

## Between Future and Past - An Exercise in Political Ecology

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This paper on Arendt and the Anthropocene was presented at the conference, “Post-Truth and Politics,” hosted and organized by the Berlin ICI Institute for Cultural Inquiry in collaboration with the Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College and Bard College Berlin on April 29, 2017. The conference departed from Arendt’s 1967 essay, “Truth and Politics,” which responded to historical exigencies that seem, some fifty years later, to resonate with those presented by the advent of the so-called “post-truth society.”

Examining the interminable conflict and contamination between truth and politics, Arendt argues in that essay for a rigorous distinction. While politics is antithetical to the truth insofar as it is taken up with the plurality of opinions and the uncertainty of action, it should nonetheless be informed by the truth, which provides the basis for the maintenance and persistence of a common world. Arendt concludes with the following line: “Conceptually, we may call truth what we cannot change; metaphorically, it is the ground on which we stand and the sky that stretches above us” (Arendt 1968a, 264). If this phrase must have been unsettling enough in 1967, today it is positively vertiginous. It is tempting to ask whether some of the sense of disorientation and dislocation that characterizes contemporary political experience and discourse is not, to keep with Arendt’s metaphor – if it is still a metaphor – the result of the erosion of this ground and of the pollution that obscures the sky. For it is the fact of global climate change that today reposes in the most radical and arguably consequential fashion the question of “truth and politics” for our generation in a way that Arendt’s generation, faced with apparently more immediate calamities, was only beginning to imagine – or to deny. I seek in what follows to do no more than indicate some of the ways in which Arendt’s thought may be helpful in articulating the theoretical challenges presented by the ecological and political perplexities concentrated in the loaded term “Anthropocene.”<sup>1</sup>

While the problem of “truth and politics” is found everywhere in Arendt’s writings, there are three related texts in which it most explicitly features: “Truth and Politics,” published in 1967 but occasioned by the reaction to Arendt’s report on the Eichmann trial in 1961; “Lying in Politics,” which responded to the Pentagon Papers and the Vietnam War in 1971; and finally, “Home to Roost,” published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1975. Prepared as an address given in Boston for the bicentennial of the American republic, “Home to Roost” responds to what Arendt called, “the recent cataclysm of events,” in-

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<sup>1</sup> The paper has been revised in the light of helpful comments from the editors and peer reviewers of HannahArendt.net. I have retained the form and tone of the oral presentation.

cluding the end of the Vietnam war, the Watergate Scandal, and the 1970s economic recession (Arendt 2003, 257-8). It would be the last text she published before her death.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast with the political theoretical perspective assumed in the first two essays, “Home to Roost” – perhaps because it was intended as a political address rather than a theoretical exercise – is very different in tone, at once more despondent and more urgent. It is also, however, a scathing attack on the very posture of “theory,” which, in its modern manifestation, Arendt associates with the kind of loss of contact with reality that is propagated and supported by the mass media production of what she calls “images.” Theories operate upon the basis of the plausibility of their hypotheses, while reality, for better or worse, is in no way so constrained. Whence the critical significance of that aspect of reality that she calls, “the unbelievable,” which “cannot be anticipated by either hope or fear” (ibid., 261). “I think,” she writes, “that most people who have watched the frantic, panic-stricken end of the Vietnam war thought that what they saw on their television screens was ‘unbelievable,’ as indeed it was” (ibid., 261). The apparition of the “unbelievable” finally gave the lie to the plausible theories and images that had in fact served to prolong the war. As Arendt observes, “If it is in the nature of appearances to hide ‘deeper’ causes, it is in the nature of speculation about such hidden causes to hide and to make us forget the stark, naked brutality of facts, of things as they are” (ibid., 261).

