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THE DISSIDENTS' THINKER?
TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS
IN HANNAH ARENDT
AND GDR DISSIDENTS

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The political theorist Hannah Arendt, by her own definition neither a philosopher nor a scientist, was a practical thinker.¹ In her view, experience meant the discovery and understanding of the human condition. A theorist of modernity, it was not social structure that she wished to change, but human practice.² It is for this reason that her approach may not be conflated with Karl R. Popper's *Open Society*, a study which equalled Arendt's in its passionate treatment of a similar historical background; radical liberal Popper's

¹ I am grateful to Marcin Rebes (Cracow), Stephanie Tölle (Dresden) and Barbara Lubich (Trent) for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

² This may be a reason why Arendt used to sketch historical developments and analyse political systems quite roughly (and most strikingly and self-confidently in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*); on the other hand, she never failed to draw detailed and intimate pictures of personalities (e.g. in *Men in Dark Times* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*). It is also the driving force behind her long-standing reflections on the negative influence of philosophy on politics, which she tried to reconcile. Although she did not manage to provide her readers with a definite position on the matter, in her latter years she did reconcile herself with philosophy. See Frederick M. Dolan, 'Arendt on philosophy and politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa, Cambridge 2000, 261-276; Margaret Canovan, 'Socrates or Heidegger? Hannah Arendt's reflections on philosophy and politics', in eadem, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, Cambridge 1992, 253-274.

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Totalitarianism and Liberty.

Hannah Arendt in the 21st century,

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description of the advent of global capitalism and those he saw as its "bedevilled" adversaries also used a comparative perspective anchored in Greek antiquity.³ Nevertheless, the ultimate goal of Arendt's argumentation was not open government. In the tradition of Immanuel Kant she pleaded for open governance of the self, something she considered a prerequisite for a positive evaluation of human plurality and for the willingness of the individual to assume responsibility.

By the same token, Arendt manoeuvred herself into potential opposition to any social relationship not reproduced as a result of individual participation. This is the case in any hierarchical system with a surplus of reified consciousness, as well as in all communities of belonging which are primarily based on the merits of descent and heritage. By theorizing on historical manifestations (the polis, modern revolutions) and methods (thinking as a mode of existence, individual poetic approaches to the world) of inter-subjective power, Arendt created a position of extreme personal openness. This position was based on two foundations, the first being the methodological amalgamation of philosophy, social science and poetry.⁴ The second is the way in which Arendt's political forms a manifesto of *self-representation*. Her philosophizing sought to contribute to a political theory which would empower people, i.e. enlighten them by providing them with an example of free thinking in order to enable them to think and act freely and for their own sake. It was never Arendt's intention to represent others; she represented herself in relation to others, thereby recognizing and underlining their inviolable and homologous right to existence. Self-representation in

³ Whereas Popper uses the historical example of Athens in the time of Socrates and Plato to describe opposing political systems and their underlying principles and methods, Arendt focuses on political spaces and their respective potential for individual emancipation. See Karl R. Popper, *The open society and its enemies*, vol. 1, 5. London 1993.

⁴ Cf. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, New Haven and London 2006, 11.

relation to others is commonly called solidarity: not solidarity derived from the consciousness of a class—a community of exclusive and militant belonging in a hierarchical system⁵—but from mind-transgressing individual insights into personal modes of existence. This is what unites dissident minds.

Hannah Arendt was a dissident mind par excellence. Throughout her life and work she showed both passionate engagement with and critical distance from such diverse personalities as Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers and student protesters, for instance Daniel Cohn-Bendit.⁶ Additionally, she never failed to observe and criticize illiberal developments wherever she met them. Few are those that have endeavoured to make creative theoretical use of Arendt's assumptions, and all of those that have adhered to a form of marginal critical theory. Among the most prominent thinkers to have attempted to retrace Arendt's argumentation in order to overcome her limitations are Agnes Heller (writing on the defence of active citizenship in modern democracy), Giorgio Agamben (writing on the understanding of the arcana imperii and human action in the era of biopolitics), and Jürgen Habermas (writing on the positive re-evaluation of communicative rationality). When it comes to methodology and historical perspective, Michel Foucault may be seen as a brother in mind.⁷

⁵ See Richard Sennett, *Respect. The formation of character in an age of inequality*, London 2003, 247–264.

