

## Conceptions of ‘the political’ - a note on contrasting motifs in Hannah Arendt’s treatment of totalitarianism

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At every meal that we eat together, freedom is invited to  
sit down. The chair remains vacant, but the place is set

René Char<sup>2</sup>

For partisans of a contemporary wave of interest in the rediscovery of ‘the political’, the thought of Hannah Arendt offers a seemingly ineluctable intellectual resource. Inasmuch as the problem of totalitarianism is at the core of Arendt’s thought, her sympathy towards this attempt to enlist her in the service of this cause must be imagined to bear heavily upon the place of ‘the political’ in her treatment of totalitarianism itself. This note on Arendt’s thinking on the political thereby proceeds from the claim that there are, at heart, two divergent conceptions of totalitarianism in the cumulative literature on the subject.

The first of these, I want to argue, is presently the dominant conception of totalitarianism. It is the dominant conception in social science, among historians and (to a lesser extent) among political theorists. Moreover, it has a special kind of import, in the light of at least two things. At one level, it is informed by the attempt to fashion plausible accounts of twentieth-century political experience as a coherent whole; these are accounts in which, in turn, the experiences of communism and fascism are necessarily, on this view, to be accommodated. At another level, this conception is equally informed by what might be termed post-Marxism, insofar as this term denotes a kind of shorthand for a loss of confidence in ‘transformative politics’. Thus, in short, the suggestion is that the dominant conception of totalitarianism is one which is framed by (and in many ways constructed from) the standpoint of the present; and, in particular, from the standpoint of the self-understanding of liberal democracy. The common theme that recurs in many of these kinds of account is that totalitarianism has something to do with the promise of salvation in-the-present, totalitarianism thereby deriving – paradoxically – from religious sources, while being at the same time concerned with an ultra-modernist attempt to build Utopia. I hope shortly to give some evidence in support of this observation, before giving some reasons as to its inadequacy as an account.

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2 Cited in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1968), p. 4

The second conception of totalitarianism that I have in mind is the account offered by Hannah Arendt herself. This is where, I will argue, 'the political' comes in. In contrast with the present (and dominant) conception, Arendt's perspective is neither 'post-Marxist', nor is it a retrospective on the twentieth century. Rather, Arendt's perspective, rooted in the mid-twentieth century, is one conditioned by an urgently felt need to 'come to terms' with the fact of the Nazi genocide (at least insofar as 'theory' might allow for this).

But rather than to merely contrast two types of context here, the question I want to ask is: what exactly is – at bottom – Arendt's account of totalitarianism? By this I mean that even the most regarded of commentators on Arendt's thought have confessed to finding this a puzzle.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the task is made even the more difficult in the sense that Arendt's writings – not only on totalitarianism, but on political life more generally – make repeated reference to the problem of explanation.<sup>4</sup> In other words, if Arendt's intent never was – in the rigorous sense often demanded of historians – to causally explain totalitarianism, then what purposes can her account serve? What I want to suggest here is that one of these things might well be to say something substantive about the political. The possibility that it does, in short, is the consequence of the main claim that I want to make: namely, that in contrast with the dominant conception, Arendt's conception of totalitarianism is the outcome of looking at it from the specific standpoint of the political.

Given this, the structure of this article falls into four parts. In the first part I suggest that making the claim that Arendt's conception is the outcome of looking at it from the standpoint of the political involves accentuating a distinctive set of ideas within her thought that are, to some degree, in danger of being overshadowed. In the second part, I shift the attention to the 'dominant' conception of totalitarianism, to the extent that the argument is concerned with this, centrally doing so by summarising a recent account of this kind that can be taken as especially characteristic. In the third part, I return again to Arendt, and suggest that using her thought as a foil to the dominant view helps, for one thing, to get her meaning clear, the substance of which I try to clarify in the fourth and final section of the paper.

## I.

To begin, in order to flesh out what is meant by Arendt's conception of totalitarianism here requires 'reading into' her thought an understanding that does not rely solely on the obvious text (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*) nor, for that matter, upon this text in conjunction with perhaps the next-most-obvious text, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Instead, it involves thinking about Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism in close connection also

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3 E.g. Margaret Canovan, 'Beyond Understanding? Arendt's Account of Totalitarianism', *Hannah Arendt Newsletter* 1 (April 1999), 25-30. This state of affairs is not helped by the fact that Arendt never, strictly-speaking, defines the term 'totalitarianism'. See Richard Bernstein, 'The Origins of Totalitarianism: Not History, but Politics', *Social Research* 69/2 (Summer 2002), p. 383.

