

Reconsidering Hannah Arendt's Reading of Marx: From the Critique of Totalitarianism to the Critique of the Dialectic

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Abstract

Perhaps the most often criticized element of Hannah Arendt's political theory is her insistence on the necessity of constructing and maintaining rigid boundaries between various activities of the human condition. Less often, however, is the attempt undertaken to determine the philosophical motivation stimulating this project of distinction. This paper will attempt to demonstrate the extent to which Arendt's imperative is rooted in a certain misreading of the Marxian dialectic. The first part of the paper will outline the contours of Arendt's erroneous interpretation of Marx's understanding of labour, demonstrating the degree to which the latter breaks down the tripartite structure of the *vita activa*. The second part of the paper will read Arendt's affirmation of distinction as being a response to what Arendt will take to be the problems of the dialectic, specifically the dialectic's allegedly necessary positing of conceptual contingency and logical necessity. Finally, the third part of the paper will demonstrate, through an examination of two key passages in the work of Marx, the extent to which Marx himself was just as concerned with overcoming the type of homogenous and abstract universalism rejected by Arendt. The ground will thus be provided for the overcoming of the necessity of Arendtian distinction, and perhaps also for a more fruitful engagement between the Marxian and Arendtian theoretical problematics.

Introduction: The Problem of Distinction

It is well known that several of the performative and agonistic elements of the political thought of Hannah Arendt have served as a foundation for the construction of many contemporary theories of radical democracy. Almost universally, however, such theories have been adamant with respect to the need to reject that Arendtian tendency which looks towards the conceptual partitioning of modes of human activity into closed and self-contained spheres which preclude interpenetration. Although critics often point out the extent to which human activity eludes or overflows such divisions, they generally do not identify the theoretical motivation behind the Arendtian practice. It is precisely this which the present paper will attempt to do. In particular, in identifying the philosophical misreading upon which the motivation is based, it will provide a ground, not only for the overcoming of the practical schematization which marks Arendtian division, but also for the overcoming of that very need which stimulates the construction of this division.

The paper will be primarily concerned with evaluating those Arendtian distinctions which have been subject to the most amount of external criticism, those between what Arendt takes to be the three elements of the *vita activa*. The structure of Arendt's organization of human activity takes the form of a hierarchically organized tripartition, the independent 'value' of each triadic moment being defined by its ability to properly facilitate, as opposed to merely contribute to, the expression of human freedom. These three elements are: labour, that cyclical movement of regeneration which corresponds to the biological life-process of the organic body; work, that fabrication of human objects which creates an independent and stable world of things marked off against the species, testifying thereby to the unnaturalness of human existence; and action, pluralistic human intercourse mediated by speech and aiming at the initiation of radical beginnings, beginnings whose appearances cannot be traced back to any prior moments in a causal sequence of events. According to Arendt, ultimately neither labour nor work can be identified with freedom, labour to the extent that it destroys plurality by uniting many into one through the reduction of human activity to processes concerned with merely bio-cyclical regeneration, and work to the extent that as a process of conscious fabrication it is always carried out within an instrumental continuum whose goal is predetermined.

The standard objection to Arendt's schematization points out that human activities are far too complex to be reduced to a simple inclusive category, and in fact always contain a surplus which exceeds the boundaries that Arendt constructs. Indeed, the fluidity of the conceptual content under discussion is perhaps nowhere articulated so well as in Marx's understanding of the nature of the ontological status of human labour. Arendt was certainly aware of this fact. Indeed, Arendt's entire schematization of the *vita activa* can only be comprehended within the context of the Marxian dialectic of labour. The thesis of the present paper is that Arendt's project of categorization must be interpreted as a specific response to what Arendt will identify as the difficulty of the Marxian dialectic, specifically the relation of the dialectic to the great political disaster of the twentieth-century, the rise of totalitarianism. Marx is implicated in the rise of totalitarianism to the extent that the formal structure of the dialectical logic reproduces totalitarianism's affirmation of conceptual contingency and historical necessity. Dialectics must thus be countered by distinction. It will be suggested here, however, that

recognizing the extent to which Arendt misreads Marx's reconstruction of the dialectic, the extent to which the latter escapes assimilation into the theoretical tendency that Arendt describes, opens the ground for the transcendence of Arendt's much maligned project of partition.

