism," Naville wrote, "cannot be completely elucidated and set up if one does not consider the entire life of work [*la vie totale de travail*]."⁹⁸ This sentiment, which put stock in a dialectical materialist approach, was essentially echoed by Naville's collaborator, Friedmann. Though Arendt's notes pronounced Friedmann guilty of "preaching a humanism of labor," this humanism, expressed in what he thought to be quite dire and changing times, was understandable given the impending elimination of manual work.⁹⁹ Friedmann was urgently concerned with what would happen to the value of human life when it would be deprived of the "essential element" on which humanity's "mental balance and the possibility of self-realization has been based."¹⁰⁰ With this disappearance it would be critical to found "a new center for human development in the hours thus freed, i.e., in the active use of leisure."¹⁰¹ He proposed that this time might be filled with a return to the craftsman model of work, whereby the worker, in a hobby-like way, makes things for himself purely for pleasure rather than need.¹⁰²

Like Friedmann and Naville, Arendt was worried about the effects that emancipation from labor, through automation, would have on the laboring classes.¹⁰³ The difference, however, was that while the French thinkers suggested

97. Naville, *La vie de travail et ses problèmes*, 18.

98. Naville, *La vie de travail et ses problèmes*, 18.

99. Arendt, "Georges Friedmann—Problèmes Humains du Machinisme Industriel [*sic*]," in "Labor," Excerpts and Notes, HAP. As Benanev points out, discourse around automation and fears of a postwork society recur throughout moments of capitalism in crisis ("Automation and the Future of Work—1").

100. Friedmann, *Anatomy of Work*, xvii.

101. Friedmann, *Anatomy of Work*, xvii.

102. McLellan, *Marxism after Marx*, 338.

103. For more on Arendt's sources in thinking about automation, see Simbirski, "Cybernetic Muse."

that the potential threat of meaninglessness could be solved by injecting the meaning-making process of work into the “hours freed” by automation, Arendt thought this would create an apolitical society of consumer-hobbyists, who would never go beyond the misplaced valuation of productive labor.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, this would be an essentially homogeneous community devoid of plurality, given that its members’ freedom was premised on their common identity—on a false unity. Since this construal of the laboring classes as a socially coherent category in itself was ultimately misguided, “one can only hope,” she wrote in a footnote, “that [the factory workers] themselves will not accept the social substitutes for contentment and self-respect offered them by labor theorists, who by now really believe that the interest in work and the satisfaction of craftsmanship can be replaced by ‘human relations’ and the respect workers ‘earn from their fellow workers’” (HC, 149). Here Arendt underlines the essential aporia of all the “author[s] in the field” of automation studies, which is also the very same aporia discovered in Marx and Heidegger: namely, the overvaluation and projection of the model of the “self-respecting craftsman” onto all forms of labor (HC, 149). Labor theorists have been continually mistaken in conceiving factory work as “work” or *Herstellen*, rather than labor. “The workers in the factory,” she wrote, “have always been laborers, and though they may have excellent reasons for self-respect, it certainly cannot arise from the work that they do” (HC, 149). The nature of the work performed in the factory, the fact of its laboriousness and its disconnection from individual laborers’ ability to see through or participate in an object’s production from beginning to end, could not possibly serve as the grounds for their self-respect and could not facilitate properly political relationships, or “human relations,” at all.

We begin to see here how Arendt’s story about the Aristotelian *polis* and the *oikos* ultimately links up to an explanation of *why* the kinds of idealisms put forth by proponents of automation, or socialist political economies more generally, are wholly insufficient for overcoming the knot at the base of the Western political tradition: the interrelation between labor and necessity. By means of her earlier reflections on Aristotle, Weil, Hegel, and Heidegger, she knew that liberation from toil and trouble could not be achieved by confusing labor and work. Her philosophical inquiry into the problem of political economy,

104. Friedmann and Naville were not unlike today’s more technocratic socialists, who are also advocates of automation. See Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*; and Srnicek and Williams, *Inventing the Future*.

polis and *oikos*, *Arbeit* and *Herstellen*, was thereby transmuted into dealing with the more proximate issue of automation and dialectical materialist political economy.