4 Characteristically, Arendt writes that '[w]hoever in the historical sciences honestly believes in causality actually denies the subject matter of his own science... Belief in causality... is the historian's way of denying human freedom which, in terms of the political and historical sciences, is the human capacity for making a new beginning'. Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)' in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1994), pp. 319, 325 note 13.

with the work of political theory for which she is most famous, *The Human Condition*.<sup>5</sup> The upshot of this, as I intend to set matters out, is that there exist at least two dominant motifs within Arendt's treatment of totalitarianism. One of these motifs is the more familiar – especially as it is emphasised by commentators who, with a primary interest in totalitarianism rather than in Arendt's thought in itself, tend to approach things. This motif tends to find expression roughly as follows: that, for Arendt, totalitarianism is primarily to be characterised in terms of the attempt to manufacture political reality so as to make it consistent with laws of historical necessity.<sup>6</sup>

A second motif, however, applies to her thought more generally. It is best expressed by Arendt herself when she talks about the 'power' that a (proper) public realm has to 'relat[e] and separat[e] men at the same time'. It equally finds expression when she evokes the loss of this power, and the disappearance of precisely such spaces, in the late modern world.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, when living together is (properly) sustained by the permanence of a public realm, Arendt compares it to a situation whereby men are at-once related and separated by virtue of sitting around all the sides of a table. For Arendt, the collapse of the availability of such spaces – spaces arranged in a way comparable to human interaction around a table – is (empirically) evidenced in the rise of mass society and (conceptually) mirrored in the hostility shown by modern political thought toward the 'political'. Furthermore, this loss and collapse is heavily indicted in Arendt's interpretation of totalitarianism where, in the most extreme terms conceivable, men are reduced both to isolation and, by the same token, pressed together into an image of 'Man' in the singular.<sup>8</sup> This image, somewhat overlooked in the secondary literature, Arendt both invokes in citing René Char's aphorism stated at the outset of this paper, in the preface to *Between Past and Future*, and alludes to in passing in *The Human Condition*.

Now, it is not the argument I want to outline here that Arendt's position on totalitarianism should cease to be formulated in terms of the first motif (the motif of historical necessity) and the second put in its place (the table motif). If anything, only together is anything of Arendt's complex thought on this to be grasped. Yet, the point is

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5 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1973); *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (New York: Viking Press, 1965); *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). The continuity of Arendt's thought has long been contested, the prevalent view traditionally being that Arendt's later studies little connect with the earlier analysis of totalitarianism. More recent surveys of her thought have done much to undermine this reading. Most notably, Margaret Canovan has, through attention to her unpublished writings, persuasively recast the 'proper context' of her corpus as a whole to be the problem of totalitarianism. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 7. See also Richard Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), p. 32; Ben Halpern, 'The Context of Hannah Arendt's Concept of Totalitarianism' in Yehoshua Arieli and Nathan Rotenstreich, eds. *Totalitarian Democracy and After* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p. 387; Agnes Heller, 'An Imaginary Preface to the 1984 Edition of Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*' in Ferenc Feher and Agnes Heller, *Eastern Left, Western Left: Totalitarianism, Freedom and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), p. 244; Steven Aschheim, 'Nazism, Culture and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: Hannah Arendt and the Discourse of Evil', *New German Critique* 70 (Winter 1997), p. 121.

6 See, for instance, Domenico Losurdo, 'Towards a Critique of the Category of Totalitarianism', *Historical Materialism* 12/2 (2004), pp. 25-55. Losurdo renders it slightly differently to my formulation, capturing Arendt's meaning as 'the sacrifice of morals on the alter of the philosophy of history'. On this understanding, the laws of historical necessity in question throw the traditional constraints of morality out the window.

7 *The Human Condition*, pp. 52, 55.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

that the first motif to some extent corresponds to the dominant conception currently in circulation. Consequently, what this excludes – and which Arendt's second motif does not – is the standpoint of the political.

There is, in fact, a further argument involved here, which constitutes something of a paradox. This is that Arendt, as a political theorist notionally inquiring into the 'origins' of totalitarianism, is not principally driven by a concern to delineate an intellectual history behind totalitarianism, i.e. to delineate a progression or logic of ideas that can be deduced, step-by-step, from some specified point in the past through to Hitler and Stalin. It is precisely this approach, as I aim to indicate shortly, that undergirds the dominant conception in the present. Arendt's emphasis on the political, conversely, charts a course far closer to the surface of actual events and processes. This she does by means of formulating a conceptual framework intended to disclose the 'hidden' meaning of the political (as she might understand this) and, in turn, by means of 'measuring' this against, firstly, the rise of and, secondly, the reality of totalitarian regimes.

## II.

To return now to substantiate more the dominant conception of totalitarianism presently under scrutiny, there is some merit in briefly touching upon one recent account that can be taken as representative of this general trend. This is the account offered by the Bulgarian-born and Paris-based thinker Tzvetan Todorov, that forms a part of a larger work entitled *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century*.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, *Hope and Memory* is presented as a kind of 'balance sheet' for the twentieth century; it is one that probably amounts to a fairly standard 'liberal' reading of the century, both in which totalitarianism becomes its central political innovation, and in which totalitarianism gives rise also, chronologically, to the conflict between itself and democracy that lasts through to the end of the Cold War.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Todorov's account is assembled from the perspective of post-Marxism. To some extent, the equation of communism with Nazism itself hints in this direction: in particular, Todorov's point of reference is the Soviet period as a whole, not just Stalinism (as it is in Arendt).