Questioning Distinction: the *Vita Activa* and Marx's Ontology of Labour

It is quite evident that Marx's theoretical problematic provides a direct challenge to Arendt's affirmation of the tripartite structure of the *vita activa*. Arendt, however, does not provide a critique of those aspects of Marx's thought which would seem to invalidate her theoretical structure, but rather a critique of an imagined content within Marx which in fact produces the initial need for this theoretical structure. Arendt's interpretation of Marx can only be described as highly tendentious, Hanna Pitkin noting that "its detailed formulations are almost always mistaken, sometimes blatantly so" (Pitkin, 1998, 115).¹ A comprehensive examination of Arendt's critique of Marx is beyond the scope of the present work, but a basic understanding of Arendt's specific criticisms of the function of labour in Marx's philosophy is nevertheless essential to the present discussion.² Most simply, Marx's concept of labour is identified as a legitimate object of criticism by Arendt to the extent that she takes his affirmation of the potential for material production to act as a mode for the expression of the human essence as evidence that he associates human nature with the natural and biological movements of her *animal laborans*. Arendt ultimately fails to interpret the Marxian concept on the terms of its own logic, but rather immediately maps it within the universe of her own *vita activa*. There does not seem to be much of a valid ground, however, for this conceptual identification. Arendt, for example, will maintain that proof that Marx's concept of labour conforms to her own can be seen in his description of labour as the human being's 'metabolism with nature' (Arendt, 1998, 99). To Arendt the invocation of this latter phrase is clear evidence that Marx thought of labour in terms of the physiological circle of production and immediate consumption. This basic misunderstanding of the meaning of labour in Marx is the foundation for Arendt's production of a whole set of misinterpretations of Marx's critical theory. Thus, for example, Marx's value theory is alleged to demonstrate the extent to which Marx is incapable of recognizing the – Arendt's – distinction between labour and work. Arendt notes that Marx theorizes that despite the fact that it leaves nothing behind, labour does in fact have a productivity; specifically, labour is capable of producing a surplus, more than is required for its reproduction. Labour's productivity lies not in labour itself, however, but in a surplus of human labour-power. From the standpoint of this productivity, tangible things are brought into existence only accidentally, as what is really produced is simply life: "Unlike the productivity of work, which adds new objects to the human artifice, the productivity of labour power produces objects only incidentally, and is primarily concerned with the means of its own reproduction...it never 'produces' anything but life" (p. 88). As a consequence of this understanding Marx loses the distinction between labour and work. Under communism "all work would have become labour because all things would be understood, not in their worldly, objective quality, but as results of living labour power and the functions of the life process" (p. 99). Marx valorizes labour not because of the object that it produces, because the object possesses a certain quality, but because it produces a surplus. The distinction between labour and

work is erased to the extent that the condition of the worldly object is no longer seen as being a relevant element of the productive process.

Now, even a cursory reading of Marx demonstrates the falsity of Arendt's positions here. Arendt notes that Marx often speaks of labour as the production of life (p. 88n20). For Marx, though, life is clearly species life. The significance of the distinction between mere life and species life is lost on Arendt to the extent that she interprets the latter as a conceptual representation of a process whereby all individual human trajectories are assimilated into a common stream in order to serve the process which moves the collective species. For Arendt Marx's concept of species being reduces each individual to the position of a generic and undifferentiated member of the species, into an element of the only humanity fit for participation in a universally construed automatic and necessary life-process (p. 116). Marx is alleged to abstract from the plurality of individuals a singular noun which absorbs all human beings into one conceptual unity (pp. 324-325). What all members of the species share under such a condition is a one-sided concern with the production of their merely physical lives. Marx is quite explicit, though, that such a production is actually that which represents the alienation of species life, the latter always affirming the embedded self-differentiation of the individual. Contrary to Arendt's interpretation, Marx in his account of species being makes it quite clear that the individual must always remain a particular individual: "it is precisely his particularity which makes him an individual, and a real *individual* social being" (Marx, 1988, 105). Individuals "produce their social being which is no abstract, universal power over against single individuals, but the nature of each individual, his own activity, his own life, his own enjoyment, his own wealth" (Marx, 2000, 125). The subject of species-nature is thus "Men, not in the abstract, but as real, living, particular individuals" (p. 125).

Arendt's contention, furthermore, that Marx was not at all concerned with the objects of production fabricated in labour quite clearly contradicts the latter's account of the central role of objectification in labour. Needless to say, for Marx a reflection upon the nature of the object is essential to the subject's proper identification of her social power. We know that the first moment of alienation is in fact the alienation of the labourer from the object of her production. Labour of course always produces an object, and hence objectification is the inevitable result of all productive activity: "The product of labour is labour which has been congealed in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labour" (Marx, 1988, 71). Labour thus realizes itself through being objectified. What is more important to note, however, is that the human being does not just alter the nature of the objective world through her participation in such processes; she also alters the subjective nature of herself as a specific human being through the development and refinement of her faculties and capacities. Creative activity not only transfers subjectivity to the object, recognized already by Locke, but also transforms the nature of subjectivity. In the final instance Marx's understanding of human essence is conceptualized as a form of praxis in which the individual, by setting in motion – through activities of labour – conscious processes of creation, and acting communally with her other species-beings, overcomes simultaneously both the nature of the objective world and the nature of herself.

