

Reconceiving the Political:
Arendt, Levinas, and the Potential for Politics to Become Otherwise

The concern motivating this paper is that in dominating and fast replacing all other forms of economic structure on our globe, Hellenistic¹ logic, the logic of the West, obviates alterity. As many of those of us who live in the groundswell of surplus created by this onslaught know only too well, not only does this wealth come at the expense of others past² and present, but, as this structure of economy is radically unsustainable, it comes at the expense of future others as well. It is potentiality itself, the possibilities of future others and of yet unconceived interhuman systems that are stymied and circumscribed by this logic, a logic which I argue is decidedly *political*.

In making this argument, and thus participating in the very form of political dialogue that I wish to find ways out of, I counter the position Hannah Arendt puts forth in *The Human Condition* that all has become economic. Labour, which, by Arendt's definition includes all modes of activity involved in the production of consumable wealth, has overflowed the confines of the household and now engulfs, subsumes, and dissolves the political. I suggest, however, that while Arendt is quite correct in pointing to an economic colonization of politics, it is precisely because politics has become the defining structure of economics that this colonization has and is continuing to take place. The market system that has come to dominate our globe has done so precisely because it

¹ Although it has been pointed out to me that the typifications Arendt and Levinas offer of Ancient Greek thought and social, political, familial and economic structures are not always accurate, I am not a scholar of Ancient Greece, and so, for the purposes of this paper, take these typifications at face value.

² One need only trace the wealth of the West built on colonization, forced labour, and slavery to find a myriad of examples of this.

operates according to the very logic of the political that Arendt upholds as its ideal antithesis.

For those who seek to forward the cause of distributive justice there is a disturbing feature of Arendt's schema. The return to politics and the re-establishment of a realm of public freedom and speech that Arendt champions would also entail the continued subjugation of productive and reproductive labour. The political plane of freedom and equality requires, for its very existence, economic servicing. Freedom must be provided for. This is precisely one of the reasons that Emmanuel Levinas rejects the West's preoccupation with attaining freedom for the self. Freedom comes at a price, but it is not the most free who pay this price, rather it is the least free. We see this dynamic starkly mirrored in capitalist market economics in which the accumulation of wealth by some rests on the productive labour of others.

To put this in Levinasian terms, in becoming the dominant logic of economy, politics, which Levinas theorizes as war by more peaceable means, has come to replace ethics, and in so doing entraps the interhuman³ within the current system. Put in other Levinasian terms, the ego, that which secures its own future by grasping and laying claim to things in the world as its own, now holds 'the feminine,' that which gestates and nourishes the other, hostage; or, as I choose to frame it, the market has replaced kinship as the overriding relational form. The market manifests a particular form of economic interaction in which vendors compete through the active purporting of the superiority of their particular wares over those of the other vendors. This follows the pattern of Arendt's rendition of what the political ought to be: a realm in which each individual,

³ This is a Levinasian term which I take to mean any formation of interaction between people.

each political actor, puts forth his voice in an attempt to convince the others of the superiority of these ideas over those put forth by other political vendors.

Like Arendt, Levinas analyses the political through the rubric of speech. For Levinas the political is the plane of what he terms the 'said,' in which that which is cognized and represented linguistically becomes ossified. This ossification takes place through thematization, which can be understood, via Levinas, as an ontologization, a process whereby the represented is brought into manifestation as such. This process of actualization through rendering common also circumscribes that which is represented to this representation. I address two respects in which this thematization is problematic.

Firstly, in the cacophony of political vending it is the positions of those with the loudest and most powerful voices that shape the contours and armatures of the collective to the exclusion of other possibilities. As Arendt explains, it is through the success of such new beginnings put into motion by political speech that the individual marks his presence in the world, and extends this presence into the future. The presence and identity of the self is thus secured through this process of shaping, defining, and thus also circumscribing. Within the frameworks of both thinkers the political is this site of presence and manifestation. While Arendt seeks to place the plane of that which is most present and most manifest, the plane of the political, at the apex, subordinating all that which makes politics possible, Levinas gives ethical priority to that which is most silent, least visible, least manifest: to the preconditions of politics.

