

## **Biopolitics and Temporality in Arendt and Foucault**

**Kathrin Braun**

---

**ABSTRACT.** The article demonstrates that Hannah Arendt's examination of modern temporality strongly intersects with Michel Foucault's diagnosis of modern biopolitics. Both observe three key features of biopolitical modernity: the political zoefication of life, a technocratic understanding of politics, and processual temporality which link the project of modernity to the project of 20th-century totalitarianism. Arendt, however, also offers an alternative, non-biopolitical understanding of politics, life, and time captured in the concept of natality. Built into the concept of natality is the 'weakly' messianic temporal structure of the interval as opposed to processual temporality. **KEY WORDS** • Arendt • biopolitics • Foucault • messianic time • modernity • natality • temporality

Although Hannah Arendt never used the term 'biopolitics', she has developed some of the most critical insights into the primacy of life in modern society and the reduction of people to mere living things in 20th-century totalitarianism. These insights, I will argue, essentially refer to a fatal modern structure of temporality, which I will term processual temporality, that runs from the beginnings of modernity through 20th-century totalitarianism up to post-war capitalist mass society. I will show that Arendt's examination of modern temporality to large degrees overlaps with Michel Foucault's diagnosis of modern biopolitics but that Arendt, unlike Foucault, also offers a starting point for developing a different, non-biopolitical conception of politics, based on a different, non-processual form of temporality: the temporality of the interval.

Recent work in philosophy and the social sciences has highlighted a number of intersections and affinities between Foucault and Arendt, although they never referred to one another (Allen, 2002; Gordon, 2002). Both reject an essentialist conception of human nature and a teleological conception of history, be it of Hegelian or Marxist provenance, and both share a commitment, although spelled out differently, to a type of inquiry that combines philosophical and historical perspectives. It would not be too far-fetched to say that not only Foucault but also Arendt reconstructed the 'history of the present', to use Foucault's term. Both investigate the ideational dimension of history without reducing it, however, to a traditional history of ideas. While in Foucault it is the body that is of particular importance to his history of the present, in Arendt it is the category of experience, as we will see later on. It has also been noted that both Arendt and Foucault move beyond a Weberian notion of power (Allen, 2002; Gordon, 2002), both stressing the relational and performative, and, as I would add, the generative character of power. However, one must not take the analogy too far because, as Richard Dana Villa (1992) remarks, when Foucault and Arendt speak about power, they speak about different things. While the Foucauldian concept of power in a specifically crypto-normative way denotes a ubiquitous, pervasive, and somewhat dark and troubling force, power in Arendt (1970) emanates from concerted political action. It is neither dark nor troubling but, as we will see, the public and visible manifestation of human action's 'weak' messianic potency, making its appearance in a specifically messianic structure of temporality: the interval.

It was Giorgio Agamben, however, who most influentially highlighted the aspect of biopolitics in Arendt and Foucault, bringing together the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics with Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism. In his *Homo Sacer*, Agamben (1998), who makes detailed reference to Arendt's analysis of how totalitarianism reduces persons to mere specimens, deplors the fact that Arendt did not explicitly draw a connection between her analysis of modern society in *The Human Condition* (1958) and her analysis of totalitarianism in *Origins* (1968). He concludes that *Origins* was altogether without a biopolitical perspective (Agamben, 1998) whereas Foucault, Agamben says, has never dealt with 20th-century totalitarianism. Both statements, however, are only partly correct. Foucault, in the last part of *The History of Sexuality* (1980) and in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1976 (Foucault, 2003), albeit briefly, *did* refer to totalitarianism, and these passages, as Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg (1998) have shown, are perfectly in line with his other works. As far as Arendt is concerned, it is correct that in *Origins* she does not refer to the terms 'life' or 'biopolitics' and does not explicitly explain the relation between *The Human Condition* and *Origins*. However, in *The Human Condition*, she intensively examines the notion of life in connection with the emergence of the social and the decline of politics in occidental history up to the 20th century. Agamben,