What I find particularly intriguing about this last essay of Arendt’s is her use of the saying cited in her title as she reflects on contemporary history:

I said before that in the cataclysm of recent events it was as if ‘all the chickens had come home to roost,’ and I used this common saying because it indicates the boomerang effect, the unexpected and ruinous backfiring of evil deeds on the doer, of which imperialist politicians of former generations were so afraid. Indeed anticipating this effect actually restrained them decisively from whatever they were doing in faraway lands to strange and foreign people. (ibid., 271)

It is “as if” the imperialist venture on which the United States had speculatively embarked and that was supposed to affect only “faraway lands” and “strange and foreign people,” had been brought home in the form of hard facts. The implausible, and therefore anti-theoretical, “hypothesis” of Arendt’s essay is that flight from the world, ignorance of the actual state of affairs, and disavowal of the unforeseen consequences of one’s actions, cannot ultimately escape from reality. “When the facts come home to us,” she implores in conclusion, “let us try at least to make them welcome. Let us try not to escape into utopias – images, theories, or sheer follies” (ibid., 275).

Nonetheless, Arendt reports little evidence that such facts were being welcomed. Only in one passage does she speak of a “ray of hope” referring to the “recent sudden awakening to the threats to our environment” (ibid., 262). This “environmental awakening” promised to counteract what she calls “the doctrine of Progress,” which facilitated the rapacious processes of mass consumer society “at the expense of the world we live in” (ibid., 262). The reference to the political significance of the environment is not altogether

<sup>2</sup> “Truth and Politics” was published in *The New Yorker* (February 25, 1967) and then as the final essay in the second enlarged edition of *Between Past and Future* (1968). “Lying in Politics” appeared in *The New York Review of Books* (November 18, 1971) with the subtitle “Reflections on The Pentagon Papers” and then in *Crises of the Republic* (1972). “Home to Roost: A Bicentennial Address” was published in *The New York Review of Books* (June 26, 1975); her talk in Boston, which was broadcast on National Public Radio on May 20, 1975, can be found in *The American Experiment* (1976) along with some remarks on its reception.

isolated in Arendt's thought. Nonetheless this moment seems to me to indicate a theoretical and historical threshold – a threshold between generations – which she would not live to articulate. Arendt seems herself to have been aware of such a threshold, when she observes in the address: “We may very well stand at one of those decisive turning points of history which separate whole eras from each other” (ibid., 259). With the benefit of hindsight, I am inclined to suggest that the turning point Arendt here dimly senses had in fact already more or less imperceptibly taken place. And it marked the advent not of a new stage in human history but of a new human stage in the history of the earth – the Anthropocene. The curious belatedness that seems inevitably to accompany the consideration of this epochal event relates to the perplexing temporality of “environmental awakening” as it is legible today: why did the “recent sudden awakening to the threats to our environment” that Arendt describes in the early 1970s fail to turn into a sustained political consciousness?<sup>3</sup> Why, when it comes to the environment, are we still in the bewildering stage of awakening and not yet awake?

Already in *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt had presciently discussed what she considered to be the newfound human ability, owed to developments in techno-science, to “act into nature” (Arendt 1958a, 231). She identifies the splitting of the atom as the decisive historical moment when the human capacity to initiate processes – with unforeseen, unforeseeable, and altogether uncontrollable consequences – began to be introduced into the processes of nature. Her observations coincide with the current consensus which locates the beginning of the Anthropocene around 1950 with the global dispersal of man-made radio-active elements as a result of stratospheric thermonuclear testing and the advent of the period of intensifying economic growth and consumption known as the “Great Acceleration” (see Waters et al. 2016). What we have to learn today from the Anthropocene, beyond the scientific debates around its start date, is that for some time now, our action has always already been acting into nature.<sup>4</sup> At the very least, our current situation makes clear that the theoretical distinction between history and nature and between politics and techno-science cannot be, and perhaps never has been, sustained in practice.