What seems clear, and what Arendt does not realize, is that it is precisely because Marx understands the nature of the specifically human social power to be a form of

spontaneous creative expression, resulting in the production of a world of objects, that he values labour. The good of labour for Marx does not lay in the fact that it produces an abstract surplus of labour-power, but in its intrinsic ability to develop and refine human capacities. What Arendt is unable to grasp, or, more precisely, what Arendt refuses to grasp, is that the Marxian concept of labour at once cuts across all three of the dimensions of the *vita activa*. Labour is that activity which, potentially all at once, produces the material required for the physical reproduction of the differentiated and non-identical members of the species, constructs that objective world of things within which individuals recognize their uniquely human quality, and gives an expression to this quality, which is the performative impulse to initiate beginnings through the spontaneous production of new subjective and objective actualities. For Arendt work cannot be labour to the extent that only the former has a definite beginning and a definite end, and only the former is carried out by subjects who control the process through willing specific intentions. Labour cannot be action because, again, it does not begin anything, does not end, and is not intentional, but also because it is a false plurality which simply reduces all individuals to the same undifferentiated content. Work, finally, cannot be action to the extent that it is performed alone and to the extent that it is always instrumental. What Marx is able to show is that all of these distinctions are false, or at least historically constructed and lacking relevance outside of the context of the social formation which he will identify as capitalism.

The activity which Arendt refers to as labour is what Marx refers to as alienated labour. Arendt does not recognize this to the extent that she does not adequately take account of the basic Marxian distinction between alienated and non-alienated modes of productive existence. This latter fact is evident in Arendt's reproduction of that common error which sees a contradiction between Marx's affirmation of labour as the means to the realization of the human essence, and Marx's advocacy of the abolition of labour. She thus asks, "If labour is the most human and most productive of man's activities, what will happen when, after the revolution, 'labour is abolished' in the 'realm of freedom,' when man has succeeded in emancipating himself from it? What productive and what essentially human activity will be left?" (Arendt, 1993c, 24). We know, of course, that all Marx desires is the abolition of alienated labour, of that repetitive and rhythmic process of production which blunts and denies human capacities, precisely the same process that Arendt will critique, and yet bizarrely label a Marxian ideal.³

Whereas Arendt abstracts from her present historical context a specific mode of social production, affirming this mode's transhistorical form, Marx will differentiate between such modes on the basis of an analysis of the various embodiments of the social relations of production. Such an historical method of abstraction is able to envisage a form of socialized labour which not only provides the material of life, but produces a world of objects through creative practice and allows for public deliberation regarding the form and content of social production and consumption. The public and intersubjective dimension of labour here assumes a great significance, to the extent that Arendt will concede that not only do all of the activities of the *vita activa* contain an element of natality (Arendt, 1998, 9), but that working in fact requires the same capacity for creativity as does action. Arendt is quite explicit that spontaneity, the capacity to begin something new, is manifest outside of the realm of action: "Spontaneity reveals itself in the productivity of the artist, just as it does with everyone who produces things of the

world in isolation from others, and one can say that no production is possible without having first been called into life by this capacity to act” (Arendt, 2005b, 128). It would seem that objects of work can be in a sense understood, then, as products of a form of creation, a creation which differs from the creation of action only to the extent that, Arendt believes, work is necessarily an independent activity. For Arendt the craftsperson is hostile to the actor and the public world to the extent that the former is not dependant on the fact of human plurality: “In order to be in a position to add constantly new things to the already existing world, he himself must be isolated from the public, must be sheltered and concealed from it” (Arendt, 1993b, 217). It is of course, though, Marx’s point to show that all production, to the extent that it is carried out in manner suitable to the human essence, is in fact social production, the collective realization of species being: “Activity and consumption, both in their content and in their *mode of existence*, are *social*: *social* activity and *social* consumption; the *human* essence of nature first exists only for *social* man; for only here does nature exist for him as a *bond* with *man* – as his existence for the other and the other’s existence for him – as the life-element of the human world; only here does nature exist as the *foundation* of his own *human* existence” (Marx, 1988, 104). Hence “The individual *is the social being*. His life, even if it may not appear in the direct form of a *communal* life carried out together with others – is therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life*” (p. 105). Objectification is always species-activity to the extent that its subject is never the private individual alone who labours irrespective of a consideration of the species-existence of other individuals. Work, though, is also distinguished from action, according to Arendt, to the extent that it is carried out within a means-end continuum. Because of the instrumental nature of work all material production is seen as an expression of domination. Production implies an inherent violence towards the object, the making of a table, for example, involving the killing of a tree, which is justified to the extent that the means of production are undertaken in the service of the realization of a fixed end (Arendt, 1994a, 283). Needless to say, however, Marx does not understand production in such terms, quite consciously resisting interpreting the objects of the natural world as the mere stuff of domination. Indeed, objectification, the process by which the sensuous human being both posits and is posited by objects, is in fact the foundation of the unity of human and non-human nature. Marx thus believes that “communism, as fully-developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism” (Marx, 1988, 102). Significantly, this understanding of the relation between concrete human practice and nature will be further developed by the Marxist thinkers of the Frankfurt School, who will argue that a genuinely humanized existence implies in a real sense the notion of the subjectivization of nature.⁴ In the final instance, neither of Arendt’s bars blocking the interpenetration of the realms of work and action would seem to hold up to the scrutiny of Marx’s understanding of non-reified objectification.