strangely enough, makes little or no use of these thoughts. In this essay, I will not undertake a detailed discussion of Agamben's political theory but rather continue the project of bringing Arendt and Foucault together on the issue of biopolitics. Although the term 'biopolitics' does not appear in Arendt, I will argue that in her work we can find a rich and in-depth analysis of the specific features that constitute modern biopolitics, so that we can read Arendt as a theorist of biopolitics *avant la lettre*. So far, this aspect in Arendt's work seems to have been widely overlooked. An exception is André Duarte (2005) who argues that reading *Origins* and *The Human Condition* as analyses of biopolitical violence, even though biopolitics is not an Arendtian category, enables us to find the missing link between these two works and to understand the lingering continuity between capitalist market society and totalitarian violence in our contemporary world. Duarte suggests that we live in a world in which there is a constant danger that the Arendtian *animal laborans* gets converted into the Agambian *homo sacer*. My own reading of Arendt widely corresponds to this thesis, but I will discuss in more detail the overlaps and intersections between Foucault's conception of biopolitics and Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism. These intersections, I argue, concern the analysis of certain critical features of the modern project that culminate and converge in totalitarianism: the zoefication of humans, a technocratic understanding of politics, and, not least, processual temporality. The issue of temporality, as I will show, is of particular significance in Arendt's political thought. Furthermore, I will focus on Arendt's specific contribution to a theory of biopolitics and modernity and point out the additional insights she can offer. Those consist, in my view, first in opening up an additional dimension of understanding in regard to biopolitics, one that refers to a debatable but also inspiring existentialist, if not theological, layer in her thought. Second, and linked to this dimension, with her concept of natality, she presents an alternative way of conceiving temporality, politics, and life that has the potential to take us beyond the spell of biopolitics.

Both Arendt and Foucault belong to those thinkers who draw our attention to the dark sides of the modern project. Arguably, what Jeffrey Isaac (1996) said about the work of Arendt is equally true for Foucault: both are puzzled by the irony 'that the modern age, which proclaims the value of life above all else, is also the age of genocidal mass murder' (p. 65). That is, both Arendt and Foucault ask the question of how the atrocities of 20th-century totalitarianism were rooted in the soil of modernity and how to unearth these roots. Whereas Arendt provides an in-depth study on the functioning principles of totalitarian rule and the nexus between shaping, regulating, and enhancing the *Volkskörper* and classifying and killing people marked as 'life not worth living', Foucault's works, as Milchman and Rosenberg (1998) point out, rather shed light on the formative stages of this nexus. Milchman and Rosenberg argue that the idea of 'life not worth living' can be seen as one possible, though not necessary,

outcome of the practices of classifying and categorizing in terms of health–disease, normal–pathological, fit–unfit, which Foucault traced back to the emergence of modern medicine, psychiatry, biology and the carceral society. In the following, I will highlight some further aspects in the works of Foucault and Arendt that illuminate the threads running from the formation of the modern project to the extermination camps. To avoid misunderstandings, this is not to say that Nazism was the inevitable, necessary outcome of anything. It is only to say that Nazism was able to build on ideational and practical elements that were and still are key to modernity and that it is worthwhile studying these elements in order to be aware of the possibility that they might again grow into a real nightmare.

The first aspect I want to highlight is the observation of what might be termed the political zoefication of humans.<sup>1</sup> Looking at the formative stage of the modern state, Foucault (1980) observes that it was accompanied or even characterized by the move through which humans as living beings became the subject and target of political rule: ‘Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate domination was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access event to the body’ (pp. 142–3). The life at stake here is clearly not the life people live, not the life story, the biography, but rather the *zoe*-aspect of their existence. Public policy and the welfare state through the late 18th and 19th centuries, Foucault argues, co-emerged with practices, institutions, and new bodies of knowledge, designed to take care of the physical aspects of human life such as fertility, health, disease, longevity, or morbidity, in order to enhance the productivity of the population as well as its loyalty to the state (Foucault 1988). Foucault (2000) makes it clear that the shift towards ‘the population’ was a decisive precondition for the emergence of the economy as a separate sphere which he links to the ‘governmentalization of the state’ (p. 220), that is, the understanding of politics as government in the sense of management.

This analysis partly overlaps with Arendt’s indictment in *The Human Condition* (1958) that modern society is being based on labour rather than on work or political action. Labour, in her terminology, means the type of activity that serves the necessities of life and the ongoing circle of consumption and reproduction. The purpose of labour is not really to produce lasting works but to maintain the life processes of the individual, society, and the species. The Arendtian categories of labour, work, and action are certainly problematic, as Bronislaw Szerszynski (2005) argues, particularly when understood as universal, neatly separable features of human existence or as an account of the social evolution. Still, I think, if we do not share Arendt’s ‘phenomenological essentialism’ (Benhabib, 1996: 123–41) but rather understand ‘labour’, ‘work’ and

'action' as a typology of action *within modern society*, these concepts may be useful to understand some of its basic features.