Secondly, within the realm of the political, thematization is applied to the self and the other. We can perhaps understand this as the ethical problem underlying the Hegelian formula of mutual recognition which Arendt, and proponents of liberal democratic

processes generally, advocate. Arendt's work can be seen as popularizing the thematic of recognition Hegel outlines in *Philosophy of Right*. In this thematic self-determination is actualized through a process in which the self-cognizant being lays claim to property, engulfing and bounding that which is exterior to itself. It is this egoist ownership which gives the self-cognizant being substance, material actualization. This material actualization, however, requires, for its actualization and legitimation, the recognition of others. Property, fundamental to subjectivity, is owned through an intersubjectivity of contradistinction to and recognition by and of other cognizing property owners.⁴

When looked at in detail, the intersubjective exchange Hegel outlines, which applies not only to the individual person but also to the nation state as a self-cognizing macro-organism,⁵ gives rise to, and continually reinforces, a very specific type of ontological structure, or manifestation of being. The process of recognition, so hailed as the thing that all oppressed groups struggle to attain, is, while politically necessary under the current system, also a process which shapes the mutual recognizers as, ontologically, replications of the same thing.

⁴ See sections (i) and (ii) of Abstract Right in Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952).

⁵ A macro-organism, or as Cornell Biologist Thomas Seeley terms it: "superorganism." (Thomas Seeley, "The Honey Bee as Superorganism," in *Exploring Animal Behavior: Readings from the American Scientist*, ed. Sherman and Alcock (New York: Sinauer Associates, 1989).): The term super-organism has a long history. It was coined "by William Morton Wheeler (1928) to denote insect societies that possess features of organization analogous to the physiological processes of individual organisms....It seems correct to classify a group of *organisms* as a superorganism when the organism form a cooperative unit to propagate their genes, just as we classify a group of cells as an organism when the cells form a cooperative unit to propagate their genes. By this definition, most groups of organisms are not perfect superorganisms because there is usually intense intragroup conflict when members compete for reproductive success.....In the most advanced species of social insects, however, there appears to be little if any conflict within colonies, so that colonies do represent superorganisms."

One way to illustrate this is through Arendt's assertion that recognition by a slave is not recognition at all, as a slave cannot be recognized. Recognition can only be granted to and offered by recognizable subjects, that is, subjects with a particular ontological structure. Manifestation requires both the internal structure of ownership and the recognition of the validity of this internal structure by recognizable recognizers.

Levinas attempts to consider the onto-political plane from outside of the rubric of recognition and identity. What this approach offers is the insight that while at the political level there can be a plurality of identities, at the ontological level what we have are replicas, clones, or, as Levinas might put it, totalization under a system. In order to cease participating in this totalizing process, one responds to the other not on the political level, the level of identity, but rather ethically. More accurately, from a Levinasian standpoint, ethics comes first so that even before I can recognize another person, before I see in her, or place upon her an identity, I sense, phenomenologically, a call to welcome her into the place I call home, and to provide for her needs, even if it means going hungry myself. Recognition, politics, identity, comes later, but it louder, more active and covers over this initial ethical response. In mutual recognition what is recognized is that the other is an identity, a different identity than I am, but an identity like me nonetheless. What is recognized is that the other is the owner of his or her property, which means it is inaccessible to me, and I demand in return that my property be recognized as rightly mine, and therefore the cold and hunger I see in the face of the other also belongs to the other, and has no bearing on me.

The ethical implications of recognition as the structure of identity are thus threefold: firstly, it is a form of ontological colonization and homogenization. Although

mutual recognition is perhaps necessary for justice in a world ruled by the tandem of more or less democratic states and capitalist economics, this does not change the fact that mutual recognition obviates alterity. Secondly, under this regime of mutual recognition, those who thrive while others suffer and go hungry, do so with a sense of rightful impunity. Thirdly, the plane of the political in which this recognition takes place, in which the individual can mark and extend his own presence, requires the subordination and exploitation of unrecognizable others.