The key point for the argument here is that, in light of these two features of the account, Todorov's procedure is to build an 'ideal type' of totalitarianism from the starting point of the self-understanding of liberal democracy. This ideal type – in Todorov's terms – 'extrapolat[es]', and gives sense to, the 'underlying trend' and 'dynamic' of the type of regime in question. In other words, following the way in which Max Weber formulated ideal-types – as a means (by way of a description) of giving logical coherence to a given phenomena, on the basis of arranging aspects evident in discrete instances of this phenomena in reality – Todorov conceives the ideal-type method as instructive in 'delineat[ing] the essential features of communism and Nazism'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Hope and Memory: Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-4

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77. Consequently, following the precedent set by several other accounts, Todorov is able to both concede residual differences between the two, and concede the probability that neither expresses each of these features at all times. Max Weber's definition of the ideal type is that it is formed by the one-sided

Accordingly, before summarising the conception that Todorov arrives at on this basis, it is worth taking a moment to push a bit further what it might mean to proceed as such. Crucially, taking as a point of departure, in the construction of this ideal type, the self-understanding of (contemporary) liberal democracies is evidently not the same as proceeding from the self-interpretation of totalitarian movements and regimes.<sup>12</sup> Nor is it to start from communism's perception of Nazism, or vice versa.<sup>13</sup> With this in mind, it is at least plausible that to begin to understand totalitarianism from the standpoint of liberal democracy carries with it in-built conceptions no less than does, say, looking at Nazism from the standpoint of communism.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it is seen from the vantage point of liberal democracy that Nazism and communism begin to look like 'species' of a singular 'genus' and, moreover, in a particular way. Significantly, this vantage point firstly privileges certain kinds of institutional arrangements, and secondly rejects – out of hand – certain views of the world.

In the first sense, this vantage point privileges, to be exact, the institutional safeguarding of civil rights and, above all, the separation of the public and private spheres. As such, given that – in practice – communism and Nazism transgress these limits, they start to look equivalent. In particular, in the line that is almost universally rehearsed, both violate the boundaries between public and private by 'politicising' all areas of life, including those that – from this standpoint – are to be relegated to the private sphere and regarded as areas of individual freedom of choice.<sup>15</sup>

In the other sense, the worldviews that are rejected – again, from the standpoint of liberal democracy – are historical and ideological conceptions. On this view, both communism and Nazism are driven by ideological interpretations of history that seek either to 'speed up' historical time or, on some readings of Nazism, to 'set the clock back' – acting out of interpretations of history either revolving around the struggle between classes, or revolving around 'biological' fictions of race. The key point, however, is that according to the logic of either accelerating time, or stemming its flow, individuals are utilised – and, in turn, coerced – as instruments in the realisation of a grand, utopian

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*accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the *synthesis* of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and *occasionally absent* concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasised viewpoints into a unified analytical construct... In its conceptual purity, this mental construct... cannot be found empirically *anywhere in reality*. See Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and eds. Edward Shils and Henry Finch (New York: Free Press, 1903-1917/ 1949), p.90; italics added.

12 The self-interpretation of communism, for instance, might be summarised as a project, founded on Marxist-Leninist principles, concerned with the practical task of 'building socialism' in particular circumstances. Methodologically, it should be noted that Arendt takes 'self-interpretations and self-understandings' seriously, as a means of avoiding the reduction of events to surface effects of underlying trends. See, for example, Arendt, 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism', in *Essays in Understanding*, p. 338. However, this is not my primary point.

13 In this sense, for instance, communism would understand Nazism to be a counter-revolutionary, desperate attempt by capitalism to preserve power and fend off 'genuine' working-class revolution, while Nazism would perceive communism to be the acting out of a plot devised by 'Jewish internationalism'.

14 Centrally, they become linked by the kind of similarities for which the standard 'Cold War' interpretations of totalitarianism are well-known for highlighting. The following draws heavily upon Dan Diner, 'Remembrance and Knowledge: Nationalism and Stalinism in Comparative Discourse' in Helmut Dubiel and Gabriel Motzkin, eds. *The Lesser Evil: Moral Approaches to Genocide Practices* (London: Routledge, 2004).

15 For this summary of the 'liberal' reading of totalitarianism see Michael Halberstam, *Totalitarianism and the Modern Concept of Politics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press), p. 6.

project. And this is the theme, in particular, that becomes enunciated in the dominant conception.

The immediate point to be noted, then, is that Todorov's account is indicative of this approach, starting out from an ideal type of democracy in order to construct an ideal type of totalitarianism. The main steps of his reasoning can be reconstructed as follows.<sup>16</sup> Stage one. Todorov equates what he calls 'modernity in the political sphere' with a 'combination of [...] two principles',<sup>17</sup> whereby democracy ultimately rests upon the combination of the 'autonomy of the collectivity' with the 'autonomy of the individual'. On this logic, individual autonomy historically becomes the counterweight to popular sovereignty, protecting individuals not only from absolute rulers but from government itself. This combination of principles accordingly gives rise to pluralism and a strict division of individual life between a free private sphere and a regulated public sphere.

