Introduction

Nearly a generation has passed since Hannah Arendt died. Indeed, her most influential book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, first appeared over four decades ago. Her work certainly has not become passé in the meanwhile, as the rich and burgeoning commentary represented in this volume demonstrates. But by now it has ceased to stimulate the inflamed polemics of the sort that her “banality of evil” thesis once provoked. In fact, some of the most bitter academic quarrels during the 1950s and 1960s—whether behavioral science should displace political theory, whether totalitarianism was monolithic, whether the age of “ideology” was coming to an end—stir scarcely an echo today. It may therefore be possible to understand and evaluate Arendt’s arguments without the rancor and the distortions that prevailed in the past.

There are good reasons for undertaking this sort of reappraisal, beyond the mere fact of temporal distance and the clarity it can bring. Although the Cold War and other circumstances that conditioned Arendt’s thinking have lapsed, certain broader trends and phenomena that she described make her writings seem almost prescient. Recent events in Eastern Europe (not to mention similar cases in the Philippines and elsewhere) offer the rare spectacle of what Arendt termed *action, power, and public freedom* transforming, almost overnight, societies whose citizens had been subject to extreme forms of domination. Journalistic accounts of the events in Eastern Europe have a palpably Arendtian
ring, as one example will attest: "to have been at a nighttime march in Leipzig, . . . to have sensed the pride of those who faced guns in Timisoara, . . . is to have known moments when doubts and differences are suspended and people come together in a single-minded quest. It may sound mawkish, but call it freedom."1 Yet all of these revolutions, as Arendt surely would have predicted, stagger under onerous "social" burdens. Like their great prototype, the French Revolution, they must try to achieve free institutions while coping with lofty but unsatisfied expectations of economic improvement.

At the other extreme, Arendt would hardly be surprised to see a new wave of stateless persons (notably the Bosnian Muslims) driven into exile by "ethnic cleansing." No doubt we can expect more refugees to flee from the erstwhile "prison of nations," the former Soviet Union, with its dozens of ethnic minority enclaves inside newly established and still fragile republics. Arendt hoped against hope that people would be able to cordon off the political realm against such consanguinary or religious definitions of citizenship. The fact that ethnicity once again has become the decisive criterion for membership in a political community in so many places reminds us urgently of why she took the stand that she did. So Arendt's political philosophy begins to see more timely than ever, uniquely suited to illuminate some of the shapes that a post-Cold War world might take.

The purpose of this collection, then, is to refocus public discussion on the virtues and failings of Arendt's political thought. From the extensive critical literature about Arendt that has been published since her death, we have chosen essays that represent a diversity of opinion regarding her project, that raise significant questions across the full range of her thought, and that have not been previously anthologized or incorporated into other books. The contributions included here may suggest why Arendt's books deserve to be read and debated anew. While some are purely interpretive articles, others are systematic attacks on, or defenses of, Arendt's most important arguments and distinctions. In spite of their diversity of theme and approach, these chapters share certain concerns, ones that deserve preliminary emphasis and comment.

From the 1950s through the 1970s, students of political thought had trouble locating Arendt on the Left-Right continuum. On the one hand, Arendt championed participatory democracy and civil disobedience, harshly criticized capitalism, imperialism,
and racism, and applauded certain aspects of the revolutionary tradition (including the nineteenth century labor movement and protosocialist insurrections such as the Paris Commune). On the other hand, she lamented the rise of "mass society," attacked the "laboring" mentality of thinkers like Marx, and displayed little sympathy for social engineering, economic planning, and other tools of the welfare state. In fact, she seemed not to care much about issues of social justice, a finding that has provoked criticism which still enlivens some of the articles reprinted here.

But in the past decade, the meaning—and even the very utility—of Left-Right categorizations has come under scrutiny. Increasingly, political issues are being defined along modern versus postmodern lines. Modernism is usually taken to entail a commitment to universal political values such as equality, justice, and rationality, and an account of the self as being (in principle) capable of disengagement from its concrete roles, statuses, and heritage. Postmodernism shelters a variety of different antimetaphysical, often antiliberal tendencies, united more by what they reject than by what they affirm. Perhaps the only common denominator among postmodern writings has been their insistence upon the fragmentary and "constructed" quality of social reality, of the self that objectifies it, and of the allegedly neutral, universal, transparent language that claims to describe it. Postmodernists want to find a voice for excluded or ignored social groups as well as for modes of experience that have been marginalized in the dominant traditions.