Arendt's distinction between humanity and animality is instructive in understanding the dynamic of this subordination. Labour, for Arendt—and we can understand labour as those activities which produce the material necessities (and niceties) of life and which reproduce life itself—reduces the human to the animal. Full humanity, or *homohomo*, humanity squared, to borrow a term and concept from Hardt and Negri,⁶ is achieved, for Arendt, only in one's capacity as a free and equal speaker within a political realm of freedom, equality, and speech. The political in which identified citizens recognize each other into fully human being is distinguished from the properly economic realm, the household, the realm of silence and repetitive labour, in which persons are fully human only in potentiality, in which nothing new is said, and, even if it is, it does not count, as it cannot be heard.

This last point is rather an important one. In order to be counted, one's voice must be heard by a plurality of equals. But it is not equality per se which enables speech in the fully human sense; speech requires equality among *free* speakers, among those liberated from economics. The words of a slave, as I have mentioned, even spoken to other slaves

⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Pg. 72.

equal in rank, do not constitute speech, for slaves, trapped within the ranks of beasts and machines,⁷ cannot recognize into existence the words and identities of others. Those who labour, who produce and reproduce life and its necessities, can neither speak nor enable the speech of others.

Feminine Silence

The silence of the household, the lack of speech, is the consequence of two features: it's totalitarian structure and the repetitive nature of labour. Both of these features, working in tandem, provide the prerequisite for democracy in its Arendtian idealized form. The master must leave the household and enter into the political realm in order for his speech to be heard and to thus identify himself. This shedding of encumbrance, of the work of providing for others, is necessary for liberty and equality, which continue to rest on the encumbrance of others. In order to uphold the modern extension of citizenship that now claims to include women and those who labour, that excludes only the foreign and the 'incompetent,' this encumbrance must be hidden via a number of socio-ideological mechanisms. In the exchange of labour for wages, for example, the supposition continues to prevail, despite a good deal of left-leaning analysis to the contrary, that there is a certain rough equality in this exchange, that labour is exchanged for wages of more or less equal value and that workers embark on this

⁷ For Arendt the biological and the mechanical operate according to the same logic and play the same roles. Slavish activities are those of repetition in the service of economic provision, whether it be the factory machine repeating the same motion and function over and over again in the production line, the farm worker picking the apples from tree after tree every fall or the home worker cooking, sweeping, washing day after day. All these activities are, for Arendt, caught within endless economic cycles, functions trapped within 'metabolic' systems.

exchange freely. In the free market ideal workers gravitate to the most convincing vendors of income.⁸

There is, however, a category of labour still falls outside and defies the political logic that has subsumed, for the most part, economic engagement. This is the labour of kinship, the most central of which is maternity, motherhood, but it is often strongly enacted in many interhuman relationships: fraternity, paternity, friendship, neighborliness, the gesture of reaching out to the stranger in need of assistance. Maternity is the birth, if you will, of not only all modes of kinship and friendliness, it is also the birth of the interhuman, the inception *of sociality itself*. Furthermore, it is the first site of communicative interaction, that is; the first site *of language*. There is no doubt that the work of maternity is deeply economic: it not only reproduces life, it requires the continual nourishing, providing, for and cleaning up of those who are created in this reproduction. Neither is there a doubt that the labour of maternity overflows the confines of free market economics and ethics. The labour of maternity is, in other words, so much more than politics.

⁸ I would like to note, here, that attempting to build an academic career in Political Theory is not a lucrative career. After sixteen years of post-secondary education, two diplomas, three degrees, and just finishing my Ph.D. while having single-handedly raised a fourteen-year-old (with the help and encouragement of friends and family) I am offered a position as a full-time Teaching Fellow, in a one-year intensive program in the history of Western Thought, beginning with *The Bible* and Homer, and ending with Derrida and Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved*. It is my teaching dream come true. But, I am forced to hesitate to take the job. It means uprooting my child, selling our home, and leaving the support system it took eight years (and two degrees) to create. Moreover, the salary is barely enough to cover our most basic living expenses, let alone the repayments I must now begin to make on my student loan. An annual wage of \$31,500, to be precise. What's more, the workload is so phenomenally intense (teaching two to three tutorials per day, four days a week, attending a two-hour lecture four days a week, spending three hours a day reading seven days a week, and grading bi-monthly essays) that I would be unable to think about my own work, or the prospect of publishing, or perhaps even get sufficient sleep, for the school year.