Displacing the Dialectic of Labor

Grasping the interaction between Arendt's inquiry into the "great tradition" of Western political thought and her critique of socialist political economies provides the opportunity to see both the meaning and the historical significance of Arendt's concepts more clearly. Her distinction between labor and work was not just a rebuttal to Aristotle's devaluation of banausic labor in the *polis*, a response to Marx's overloaded notion of *Arbeit*, or an overturning of Heidegger's *poietical* politics, but also a fissure injected into the dialectical materialist notion of labor—the central premise of any emancipatory, socialist notion of political economy. Arendt, as we have seen, separated out the burdensome character of laboring from the world-forming character of working and denied to either control of political activity. Her attempt to rethink the supremacy of labor was, in this light, of a piece with the persistent attempts to redefine and then deracinate labor from Marx's political economy to more properly theorize capitalism of the midcentury, which was seen to have more diffuse class antagonisms than Marx had originally accounted for.¹⁰⁵

By the 1980s the dialectic of labor, with its twofold emancipatory and burdensome qualities, had been called into question if not shelved entirely by those working under heterogeneous Marxian horizons. For Frankfurt School thinkers in particular, labor could no longer be tasked with providing an escape route from advanced capitalism. According to Axel Honneth, this growing theoretical skepticism around orthodox Marxian political economy could be attributed to material developments of the midcentury. The pressure of Taylorism and scientific management in the factory caused a crisis in social philosophy, which looked to overthrow the nineteenth-century, emancipatory concept of work that could be found in Hegel and Marx. According to Honneth, "theoretical milestones" of this process included, in addition to Max Scheler's phenomenological philosophy, the publication of Arendt's *Human Condition*.¹⁰⁶

By making a clean break between "reflexive bodily labor" and "truly 'manual' work," Arendt's theory amounted to the "historical product of the

105. For accounts of these transformations, see Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*; Wood, *Retreat from Class*; and Aronowitz, *Crisis in Historical Materialism*.

106. Honneth, "Work and Instrumental Action," 168. The translator explicitly makes the curious decision to translate *Arbeit* as "work" rather than "labor," causing confusion with the categories in Arendt's *vita activa*. I have altered the translation where necessary.

Taylorisation of industrial work.”¹⁰⁷ She responded to, and then redepicted, the “formal social results” of Taylorism, which had created divisions between mechanized labor, with its repetitive, bodily, and unskilled aspects, and the more intellectual, skilled, and satisfying work characteristic of the managerial class. Arendt, per Honneth’s account, had only replicated this historical situation of late capitalist conditions of social labor—for which Marx’s idea of labor as self-cultivation had lost any clarity—by categorically removing emancipatory significance from the act of working. This removal was continued by Habermasian social theory, which denied forms of resistance that were tied to the capitalist work process. It was therefore rooted in “the same contemporary experience, to which the theory of action in Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* is also a response.”¹⁰⁸

Arendt’s theory is seen by Honneth as a product of late capitalism, as well as a product that was decisively unaware of its historical, material specificity. This, like many other accounts, imagined Arendt as she sometimes liked to present herself: ignorant of her social context, a thinker engaged with only perennial problems, a person embedded more in the past than in the present. As she herself said in the prologue to *The Human Condition*, she did not want to “discuss the modern world against whose backdrop this book was written.” Refusing to discuss is, however, quite a different thing from refusing to consider. While Honneth presumes Arendt ignorant of these developments, the reconstruction I have just outlined suggests otherwise. Arendt *did* engage deeply and critically with exactly the context that Honneth says she unwittingly participated in. Her theory was not simply a product of Taylorism but a considered response to the industrial conditions of her day; one that sought to theorize, against the knee-jerk principles of socialist political economy, a new way of thinking about the relation between politics and economics, *polis* and *oikos*; one that considered, and attempted to overturn, conceptual subsumption, crudely dialectical thinking, and overdependence on historical materialist methodology.