Where would Arendt’s ideas fit in this new version of the political-philosophical spectrum? We suspect that modernists and postmodernists will find in Arendt much to support—and reject—just as did the previous generation’s partisans of the Left and Right. And for that very reason, we believe that her writings may continue to appeal to a wide range of readers.

Arendt’s work does have surprisingly much in common with the views of philosophers we may loosely label postmodern. She studied under both Heidegger and Jaspers, of whom the former has had an enormous influence on French deconstructionist thinkers. And as both the Benhabib and Luban articles mention, Nietzsche in his "perspectivist" and deconstructive personae lurks behind the scenes especially of The Human Condition (despite her critique of him in that work). From all three philosophers, Arendt learned to reject what some today call the "totalizing" claims of traditional metaphysics. As Arendt herself averred, "I
have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have
been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with
all its categories, as we have known them from their beginning in
Greece until today.” Luban even explicitly compares her method
of “dismantling” to Derridean deconstruction, and another com-
mentator calls her thought a “radical form of anti-modernism.”

The antitotalizing stance taken by Arendt finds expression on
many different levels. Benhabib remarks that Arendt endeavored
to “break the chain of narrative continuity, to shatter chronology
as the natural structure of narrative, to stress fragmentariness,
historical dead ends, failures and ruptures.” Arendt regarded the
pretensions of 1950s—and 1960s—vintage social science to bring
all human phenomena under lawlike generalizations in much the
same light as she did these older metaphysical systems. Both
tended to obscure the human capacity to break with the past by
beginning something new and unprecedented, a point we develop
in our article on Arendt and existentialism.

Arendt's perspectivistic, unsystematic approach also af-
ected her reception of the traditional preference for theoria over
praxis. She attacked classical philosophers for trying to subordi-
nate the practical to the contemplative life. Moreover, she de-
tected the continuing influence of that hierarchy precisely in its
conscious reversal by Marx, who she claimed privileged labor
over work and action. Although Arendt is usually treated as a
proponent of “action” in the narrowly political sense, she in fact
intended something far more ambitious. Her goal in The Human
Condition was to allow the underlying experiences of the vita
activa to emerge more clearly than they do when one looks
“down” on them from the contemplative standpoint of the phi-
losopher. Arendt seemed to have adopted a kind of pluralism in
reserving for each element of the human condition (labor, work,
and action) its own peculiar institutional sphere, expression,
vocabulary, and limits; in a well-ordered polity, none of these
activities should encroach on the conceptual and structural
integrity of the others (as, in her view, animal laborans had
usurped the sphere of activity traditionally reserved for the zoont politikon). Action was certainly given preeminence in The Hu-
man Condition, but that was so partly because it seemed more
fragile and endangered to Arendt than did the other two com-
ponents of the active life.

A similar postmodern antipathy to hierarchy pervaded her
last work, The Life of the Mind. Young-Bruehl correctly empha-
sizes that the faculties of thinking, willing, and judging, as Arendt understood them, are autonomous: each exhibits its own inner logic and none “takes orders” from the others. As has been noted already apropos of the categories of the vita activa, what is at stake in The Life of the Mind is the exegesis of essentially different experiences that philosophers have categorized, more or less lucidly, under the rubrics of thinking, willing, and judging. To uphold the boundaries among these categories means to honor the specificity of the experiences and vocabularies that became congealed (and eventually dessicated) in the conceptual accounts of each.