Stage two. Historically, the bridge from here to the 'context in which the totalitarian project' takes shape is the conservative critique of democracy expressed in the early nineteenth-century. This critique is animated by a nostalgia for the social cohesion undermined by the expansion of the private sphere. In the late nineteenth-century, the totalitarian project 'integrates' this (conservative) critique, though projects 'the dream of a better society' not into the past but, instead, onto the future. At this point, for Todorov, the actual 'ideal type' of totalitarianism thereby emerges in which individual autonomy is rejected and pluralism replaced by monism.<sup>18</sup> In positing this single ideal, Todorov says, totalitarianism holds out the promise of salvation – 'the hope of plenitude, harmony and happiness' – in contrast, and in response, to the pursuit of individual happiness of the sort guaranteed by democracy.<sup>19</sup>

Stage three. The final move that Todorov makes is to clarify that – as a 'project' – totalitarianism envisages a particular kind of monism. This plan, as it effectively is, is historically-specific, and can only take shape in the nineteenth century. At this point two aspects 'fuse' into a specifically modern synthesis of science and religion. On one side of the totalitarian project, the promise of salvation has behind it a specific intellectual history. It is the outcome of utopianism, which is itself the (secular) outcome of millenarianism.<sup>20</sup> On the other side of the project, the utopianism is inspired by a doctrine of more recent date which is – on the surface – in opposition to religion; namely, what Todorov calls 'scientism'. Scientism, in the way that Todorov presents it, however, is synonymous with an excessive faith: faith in reason, and the faith that science can make reality, as a whole, transparent to the human mind – thereby facilitating the construction of a new world and a new man, and capable of replacing conflicting opinions with a single truth. It is none other than a 'cult of science', the origins of which lie partly in the

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<sup>16</sup> *Hope and Memory*, pp. 1-47.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> On the logic of the ideal type method, to reiterate, the 'ideal' of the imagined community behind this – Todorov calls this an 'organically-unified' community – quite conceivably might never be established in reality, though there is – Todorov thinks – a 'list' of 'characteristics' of this regime that are to be expected: a single-party system, state control of other public associations, and so on. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 19. Millenarianism is defined here as a form of religious heresy acting out violence in the anticipation of happiness in the here-and-now.

Enlightenment.<sup>21</sup> In sum, the final synthesis is the product of several elements. It is lent most succinct expression by Todorov as 'the idea of creating a new society of new men and of solving all problems once and for all through an inevitable revolution'.<sup>22</sup>

### III.

What I want to do at this point is to draw out some particular features of the dominant conception, as it is indicated above by Todorov. For present purposes two stand out. First, by locating the intellectual sources of totalitarianism in the merging of various strands of European thought, what is in fact veered close to is a deductivist approach, one whereby (in retrospect) totalitarianism verges on becoming the necessary and inevitable consequence of preceding ideas. It is certainly conveyed as a logical consequence, and the approach is set up in such a way that the clear implication is that the conclusion (i.e. totalitarianism) must follow from its premises. Indeed, Todorov refers on several occasions to totalitarianism's 'intellectual premises', and at the very least the rationale is one of moving backward from the twentieth century, irrespective of consideration of the specific historical circumstances that might have given rise to totalitarianism.<sup>23</sup> Second, the ideal-type approach both contrasts it with (liberal) democracy and, furthermore, gives 'logical coherence' to something notoriously difficult to comprehend.<sup>24</sup> But where this leads next – in terms of opposing the dominant conception to Arendt's account – is to concerns that Arendt registers toward both these kinds of approach (the deductivist approach and the ideal type approach). This, in turn, takes us back to the point raised initially, regarding the puzzle whereby Arendt seems to problematise the very notion of 'explaining' totalitarianism.

In this respect, Arendt's concern in the broadest sense is that 'ordinary' social science will necessarily serve to obscure rather than illuminate totalitarianism, especially in terms of its novelty and originality.<sup>25</sup> This concern derives, most of all, from her insistence that totalitarianism throws into doubt what she takes to be a basic assumption of conventional social science; specifically, the assumption that human behaviour derives fundamentally from self-interested, instrumental and 'utilitarian' considerations.<sup>26</sup> More accurately, in

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21 In the course of the nineteenth century, scientism splits off into two key variants: on the one hand, into a cult of 'historical science' (as represented by Marx); and, on the other, into a cult of 'biological science' (as represented by racist thinking in nineteenth-century European thought). The first, the insinuation is, paves the way toward left-totalitarianism, while the second is supposed to anticipate Nazism.

22 *The Human Condition*, p. 27.