Although it may at times feel like it, maternity is not war. This is not to say that maternity, in this society subordinated to the economic logic of the political, has not been thrown into a perpetual crisis. Yet, despite this crisis, maternity cannot be subsumed by Western political logic. It continues to defy the values of self-interested freedom. And it remains defiant although self-interested freedom rests upon, and indeed requires, the subjugation of the feminine, of ethics, of other-oriented economics—the subjugation of maternity, of gestationality. Even more paradoxically, although it is the interhuman inception of the very possibility of evolving an economy of exchange, gestationality is denied visibility, a voice and a seat at the politically economic and political tables.

The market exchange model is inadequate to account for the full spectrum of unpaid domestic and childrearing responsibilities carried out, for the most part, by women. One way of addressing the issue of unpaid labour is through advocating for payment, through advocating for the continued expansion of the political, advocating, in a sense, for the coming to fruition of equality. Indeed, those who take an Arendtian position would argue that our world suffers not from an overabundance of political recognition, but rather from a deficit. The remedy for injustice is to be found in bringing into the political arena the voices of those currently silenced by these injustices.

But would the joining of the political war of all against all not be, at some level, to further sacrifice one of the few interhuman relationships which so clearly rises beyond self-interest. In maternity one must routinely put aside one's own needs and desires to attend to the needs of the other. In maternity one finds oneself wanting, more than one's own happiness, the happiness of the other. Levinas allows us to see caregiving labour in this light, as giving rise to the sociality of kinship which makes other forms of politics

and economics possible, and which itself continues to fall outside of this system of value, measurement and exchange.

What Levinas does, and this, I believe, has been widely misunderstood by feminist scholars, is to look at politics not from the vantage point of freedom, or even from the impetus, taken by Arendt as a universal striving, towards this freedom. Rather, Levinas is concerned with the vantage point of the encumbered. This is not to say that Levinas takes the position of the encumbered. Rather, he begins with a particular sentiment of the encumbered: empathy. It is in empathy with the empathic that Levinas tries to understand the political. And it is this sensibility of the encumbered that provides persons in maternal roles the strength to face this encumberment against overwhelming odds. Moreover, Levinas seems to be saying that this sensibility, this responsibility for others, ethics, taps into transcendence.

To become feminine requires a previous egoism which is only possible in having been welcomed and given to by another feminine. This does not circumscribe the other, obviating alterity, but rather creates the conditions of possibility of a great myriad of interhuman potentials. It is a cyclical movement, a cyclical process. This cyclical nature of new beginnings in which one absents herself for the other holds a deep criticism of the ideal of liberation, of the ideal of political being, of the liberal democratic ideal of freedom as the highest form of being. This cyclicity is the way of giving rise to new beginnings, to new and *other* possibilities and potentials. The political subject Arendt upholds as the ideal model of being is a model of arrested development, a block in the cycle. But this is precisely what Arendt seeks: liberation from being caught up in the metabolic forces of nature, liberation from cyclical repetition, liberation from economy.

And it is the political, the realm of speech as action, which, for Arendt, manifests this liberation.

Regarding this liberation there are two important points to take note of. Firstly, I would argue, contra Arendt, that a liberation from repetition and economy is impossible. Indeed, if we look at the mode of interaction between Arendt's ideal speaking subjects within the political sphere we find that it is precisely through repetition and exchange that they continually reproduce each other as political actors, humanity squared. As Derrida's work on iteration has taught us, every act of speech is comprised of a composite of repetition and difference.⁹ It is not only that the public political sphere of freedom and equality is repetitive, but also that this repetition is economic. Further, it is not only the acts of speech that are repetitious, but the formulation of the actors themselves. Within the schema Arendt gives us, the speaking subjects of the political realm are themselves iterations.