Arendt’s perspectivist and antitotalizing campaigns share with postmodernism a distrust of a project that is commonly associated with the Enlightenment: the positing of an independent moral-epistemic subject that is capable of constructing and justifying ethics from a standpoint outside of all social roles and historical traditions. As Benhabib points out, the eighteenth century’s “autonomous moral agent” has certain affinities with the isolated, “worldless” mass man of the twentieth century, the person who lacked a specific social perspective and therefore could be persuaded to believe and to do almost anything. The linchpin of Arendt’s political ethics was the conviction that “not Man, but men . . . inhabit the world”; the single most important check on our beliefs and conduct is the presence of others who see things differently.

Arendt’s concept of action partially “decenters” the ethical subject of the philosophical tradition from Aristotle to Kant and beyond, in a manner reminiscent of some postmodern writers as well as Nietzsche. She refuses to treat political action as a means to or even a component of a good beyond the action itself. Actions do not simply express and carry out the interests, goals, and needs of a self distinct from those actions; in the actions themselves, as mediated through the narratives and judgments of others, shines forth (and indeed is first constituted) the “who” of the agent. In other words, the self for Arendt is more like a shimmering play of light and energy arcing between agent and spectators than it is like Kant’s transcendental ground of synthesis and unification. But—and here the residual “center” of the agent reemerges—action does flow from a “principle,” such as honor, fear, distrust, or love of equality, that directs it and continues to inspire it (because such principles are not definite goals to be achieved and then put aside until the next goal comes into view).
Yet Arendt’s perspectivism and pluralism never moved in postmodern directions. For example, as Wolin remarks, she evinced little interest in the popular traditions, religious influences, associational ties, and networks of resistance and self-affirmation that spring up amid nonelite people as they attempt to maintain their identity and generate power. Nor did she study, review, or assimilate “social history,” the record of the everyday events and experiences that has become so prominent a part of historical revisionism. On Revolution and The Life of the Mind drew their examples unrelentingly from the writings and deeds of elite figures. Although Arendt heaped praise upon many of the revolutionary episodes and popular movements of the modern West, she conducted little research into the background, motives, and inspiration of the people who participated in them. Evidently, she thought it sufficient to attribute their enthusiasm and courage to a love of liberty.

The articles by Canovan and Dietz help to reveal the underlying reasons for Arendt’s indifference to popular culture and social history. In many cases, the solidarity of nonelite social groups presupposes—indeed, explicitly invokes—quasi-natural ethnic, sexual, or biological ties. In the United States, for example, many women, Native Americans, and African Americans define themselves at least partly in terms of physical and biological characteristics that group members share. But Arendt drew on a tradition of thought within which politics is and must be maintained as an artificial activity, one that brings out the existential uniqueness of its participants rather than emphasizing their shared natural endowments. Her position in this respect was consistent. Not only did she reject the blood-and-soil definitions of Germanness that pervaded Nazi ideology, she also advocated an Israel that would include Palestinians as full citizens; that is, a polity not organized around ethnic loyalties and attachments.

For Arendt, the postmodern and feminist shibboleth that the personal is political would have seemed a contradiction in terms. All matters pertaining to the body (so highly politicized by Foucault) fall under the aegis of natural “necessity” according to Arendt. That is, sexuality, gender differences, consanguinity, and ethnic identity belong, part and parcel, to Arendt’s “private sphere,” roughly equivalent to the Greeks’ oikos. And the private sphere was meant to contain and limit those aspects of life that are more or less forced upon people by their biological needs.
For reasons explored in our article on Arendt and Jaspers, as well as the essays of Dietz and Canovan, the private sphere, the body, the realm of the personal and intimate simply do not establish a suitable "space of appearances" for freedom. The individual "who," the narrative unity of a life, is submerged in a communal identity that, however fulfilling and supportive, truncates and distorts distinctively political experience.

Arendt also departed from postmodern politics in another respect. Although she could no accept the autonomous moral subject as the centerpiece of political philosophy, neither could she entirely abandon this venerable notion. In The Origins of Totalitarianism she accused totalitarian regimes of having tried to destroy the essence of man. Although disclaiming the concept of human nature in later works (on the grounds that if there were such a thing, "only a God could know and define it"), she nevertheless postulated the existence of a human condition consisting of limits that people violate at their peril. Overlooking the conceptual ambiguities in those statements, one may read them as confessions of faith in at least one tenet of the traditional metaphysics that Arendt, in most other cases, had discarded. Moreover, as Young-Bruehl's essay underscores, she did believe it is possible to establish the meaning of events. That is, in fact, the definitive function of "thinking," albeit the thinking of philosophical or historical spectators rather than the dramatis personae themselves. In short, Arendt retained enough of the traditional discourse—essence, meaning, individuality, public and private—to make her arguments suspect to those with postmodern sympathies.