23 Arendt herself, in this sense, emphasises the unmaking of organisational structures.

24 What is typical of the dominant conception is the invocation (in connection with one another) of 'utopia', 'science' and 'religion' as shorthand for the paradox of totalitarianism's ultra-modernism and its resistance to modernity.

25 This concern is articulated early on in her thought. See Arendt, 'Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps', 'Understanding and Politics' and 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism' in *Essays in Understanding*.

26 Peter Baehr, 'Of Politics and Social Science: "Totalitarianism" in the Dialogue of David Riesman and Hannah Arendt', *European Journal of Political Theory* 3/2 (April 2004), p. 193. The peculiar figures of speech that Arendt makes use of repeatedly indicate the impossibility of understanding totalitarianism on the basis of this assumption: 'ideological nonsense', 'fabricated senselessness', 'human-made hell', 'atmosphere of unreality', 'insane consistency', and so forth. These figures of speech appear at various points in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. See Baehr, *ibid.*, p. 194.

this context, Arendt has misgivings about at least three aspects of conventional social science: first, regarding 'functionalism' as an approach in social science; second, regarding the deployment of analogies; and third, regarding ideal types themselves. Thinking about these concerns point-by-point is potentially useful here insofar as it helps to clarify what Arendt herself is actually engaged in when trying to work through the 'problem' of totalitarianism.

First, Arendt has particular unease about a tendency she calls 'functionalism'. Notably, she registers an objection toward labelling communism a religion, for fear that this boil down merely to the contention that communism – as a belief system – might, in some way, perform the same function as do religious denominations in 'ordinary' societies.<sup>27</sup> The dominant conception, as we have seen in the case of Todorov, makes much of the 'breeding ground' that totalitarianism supposedly owes to religiously-derived views of the world; in Todorov's case, 'scientism' becomes a kind of 'substitute' (or replacement) religion. Yet in this – on the basis of her objection here – Arendt would be likely to see only the reduction of the specific to something more general. (In fact, she warns that it is potentially to see religion everywhere; and to the extent that it neglects the substance of the particular phenomena at hand, she warns that it potentially closes off the question of what exactly a religion is if there can be such a thing as a religion-without-God.)

Second, and related, Arendt is particularly sceptical towards loose analogies. Importantly, in this regard, she intimates that efforts to construct backward-looking pathologies and genealogical trees of European thought do no more than yield 'farfetched historical parallels'. In this sense, she warns against 'let[ting] our attention wander into the [endless] connections and similarities which certain tenets of totalitarian doctrine necessarily show with familiar theories of occidental thought'. On her view, 'such similarities [are] inescapable', but fall short of being adequate to the task at hand.<sup>28</sup> Thus implication would thus seem that, whatever the insinuation of its title, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is not a post-Enlightenment history of European ideas.<sup>29</sup>

Yet this is not the complete picture and the point requires closer attention. Notably, the gist of the first motif in Arendt's treatment of totalitarianism (to recall, the historical necessity motif) does share, at least superficially, some common ground with the dominant conception. Regarding the background to totalitarianism, she makes it clear that Hitler and Stalin contributed nothing new to the content of either racist or Marxist ideology. Thus, to this extent, she seems in agreement with Todorov's notion of a pre-existing totalitarian synthesis.<sup>30</sup> The key point at stake here concerns Arendt's emphasis

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<sup>27</sup> Arendt, 'Religion and Politics' in *Essays in Understanding*, p. 372. Arendt's critique here is actually more complex. She draws a distinction between a 'historical' approach and a 'social science' approach.

Functionalism features more largely in the latter.

<sup>28</sup> Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding)' in EU, p. 309. Elsewhere Arendt is clear that nineteenth-century thought 'may have foreshadowed th[e] event [of totalitarianism]', and may well 'help to illustrate it', but in no sense did it 'cause it'. Arendt, 'Tradition and the Modern Age', *Between Past and Future*, p. 26; italics added.

<sup>29</sup> See Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, p. 23; Samantha Power, 'The Lesson of Hannah Arendt', *New York Review of Books* April 29, 2004, p. 34.

<sup>30</sup> See Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror: Essays on the Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 92. Further, what she also makes clear is that what Hitler and Stalin *did do* was to perfect the logicity of these doctrines (broadly similar to Todorov's notion of 'scientism' in totalitarian practice). See the discussion of Arendt and ideal types below.



on rigid and inflexible Laws of Nature and Laws of History (in the cases of Nazism and communism respectively). Ultimately, however, even here Arendt's emphasis is as much on the internal dynamics of totalitarian regimes as it is on their (longer-term) origins. Consequently, as Margaret Canovan summarises Arendt here, the job of the totalitarian regime is simply to speed up the execution of death sentences pronounced by the law of nature or of history.<sup>31</sup>

Accordingly, what is meant by Arendt's 'historical necessity' theme is her observation that totalitarian regimes pose as interpreters of (supposedly) scientific historical forces which are, in principle, beyond human control. What Hitler and Stalin did, she says, was to act out these purportedly inexorable laws by identifying the relevant collectivities in each case (races and classes respectively), and then by applying these laws directly to the 'species', to mankind; typically, by applying these laws through terror (through camps and purges), this being the means of making these abstract laws a concrete reality, and of obliterating specific sections of the

As such, Arendt's treatment of totalitarianism appears at far remove from the deductivist approach. To move on, however, the third aspect of Arendt's misgivings toward the tools of conventional social science – which involves her resistance toward subjecting the new phenomena of totalitarianism to ideal-type analysis – seems to involve a good deal more ambiguity.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the suggestion that I want to make is that this is, to some degree, a creative ambiguity, one which leaves open the space to read into Arendt a conception of totalitarianism constructed from the specific standpoint of the political.