From this perspective, Arendt's delineation of the role of labour as compared with work and action clearly draws from Marx's analysis of capitalist accumulation (Braun, 2001); human activity merely serves as a means to feed the ongoing dynamic of a process that Marx has analysed as the process of capitalist accumulation. Any act of work tends to get transformed into an act of labour insofar as it is neither performed for its own sake nor for the sake of creating a lasting product but merely as a means to maintain the dynamic of the economy. Arendt (1958) here speaks of 'repetition and the endlessness of the process itself' and of a 'specifically modern acceleration', which has transformed work into labour (p. 125). It is not least in this sense that life in modern society has become the highest good; however, it is not the life of human individuals but rather the 'life' of society, the ongoing dynamic of the economic process, which ranks as the supreme good.

Thus, while Foucault stresses that life is a resource which gets mobilized, Arendt points out that life is constantly (re)produced. Both, however, state that individual life functions as a force that feeds into the dynamic of a larger process, be it as a resource or as a product, and that the newly emerging sphere of the social is not least characterized by the constant consumption of life in order to maintain the dynamic of this process. They both, I argue, make the diagnosis, which is actually very similar to the Marxian analysis of capitalist society, that the rise of the social implies a certain degradation of individual lives to mere means of sustaining and feeding the economy. Thus, to a certain extent, we can say that the political zoefication of humans is inherent in modern society from the very beginning.

The totalitarian systems of the 20th century, however, have taken the political zoefication of humans to the extreme in reducing certain groups of people to the status of *being* mere life. They did so through stripping these people of their civil rights, social positions and political status. The concentration camps, Arendt (1968) says, demonstrated 'that human beings can be transformed into specimens of the human animal' (p. 455). She also makes clear, however, that the practice of stripping people of their legal and political status was not *invented* by the Nazis. It had already occurred in the aftermath of the First World War, when hundreds of thousands of people became refugees, homeless or stateless due to expatriation, flight, or expulsion. These people, Arendt says, belonged 'to the human race in much the same way as animals belong to a specific animal species' (p. 302); they were reduced to a status similar to that of an animal; it did not matter what they thought or did but only what they *were* (Arendt, 1981). While it was the Nazi state that declared whole categories of people to be 'life not worth living' and accordingly destroyed their lives, the Stalinist Soviet Union also, as both Arendt and Foucault remark, classified political adversaries

in biological terms, as mentally ill (Foucault, 2003) or 'dying classes or parasitic races' (Arendt, 1996: 938).<sup>2</sup>

The political zoefication of humans is closely linked to another thread which, according to both Arendt and Foucault, runs through modern politics and society up to totalitarianism: the conception of politics as administration, namely the administration of life. Foucault (2003) shows that the emergence of biopolitics comes with a shift from understanding politics basically as the continuation of war to an understanding of politics as administrating, regulating, calculating, and managing the life of the population. Within this new paradigm the population was seen as a resource that can be mobilized in order to strengthen the state. Administrating and managing this resource was dependent on knowledge and gave rise to population statistics, population science, hygiene, public health, or eugenics. These bodies of knowledge were, as Foucault points out, intrinsically based on a logic of classifying, qualifying, categorizing, and ranking. Biopolitics in Foucault, as Larry Reynolds (2005) notes, actually means bio-administration. Foucault thus diagnoses a specifically technocratic understanding of politics in modernity: politics is mainly the set of technologies required to achieve certain ends such as the increase of the welfare and productivity of the population and the relative strength of the state as compared to other states.

Arendt (1958), too, views modern politics mainly as administrating or managing the necessities of life. The 19th and 20th centuries, according to her, have developed an understanding of politics that equates politics with government and sees it as a sort of housekeeping. Whereas, however, Foucault takes a non-normative view, simply stating the substitution of one unappealing understanding of politics for another, Arendt takes a decisively normative perspective, mourning the loss of the public sphere and referring to an emphatic idea of politics as an activity that forms an end in itself.

Again, we find that a general feature of modernity culminates in totalitarianism. Under totalitarian rule, there is no room for politics in the sense of expressing and debating different viewpoints and opinions and for acting in concert as opposed to exercising command and obedience. In short, there is no space for political action as an end in itself. The sites where the utmost destruction of the ability for political action altogether took place were the camps (Arendt, 1996). Hence, we find that both Arendt and Foucault see totalitarianism as the extreme case of a system that has turned politics into a knowledge-based administration of life.

In totalitarianism, according to Arendt (1968), this knowledge-based administration of life takes on a new dimension: she depicts the system of the camps in terms of 'experiments' and 'laboratories', that is, in terms of technoscientific knowledge production. Totalitarianism, here, is seen as a gigantic experiment on human subjects, the camps being the laboratories where new

technologies of turning humans into mere life are developed and tested: ‘The concentration and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified’ (p. 437). The last observation about the relation between modernity and totalitarianism in Foucault and Arendt concerns the processual structure of time. It is here that Arendt can offer some crucial insights into the nature of totalitarianism and the modern link between politics and life. Therefore, in the following, I will reconstruct her argumentation in more detail.