It is partly for these reasons that Benhabib declares Arendt's political philosophy to be "modernist and universalist." However, Arendt never quite found a home among modernist philosophers either, taking that label to identify those who want to distinguish truth from power, authority from domination, justice from hegemony, and (more generally) to preserve an objective, transpluralistic standpoint from which to judge theory and practice. Habermas, for example, berates Arendt's theory of power precisely for its postmodern tendencies. Arendt failed to recognize, he argues, that political actors (at least implicitly) advance claims to truth that can and should be scrutinized in the public realm. She did not admit that power must be tempered by a "cognitive element," but instead separated political practice so sharply from theory that the latter could not intervene to challenge
questionable veracity claims. Wolin, Pitkin, and Sitton join Habermas in attacking the rigidity of Arendt’s distinction between the political and the social. All, in one way or another, hold the conviction that political debates ought to be “about” social and economic issues, especially when the distribution of wealth, power, and opportunity is at stake. Habermas’s comments deserve to be quoted because they epitomize the uneasiness so many commentators feel on this point:

a state which is relieved of the administrative processing of social problems; a politics which is cleansed of socio-economic issues; an institutionalization of public liberty which is independent of the organization of public wealth; a radical democracy which inhibits its liberating efficacy just at the boundaries where political oppression ceases and social repression begins—this path is unimaginable for any modern society.8

Controversial as Arendt’s separation of politics from social justice may continue to be, her arguments about the relationship between morality and politics, discussed in the Lang and Beatty essays, have also stirred up passionate denunciations. In The Human Condition, especially, she criticized the temptation felt by many philosophers to subordinate politics to moral imperatives, however conceived. It was not the inherent function of politics to promote social justice; by the same token, neither should politics become a moral crusade to achieve righteousness or maximize social utility. In either case, one would tend to think of politics as a means to attain ends external to it, thereby obscuring its intrinsic, unique modes of experience and opportunities for individual self-revelation.

On the other hand, as Lang points out, Arendt recognized that politics in this century has deeply undercut traditional assumptions about guilt and moral responsibility. Totalitarian regimes are not morally odious simply because of the destructive choices or policies of their leaders; they are evil in a more profound sense, because they make human beings superfluous. They leave behind “shells” like Eichmann who look human enough but no longer have the essentially human capacity to reflect or to put themselves in the position of others, most notably their victims. To speak of the “banality of evil” is not to say that the deeds themselves were commonplace, but rather that they resulted from what Lang terms mechanical thoughtlessness.
In his own essay on the implications of the “banality” thesis, Beatty attacks an argument that Arendt developed more thoroughly in later writings than she had in the Eichmann book: namely, that thinking itself is the surest check on evildoing that humans possess, surer even than the potential disapprobation of political “spectators.” Ironically, given Arendt’s profile as a champion of the public sphere, Beatty criticizes her moral arguments as apolitical. Morality and individual rationality converge, he claims, only when a political structure has been established that harmonizes them. The article by Beiner on Arendt’s neo-Kantian notion of political judgment may indicate how Arendt could have replied to Beatty’s objections.

Modernism has its ultimate source in the political vision of the Enlightenment, notably the Kantian hope of achieving liberation from our (self-imposed) immaturity, of attaining social progress and justice by means of rational inquiry, public communication, and the fostering of moral responsibility. Arendt, however, sensed that totalitarianism had changed the world permanently, having severed the threads of tradition that connected us to the Enlightenment and the more distant past. She could not commit herself to the language of modernism because modernist philosophers still wanted to affirm the continuity of Western thought and the (at least potential) unity of experience, despite the watershed events of the twentieth century. Thus, much more hinges on Arendt’s theory of totalitarian domination than is usually recognized. The totalitarian phenomenon supposedly marks a rupture in the narrative unity of European experience. But this can be the case only if totalitarianism really does represent a novel, unprecedented form of government. We have therefore included Stanley’s essay, which challenges the totalitarian thesis and, by implication, the “narrative rupture” theory that it undergirds.