In *The Human Condition* this new political possibility “to overpower and destroy not man himself but the conditions under which life was given to him,” is raised without being conclusively addressed – perhaps because of its radical implications for the human condition itself (Arendt 1958a, 238). For action into nature, while it shares the absence of

<sup>3</sup> The environmental awakening does not appear to have figured at all in the immediate public response to Arendt's talk as it is recorded in *The American Experiment* by Sam Bass Warner, who writes that the “most rewarding” of the topics that came under discussion were “the Founding Fathers and the Constitution, the presidency, the federal bureaucracy, its development and possible decline, the Supreme Court and the judiciary, totalitarianism, the helplessness of the modern voter, and accountability in government” (Warner 1976, 80). Nor was it mentioned in Tom Wicker's laudatory *New York Times* editorial, “The Lie and the Image” (May 25, 1975). Equally telling is that the relevance of Arendt's thought for eco-politics has only in the last couple of decades – at least a generation after Arendt's talk – become subject to increasing attention, see Macauley 1996, Whiteside 1998, Sandilands 1999, Smith 2006, Greear 2012, Voice 2013.

<sup>4</sup> It is the start date, not so much the fact, of the Anthropocene that remains subject to scientific debate. In 2016, the Anthropocene Working Group, an international team of researchers, proposed the most widely-accepted start date for the Anthropocene as around 1950. In a famous 2002 article that popularized the term, Paul Crutzen had proposed the year 1784, the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, while others reach back to the “Columbian Exchange” following the European colonization of the Americas – or even further. The Working Group's mid-twentieth century date was constrained by the need to identify a clear global signal to identify the Anthropocene as a geological event. The signal, however, should not be confused with the event or its causes. See Waters et al 2016, Crutzen 2002, Steffen et al 2011.

sovereign control and so the dangerous frailty characteristic of all action, is without the always fragile remedies that are available to strictly human action. While the capriciousness of the processes set in motion among humans can be stabilized to some degree by promises, there are no promises with nature nor for that matter with technology. While the irrevocability of actions can be attenuated to the extent that they can be forgiven, acting into nature is, in contrast, unforgivable. Since it can no longer be a matter of attempting to preserve or recuperate the limited space of human action – if such a space ever existed in pristine form – the question posed by the post-human condition in its increasing implication with the processes of nature is whether there are criteria for political judgment that can be developed and analyzed internal to this dynamic. It is in this direction that Arendt's last essay seems to point.

In "Home to Roost," Arendt draws on the common saying in order to make a suggestive and non-speculative claim – perhaps therefore a political one – about the character of facts and the description of reality. The claim is ironic: even as it remarks on the ironic stubbornness of facts in the face of the pretension of human intentions, it does so in a tongue-in-cheek manner that ironizes the superstitious philosophy of history it seems to present. The claim is persuasive, however, only insofar as it implicitly relates to the intensification of global and globalizing processes contributing to what Arendt, already in the 1950s, had described as "the emergence of one world on a planetary scale" (Arendt 1994, 433; see also Arendt 1951, 297). If the facts came home to roost, this owed to and emphasized the reality that a planet of limited resources was shared by a growing plurality of people, the actions among whom were increasingly and consequentially interconnected.

The world was in fact, as another common saying goes, getting smaller. In this respect, Arendt's remarks about American imperialism present the culmination of the tendency she described in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* about the European imperial project a century or so earlier. The dogma of European imperialism had been "expansion for expansion's sake" but this process, itself arguably provoked by a sense of constraint, inevitably ran up against the objective limits presented by the finitude of the earth. Those chickens came home to roost in 1914.

The awakening of environmental awareness that Arendt applauds in 1975 is a consequence of the globalizing world getting smaller, if no less divided, just as the realities and prospects of environmental devastation across national and ideological boundaries appeared to be getting bigger – and more urgent. For environmental awareness is an awakening not only to the limitedness of the earth but also, I would suggest, to a particular experience of time, namely, the finitude of natural-historical time. The doctrine of progress, even in the deflationary and apparently mundane contemporary form of so-called "economic development," transposes the imperial "expansion for expansion's sake" into time. Accordingly, the ecological ramifications of "progress" disproportionately affect "faraway lands" and "strange and foreign people" not just across space but far into the future. And while the spatial limitedness of the earth is commensurate, to some degree, with the "common sense" of human measure and comprehension and can for that reason become "political," the temporality of ecological events in no way corresponds to the finitude of human senses or the time-span and temporality of human life. Environmental awakening has to do with becoming sensible to the fact that the irrevocability and unpredictability of

human interaction with nature does not simply unfold in time but can become a determining factor of the ordering of time – natural-historical time – for which we lack a common sense measure.