⁶ For the development of her political thought see Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954. Formation, Exile, Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn, New York 1994; see also her "Truth and Politics", in eadem, *Between Past and Future*, rev. edition, New York 1968, 227–264; with an emphasis on Arendt's comments on politics and current affairs and the Jewish question in particular: Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: for love of the world*, New Haven 1982.

⁷ See Agnes Heller, *Can modernity survive?*, Cambridge 1990; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford 1998; Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Cambridge 1984–1987; Michel Foucault, *Society must be defended: lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, New York 2003.

The key issue here is not how (in-) congruent Arendt's thinking actually is. It is rather a question of its subversiveness, the quality of her texts and concepts as sources of orientation and inspiration, and their ability to trigger what Arendt believed to be the media of inter-subjective power, even in dark times: reflection and communication.⁸ If we are to believe the assessments of various scholars, Arendt's influence on disillusioned Central Eastern European dissidents were considerable: "The Arendtian resonances—creating value, resisting futility, regenerating democracy—are striking."⁹ Her political concept, problematic as it may seem in times of parliamentary routine, is deemed to be tailor-made for the post-totalitarian moment. While this argument seems convincing where the literary dissident scenes in Hungary and Czechoslovakia are concerned, and also conforms with strong anti-totalitarian sentiment exhibited in Poland, the situation in East Germany is not as straightforward.¹⁰ Bearing in mind the official silence maintained by the state on Arendtian thought, and with special reference to her literary style of thinking and writing, we ought to be able to identify fairly favourable conditions for the reception of her work in the GDR,¹¹ especially as dissidents living under censorship tended to develop a symptomatic thirst for all literature banned from official discourse.¹²

⁸ Cf. Patricia Altenbernd Johnson, *On Arendt*, Belmont 2001, 84.

⁹ Jeffrey C. Isaac, 'Oases in the desert. Hannah Arendt on democratic politics', in idem, *Democracy in Dark Times*, New York 1998, 145; cf. Michael Walzer, 'Als Allierte willkommen', *Literaturen. Das Journal für Bücher und Themen*, Sep. (2002), 29.

¹⁰ Cf. Seyla Benhabib, *The reluctant modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Thousand Oaks 1996.

¹¹ Bibliographic research and inquiries at the major GDR publishing houses indicated that Arendt's works have not been published in the GDR.

¹² Cf. Astrid Köhler, 'On the Role of Language in the Memory. Processing and Overcoming of Dictatorships', in *Present tensions. European writers on overcoming dictatorships*, eds Kristina Kaiserová and Gert Röhrborn, Budapest 2008 (forthcoming).

Transformative politics and autonomy, or the challenge of modernity

In order to evaluate whether Arendt's political theory might have been attractive from the perspective of GDR dissident groups it is necessary for me to adopt a political analytical framework which goes in the face of the usual trinity of polity, politics and policy. It aims to treat all political concepts equally, i.e. as different approaches to the same human problem. I have selected an approach which considers each political concept and its respective political system (where applicable), as a specific answer to modernity's general trend towards structural differentiation. Rapidly advancing rationalisation, secularisation, and supra-subjective interdependence are the key characteristics of this on-going process. Modernity may be conceptualized as a "story of continual constitution and reconstitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs."¹³ The end of traditional society triggered a wide spectrum of "essentializing reactions to a crisis fuelled by externalities,"¹⁴ as well as a situation in which social tensions could no longer be suppressed on mythical or collective grounds. These conflicts manifest themselves as conflicts over distribution, responsibility and decision-making. The definitive loss of cognitive clarity and normative unambiguity endows the individual with the right and duty to make personal decision.

The ambivalent and contingent thrust that is at work in the material world and social relations challenges our mind—which is built on unequivocal language—on a permanent basis. This process brings about a kind of uneasiness which results in a call for order

¹³ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, 'Multiple Modernities', *Daedalus* 129 (2000), 2.