The political Arendt holds up as ideal is continually (re)produced through the (re)production of the political agency of the conglomerate of political agents of which it is comprised. This (re)production takes place through a marketplace exchange not of tangible items or services, but of (re)cognition—cognition repeated. This exchange of recognition operates at the ontological level, at the level of being. To summarize: although it is precisely here, in the repetitive and economic nature of speech, that we find the possibility of new interhuman beginnings, the marketplace character of this repetition, the exchange of recognition, circumscribes these interhuman possibilities within the boundaries of the political. It is not, as Arendt would have it, that the fecundity of agency

⁹ See Derrida's essay Signature Event Context in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

is circumscribed by repetition and economy, but rather that the fecundity of repetition and economy, their radical gestationality, are circumscribed by the exchange of recognition upon which political agency, and now private property, is founded.

According to Arendt's own chronology, kinship or household economics is prior to the market. The market is simply the coming-into-public of that which the household ought, ideally, provide. My argument, that politics is a coming-into-public of the very same thing: the maternal relation, is a connecting of the dots that Arendt herself lays down. Further, I suggest the problem of our current condition is that politics does not re-enact the maternal relation from the position of the mother, but rather from the position of the toddler or adolescent. Politics re-enacts the maternal relation not from the position of maturity, but rather from the egoist position of the child demanding to be serviced.

This is the critical contradiction inherent within Arendt's use of the rubric of natality offered as the paradigmatic condition of man¹⁰ as political. Arendt claims that it is in the political arena, in this venue of voice, speech, and action, that new beginnings, new possibilities, commence. Hence, natality is, for Arendt, the "central category"¹¹ of the political. But Arendt's rubric of natality as the condition of man works only if seen from a particular angle: that of the born. Within Arendt's schema, those who *give* birth to others, and whose energies and resources nourish and nurture these others into independence, do so at the level of animality, biology, the mechanical, and labour: at the level of economy at its most base.

¹⁰ The masculine form denoting 'human' is used here in a double sense to indicate masculinist humanity.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
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My disagreement lies not with Arendt's analysis of modern consumer society, but rather the starting point of the criticism. Arendt's diagnosis of the modern world is that labour and consumption have spilled out from their proper confinement to the household, infiltrating and structurally altering, denigrating and dissolving the political. With the rise of labor we have lost presence, stability and a common world. The modern emancipation of labor, in both the sense that the labourer has claimed citizenship, and in the sense that labour, as it has become less arduous through technology, has given rise to a modern western world devoid of politics and dominated by labour's goal: abundance. Domination by labour, by the activities beneath presence in which the labourer is undifferentiated from natural rhythms and caught within cyclical processes,¹² is manifest in a society of producers and consumers in which everything—including the household property itself—becomes a consumable.

In conclusion: I am arguing that the configurations of the liberal democratic structure of the political and market economics, the peaceful war of all against all, rests and relies upon that which it subjugates and hides: another cluster of economic configurations, what I term 'maternal' or 'kinship' economics. Levinas' critique of Western Philosophy provides us with some useful theoretical tools in rethinking this other economic level. What does it mean to understand the maternal as a tapping into transcendent powers, not through public speech, but through empathy, listening, caring? Fecundity is not, in Levinas' work, a masculinist counterpart to the feminine, as feminist

¹² For Arendt the rhythm of the factory is akin to biological metabolic processes or to the seasonal nature of agriculture.

philosophers have argued.¹³ Rather, fecundity is an aspect of the evolution of the feminine toward the maternal. In the trajectory of Levinas' thought, the concept of fecundity falls between the feminine of *Totality and Infinity*¹⁴ and the maternal of *Otherwise Than Being*.¹⁵ Levinas is not suggesting that women adhere to the essentially prescribed roles of patriarchal femininity. Rather, Levinas is suggesting the feminization of us all. Levinas is suggesting a rejection of the dominant value system of the masculinist and Hellenistic West. The household, the place of kinship, remains, even in our modern world, an ethical realm. It is true that welcome, hospitality and nurturing give rise to the possibility of egoist politics. But it is also true that kinship is the precondition for overcoming this egoism, for the feminization of the self.

¹³ Tina Chanter, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas, Re-Reading the Canon* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2001).

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1969).

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981).

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