However devastating they may be, ecological concerns hardly appear in the “world” let alone in the “space of appearances” in which, according to Arendt, political engagement takes place, if it takes place at all. For one thing, ecological events tend to be slow.<sup>5</sup> As Rob Nixon has emphasized, they are often too slow to be perceptible and so, for practical and political purposes, do not appear at all. Furthermore, they are lasting in ways that everyday discourse relating the causes and effects, action and responsibility in human affairs, fails to account for. To take an example that resonates with Arendt’s essay, in his book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon cites a 2003 *New York Times* editorial in which it was stated about the Vietnam War: “during our dozen years there, the U.S. killed and helped kill at least 1.5 million people” (Nixon 2011, 13). Nixon observes: “But that simple phrase ‘during our dozen years there’ shrinks the toll, foreshortening the ongoing slow-motion slaughter: hundreds of thousands survived the official war years, only to slowly lose their lives later to Agent Orange. [...]. The afflicted include thousands of children born decades after the war’s end” (ibid., 14). If the brute facts as they appeared at the end of the war were, as Arendt puts it, “unbelievable,” another order of no less brutal facts relates to a reality that, on account of the mode and temporality of its appearance, never emerges in the public realm with the force to provoke incredulity. In short, ecological facts, even if they come home to roost – and there is good reason to think that some do in the end – are nevertheless not driven home for they often lack the shocking reality to which Arendt could appeal in order to discredit the theories and images of “progress” and of American imperial power. That the environmental awakening, about which Arendt was hopeful, failed to gain significant political traction in the generation since she wrote owes much to this perplexity.

If, in the spirit of Arendt’s last essay, one is to address new forms of imperialism today, it is necessary to think not only horizontally, so to speak, on a global scale but on a historical axis as well.<sup>6</sup> For the on-going expropriation of the earth and exploitation of people in far away or out of the way places is also, and perhaps first of all, the expropriation – and prospective devastation – of the future of the earth and of the people distant in time who might inhabit it. Politically speaking, it is necessary not only to seek to reconcile the singularity of the earth with the plurality of its inhabitants, but to conceive of plurality, the concept so central to Arendt’s thought, as a plurality across generations that have not yet been born. This is easier said than done. For while it is habitual to conceive of and care about the next generation and the next – such concerns being integral to the scope

5 Or rather: they are slow – until they are not. On the epistemological challenges presented by the problem of ecological “tipping-points,” radical, irreversible, and largely unforeseeable transformations brought about by apparently small or iterative alterations to Earth systems, see Lenton et al. 2008; Rockström et al. 2009.

6 For a postcolonial reflection on the historical relation between the Anthropocene and empire and imperialism, see Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. In order to acknowledge the historical disparities and asymmetries in bringing about and reaping the ‘benefits’ of climate change and ecological degradation, a series of alternative terms have been developed including Anglocene, Technocene, Capitalocene, and Plantationocene. See Bonneuil and Fressoz 2013; Hamilton et al. 2015; Moore 2016; Haraway 2016. While the question of historical responsibility is to be sure a pressing moral and political concern, I am interested here in the application of Arendt’s critique of imperialism for thinking about an on-going imperialism of the future.

and timeframe of human life and especially the bourgeois nuclear family – the challenge presented to politics by ecological thought is how to conceive of and care about generations affected by processes in which we are engaged long after any generation we can hope to interact with in person.<sup>7</sup>