¹⁴ "[...] essentialisierende Reaktionen auf eine Externalisierungskrise". Jürgen Osterhammel, 'Transferanalyse und Vergleich im Fernverhältnis', in *Vergleich und Transfer. Komparatistik in den Sozial-, Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften*, eds Hartmut Kaelble and Jürgen Schriewer, Frankfurt a. M. 2003, 459.

and relief. It is the legal institution of citizenship which is used to regulate the tensions that arise between the transgressing logic of the economy, military, and communication on the one side and administrative control of territorial borders, human resources, and participatory rights on the other. In a similar way to that of biological life (survival instincts, species reproduction, etc.) or the human faculty of thinking (built on categorization), politics can only exist by permanently establishing and reproducing borders. Without reinforced and reliable demarcation lines there is neither a basis for security by the rule of law and social control, nor is there sufficient potential for the orientation and personal development of the individual.¹⁵ Politics is the definition of political space and responsibility. "Truth", in this respect, "is an aspect of the hegemonic form of rule."¹⁶ The ruling classes use their power to shape cultural systems of understanding in a way that reinstitutes the life-world experience of their specific group on a social level. By the same token, they also promote their economic interests. They nevertheless have to recognize the self-destructive discrepancy between stabilizing cultural systems and ever-continuing socio-economic change, an antagonism which endangers social reproduction in general. Ideological hegemony finds its limits in a specific degree of "tolerance" (of ambiguity). The difference between totality and hegemony is postponed extermination.¹⁷

¹⁵ Cf. Stein Kokkan, 'Differenzierung und Grenzsbildung', in *Grenzsoziologie. Die politische Strukturierung des Raumes*, eds Monika Figgmüller and Georg Vobruba, Wiesbaden 2006, 25-36; see also Georg Simmel, 'Der Raum und die räumlichen Ordnungen der Gesellschaft', *ibid.* 15-23; Martina Löw, *Raumsoziologie*, Frankfurt a. M. 2001; Markus Redepenning, 'Über die Unvermeidlichkeit von Grenzbeziehungen', *Berichte zur deutschen Landeskunde* 79 (2005) 2/3, 167-177.

¹⁶ "ein Aspekt der hegemonialen Form der Herrschaft", Zygmunt Bauman, *Moderne und Ambivalenz. Das Ende der Eindeutigkeit*, Hamburg 1992, 283.

¹⁷ Cf. *idem*, *The individualized society*, Cambridge 2001. On the contingent interplay between knowledge and ideology as well as the establishment and change of social order see also Max Weber, 'The Objectivity of Social Science', in *idem*,

Seen from this perspective all politics is transformative politics, the politics of change. Modern politics in particular tends to transform society into a laboratory we have commonly agreed to term "the camp."¹⁸ In this respect it is irrelevant whether attempts are made by "progressives" to change parameters or by "conservatives" to change methods in order to maintain a set of parameters. People always claim to be part of, or they are actually assigned to, a specific "camp" (of political parties, religious beliefs, methodological convictions etc.). These are still virtual, or to be more precise, potential social groups. They struggle for privileged access to relevant, meaningful and sustainable forms of social action.¹⁹ Political decisions with social implications are shaped, embedded and (re-)framed in a public discourse. Though it is neither culturally nor anthropologically neutral, it is pre-determined by the distribution of social power relations. Participatory parity and equality of access, which are basic rules of democratic politics, do not exist *per se*.²⁰ The extent to which these rules are substantiated in a given historical social setting is part of the continuous political battle. Even in liberal democracies with their principle of political competition and maximizing of votes, focus on the satisfaction of present interests continues to engender future distributive conflicts and

Sociological Writings (The German Library, vol. 60), ed. Wolf Heydebrand, New York 1993, 248-59; Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, London 1936; Antonio Gramsci, *Philosophie der Praxis*, ed. Christian Riechers, Frankfurt a. M. 1967.

¹⁸ Cf. Agamben, *Homo sacer*. See also more recent accounts of the discussion in *Auszug aus dem Lager: Zur Überwindung des modernen Raumparadigmas in der politischen Philosophie*, ed. Ludger Schwarte, Berlin and Bielefeld 2007.