Arendt's position here is actually unclear. On occasions, for instance, her objection seems to be toward applying Weber's own existing ideal types to totalitarianism – for example, Weber's 'charismatic-leader' type.<sup>33</sup> On other occasions, Arendt's objection seems to be toward constructing totalitarianism as an ideal type in itself. Some commentators on Arendt see in this a purely methodological objection.<sup>34</sup> Others indicate more a moral objection: generally, that 'abstracting' totalitarianism in such a way serves somehow as a device to normalise it, to make it 'serviceable' in other contexts and, in turn, to thereby trivialise its uniqueness.<sup>35</sup>

Insofar as the moral objection sticks, however, it might equally be the case that formulating totalitarianism as an ideal type serves precisely to establish historical uniqueness, by virtue of lending greater clarity to the issues at stake. Yet more important is another point. Namely, insofar as Arendt's concern with ideal types is bound up with

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31 Canovan, 'Beyond Understanding?', p. 27.

32 See Lotte Kohler, ed. *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936-1968* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1996), pp. 61-2, 64, 69, 71-3; *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 361-2, note 57; Baehr, 'Identifying the Unprecedented: Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism and the Critique of Sociology', *American Sociological Review* 67/6 (2002), pp. 804-831

33 See Canovan, 'Hannah Arendt on Totalitarianism and Dictatorship' in Baehr (ed.), *Dictatorship in History and Theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism and Totalitarianism*. With regard to Weber's 'charismatic-leader' type Arendt sees in neither Hitler nor Stalin any creative genius capable of inspiring, and dominating, the masses.

34 As Margaret Canovan understands Arendt's theoretical treatment of totalitarianism, the use of 'the general term "totalitarianism"... does not indicate an abstract Weberian ideal-type used simply to aid research into particular cases', but rather the attempt to offer 'an account of a *logic of a situation* in which modern human beings [...] are liable to find themselves'. Canovan, 'Arendt's theory of totalitarianism: a reassessment' in Dana Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 38.

35 Baehr, 'Identifying the Unprecedented'.

her emphasis on totalitarianism's break with 'normal' utilitarian human motives – a break that, in itself, for her, renders previous modes of thought redundant – this may represent a misunderstanding of the nature of ideal types. This can be demonstrated by example. What Arendt herself presses is the case, towards the end of the Second World War, of the Third Reich's 'irrational' (and wholly anti-utilitarian) diversion of resources away from the war effort, in order to speed up the final stages of its genocide. Yet, as Todorov might point out, this hardly detracts from totalitarianism's (perversely-) logical coherence; it is, that is to say, consistent with a destructive vision for the 'transformation of society'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, this point is congruent with Arendt's own repeated emphasis elsewhere on what she tends to refer to as totalitarianism's 'stringent logicity', or its 'supersense'.<sup>37</sup>

To begin to move towards the final part of the paper, therefore, the thought is that Arendt's own attempt to ascribe logical coherence to totalitarianism – which may (or may not) smuggle in an ideal type through the back door – involves reading her specific work on totalitarianism in connection with *The Human Condition*. This is where the importance of the political resurfaces; and it is where the importance of the 'table motif' emerges more clearly. Moreover here in fact, in reciprocal fashion, Arendt's understanding of totalitarianism might be said to inform her understanding of the political and, vice versa. And the central sense in which the interpretation that arises might be said to unsettle the 'dominant' conception of totalitarianism entails the latter's privileging of the private sphere over the public; or, better put, the comparatively restricted public realm it presupposes, and the effective de-politicisation of this realm that it enacts in its transference of all major sources of conflict to the private sphere, a move separating, as it were, *l'homme* from *le citoyen*.

#### IV.

The assumption that informs the dominant conception is that the public is subordinate to the private. Accordingly, it follows that private individuals should be free to determine their own courses of action unrestrained by public coercion, except where such conduct might interfere with the freedom of (other) private individuals. However, on the basis of the conceptual framework that Arendt ultimately advances in *The Human Condition*, this reasoning is complicit in a misunderstanding of the nature of the political. It is to misunderstand the nature of the political, she thinks, to the extent that freedom (and individual autonomy) is neither its aim, nor its objective, but its very expression.