Again, Foucault makes us aware of a specifically new modern feature of power and politics which, as Arendt’s analysis makes clear, fully and fatally takes shape in totalitarianism. He points out that the new modern form of power which refers to ‘man-as-a-living-being’ (Foucault, 2003: 242) does not really target individuals as living beings. It does not primarily operate through exercising direct control over the body or through intervening in individual lives. Instead, it targets collective phenomena such as the birth *rate*, or the *average* life expectancy. While on the individual level these phenomena seem ungovernable, they are not necessarily so when taken as collective phenomena. This, however, implies another characteristic new feature of biopolitics, namely that it targets *processes*, temporal phenomena, phenomena which ‘occur *over a period of time*, which have to be studied *over a certain period of time*: they are *serial* phenomena. The phenomena addressed by biopolitics are, essentially, aleatory events that occur within a population that exists *over a period of time*’ (p. 246, emphases added).

Biopolitics is essentially about ‘taking control of life and the biological *processes* of man-as-species’ (Foucault, 2003: 247, emphasis added); it ‘is a technology in which bodies are replaced by general biological processes’ (p. 249). In other words, the processes Foucault is talking about do not take place within an individual’s life time. On the contrary, they pass through individual life. The individual’s birth and death do not delimitate but on the contrary mediate and facilitate the activities of modern governing. Hence, the life that biopolitics targets has a supra-individual dimension, not just in a numeric but also in a temporal sense (Gerodetti, 2005). Modern politics, as Foucault depicts it, consists of a set of government technologies which act upon a target, the biological processes in the population, within which individual life is just a transitory moment.

We will rediscover this relation between politics and life and its specific temporal structure in a radicalized form in Arendt’s analysis of totalitarianism. To her, it forms a key to understanding the specific nature of totalitarianism. Understanding, here, means to recognize the principle that sets this form of government in motion (Arendt, 2005). However, it is also more: ‘Insofar as totalitarian movements have sprung up in the non-totalitarian world (crystallizing elements found in that world, since totalitarian governments have not been

imported from the moon), the process of understanding is clearly, and perhaps primarily, also a process of self-understanding' (p. 310).

Trying to understand totalitarianism, for her, includes asking the question of how it could have an 'appeal' to people and she examines this question both in her works on totalitarianism and in *The Human Condition* (1958). However, she does so not on a political sociology plane but on a speculative, if not theological, plane, seeking to understand the rule of processual temporality as an answer to the questions of death, finitude, and loneliness. It is at this point that Arendt and Foucault definitely part; Foucault would not concede that it made sense to deal with questions of that kind. He deliberately restricts himself to the study of when and how certain questions emerged and evolved. However, such self-restriction comes at a cost: within these limits it is neither possible to ask the question of 'appeal', which certainly limits the range of understanding what was going on, nor is it possible to develop better, non-destructive answers or to distinguish between bad, worse, and better answers at all. Therefore I think it is worthwhile to take a closer look at Arendt's analysis of the configuration of politics, life, and temporality that characterizes the nature of totalitarianism and links it to the modern predicament. Against this backdrop we can then reconstruct Arendt's concept of natality as a guidepost to break away from this still dangerous configuration.

At the core of totalitarianism, both as a form of government and as a type of ideology, Arendt argues, lies the idea that all human action is subordinated to laws of nature or laws of history.<sup>3</sup> In retrospect, one such line leads from Darwin to Nazi racism, another from Marx to Stalinism. What both have in common is the idea 'that a superior process of movement has seized both nature and history' (Arendt, 1996: 952).<sup>4</sup> Totalitarianism, according to Arendt, is largely about executing the laws of nature or history. What does this mean? It essentially implies a disastrously distorted, preposterous relation between continuity and change, intransience and transience, timelessness and time. Here, Arendt in fact starts from some basic assumptions about human needs, and about the kind of relation between intransience and transience that would be more appropriate to humans. Her assumption is that, due to their capacity for freedom and spontaneity, human actions and their results unavoidably have a moment of unpredictability, instability, and transience to them. That is, transience is built into the human condition – which is a problem men inevitably have to deal with. Positive law and political institutions, to Arendt, form something like an appropriate compensatory answer to this problem. They are able to provide continuity and stability in order to balance the essential instability and changeability of human action. Positive laws are depicted in terms of 'boundaries' (Arendt, 2005: 341–2) or a 'framework of stability' (p. 341), which confines but also permits and protects the exercise of freedom. As such, positive law hedges what she calls a 'common world, the reality of some transcending continuity' (p. 342).