¹⁹ Here we are confronted with the antagonism between autonomy and the good life that brings about (biopolitical) confusion between the individual, collective and symbolic body. Cf. Ferenc Feher and Agnes Heller, *Biopolitics*, Aldershot 1994, 21-49.

²⁰ Cf. Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins, Minneapolis 1993, 1-32.

disadvantaged groups.²¹ When circumstances worsen, the social phenomenon of borders may manifest itself in more visible forms, for example in barbed wire.²²

Postmodern politics has lent demarcation more civilized or subtle forms. Exclusion and privatisation are simply a difference in manifestation. The "management" of social problems has replaced the manufacturing of "solutions". Even in the face of increased efforts aimed towards international cooperation, alternative forms of transfer of national sovereignty, and consolidated institutions of global governance, we should not forget that the modern state has not vanished for good. National parliaments may have partially lost their influence on supra-national decision-making, yet state bureaucracy still prevails.²³ The constitutional state remains the primary guarantor of individual rights, even though it has by no means rid itself of its problematic features. If we conceptualize increasing depoliticization as an important feature of this on-going civilizing process,²⁴ three different models of individual autonomy can

²¹ It is tempting to follow Schumpeter's general argument towards economic and intellectual corporatism here. In the case of the former communist world dealt with in this article it may be instructive to revisit the work of György Konrád and Iván Szelényi. See Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, New York 1942; György Konrád and Iván Szelényi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power*, Sussex 1979.

²² "Virtual camps" should not be understood as an alternative term for "imagined communities". When it comes to politics it is rather the more fundamental—and therefore more appropriate—category. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, rev. and ext. edition, London 1991.

²³ Cf. Gilles Pacquet, *The new geo-governance. A baroque approach*, Ottawa 2005; Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Malden and Cambridge 2004. The implications for supra-national governance in the European Union can be studied in S. S. Andersen/T. R. Burns "The European Union and the Erosion of Parliamentary Democracy: A Study of Post-parliamentary Governance", in *The European Union: How Democratic is it?*, eds S. S. Andersen and K. A. Eliassen, London 1996, 227–50; Jan Zielonka, *Europe as Empire. The Nature of the Enlarged European Union*, Oxford 2006.

²⁴ See Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process*, vol. 2: *State Formation and Civilization*, Oxford 1982.

be distinguished. The first is the *sovereign (national) state*, which chooses its subjects on ethnic or culturalist grounds and (pretends to) protect(s) them *effectively* against looming external intervention. In this case, self-realization is bound to a cultural programme neatly defined by majority groups and/or elites.²⁵ This structuralist approach is ill-founded, as it identifies autonomy with security and an overt will to decide authoritatively on legitimate forms of individual self-realization. The second model is the *consumer society*, in which all activity is either an expression of identity, a matter of enterprise, or both. It equips the individual with standards and strategies to deal with plurality in a more *efficient* way. Civility is its core behavioural feature.²⁶ It needs to be reproduced by cultural institutions and in actual exchanges. The weakness of the concept is its one-sided material orientation and the lack of a conceptualization of qualitative change.²⁷ The third model, if we are ready to understand it as such, is the philosophical idea of immanence. It

²⁵ The position ultimately goes back to Thomas Hobbes and finds a distinguished advocate in Carl Schmitt. The "Nouvelle Droite" discourse on "Ethnopluralism" follows a similar concept. Putin's Russia could represent a practical example here. See Carl Schmitt, *Staat, Großraum, Nomos. Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916–1969*, ed. Günter Maschke, Berlin 1995; Alain de Benoist, *Démocratie: Le problème*, Paris 1985.

²⁶ "Civility bespeaks a common standard within which a multiplicity of ways of living, working and associating are tolerated. It demands that in all life outside home we afford each other certain decencies and comforts as fellow citizens, regardless of other differences between us. It is, it should be noted, a cool concept. It does not require us to like those we deal with civility, and as such it contrasts strongly with the warmth of communal, religious or national enthusiasms." Christopher G. A. Bryant, 'Civic Nation, Civil Society, Civil Religion', in *Civil Society Theory. History, Comparison*, ed. John A. Hall, Cambridge 1995, 145.