It is disingenuous for Arendt to claim that Marx does not see the human essence in terms of reason (the human as *animal rationale*) or material production (the human as *homo faber*), but in terms of labour (the human as *animal laborans*) (Arendt, 2005a, 79; Arendt, 1993c, 22) precisely because Marx cannot make these distinctions, because labour for him is understood as an activity that both produces objects and develops and refines critical-rational capacities. For Marx labour contains aspects of all three of Arendt’s activities of the *vita activa*: labour is necessary for the species’ biological

reproduction, labour is the creation of a stable objective reality through the interruption of natural processes, and labour is praxis, is self-development, creativity, and the expression of freedom. Marx did not want to overcome work for the sake of labour, but rather overcome just the reifying aspects of work. Just as Arendt failed to distinguish between alienated and non-alienated modes of labour, so too does she fail to distinguish between objectification and reification, thus believing that Marx's critique of the latter is necessarily a critique of the former. On the relationality of labour and reason, Bikhu Parekh writes that Marx's

point is that the abstract and subjective faculty of reason becomes an effective power in the world only when it is embodied in, and guides, the concrete material activity of production. Marx calls such a rationally planned activity of production, labour. It need hardly be said that he does not view labour as a natural force or an exertion of raw bodily energy, but a purposive and planned activity in which man activates his rational and physical powers to transform nature (Parekh, 1979, 85).

In short, Arendt ignores the fact that labour for Marx is always "*purposive* or *rational* labour" (p. 84), as is straightforwardly revealed when Marx writes that "We are not dealing here with those first instinctive forms of labour which remain on the animal level," but rather, "We presuppose labour in a form in which it is an exclusively human characteristic" (Marx, 1976, 284-285).

Arendt's Critique of the Dialectic: On the Need for Distinction

It was certainly suggested to Arendt that the inflexibility of her conceptual categories could be potentially undone through the type dialectical analysis practiced by Marx. Arendt once proudly agreed with Albrecht Wellmer that her concern with preserving distinction was a consequence of the lack of Hegelian elements in her thought (Arendt, 1979, 325). After Wellmer had proposed to Arendt a technique to dissolve the rigidity of her distinctions, she responded thusly: "I would say that by these fancy methods you have *eliminated* distinction and have already done this Hegelian trick in which one concept, all of its own, begins to develop into its own *negative*. *No it doesn't!* And *good* doesn't develop into *bad*, and *bad* doesn't develop into *good*. There I would be adamant (pp. 326-327)." Although Arendt does concede that her distinctions "hardly ever correspond to watertight compartments in the real world" (Arendt, 1972, 146), she is quite clear that human existence nevertheless demands that they be made. For her it is of the utmost importance to maintain distinctions, despite the fact that there is "a silent agreement in most discussions among political and social scientists that we can ignore distinctions and proceed on the assumption that everything can eventually be called anything else, and that distinctions are meaningful only to the extent that each of us has the right 'to define his terms'" (Arendt, 1993d, 95). Such a right to define terms arbitrarily is only possible in a world devoid of common sense, and is a manifestation of the individual's retreat from the public world of shared meaning into a strictly private realm. For Arendt, of course, the 20th century 'political' phenomenon which is most successful in overcoming the public realm is totalitarianism. The dialectic is implicated in the triumph of totalitarianism to the extent that it provides the theoretical tools for that practical overcoming of distinction which marks the totalitarian experience.