To relate this to the dominant conception, then as we have seen, on Todorov's view, 'modernity in the political sphere' consists in individual autonomy acting as a counterweight to the autonomy of the collectivity, this being the arrangement that constitutes the 'ideal type' of democracy. For Arendt, by contrast, and on the basis of *The Human Condition*, the story of modernity is largely to be told in terms of what she calls

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<sup>36</sup> Todorov, *Hope and Memory*, p. 78

<sup>37</sup> E.g. Arendt, 'Understanding and Politics', p. 317; 'On the Nature of Totalitarianism', p. 355. This is the way in which Arendt imagines a 'fictitious world' to be maintained. See Jacques Taminiaux, 'The Philosophical Stakes in Arendt's Genealogy of Totalitarianism', *Social Research* 69/2 (Summer 2002), p. 438.

the 'rise of the social'. On her view, the modern world tends to rest on a negation – not only of individual autonomy, but of the very human condition as it has been given to men. This human condition is, for Arendt, one of 'plurality' insofar, as she says, 'men, [and] not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world'. The rise of the social, however, denotes the reduction of men to precisely that status in which they are (for all intents and purposes) undifferentiated; specifically, to the status of labourers caught up alike in repetitive processes of consumption and of sustaining life itself. It is a process that, for Arendt, entails the 'rise of the "household" or [the rise] of economic activities to the public realm'. Consequently, in the political sense, the characteristic form of modernity becomes not democracy, but rather bureaucracy: what she identifies as the rule of nobody, the management of 'society' as if it were nothing more than a nationwide extension of housekeeping. In this respect, what modernity has a tendency to devalue are those public spaces – capable of relating and separating men at the same time – that might allow for the disclosure of plural perspectives on the world and its affairs and, in her terms, the individual performance of speech and deeds in the sight of a broad public.<sup>38</sup>

In this way, the loss of freedom that Arendt traces to the point of its utter eclipse in totalitarianism is already evident in the modern world. Freedom, as the expression of the political, can only 'appear' (in Arendt's terminology) on condition of there being available public spaces separating-and-relating individuals on the analogy of a table. Perhaps, to this extent, Arendt sails close (by virtue of approaching totalitarianism from the standpoint of the political) to portraying modernity itself as a kind of 'soft' totalitarianism.<sup>39</sup> Yet what becomes key, for her, is that the novelty (and 'unprecedentedness') of totalitarianism itself resides in the radical acceleration of what she terms the 'superfluosity' of human beings implicit in modern, mass society. And essential here to Arendt's conception of totalitarianism is an extension of the public/private distinction, whereby a fictitious and unreal (private) world is contrasted with a real and normal (public) world. In the absence of a world-shared-in-common, she thinks, individuals are thrown back onto themselves, and into introspection – thereby doubtful of their own experiences of the world and deprived of the presence of others to confirm its reality.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, such individuals are (ultimately) swept into the ranks of totalitarian movements which – though at best speaking a language of half-truths – offer to restore certainty and meaning to these individuals. In turn, totalitarianism attempts to actively construct this fictitious world on this basis and, through terror, it attempts to maintain it.

At this point, specifically in Arendt's account of totalitarian terror, the conceptual scheme later set out fully in *The Human Condition* is anticipated most clearly. The aim of this terror, for Arendt, is to eliminate those very conditions upon which her understanding of the political depends. First, it seeks to eliminate plurality. It seeks to do so by, as she expresses it metaphorically, holding men 'so tightly together that [it is] as though their plurality [disappears] into one [single] Man of gigantic dimensions'. Second,

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<sup>38</sup> *The Human Condition*, pp. 7, 38-50.

<sup>39</sup> See Dana Villa, *Politics, Philosophy, Terror*, p. 187

<sup>40</sup> As a result, Arendt describes totalitarianism as the 'political expression' of 'loneliness'. See *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 460-1.

it seeks to eliminate the very possibility of the kind of spaces she imagines 'by pressing men against each other' and destroying any space 'between them'.<sup>41</sup>

Consequently, in this respect Arendt persistently locates the significance of totalitarianism – no less than does Todorov – in the mysterious, if not metaphysical, aim behind a totalitarian 'project': namely, in her case, this aim being the reduction of (unique and individual) human beings to a state of utter superfluousness. Where the aim of this project, in turn, becomes most manifest is, as she persistently insinuates, in the concentration camps, which she repeatedly takes to epitomise the totalitarian 'experiment' in 'domination'. As such, in the last analysis, insofar as the ideal type method entails accentuating particular viewpoints with respect to where these viewpoints might generate logical coherence to the phenomena under investigation, what Arendt would seem to be doing herself is accentuating the particular viewpoint on the particular institution of the camps. It is from this viewpoint that Arendt gives emphasis to a peculiar logic involving, in turn, the obliteration of man as a bearer of rights; the obliteration of man as the owner of a conscience; and the obliteration of man as bearer of an individual personality.<sup>42</sup> In other words, we see the obliteration of all she presupposes in a proper manifestation of the political. Therefore, seen in this light, the concept of the public realm that Arendt gives full expression to in *The Human Condition* begins very much to look like it is advanced with the intention of countering the totalitarian experiment as enacted in the concentration camps.<sup>43</sup>

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41 Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 465, 466.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 437-459.