²⁷ I do not want to neglect the attempts of some other critical theory supporters to supplement the Western civil society paradigm. They deal with procedural rules, alternative (i.e. non-regulated) sources of rationality, and legitimate actors in particular. See Heller, *Moderernity*; Jürgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy", in idem, *The Inclusion of the Other. Studies in Political Theory*, ed. Ciaran P. Cronin and Pablo De Greiff, Cambridge 1998, 239–252; Nancy Fraser, *Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, Participation*, WZB discussion paper FS 198–108, Social Science Research Center Berlin 1998.

envisions communication and social relations as being characterized by processes of long-term asymmetric reciprocity. These are based on the virtues of a fully developed personality and non-economic interest in others.²⁸ Its logic is not to exchange something in order to achieve a material outcome, but to create and evaluate a common ground or indebtedness in order to maintain a steady process of exchange. Its *raison d'être* is to promote self-realisation by *acting together* for a certain period of time. The concept aims to realize the human dream of individual uniqueness against a backdrop of non-existent autarchy and a permanent danger of the abuse of power relationships. It builds on trust between individuals who no longer put a premium on social adaptation, and instead value the individual's efforts to develop its skills and personality. Dignity is grounded in differentiation.²⁹ In practice, immanence's shortcoming is the need to continually renegotiate social contracts—or at least rules of procedure—between the individuals concerned, i.e. the existence of a permanent *state of exceptions*.

The plural used in the above sentence is of significance. Immanence is apparently meant as the pure counter-concept to the sovereign state. In a context of permanent change the sovereign state jeopardises its own legitimacy when reaching the inherent limits of its capacity to act. It cannot conceal the discrepancy between

²⁸ See Sennett, *Respect*.

²⁹ The concept of immanence has predominantly been developed in fiction or by men of letters, sometimes by academics. Among the most prominent examples is the figure of "Bartleby, the Scrivener. A Story of Wall Street" by Herman Melville (1853, in *Putnam's Monthly. A Magazine of Literature, Science, and Art*, vol. 2, 11–12). For an immanent interpretation of the story see Giorgio Agamben, *Bartleby, or On Contingency*, in idem: *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford 1999, 243–271; Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, transl. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, Minneapolis 1997, 68–90. Similar perspectives concerning human action may be found in Hermann Hesse, *Demian: Lie Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth*, New York 1965; perspectives on the role of reflection in social action can be drawn from György Konrad, *Der dritte Blick. Betrachtungen eines Antipolitischen*, Frankfurt a. M. 2001.

former decisions on the one hand and the premium that is placed on future forms of action, and which might defy the same decisions, on the other. A *state of exception* (in the singular) "marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without logos claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference."³⁰ Civil society, on the other hand, is a durable model of pragmatic day-to-day solutions. The secret of its relative success lies in its balance between the autonomy of the state and the autonomy of the individual.³¹ In short, it brings stability and mainstreamed respect for biological life at the expense of the emotional and cognitive requirements of (both aggregate and individual) actors. The extent to which this can be deemed to be a legitimate trade-off is a matter of circumstance and conviction. Not only have the great ambiguous (and dangerous) minds like Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche despised it, although on different grounds. In any case, we can see that the dream of autonomy has not, or at least not as yet been fulfilled. At this point of the discussion we may find it easier to understand Karl Popper's (strongly personal) evaluation that the persistent "strength of both the old and the new totalitarian movements rested on the fact that they attempted to answer a very real need, however [poor] this attempt may have been."³²

In order to evaluate the appeal of Hannah Arendt's political theory it is finally necessary to focus on the different but consecutive levels of the political process. Here I propose a distinction between (1) basic functions, (2) fundamental rules and legitimate actors,

³⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, Chicago and London 2005, 40.