Arendt’s critique of political economy dovetailed with several landmark accounts of the shift in the lived manifestation of capitalism’s logic—and, therewith, Marxism’s capacity to respond to it. In the 1960s, coinciding with the crisis of Marx’s labor theory of value (LTV) in the field of academic economics, Antonio Negri attempted to overturn the centrality of the “Law of

107. Honneth, “Work and Instrumental Action,” 171.

108. Honneth, “Work and Instrumental Action,” 175.

Value” to Marxism, which maintained that the value of human labor was the basis on which commodities could be exchanged.¹⁰⁹ In large part, this was because Marx’s theory of labor relied on a reductive definition of productive, manual labor, even though the “theoretical conditions have changed”—Arendt might have called this a misplaced valorization of *Herstellen*.¹¹⁰ Against the dialectical materialist view, Negri, like Arendt, believed that late capitalism revealed that labor expressed a relationship of domination and violence, or necessity, more than it did any kind of emancipatory capacity. By his account, the theoretical “*overdetermination of process*,” through which capitalistic violence was overthrown by proletarian violence according to Marxian political economy, imagined only an “empty space” that, because of the necessity of the Law of Value to capitalist exchange, would continue to “live in the immediacy of use value.”¹¹¹

This is so because Marx’s formulation of the “transition” requires a phase in which the termination of the capitalist production process is overseen by the dictatorship of the proletariat. The proletariat commands the “necessary intermediary through which fixed capital needs to reproduce society,” but for Negri this means that capitalism “invades the horizon of the constituting process.”¹¹² Socialism per se never appears; rather, it appears as a mature form of capitalism—true constituent power is foreclosed on. On the contrary, he wrote, “communism does not come in a ‘subsequent period,’” as the result of a chain of effects or inversions of violence, but “springs up contemporaneously as a process constituting an enormous power of antagonism and of real supersession.”¹¹³ In other words, transition was neither the result of careful planning or a crude dialectical violence. It was rather the formation of subjectivities and the coherence of those subjectivities into collective action, a “constituent *dispositif*,” that would be the driving mechanism of revolutionary theory.

The intellectual origins of this *dispositif* are clear if complex to Negri. “Hannah Arendt,” he wrote, “well understood this truth of constituent power.”¹¹⁴ He then summarized this idea as it appears in Arendt’s *On Revolution*, where it coincides with the potentiality bounded in genuine beginnings or

109. Analysis of LTV and its inadequacies was driven by post-Keynesians at Cambridge. See Meek, *Studies in the Labor Theory of Value*; Robinson, *Essay on Marxian Economics*; and Sen, “On the Labour Theory of Value.” For historical accounts of the debates over the labor theory of value, see Steedman, *Marx after Sraffa*; and Steedman, *Value Controversy*.

110. Negri, *Marx beyond Marx*, 183.

111. Negri, *Marx beyond Marx*, 173.

112. Negri, *Marx beyond Marx*, 182.

113. Negri, *Marx beyond Marx*, 181.

114. Negri, *Insurgencies*, 15.

nality. Constituent power is therefore one that founds the political from “nothingness” and maintains it as an “expansive principle.”¹¹⁵ This expansive principle, however, leaves Negri “ill at ease,” given that the agonistic moment of revolution disappears under the blanket of “linear and spontaneist” constitutionalism proposed by Arendt’s theory.¹¹⁶ It is, ultimately, only an idyllic representation “if compared to the real problems that the American Revolution had to face since its beginning, problems of class struggle, slavery, and the frontier.”¹¹⁷

The sticking point for Negri, as for generations of critics, is Arendt’s neglect, even “negation,” of the social question.¹¹⁸ While her formulation of constituent power is a radical one, she cannot “maintain the trajectory” that would lead to preserving the political space as a “terrain of freedom and horizon of desire.”¹¹⁹ While for Negri, this trajectory toward the horizon line would consist in the *potentia* of the *multitudo*, a reworked version of the proletarian agent of Marx’s revolution, it is less clear how the thematic of transition is addressed in Arendt’s political thought. If not the laborer, *who* exactly is imagined as the subject of Arendt’s “constituent power”? Because labor and work have been cut away from political action proper, what is the force that sustains this carrying over between destruction and foundation? Or, as the similar question was put more recently by Kathryn Gines: “Where [in Arendt’s thought] is the political agency of the oppressed (i.e., those carrying life’s burdens)?”¹²⁰

Arendt never answered this question directly. As a consequence, the thematic of transition has often been subordinated by scholarship to her account of political foundations. She does, however, give considered space to the question, and to the figuration of political agency, at a few key moments in her thinking.¹²¹ Briefly considering such moments can help us to see how her engagement with midcentury political economy had indirect if important effects for her work on revolution and political change. In *On Revolution* (1963), pub-

115. Negri, *Insurgencies*, 15.

116. Here Negri is deploying one of Lenin’s favorite pejorative terms; see Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?* I thank Samuel Garrett Zeitlin for pointing this out.