As was the case with Marx, Arendt was far from an adequate reader of Hegel, often, for example, reducing the latter's dialectic to the crude structural stereotype of thesis-antithesis-synthesis (Arendt, 1978, 49). For Arendt the dialectic is a mystical construction which assimilates all human events into its own previously worked out logic, a logic which claims to hold the key to the formula of universal world history. Indeed, in her mind it is a non-coincidental matter of fact that the periods of prominence for naturalistic philosophies, of which the dialectical philosophy is one, are always immediately followed by religious revivals (Arendt, 1994d, 230). To the extent that it allegedly claims an objective knowledge of the functioning of the laws of world history, the dialectic is seen as a form of ideology. Ideology is distinct from opinion "in that it claims to possess either the key to history, or the solution for all the 'riddles of the universe,' or the intimate knowledge of the hidden universal laws which are supposed to rule nature and man" (Arendt, 1968a, 159). The identifying marker of ideologies is their claim that they are able to solve the problem of history to the extent that they believe they have discovered the proper idea motivating historical movement. The happening of any event occurs as a consequence of the internal logic of the idea, a fundamental premise from which all subsequent movement can be deduced. Needless to say, such processes of assimilation must necessarily deny that spontaneous production of beginnings which characterizes human action: "No ideology which aims at the explanation of all historical events of the past and at mapping out the course of all events of the future can bear the unpredictability which springs from the fact that men are creative, that they can bring forward something so new that nobody ever foresaw it" (p. 458). It is precisely such a denial which for Arendt characterizes the operation of the dialectic: "Dialectical logic, with its process from thesis to antithesis to synthesis which in turn becomes the thesis of the next dialectical movement, is not different in principle, once an ideology gets hold of it; the first thesis becomes the premise and its advantage for ideological explanation is that this dialectical device can explain away all factual contradictions as stages of one identical, consistent movement" (p. 469). For Arendt it is precisely this process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis which Marx will adopt from Hegel and incorporate into his methodology (Arendt, 2005a, 74).

Arendt argues that "Marx formalizes Hegel's dialectic of the absolute in history as a *development*, as a self-propelled process" (p. 74). Marx read into history an iron law of movement, seeing specifically both politics and philosophy as superstructural manifestations of the struggle between classes. To the extent that he had a political philosophy, it "was based not upon an analysis of action and acting men but, on the contrary, on the Hegelian concern with history" (Arendt, 1993a, 78-79). We know that for Arendt nothing can be seen as the end-point of action in the same way that a material product can be seen as the end-point of fabrication. Marx makes the same mistake as Hegel, believing that freedom can be comprehended as an object to be constructed. If history is the process which looks towards the realization of the product of freedom, then there must come a time when this object is finished, when history ends: "the process of history, as it shows itself in our calendars stretching into the infinity of the past and the future, has been abandoned for the sake of an altogether different kind of process, that of making something which has a beginning as well as an end, whose laws of motion, therefore, can be determined (for instance as dialectical movement) and whose innermost content can be discovered (for instance as class struggle)" (p. 79). It is precisely to the

extent that history is considered within an instrumental framework of making which affirms that all means that look toward the realization of the end are sanctioned, that the Marxist tradition has so often found itself justifying violence and terror for the sake of freedom. Such a position achieves only its most advanced expression in the development of one form of the 'political' phenomenon which is totalitarianism: "Marxism could be developed into a totalitarian ideology because of its perversion, or misunderstanding, of political action as the making of history" (Arendt, 1994b, 396).

Arendt is quite explicit: she believes that the origins of totalitarianism can be at least partially traced to a certain "philosophical heresy" that reached its highest theoretical expression in the work of Hegel, and which was practically applied by Marx. (Arendt, 2007, 719). This heresy overturned the dominant view of political philosophy at the time, which presumed that positive laws acquired their stabilizing permanence through their derivation from a singular universal law. Under totalitarianism "terror, as the daily execution of an ever-changing universal law of movement, makes all positive law in its relative permanence impossible and drives the whole community into a flood of catastrophes" (p. 720). For the desire for action totalitarianism substitutes the need for insight into the natural laws of historical movement. For this reason dialectical Marxism is a suitable ideological foundation for totalitarianism, as it sees "men as the product of a gigantic historical process racing toward the end of historical time" (Arendt, 1994c, 341). Subjected to such conditions, "Human beings, caught or thrown into the process of Nature or History for the sake of accelerating its movement, can become only the executioners or the victims of its inherent law" (p. 349). Like the dialectic, then, totalitarianism sacrifices human freedom, the concern with spontaneous and radical creation, to historical necessity, and indeed, if the pure space of totalitarianism, the concentration camp, is marked by anything, it is its attempt to reduce the human being to a bundle of automatic reactions through cleansing from human life all traces of spontaneity. The effort of totalitarian movements to suppress human spontaneity and creativity is the most advanced historical attack on the human essence, nothing less than an attempt at "the transformation of human nature itself" (Arendt, 1968a, 458).