³¹ See *Staatsbürgerschaft in Europa. Historische Erfahrungen und aktuelle Debatten*, eds Christoph Conrad and Jürgen Kocka Hamburg 2001; *Die Praxis der Zivilgesellschaft: Akteure, Handelt und Strukturen in internationalen Vergleich*, ed. Arnd Bauerkämper, Frankfurt a. M. 2003.

³² Popper, *Society*, 170. Popper substantiates his claim by interpreting Plato's programme as driven by the wish to present a remedy for the stress put on individuals due to profound social change towards (opened) societies (the end of tribal unity, as Popper calls it) in Greek Antiquity. Cf. *ibid.* 171.

and (3) implementation strategies. The basic level is the *ontological*, which defines what politics is all about. It is concerned with the functions (i.e. individual motivation) of the political process. In short, it suffices to conceive of affective orientation and material well-being as being of equal importance to human existence, even though both are partially exclusive and to some degree even antagonistic human needs. Democratic institutions endeavour to combine the satisfaction that both offer. The ontological level is built upon by the *sociological* level, which clarifies where, by whom, and for whom politics is carried out. Here scholars identify a virtual twin boundary which defines the coordinate system of each and every political community: (x) access to and the rules of procedure of the political discourse, and (y) valid forms of decision-making and boundary-setting. Actors use the media of citizenship (definition of eligible participants), participation, debate and deliberation (forms of decision-making), as well as law and force (rules of implementation) on this level. A system of supportive norms and rules is thereby constantly set up, tested and evaluated. Actors choose the *strategic* level, where what people commonly call politics is conducted, in order to reach an acceptable degree of organizational control. It is the task of strategy to fulfil ontological functions by observing sociological parameters. In this case, the media of competition, cooperation, and resource distribution have to be aligned in an adequate way in order to make goal achievement possible. To summarize, I have presented a paradoxical (or rather dialectical) concept of politics as a virtual cycle which is partially closed, i.e. a self-referential system of order, but turning in time and space (an absorbing and transforming catalyst of change) at the same time.

A political theology of immanence

Arendt conceived of totalitarianism as a genuine phenomenon of modernity, or more specifically as a product of the latter's inherent fault lines (between knowledge and truth, transcendence and faith,

emotions and rationality etc.). For her, it marked the breakdown of all traditions with integrated human spontaneity.³³ She was first and foremost interested in bringing to light and warning against what she deemed to be the horrible imprint of the totalitarian signature on humanity. In her view, National Socialism and Stalinism were simply manifestations of the same transnational phenomenon, of political movements with a ruthless and violent claim to supranational rule.³⁴ In her historical analysis she uses a mix of various phases of the respective movements and dictatorships in order to support her argument. Arendt does not (want to) identify the different ontological encoding of National Socialism (in Arendt's terms possibly interpreted as a black modernity of irrationality and *damnatio: breeding to be God*) and Stalinism (the peak of scientific global rule and *ratio gone mad: manufacturing to dispense with God*); although she would have been able to achieve this using her own methodology.³⁵

What can be seen as a methodological flaw on the one hand is her strength on the other. Her final analysis is not based on arguments centring around morality or structure: Arendt is more interested in the individual human being and the impact that socio-political phenomena such as totalitarianism have on them. If applied persistently, the ice-cold reasoning of totalitarian logic destroys both sense of direction and capacity to think, act and judge with one's own mind, simply by excluding human plurality and contingency

³³ This idea, developed in Hannah Arendt, 'What is Existential Philosophy?', in eadem, *Essays*, 163-87, turned into the main line of argument in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. The importance is underlined in her essay 'On the nature of totalitarianism: an essay in understanding', in *ibid.* 328-360.

³⁴ Cf. Hannah Arendt, 'The seeds of a fascist International', in *ibid.* 147f.