Two other salient concepts in this context are ‘home’ and ‘homelessness’. Arendt (1968) goes so far as to assume that ‘human beings need the constant transformation of chaotic and accidental conditions into a man-made pattern of relative consistency’ (p. 352). The transformation of class society into mass society and the related process of atomization, in her view, have eroded such a common world and left the masses in a condition of ‘essential homelessness’ (p. 352). She even speaks of a ‘social *and spiritual* homelessness’ (p. 352, emphasis added), which underlines that she is arguing on a highly speculative plane here.

The totalitarian response to this ‘spiritual homelessness’ was to twist around the relation between continuity and change so that under totalitarian rule it is human action which is made ‘static’ (Arendt, 2005: 342), whereas all laws are turned into ‘laws of movement’. Terror, the main instrument of totalitarian rule, ‘stabilizes’ or ‘freezes’ men (p. 342) through shutting down the spaces where freedom and spontaneity could be exercised, whereas the laws of nature or history undermine and ultimately destroy the conditions of stability and a ‘common world’. At first glance, the laws of nature or history, in contrast to positive, man-made law, seem to be characterized by their unchanging, permanent quality, their ‘timeless presence’, as Arendt puts it. At the same time, however, the idea of laws of nature or history display an inherent dynamic linked to the political zoefication of humans. We can reconstruct Arendt’s argument through discerning three ways in which the laws of nature or history form laws of movement: first, they allegedly determine the course and movement of history, much as natural laws determine the course of the planets. Second, totalitarian movements make them their highest ranking source of authority, so they become the laws of *these* movements. Third, the totalitarian movement as such can only proceed if it avoids the establishment of any stable institutional order. In order to maintain its existence, it has to preserve its form as a political *movement* even after having taken seizure of the state. Arendt (1968) insists that totalitarianism is far from forming a monolithic or hierarchical state structure but is rather characterized by its ‘shapelessness’ (p. 395). Through mechanisms such as the confusing co-existence of party and state offices, real and façade power centres, overlapping and competing jurisdictions, and not least the constant shifting of the centre of power, it avoids the establishment of stability. Keep in mind, Arendt insists, that the goal of a totalitarian movement is *not* simply to retain power within the territorial boundaries of a state but to conquer the world and to create a new mankind. The latter in particular can be seen as a dynamic goal. Whereas world conquest could theoretically be achieved – the surface of the earth is limited – this is not the case with creating the master race or the ‘new man’; these are endless projects requiring an ever ongoing process of purge and elimination. It is here that the different dimensions of the ‘laws of movement’ converge with one another *and* with the political zoefication of

humans: the project of creating the new human species through the execution of supra-human laws of movement, thereby avoiding stabilization and preserving the political movement as such, according to Arendt, forms the essence of totalitarianism.

Creating the new mankind, or the new human race or species, through executing the laws of nature or history displays and implies the general features that Foucault ascribes to biopolitics: it targets collective and serial, temporal phenomena. Put differently, it operates on the level of the species and employs the sequence of generations, thereby transgressing, utilizing, and mobilizing individual life. Further, when Foucault (2003) highlights evolutionism as a general paradigm that emerged in the 19th century he comes very close to Arendt's analysis of processual thought:

Basically, evolutionism, understood in the broad sense – or in other words, not so much Darwin's theory itself as a set, a bundle, of notions (such as: the hierarchy of species that grow from a common evolutionary tree, the struggle for existence among species, the selection that eliminates the less fit) – naturally became within a few years during the nineteenth century not simply a way of transcribing a political discourse into biological terms, and not simply a way of dressing up a political discourse in scientific clothing, but a real way of thinking about the relations between colonization, the necessity for wars, criminality, the phenomena of madness and mental illness, the history of societies with their different classes, and so on. (p. 257)

Evolutionism, according to Foucault, forms an important link between classical biopolitics and what he calls the evolutionary racism developed by Stalinism and Nazism. Thus, Foucault, too, points at the specifically processual structure of modern temporality, which links the biopolitical dimension of the modern project to the totalitarian project.<sup>5</sup> Totalitarianism prolongs and radicalizes the features of biopolitics highlighted in Foucault to the point that it uses the elimination of humans as a means of productively consuming individual life in the production process of the new species life. The only functions individuals can have vis-à-vis the laws of movement are to execute them and/or to become 'walking embodiments of these laws' (Arendt, 2005: 340), which is by no means mutually exclusive. Executing them means actively applying the standards according to which certain individuals or groups do or do not allow for the unfolding dynamic of the laws of movements. Embodying them means being classified according to these standards. Laws or processes which function through transgressing and productively consuming individual lives are not served through compliance but through providing the material in which they realize themselves. This material can be of higher or lower quality and the political zoefication of humans is the outcome of a mechanism that judges the existence of individuals or groups according to the question of whether they present suitable or unsuitable material to realize and promote the project of enhancing

the human race. Within this logic, being deemed a 'dying' or a 'decadent class' functions much the same way as being deemed 'unfit to live', whether the classification refers to physical qualities or not.