The observation of historical necessity, however, is only one element of Arendt's critique of dialectics and totalitarianism, which in fact takes a double-form. The historical logic is able to preserve its sense of consistency only to the extent that it is able to eschew distinction: the logic is never wrong if it is able to redefine the meaning of categories such that they are capable of being assimilated into itself. The dialectic thus incorporates two only apparently contradictory positions, the first presuming that history proceeds along a pre-determined axis whose laws of movement can be objectively determined in advance of the movement, the second presuming that all historical objects of consideration can be redefined as the subject of historical consideration so desires. The latter position is indeed what makes the former theoretically possible. A history conceived of as "process or stream or development" necessarily must posit "that everything comprehended by it can change into anything else, that distinctions become meaningless because they become obsolete, submerged, as it were, by the historical stream, the moment they have appeared" (Arendt, 1993d, 101). Dialectics operates according to the principle of historical necessity. Its determinism, though, can only be guaranteed by the conceptual looseness of its categories, by the fact that every object considered by the dialectician has the potential to transform, by its own internal

movement, into every other object. Once again, the theoretical principle is seen to be concretely applied in the totalitarian space, which seeks to overcome distinction through the overflowing of the limits of human experience: “The camps are the living laboratories revealing that ‘everything is possible,’ that humans can create and inhabit a world where the distinctions between life and death, truth and falsehood, appearance and reality, body and soul, and even victim and murderer are constantly blurred” (Benhabib, 1996, 65). This process is imagined by Arendt in terms of an iron band which squeezes together all bodies into one, individuals being more easily assimilated into the universal history when they are all reduced to the same undifferentiated and generic content (Arendt, 1968a, 466). Just as totalitarianism is able to confirm its historical narrative through the manufacturing of reality – for example, the ideology which sees particular human subjects as subhuman is confirmed the moment the camps are able to produce subjects incapable of spontaneity –, so too theoretically can the inevitable movement of history be realized through the dialectical ability to create anything through the transcendence of distinction. Arendt makes her distinctions quite self-consciously – she refuses to be dialectical in her analyses to the extent that the dialectic is seen to remain committed to, in a certain sense, totalitarianism, the practical realization of the implacable logic of the Idea.

Marx’s Critique of Abstract Universalism

Arendt’s affirmation of distinction is made in order to guard against the excesses of the dialectic, the dialectic’s presumption of historical universality and its ability to collapse objects into one another: the former is realized precisely as a consequence of the functioning of the latter. The question that demands to be answered, however, is whether there is in fact a form of dialectical analysis which escapes the two conditions which Arendt criticizes, the two conditions which generate the need for the type of rigorous methodological separation that Arendt calls for? A comprehensive account of the structure of the Marxian dialectic is beyond the scope of the present paper. Here, however, we can briefly point to two well-known passages in Marx’s work in which these issues are confronted directly. Firstly, with respect to the issue of unidirectional historical necessity, we can examine Marx’s critique of speculative dialectical philosophy in *The Holy Family*. If Hegel will ultimately violate the negativity of his dialectic through situating it within a closed ontological structure that culminates in the positive realization of a teleological Idea, such is in no way the case with Marx. Marx will in fact take Hegel to task for the construction of a metaphysical concept which overwhelms the concrete multiplicity of the reality which it attempts to subsume. In *The Holy Family* Marx will show how, from the standpoint of Hegelian analysis, reflection on the nature of particular fruits leads to the speculative construction of the general concept of Fruit (Marx and Engels, 1975, 72). This abstract concept of Fruit is consequently taken by speculative analysis to be something real existing outside of the subject, something which constitutes the essence of the particular fruits perceived through sense-perception. In doing this, the subject is “saying, therefore, that to be a pear is not essential to the pear, that to be an apple is not essential to the apple; that what is essential to these things is not their real existence, perceptible to the senses, but the essence that I have abstracted from them and then foisted on them, the essence of my idea – ‘Fruit’” (p. 72). Particular fruits

come to be seen as simply particular forms of existence of the primary mode of being, which is Fruit: “Particular real fruits are no more than *semblances* whose true essence is ‘*the substance*’ – ‘*Fruit*’” (p. 72). The distinctions between particular fruits registered by the human sensory apparatus are consequently disregarded as contingent and non-essential.