So far we have tried to locate Arendt somewhere between modernists and postmodernists. But in one sense, Arendt stands opposed, in an almost classical manner, to the implicit egalitarianism of both currents of thought. In his study entitled Sources of the Self, Charles Taylor argues that a peculiar feature of the modern ethical outlook (talking ethical in the broadest sense) involves the “affirmation of everyday life,” in other words, of “domestic” pleasures, work and production. From its beginnings in the Reformation, this new ethical outlook took shape as a protest against the way of life and characteristic experiences of the nobility (which at least paid lip service to an ethic of valor and
gentlemanliness) and the monastic religiosity honored by the Catholic church. In its later embodiments, such as utilitarianism and Marxism, the affirmation of ordinary life developed an array of new, secular justifications. But at bottom it remained an essentially reductionistic, antielitist credo. By and large, modernist and postmodernist partisans tacitly share this commitment to an antielitist political practice and theory. The postmodernists' celebration of "difference" and efforts to include "marginalized" voices and cultures simply intensify this long-standing suspicion of elite power, values, culture, and privilege. By contrast, Arendt deliberately tried to revive the almost-forgotten experiences that defined the ethical frameworks of premodern Europe's elites: the Homeric and civic codes of valor, glory, and fame, together with the "inner" heroism of the self-mastering contemplative life as understood by Plato, Augustine, and others.

Nevertheless, we would stress that for Arendt, these experiences were, in principle, universal. That is, the taste for liberty evident in ancient and modern republics may spring up at any time and place, since it is rooted in the "human conditions" of natality and plurality. Even totalitarianism, Arendt eventually conceded, could not permanently eradicate it. Moreover, as the popular movements and revolutions of modern history testify, the once "elite" aspiration toward public happiness and the creation of a space of appearances for individuality has become available to all classes and nations. Arendt was thus elitist and antiquarian only in the sense that she invoked sources of happiness and liberty that transcended the sphere of everyday life—not in reserving those sources for a privileged few. The article by Dietz suggests that feminists, at least, need not dismiss the attractions of an active, political life simply as gender-specific experiences.

In any case, Arendt directly challenged beliefs so deeply rooted in contemporary ethics that her critics were almost certain to find her theories perplexing, impractical, and elitist. Even some of her most sympathetic commentators (such as Sitton, Pitkin, Habermas, and Benhabib) try more or less consciously to "save" the supposedly essential aspects of Arendt's political philosophy by reinterpreting or excising the offending inequalitarian elements, whether the latter are described as Ursprungsphilosophie or the "unacceptable" divorce of the political and the social.

Yet the value and originality of Arendt's work may lie precisely in reopening questions that modern and postmodern writers
tend to neglect. For example, is it possible to reject traditional metaphysics and its premise of an autonomous moral-political subject while still retaining some notion of human nature (or at least a human condition) involving freedom and self-reflection? Are there post-Enlightenment ways to think about individual existence that do not lure us into a cul-de-sac of subjectivity and self-absorption? To what extent is politics—and thinking itself—concerned with problems of meaning and narrative as well as the attainment of socially desirable goals? What risks do we run if we treat our collective life in purely instrumental terms as a means to satisfy privately defined desires (whether of individuals or groups)?

Finally, what is power and how does it differ, if at all, from domination, hegemony, or violence? The several critical essays contained here offer prima facie evidence that Arendt did not answer such questions to everyone’s satisfaction. But if they suggest some alternatives to prevailing modes of political discourse, ones that perhaps can move contemporary debates away from sterile confrontation, then this volume will have been worthwhile.

Notes


8. Jürgen Habermas, “Hannah Arendt’s Communications Theory of Power” (Chapter 8).