Compared with 19th-century processual thought, the totalitarianism as depicted in Arendt thus adds, or at least dramatically increases, the element of acceleration. The totalitarian project is not only about scientifically understanding the laws of movement but about actively promoting the process of their unfolding. Here, execution is at the same time acceleration. Its instrument is terror, which makes terror the borderline case of a technocratic, instrumentalist understanding of politics. Hence, Arendt seems to say, processual thought had a certain appeal to the masses in their 'spiritual homelessness' because it enabled them to participate in a permanent, intransient, 'timeless presence'. The alleged intransience or permanence of these laws, however, was a fatal error because in fact their operating principle was mobilization, dynamization, acceleration. What processual temporality really did was destroy the chance of establishing some sort of this-worldly stability, continuity, or common home. In the end, the

supra-gigantic forces whose movements race through humanity, dragging every individual willy-nilly with them – either riding atop their triumphant car or crushed under its wheels – may be various and complicated: still, it is surprising to see how, for all practical political purposes, these ideologies always result in the same 'law' of elimination of individuals for the sake of the process or progress of the species. From the elimination of harmful or superfluous individuals, the result of natural or historical movement rises like the phoenix from its own ashes; but unlike the fabulous bird, this mankind which is the end and at the same time the embodiment of the movement of either History or Nature requires permanent sacrifices, the permanent elimination of hostile or parasitic or unhealthy classes or races in order to enter upon its bloody eternity. (Arendt, 2005: 341)

The kind of eternity the totalitarian movement has to offer is a deadly eternity, the permanence it produces is the 'tranquility of the cemetery' (Arendt, 2005: 348). Hence, the totalitarian project is based on a specifically processual structure of temporality in which 'endlessness' has taken a deadly double meaning: first, the processes determined by the laws of nature or history and executed through terror cannot come to an end because their goal, the production of a new human species, can never be completed. Second, each individual and each human activity merely counts as a means to promote the process and not as an end in itself. These processes have a direction, but no end(s). To Arendt (1968), this structure is expressed concisely by the maxim of the SS: 'No task exists for its own sake' (p. 409). This attitude, she says, destroys 'all genuine interest in specific jobs and produces a mentality which sees every conceivable action as an instrument for something entirely different' (p. 409).

Here, however, we also see that processual temporality is not confined to the totalitarian project, although it is within the totalitarian project that it assumes its

most deadly power. Rather, the relation cited earlier between actions and ends bears considerable resemblance to Marx's analysis of the relation between exchange value and utility value under capitalist conditions, in which human productivity is essentially transformed into a mere means to advance the process of accumulation. Indeed, Arendt's later work on modern society can, arguably, be read as a study on the functioning of processual temporality before and after totalitarianism. In *The Human Condition* (1958), as I will point out in the following, Arendt both makes an endeavour to understand the development of processual temporality and to present an alternative model, the temporality of the interval, the former crystallizing in the priority of life, the latter in the concept of natality.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958) explores the rise of 'life' to be the supreme good in occidental<sup>6</sup> culture; she shows how the changing notion of 'life' is related to a pertinent transformation of temporality and how these transformations form responses to certain fundamental, traumatic historic experiences. The *polis*, in her view, had offered its citizens a kind of 'worldly immortality' in that it formed the institutional framework for the possibility of remembrance (p. 314). Life was conceived of as a life *story* that can be passed down over generations and remembrance constitutes a response to human mortality. This response required a body politic though with a functioning context of narration and remembrance. The decline of the *polis* therefore meant a traumatic experience and the cultural response to that experience was the 'invention' of a new form of temporality, namely eternity, which came with a reevaluation of the *vita contemplativa* in relation to political action. This shift, however, came at the price of devaluating the only human capacity that is able to create a common world *before* death.