It is around such concerns that the relation of our generation to Arendt's comes into question. For indeed the problem of inheritance between generations is one of the defining preoccupations of Arendt's thought. She considered the breakdown of the continuity between generations, or what she called "the tradition," to be the decisive historical and theoretical event of her generation. While she traced the attrition of the tradition throughout modernity, it was the European generation following the First World War that in her account experienced the final break. And it is with this at once liberating and bewildering experience that Arendt opens her book of exercises in political thought with a citation from René Char: "our inheritance was left to us by no testament" (Arendt 1968a, 3). For the break in tradition opened up and brought into focus the gap "between past and future" invoked in its title. The experience of this gap is the properly political experience of time, the experience of the way in which each new human inserts himself "into the small non-time-space in the very heart of time [...] between an infinite past and an infinite future" (Arendt 1968a, 13). With the historical demise of the tradition, the gap was, furthermore, democratized: "it became a tangible reality and perplexity for all, that is, it became a fact of political relevance" (ibid., 14). Henceforth at stake in politics will always also be a determination of the ways in which the past is handed on to the future. Historicity has been politicized.

In *Men in Dark Times* (1968), Arendt borrowed the phrase "dark times" from a poem by Brecht to characterize the particular confusion of this historical moment marked by the decisive breakdown of tradition. In Brecht's poem "An die Nachgeborenen," which Arendt translates as "To Posterity" (Arendt 1968b, viii), the concern is with the judgment of future generations. It ends with a plea for leniency: "Gedenkt unsrer / Mit Nachsicht" – "Remember us with forbearance" (ibid., 225). For Arendt, in contrast, the darkness of the times presented itself first and foremost as a question of the past – how to inherit without testament and recover such historical "pearls" as might enable one to carry on in the face of the catastrophes of the century (see Arendt 1968b, 205-6). For us, in contrast, as the inheritors of this crisis of the tradition, it has become a matter of how to address the unwarranted and unwilling inheritance that we threaten to bestow on the future. If, as Arendt claims, the exercise of political thought is a matter of learning "how to move in this gap" (Arendt 1968a, 14), our problem turns out to be the opposite of the preceding generation, namely, how to orient ourselves *between future and past*. We need an exercise that reflects on this gap not only with regard to the indeterminacy of our relation to the past, but all the more so with regard to the indeterminacy that characterizes our relation to the future. And this needs to be done without resorting to a philosophy of history that would neutralize politics.

One of the persistent preoccupations among both critics and proponents of historical progress has been the devaluation and effacement of individual lives and histories under the tide of historical processes and the progress of mankind. In "The Concept of History,"

<sup>7</sup> For a rethinking of sustainability in the Anthropocene "beyond our children's children" see Horn 2017; for a related perspective under the motto "Make Kin Not Babies!" see Haraway 2016.

Arendt cites Kant's reservation: "It will always remain bewildering . . . that the earlier generations seem to carry on their burdensome business only for the sake of the later . . . and that only the last should have the good fortune to dwell in the [completed] building" (Arendt 1968a, 83). And in his "Theses on the Concept of History," Walter Benjamin would refer to the nineteenth century philosopher Hermann Lotze's remark on "the freedom from envy which the present displays toward the future" in developing his influential counter-concept to historical progress (Benjamin 1968, 253). Attention to our "envy" towards missed possibilities discloses a "*weak* Messianic power" by which what was lost in the past may be recovered through remembrance (ibid., 254). For Arendt, very much in the spirit of Benjamin, the modern doctrine of progress could be contested only by recovering deeds and events that had been cast by the wayside or had disappeared into the flow of historical process and the narrative of historical progress. One way of articulating the reorientation between future and past solicited by the turning of the Anthropocene would be: How to attend to the singularity of lives and times that are yet to be lived and can hardly be conceived? How to "remember" – how to become sensible to and speak about – what, on account of human activity, has been and is being lost in the future?