However, speculative philosophy of this sort must, “if it is to attain some semblance of real content,” work its way backwards to take account of particular differentiations within the primary substance: “If apples, pears, almonds and strawberries are really nothing but ‘*the Substance*,’ ‘*the Fruit*,’ the question arises: Why does ‘*the Fruit*’ manifest itself to me sometimes as an apple, sometimes as a pear, sometimes as an almond? Why this *semblance of diversity* which so obviously contradicts my speculative conception of *Unity*, ‘*the Substance*,’ ‘*the Fruit*’?” (p. 73). The answer to the question lay in the fact that substance is conceived not as static matter, but as “living, self-differentiating, moving essence” (p. 73). Fruit thus gives itself through its own dynamic motion a multiplicity of differentiated appearances. So, speculative philosophy is able to account for concrete differences in the nature of particular fruits, but only as semblances: particular fruits are ultimately considered not from the standpoint of their concrete, sensuous existences, but from the standpoint of their objective positions within the dynamic life-process of the initial abstraction Fruit. Real fruits are spontaneously created out of the activity of the mind, which is capable of comprehending the initial abstraction as the logical starting-point of the speculative process. “In the speculative way of speaking, this operation is called comprehending *Substance* as *Subject*, as an *inner process*, as an *Absolute Person*, and this comprehension constitutes the essential character of *Hegel’s method*” (p. 75).

Arendt will attribute to Marx’s method the same metaphysical quality that Marx observes in Hegel’s method. There seems, though, to be very little justification for this former criticism. Arendt will accuse Marx of completely formalizing the dialectic, of releasing it from any substantive content (Arendt, 2005a, 75). To the extent that he achieves this the dialectic is seen to be able to be applied in any situation. A cursory reading of the basic principles of Marx’s methodology, however, as they are outlined in the famous Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, demonstrates this to be emphatically not the case (Marx, 1973, 100-101). As he was in *The Holy Family*, and as he will be throughout all of his writings, Marx is explicit on the need to reject absolute and universalist modes of abstraction. Abstraction must begin from the simplest, most uncontroversial element of reality, building up from there to more generalized and concrete concepts through the logical examination of the relations and determinations which structure the initial abstraction. Thus, for Marx, although it is not strictly speaking incorrect to simply posit that, for example, country *y* has a population *x*, it is just an abstraction to the extent that it leaves out a consideration of the further moments which structure it, for example the composition of classes within the population (p. 100). One can only analyze and evaluate the nature of the concrete concept after one has logically moved through all of the relations suggested by it. Marxian concepts are not abstract universals which impose a singular meaning on the object, but rather concrete universals saturated by these determinations and relations. Now, according to Marx the most undeniable fact of reality in capitalist society is the existence of an immense accumulation of commodities. This world of immense accumulation thus presents itself as the starting point of dialectical

analysis. Hence in *Capital* Marx moves from an analysis of the commodity to a discussion of use-value and value, to concrete and abstract labour, to money, to the primary circuits of exchange, and so on. Concrete universals are not simply posited, but constructed as a consequence of the immanent critical evaluation of simpler concepts. It is here that we arrive at the notion of the labour of the dialectic, “of the working-up of observation and conception into concepts” (p. 101), an understanding of dialectical analysis very far removed from the critical presentation of Arendt, which assumes the necessity of a previously constituted universal concept which moves backwards, structuring all simpler concepts according to its own transcendent logic.

Arendt’s misreading of the nature of the dialectic is made all the more problematic given the theoretical debt she owes to one of the most outstanding dialectical thinkers of the twentieth-century: Walter Benjamin. Arendt resolves any essential philosophical or methodological non-correspondence through a technique of denial: she is quite clear that she does not consider Benjamin a dialectician (Arendt, 1968b, 180). Such a position, of course, explicitly contradicts Benjamin’s own understanding of his work. In a letter to Max Rychner in 1931, Benjamin would state that already his *Trauerspiel* book, despite being “certainly not materialist, was already dialectic” (Buck-Morss, 1972, 22). The poverty of Arendt’s understanding of dialectical analysis is nowhere more clearly revealed than in her observation that Adorno and Horkheimer criticize Benjamin for his undialectical thinking (Arendt, 1968b, 162-165). This they certainly do, but when Adorno and Horkheimer make this critique they are condemning precisely those elements of Benjamin’s thought which affirm the vulgar principles of the caricatured model of dialectics presented by Arendt. Adorno will write to Benjamin to say that his “dialectic is lacking in one thing: mediation” (Adorno and Benjamin, 1999, 282). Adorno goes on to explain: “I regard it as methodologically inappropriate to give conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a ‘materialist’ turn by relating them immediately, and perhaps even causally, to certain corresponding features of the substructure. The materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the *total social process*” (p. 283). Benjamin’s first Baudelaire essay is criticized by Adorno for being undialectical to the extent that it is founded on the unmediated and uncritical juxtaposition of static elements, on the organization of elements according to the logic of some ossified base-superstructure model. Adorno here objects to Benjamin’s appropriation of what the former takes to be Brecht’s crude materialism. When Adorno states that Benjamin is insufficiently dialectical, he is accusing Benjamin of being dialectical in precisely Arendt’s sense; the Brechtian elements which Benjamin adopts violate the essence of that very methodology which Arendt will elsewhere make use of herself.