Similarly, Arendt (1958) understands Christianity and its idea of the immortal soul as a response to the decline of the Roman Empire. However, this shift meant a further devaluation of political action and the political realm insofar as the immortality of the soul did not rely on a functioning body politic. On the contrary, in order to save one's soul and attain immortality, what mattered was to turn away from worldly political life. For this reason, Arendt argues, the price for this new form of immortality was alienation from the interpersonal world.

The beginning of the modern age and the development of modern science mark a further upheaval in that science implied a model of investigation that devalued contemplation as a path to truth so that contemplation lost the status of being the most highly regarded form of life. For a short time, Arendt (1958) says, work took the place of contemplation and *homo faber* the place of the philosopher. However, to the extent that religion lost its capacity to determine the appropriate ends of work it lost its significance and was superseded by processual thought, be it evolutionism, historical materialism, life philosophy, or the belief in progress, as a new notion of temporality. This notion of tempo-

rality in turn, she argues, is modelled on the biological life process, or on a biologicalist understanding of life. In terms of *bios* and *zoe*, it would be modelled on *zoe*, referring to the idea of an entity that, in analogy to the species, sustains itself through the coming and going of individuals. The species in that sense is beyond life and death and so is the assumed entity that underlies processual thought, be it termed nature, history, society, or progress.

However, we could also say that Arendt understands processual thought as a response to the ‘spiritual homelessness’ that has accompanied the inhabitants of the western world from the turn to metaphysics in ancient Greece to post-war capitalism. To model thought on the life process – *zoe* – therefore means a specifically immanentist endeavour of constructing immortality. Note, however, that Arendt does not consider the quest for immortality to be an essential feature of ‘human nature’. In her interpretation, the quest for immortality is not a cause but rather an outcome of or a response to another human need, which she *does* assume to be essential: the need to find a home in the world, to be respected as a member of this worldly community.

Incidentally, according to Arendt, the capitalist economy of the 20th century is in no way based on work but on labour in that every human activity is directed at the maintenance of the economic dynamic. Again, we find, ‘no task exists for its own sake’; no activity forms an end in itself, any thing and any activity merely serves to feed the automatically proceeding dynamic. From this perspective, we still live under the rule of processual temporality. It certainly does not take as murderous a shape as it has taken in Nazism and Stalinism insofar as it is not directed at the production of one new single mankind and does not use terror as its main instrument. However, to the extent that human activities are qualified and treated as mere means to feed an automatic, relentlessly proceeding paramount process, whether it is named progress or globalization, we are still under the spell of processual thought. In post-war society, Arendt (1970) says, one form the rule of supra-human processes takes is the inexorable progress of science and technology ‘compelling us to do whatever we can, regardless of consequences’ (p. 86), not least in the realm of biotechnology which, in Arendt’s (1958) view, is apparently driven by the desire to escape the human condition of natality and mortality.

Hence, we note that Arendt and Foucault help us discern certain critical, inter-related elements of the modern project that fatally culminated and converged in the totalitarian projects of the 20th century but did not disappear with them. As such features we have identified the political zoefication of humans, a technocratic understanding of politics, and processual temporality. Biopolitics can be understood as the combination of these elements. As long as these elements are to be found in contemporary thought, science, technology, society, or politics, it is advisable to watch out for their impact and their possible convergence.

Arendt, in my view, goes a little further than Foucault in that she decidedly

outlines an alternative, non-biopolitical understanding of politics, life and temporality captured by the concept of natality. The idea of natality is meant to present a different and better response to the existential human need to find a home in the world. This response would differ from the various predominant responses we can find in occidental history which all focused on overcoming mortality. Up to now, the history of occidental thought has been preoccupied by mortality (Arendt, 1958). Metaphysics, Christianity, and processual thought, in this perspective, do respond to the need of finding a home in the world and to the experience of this need being frustrated. Metaphysics and Christianity responded in developing a specific temporal form: eternity, a sphere of permanence and intransience beyond the interpersonal world and superior to it. In processual thought, however, eternity moves from transcendence into the immanence of nature or history and in this move gets dynamized so that what remains from eternity is just the constancy of the process. Processuality is the new temporal form emerging in the 19th century. Hence, to Arendt, both eternity and processuality form temporal structures that respond to the problem of homelessness in the world, a problem caused by the nature of human action itself, but they respond in a way which rather makes things worse as they devalue and undermine those human faculties through which humans are able to create a home in *this* world. To focus on natality instead of mortality would mean to acknowledge that the only remedy to the volatility of human action and its results is human action itself, complemented by the capacity to promise and to forgive (Arendt, 1958). While human action produces results that are volatile and unstable, action is also the capacity to begin anew, to create a new political community in concert with others. Arendt (1968) concludes *Origins* with the warning that totalitarianism will stay with us as an ever-present potentiality but also with the more optimistic outlook that the end of totalitarianism at the same time implies the promise of a new beginning: 'Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man, politically, it is identical with man's freedom' (p. 479).