What is needed, it seems to me, is a concept of historicity that provides parameters in time that correspond to the constraints in space imposed by the limits of the earth. For the future is limited, and limited in ways that are not independent of the processes in which we are currently engaged. Arendt was sympathetic to Heidegger's concept of "historicity," which, by acknowledging that thinking itself is historical, finally overcame the sovereign pretension of philosophy to survey the sphere of human history and activities. But she nonetheless thought that Heidegger's thought remained captivated by an ancient anti-political philosophical prejudice insofar as it failed or forgot to address "man as an acting being" (Arendt 1994, 432). When, however, Arendt attempts to re-situate politics as a "futile," that is, limited and transient, activity among mortals she fails adequately to take into account what she identifies as the process character, which constitutes the "fall out" of all action and in particular of what she calls "acting into nature." Arendt's attempt to wrestle politics back from the modern historical consciousness with which she felt it had fatefully been confounded produces a strangely ahistorical conception of politics. Furthermore, it comes at the expense of a clearer articulation of the historicity or rather the natural-historicity of political action insofar as it is not simply coextensive with the finitude of the human condition.

It is not by chance that Arendt's most sustained reflection on acting into nature beyond *The Human Condition* is in her essay on "The Modern Concept of History" (1958), which she republished under the title "History and Nature" as the first part of "The Concept of History" in *Between Past and Future* (1961). She concludes the exercise in political thought on a sobering note of profound ambivalence about action. If, as she argues in *The Human Condition*, throughout modernity politics had been occluded, deformed, or degraded by mistaking action for making or for laboring, the great danger now was whether action itself would destroy the fragile realm of politics along with the world on which it depends:

It is beyond doubt that the capacity to act is the most dangerous of all human abilities and possibilities, and it is also beyond doubt that the self-created risks mankind faces today have never been faced before. Considerations like these are not at all meant to offer solutions or to give advice. At best, they might encourage sustained and closer reflection on the nature and the intrinsic potentialities of action, which never before has revealed its greatness and its dangers so openly. (Arendt 1968a, 63)

In the second part of “The Concept of History” entitled “History and Earthly Immortality,” Arendt suggests that what was new at the beginning of modernity was that humans found themselves in what she calls a “situation of absolute mortality” in which, she writes, “both life and world had become perishable, mortal, and futile” (ibid., 74). It seems to me that we find ourselves in this situation once again today – only now the chickens of the modern concept of history have come home to roost. Whereas, at the beginning of modernity, this moment presented the opportunity to realize radical finitude as the condition of politics, instead what Arendt calls an “escape from politics into history” was made (ibid., 83). Fleeing from the frailty and mortality of the human condition, moderns took refuge in the potential immortality of invisible historical and natural processes. And this was done with fateful consequences for the planet and its inhabitants. Today therefore it is not enough to recover politics from history as if the human condition itself has not since become entangled in the processes of natural-history. On the contrary, politics today has to be awake to the natural-historical consequence that all action and inaction has irrevocably acquired.

Despite the august invocation of humanity in its name, the Anthropocene in fact exposes in radical fashion the non-sovereign character of human action on which Arendt insisted throughout her work. We are not by any stretch of the imagination in control of what we are doing. And this lack of control cannot be reined in by returning to the confines of what remains of our common sense. Rather, as we have seen – because it by and large evades or surpasses the human senses as well as the sensitivities of our political collectivities – the Anthropocene solicits a politics at and even beyond the limits of common sense.

In all her political writings Arendt insisted on the singular significance of “common sense,” which she called, “the political sense par excellence” (Arendt 1994, 318), and emphasized the political dangers – the danger to politics itself – of its loss. In *The Human Condition*, she associated this threat to common sense above all with the rise of modern epistemology and especially the modern sciences, which discredited the validity of the human senses and demeaned the earthbound situation of human existence. “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man” (1963), included as the final essay to the second edition of *Between Past and Future* (1968), takes up this critique of modern science as a kind of “earth alienation” (Arendt 1958, 264). As the space race only more dramatically showed, science is premised on the fantasy – albeit an extremely consequential one – of an “Archimedean perspective” that transcends the finitude of corporal existence and earthly dwelling and so the confines of common sense altogether. Arendt concludes, however, with a reflection on the possibility – a sadly improbable one, she admits – of scientists finally returning to earth and to their humanity in the elaboration of a new scientific paradigm that would be “at once more geocentric and anthropomorphic” (Arendt 1968a,



278-9). This would be understood not “in the old sense of the earth being the center of the universe and of man being the highest being there is” (ibid., 279). Rather, it would be “geocentric in the sense that the earth, and not the universe, is the center and the home of mortal men, and it would be anthropomorphic in the sense that man would count his own factual mortality among the elementary conditions under which his scientific efforts are possible at all” (ibid.). The Anthropocene, for certain scientists and for certain sciences, seems to have brought about just such a turn in orientation. Indeed, faced with the Anthropocene, it is as if the unearthly pretensions of modern science have come home to roost.