Indeed, Eli Zaretsky, for example, will note that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* has a specifically Benjaminian construction, Arendt seeking in this book not to construct a definitive causal history of the phenomenon under consideration, but to uncover the various elements, for example anti-Semitism, the decline of the nation-state, racism, imperialism, and more, which would crystallize into the idea of totalitarianism. In his words, “She searched for discrete elements and showed how they combined in unpredictable ways, based upon hidden and apparently unimportant similarities” (Zaretsky, 1997, 215). What Arendt learns from Benjamin, in this work at least, is the need to posit a methodology of distinctive flexibility, a methodology which is able to

comprehend historical objects in their relational complexity, avoiding the hubris which seeks to permanently fix the nature of the object, but which at the same time does not abandon on principle the affirmation of the need for conceptual separation. What Arendt fails to learn from Benjamin is that such a methodology is thoroughly dialectical, and hence invalidates the main elements of her critique of Marx.

Conclusion

There have been many commentators who have criticized Arendt for insisting on the ontological need to construct rigid and impenetrable boundaries between the various activities of the human world. My suggestion, however, is that such commentators have not adequately theorized the philosophical motivation behind this Arendtian project. It is precisely this which I have attempted to do in this paper, noting that Arendt is forced to adopt a project of partition to the extent that she understands the dialectical logic as being implicated in the rise of totalitarianism. The dialectical method affirms on a theoretical plane that which totalitarianism attempts to practically realize in the world of empirical human bodies: it presents us with a logical system which is able to objectively determine the teleological movement of history through the affirmation of the theoretical possibility of its objects of analysis indiscriminately morphing into one another. From the standpoint of both the dialectician and the totalitarian leader, the flow of history can be mapped precisely to the extent that all historical objects escape definition. What I have argued, however, is that Arendt failed to appreciate the subtlety of Marx's dialectic, which in fact is just as concerned with avoiding the sorts of theoretical problems – specifically the problem of historical necessity and the problem of abstract universalism – that the Arendtian methodology is. Had Arendt made the effort to more seriously engage with the Marxian literature, she may very well have been motivated to re-evaluate not only her critique of Marx, but also the inflexibility of her conceptual distinctions.

It should be stressed, however, that the inadequacy of Arendt's critique of the dialectic should not invalidate other dimensions of her assessment of Marx. Arendt, for example, continues to provide us with one of the most powerful critiques of Marx's political theory. With the notable exceptions of the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy and Right* and *The Civil War in France*⁵, Marx fails to present us with a critical theory of politics that is able to affirm his dynamic understanding of creative essence; specifically, he fails to present us with an adequate theory of radical democracy, falling back instead to traditional instrumentalist and managerialist models of political transformation. Here at least, Arendt, who theorizes politics as action, as spontaneous collective activity oriented toward the production of radically new beginnings, has much to teach Marx. Not only is the Marxian dialectic open to such a politics, but to the extent that the former – as opposed to traditional, closed metaphysical systems – looks towards the possibility of allowing for the emergence of new objects of thought, for the sake of the production of new modes of doing and being, it in fact demands it.

Indeed, the potential for the construction of a dialogue between Arendt and Marx lay precisely in that each of them are concerned with affirming the historical possibility of human creation. Arendt herself seems to have been dimly aware of this, noting that in emphasizing creation Marx revealed himself to be radical in an important way: “When Marx declared he no longer wanted to interpret the world but to change it, he stood, so to

speak, on the threshold of a new concept of Being and world, by which Being and world were no longer givens but possible products of man” (Arendt, 1994e, 171). Arendt, however, was not willing to recognize the degree to which Marx’s philosophy was structured so as to allow for the sphere of labour to act as a field for the realization of this possibility for historical creation. Arendt’s mistake lay in closing off certain spheres of human activity to potentially performative modes of being. To this degree, Marx’s ontology of labour speaks to a certain lack or deficiency in Arendt, just as Arendt’s political ontology speaks to a certain lack or deficiency in Marx. The constellative juxtaposition of Arendt and Marx, seemingly closed off as a consequence of Arendt’s affirmation of the need for distinction, is opened upon the recognition of the unsustainability of this latter project, and a ground is thereby provided for a more meaningful engagement between the Arendtian and Marxian political-theoretical traditions.

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