³⁵ For her use of the term "hell" as a practical concept of mind and the freezing function of terror see Hannah Arendt, 'The image of hell', in *ibid.* 197-205; eadem, *Nature*; eadem, 'A reply to Voegelin', in eadem, *Essays*, 404. During the years Arendt apparently differentiated her evaluation of the character of the Soviet Union in particular. See the introduction to Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition, New York 1966, VII-XXIV.

using categorisation and extermination.³⁶ It defies the two-fold human need for recognition: firstly, for unconditional recognition of the individual in its specific difference from others (uniqueness as the source of dignity), and, secondly, for recognition of the persistence of differences (a plurality of beings who present diverse choices). The material content of the respective ideology is not significant; it is the will to atomize and functionalize individuals alone that is decisive. The fundamental axiom of Arendt's thinking is that we can conceive of an ultimate opposition in the secular world of modernity: individual autonomy versus total domination.³⁷

Bearing in mind the almost mystical character of such a pure distinction, can this axiom qualify as a cornerstone of her political concept? It is relatively easy to identify the positions Arendt does not occupy. She does not advocate any new form of philosophy of history or anthropology: Arendt deems their explanatory value to be rather low, and sees them as offering far too much material which could be used to establish a version of totalitarian ideology.³⁸ She also disqualifies liberalism due to the part it played in paving the way for totalitarianism and the way in which it concerns politics "almost exclusively with the maintenance of life and the safeguarding of interests."³⁹ Finally, she also excludes social democracy from

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*: 469-474.

³⁷ "If 'shock and wonder at existence' lie, as Plato tells us, at the root of philosophy, then shock at the existence of Auschwitz lies at the root of Arendt's political thinking and Adorno's mature philosophy." Dana Villa, 'Genealogies of Total Domination: Arendt, Adorno, and Auschwitz,' *New German Critique* 100 (Winter 2007), 2. Cf. Hannah Arendt, 'Religion and Politics,' in *idem*, *Essays*, 379; *idem*, *Voegelin*, 405ff.

³⁸ Cf. Arendt, *Existential Philosophy*.

³⁹ *Idem*, 'What is Freedom?', in *idem*, *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York 1993, 155. Cf. *idem*, *Origins*, 150-157. It is another matter that the view of Arendt on the political and socio-economic development of late 19th and early 20th century can be rather misleading (e.g. the difference between the literary and actual alliance of elites and mob). See Stefan Auer, 'The lost treasure of the revolution. Hannah Arendt, totalitarianism, and the revolutions in central Europe: 1956, 1968, 1989,' *Osteuropa* 56 (2006),

being an alternative. The bureaucratic overload of its structural approach—and the fetishism of social justice and consumption—endanger Arendt's notion of autonomy, which draws heavily on the ideas of human spontaneity, innovation and creative correction by consent, which is in opposition to necessity. "She insists, *contra* Marx, that we cannot, and ought not to, attempt to transcend these poles of human life."⁴⁰ To put it in her own determined words: "Nothing, we might say today, could be more obsolete than to attempt to liberate mankind from poverty by political means; nothing could be more futile and more dangerous."⁴¹

Clarification of the distinction between the various concepts of autonomy is helpful here. Arendt clearly favours a position of immanence that grounds all rights in the existence of the human being. The level of the political process she primarily focuses on is less easy to identify. A comparison with Carl Schmitt, an advocate of the sovereign state, is instructive here. His view on the calamities of the path of modernity is quite comparable to that of Arendt, however his conclusions differ strongly from her position. The devoted Catholic legal theorist identifies in the advent of rationalism

9 (English version in *eurozine*, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-10-25-auer-en.html>), 11.

⁴⁰ Hauke Brunkhorst, 'Equality and elitism in Arendt,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa, Cambridge 2000, 192 (emphasis original). Brunkhorst believes that Arendt's controversial position on the social question is rooted in the unmediated antagonism between her elitist Greek (*patres familia* in *polis*) and egalitarian Augustinian (*natalità*) understanding of freedom. 'The egalitarian Brunkhorst apparently does not see any dialectical quality in this notion: "Even in a hyper-complex world, such an *egalitarian* republicanism may be the only hope we have if we still desire to be masters of our fate. For without a republican grounding born in the 'living power of the people,' contemporary society too risks a lapse into barbarism." (*ibid.* 196; emphasis original). See also Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob. Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*, Chicago 1998, who compares Arendt's concept of society to a disastrous alien attack on defenceless individuals (*ibid.* 4).

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York 1990, 114. Cf. *idem*, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1958, 243-247.