117. Negri, *Insurgencies*, 17.

118. Negri, *Insurgencies*, 27.

119. Negri, *Insurgencies*, 16.

120. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, 57.

121. Mayer, “Hannah Arendt, National Socialism”; Jahanbegloo and Khatami, “Acting under Tyranny”; Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*; Honig, “Declarations of Independence”; and Goldoni and McCorkindale, *Hannah Arendt and the Law*.

lished just a few years after *The Human Condition*, Arendt wrote that the American revolutionaries were curiously fascinated by the legend of Exodus and the wandering of Aeneas. "In a strange coincidence," she wrote, both legends consisted in a "hiatus between the end of the old order and the beginning of the new."¹²² It concerned the exile of some community on "distant shores," uncertain of whether they would remain in asylum in perpetuity. But it was precisely during this hiatus or sojourn that "great leaders" would appear in the gaps of historical time.

This same passage on the importance of foundation myths would be transferred into the second volume of *Life of the Mind* (1978), her final and incomplete work. Here she elaborated that "the legendary hiatus between a no-more and a not-yet clearly indicated that freedom would not be an *automatic* result of liberation."¹²³ During this period one had to be resigned to the hiatus that had appeared as a break in the "continuous flow of temporal sequence" (*LM*, 205). This resignation to the interim, "a confrontation with the abyss of freedom," could happen only if one set about to rethinking those foundation legends that might "tell them how to solve the problem of beginning" (*LM*, 207). But, Arendt wrote, this applies only to "communities where the 'We' is properly established for its journey through historical time" (*LM*, 207). One needs, in other words, a social a priori, a reason for living together as a "many-in-one" (*LM*, 207).

For Arendt, great leaders are born out of an explicitly exilic, and even utopic, "We." A political agent is neither the planned proletarian subject of socialist political economy nor the constituent potential of the post-Marxist multitude. Instead, the Arendtian actor arises, beyond *polis* or *oikos*, from the eminently nondialectical "legendary hiatus." Such a reconceptualization of the transitory and revolutionary political subject was the result of a committed engagement with, and then overturning of, the centrality of labor to political thought. In thinking up the "crucial" distinction between labor and work, Arendt displaced the Hegelian dialectic of labor, broke it apart into necessity and self-forming, respectively, and then removed from these activities any kind of emancipatory potentiality, which was given to action only. In doing so, she created the space to consider new kinds of subjects of political agency that attempted to break with a certain thread of Western thinking about the relation between politics and the economy that centralized the roles of labor and work.

122. Arendt, *On Revolution*, 205.

123. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 204 (hereafter cited as *LM*); emphasis added.

She did so through deep engagement with the political consequences wrought by this manner of thinking.

Grasping the deep interconnections between Arendt's critique of Marxian political economy and the philosophical basis of Arendt's political theory can begin to suggest more synoptic genealogies of political thought. One would be about the diversity of attempts to revise the supremacy of labor in Western Marxist theory in the twentieth century.¹²⁴ Indeed, such a figure as Arendt's ahistorical wanderer has been a fundament of insurrectionary post-Marxist political thought in the past few decades, taken up in different guises by thinkers from Rancière to Agamben.¹²⁵ And, as I have argued here, placing Arendt within the context of Marxist and post-Marxist political economy can also offer a broader view of her contributions to political thought. These contributions did not necessarily live and die with her image of the public sphere. In fact, though her political theory was initially said to be silent on questions concerning political economy—worker's rights, full automation, the transition from capitalism, and the political life of laboring people—we would do well to reconsider the motives that underlie that reading. It seems that the lines that bound Arendt's supposedly impermeable political realm might be drawn only by those who have chosen to look at her politics selectively.

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124. Heather and Stolz, "Hannah Arendt and the Problem of Critical Theory."

125. Cf. Rancière's idea of the subject of democracy as the "supplementary part" in "Ten Theses on Politics"; see also Agamben's "messianic community" in *The Time That Remains*. For Agamben's relation to Arendt's political thought, see Agamben, "Beyond Human Rights" and "What Is a People?" in *Means without End*, 15–28, 29–36.

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