43 This reading of Arendt's project entailed in *The Human Condition* arises from Dagmar Barnouw's suggestion that, aside from an attempt to address the implications technocracy and bureaucracy in late modernity, this work was an effort to articulate 'a culturally secured quality of life which would defeat the senselessness of past mass destruction of human life'. Thus, drawing on this insight, Mary Dietz proposes that this work should rightly be taken under the rubric of 'political theory as response to trauma'. On Dietz's view, Arendt consciously fashions a 'healing image' in evoking the conception of the public realm as 'the space of appearance'. The obstacle to this reading resides in the truism that nowhere in the text does Arendt make detailed or specific reference to the circumstances of totalitarianism and/ or Nazism. Indeed, when in the Prologue she does signal that her concerns are framed by a response to contemporary events – that she envisages 'a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears' – she cites two other such events. First, she points to the launch of the first space satellite in 1957. Second, she calls attention to the advent of 'automation', the portent of a 'society of labourers without labour'. Nonetheless, Dietz's move, drawing on insights gleaned from literary theory, is to describe the Nazi genocide as a 'conspicuous exclusion'. '[A]dumbrated around the edges of [*The Human Condition*]', she remarks, 'is a theme that is saturatingly [*sic*] present but only as a *felt absence*'. Viewed in this way, Arendt's concept of the public realm as 'the space of appearances' becomes one, for Dietz, squarely intended to counter the totalitarian *experiment* enacted in the concentration camps. Thus, rather than an elitist, heroic, expressive, or antimodern conception, Dietz writes that 'this space, where the condition of being a unique, individual, human personality is fulfilled in the ordinary glory of speaking and doing, is the absolute counter to "the disintegration of personality" that was achieved in the extermination camps, where the end result was "the reduction of human beings to the lowest possible denominator of "identical reactions"'. Finally, therefore, Arendt's conviction that the concentration camps are at the epicentre of totalitarianism would seem, on this reading, to prefigure the concerns of her later studies in a way that supports a unitary conception of her thought. See Dagmar Barnouw, *Visible Spaces: Hannah Arendt and the German-Jewish Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), p. 195; Mary Dietz, 'Arendt and the Holocaust' in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, pp. 90, 93, 94, 95, 101-102; *The Human Condition*, pp. 5, 1, 4, and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 447-457

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What, then, by way of a conclusion, has the above argument succeeded in demonstrating? Not, I would concede, to have staked out an entirely novel reading of where Arendt's understanding of the political issues from. The salience of totalitarianism in this, as opposed to an idealised reading of the Greek polis, has long been noted.<sup>44</sup> Nor might what I have had to say in any way serve to ultimately decipher the unresolved questions at the heart of Arendt's treatment of totalitarianism. This said, though, in a certain sense there might be value in the emphasis on the two conflicting motifs (the historical necessity motif and the table motif), especially as a means of challenging a dominant conception. More importantly, however, and with reference to the political, what this particular presentation of Arendt's account calls attention to is the way in which 'thinking about "the political"' may not only have a certain force to it by virtue of potentially challenging a version of contemporary (liberal) political theory that, for its critics, effectively serves so as to de-politicise politics. Rather, it may carry forth not only normative implications, but implications instead for pursuing interpretative and / or explanatory questions.<sup>45</sup> It may also, that is to say, as Arendt's approach is demonstrative of, have wider analytical value when, as in this case, used as a yardstick against which to measure and, in turn, to attempt to account for concrete (political) events.<sup>46</sup> One consequence, then, is that René Char's aphorism, even whilst pointing to the virtues of the performance of word and deed in the sight of a broad public, might also indicate a perspective from which to engage with problems more familiar to the mainstream of social science.

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44 Stephen Whitfield, *Into the Dark: Hannah Arendt and Totalitarianism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), pp. 134, 158-160; Noel O'Sullivan, 'Hannah Arendt: Hellenic Nostalgia and Industrial Society' in Anthony de Crespigny and Kenneth Minogue, eds. *Contemporary Political Philosophers* (London: Methuen, 1976), pp. 228-51.

45 On the case for reconnecting (normative) political theory with (interpretative and explanatory) political science see, for example, Paul Kelly, 'Political Theory – The State of the Art', *Politics* 26/1 (February 2006), pp. 47-53.

46 A point of clarification is called for. This is not to marginalise the significant normative implications that follow from Arendt's thought as a whole. Rather, it is to (re)state that the systematic theory – set out most clearly in *The Human Condition*, and from which these implications follow – emerges out of the analysis of totalitarianism as a distinctive landmark in European political history. Viewed as such, it would seem likely that (in roughly equal measure) this theory both informs the analysis in the first place, and is, in turn, clarified in the light of the analysis.