What Amitav Ghosh soberly refers to as “the great derangement” appears, today at least, to lie less on the side of science than on that of common sense. In other words: it is not that we do not know, but that we do not understand. To the problem how “to understand something which has ruined our categories of thought and our standards of judgment,” Arendt devoted an early historiographical essay, “Politics and Understanding” (Arendt 1994, 321).<sup>8</sup> She is referring to the importance and the difficulty of studying totalitarianism. While the Anthropocene may not expose the depths of inhumanity or the modalities of evil of which humans are capable in the way that systems of totalitarianism did, it certainly presents a similarly abyssal theoretical challenge to received categories and forms of judgment as well as to our common sense.

In “Politics and Understanding,” Arendt turns to a curious “gift” that extends our understanding beyond the sphere prescribed by the collective human sensorium, a capacity which structurally belongs to our faculty of originating action – the imagination. Imagination is not concerned with unreality but with the residue of or resistance to reality in human apprehension: “In distinction from fantasy, which dreams something, imagination is concerned with the particular darkness of the human heart and the peculiar density which surrounds everything that is real” (ibid., 322). Imagination concerns what evades or is withheld from the delimited standpoint of common sense understanding, for which it is therefore also the enabling – and potentially enlarging – condition. It makes room for understanding:

Imagination alone enables us to see things in their proper perspective, to be strong enough to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to be generous enough to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair. This distancing of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding, for whose purposes direct experience establishes too close a contact and mere knowledge erects artificial barriers. (ibid., 323)

It is not by chance that Arendt, elaborating Kant’s definition of imagination as the ability to “make present what is absent” (see Arendt 1982, 79-80), lays out the imagination here in figures of space. Can imagination, however, also represent what has never been present – without becoming mere fantasy? Might it articulate temporal dimensions for

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<sup>8</sup> On the centrality of “understanding” for Arendt’s historical thinking, see Althaus 2000, esp. 169-248; on the problem Arendt acknowledges in this essay and elsewhere of the “reconciliation” inherent in historical understanding, see Vowinckel 2001, esp. 118-121.

the understanding of natural-historical time?<sup>9</sup> For the ability to close apparently insuperable distances, to envisage inaccessible perspectives, and also to attain a certain distance and perspective on all that appears most pressing and near at hand, and, finally, to establish contact between what we know and what we are able to sense – this ability seems indeed necessary for exercises in political understanding in the Anthropocene.

The “recent sudden awakening to the threats to our environment” in which Arendt saw a “ray of hope” in 1975 has proved in fact to be a slow, sluggish, disconcerting process, still struggling to gain consciousness. This has much to do with a collective failure of imagination in Arendt’s particular use of the term – a failure to imagine and a failure to acknowledge the validity of imagination for constituting a more sensible politics. For the moment, careful attention to the peculiar darkness that surrounds the thought of what we are doing to the life and times of “strange and foreign people” in “faraway lands,” distant from us in time, remains, perhaps unforgivably, beyond the pale of common sense.

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<sup>9</sup> The reflection on imagination in “Politics and Understanding” can be connected, on the one hand, to Arendt’s late lectures on Kant in preparation for her uncompleted work on “judging” (Arendt 1982) and, on the other, to her attention throughout her life and writings to literature and poetry. Indeed, these “aesthetic” preoccupations intersect. As Susannah Gottlieb writes in the introduction to a collection of Arendt’s *Reflections on Literature and Culture*: “just as political judgment creates public space,” so “aesthetic judgment, which suspends direct involvement in all *pragmata*, grants access to political *time*” (Gottlieb 2007, xiii).

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