Although the concept of beginning, *initium*, is taken from Augustine, Arendt (1968) gives it a distinctive turn in linking it to the factum of birth: 'This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man' (p. 479). In *The Human Condition* (1958) she develops this idea further, capturing the relation between beginning, freedom, action and birth with the term 'natality'. Being born, here, is not only a physiological process, the beginning of biological life, although it is that too, but in the case of humans it also means entering the world which is already inhabited by others – *zur Welt kommen*, in German – and the beginning of a being capable of acting, that is, of beginning herself. Action can be understood as a kind of second birth, in that the acting person once again, and this time on her own account, enters the world, that is, the interactions and common projects of persons (p. 176). Unlike many other metaphors of a second

birth this one does not devalue the 'first birth'. The second birth is not the antithesis of the first but its confirmation; it means accepting the gift of spontaneity and freedom man has received already at and through birth. While birth forms the beginning of physiological life that has to be sustained through labour and work, action is the essence of political life. Physiological life thus provides time for the good life; action fills *zoe* with *bios*. It is important to note though that political life, in Arendt, is no idyll, no paradise that had been lost and could be regained; the idea of embracing natality is not meant to lead us back to an alleged state of static timelessness. There is no denying that human action can cause mistakes and that political institutions are volatile, which is why we need promising and forgiving.

With the help of forgiveness one can not undo mistakes caused by human action but one can prevent them from determining the future. By means of making and keeping promises human beings can bring consistency and commitment into their affairs without relinquishing their freedom. Focusing on natality, instead of mortality, means appreciating these human capacities and sustaining the institutional framework that allows them to be exercised. To focus on natality also means to break away from eternity and processuality and to introduce a new temporal form instead: the interval. Thus it is not least a revision of our understanding of time that the concept of natality is aiming at, as Julia Kristeva (2001) has remarked.<sup>7</sup> Human life, then, is not understood as a transitory stage to eternity or as a means to feed the dynamic of an ongoing process nor as a timeless idyll but as 'the time interval between birth and death' (Arendt, 1958: 97). As such it has a beginning and an end, it is limited, and it provides time for the good life, which in turn can be remembered as a life story.

To focus on natality would thus mean putting an end to processual temporality and replacing it with the time of the interval. It is here where we can locate what Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (2003) has called Arendt's 'weak' or 'inconspicuous messianism' (p. 160). Arendt (1958) frequently refers to the figure of Jesus, particularly when she wants to emphasize the significance of action and forgiveness. Jesus, Arendt holds, was far from preaching the superiority of contemplation over action: 'The only activity Jesus of Nazareth recommends in his preachings is action, and the only human capacity he stresses is the capacity "to perform miracles"' (p. 318). Hence, it is not necessarily Jesus who has messianic qualities but rather Jesus demonstrates the messianic, potentially redeeming powers of action and forgiveness. To Arendt, these amount to the human faculty to perform miracles. In many passages of the New Testament, she tells us, 'miracles are clearly not supernatural events but only what all miracles, those performed by men no less than those performed by a divine agent, always must be, namely, interruptions of some natural series of events, of some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected' (Arendt, 1968/1993: 168). This miraculous power of human action has a messianic

quality to it as it ends one time and opens up another; it disrupts the time of the process and opens up the time of the interval. It brings the current time to a close insofar as it stops time's race towards the future and breaks open a time span in the present, a time between limits.<sup>8</sup>

The element of messianism and the thought of redemption are alien to Foucault and it is with regard to this messianic perspective that Arendt's and Foucault's conceptions of temporality fundamentally diverge. Foucault's considerations about time (see Michon, 2002) do not refer to the messianic idea of an end of time, whereas Arendt's conception of human action as a messianic power that manifests itself in the public sphere bears strong affinities to what Gershom Scholem (1971) identifies as the messianic idea in Judaism: 'Judaism, in all of its forms and manifestations, has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community. It is an occurrence which takes place in the visible world and which cannot be conceived apart from such a visible appearance' (p. 1).

Arendt, as well as Foucault, strictly rejects the 'strong' messianic idea that the world could be saved once and for all, which she, as well as Foucault, considers extremely dangerous. Nevertheless, she does convey a messianic message, only that the messianic powers, the human faculties of action and forgiving, are themselves temporal; they operate within time, their results are unstable and all they can do is open up time for a new beginning in this world. Hence, messianic time in Arendt has the structure of the interval, redemption means freedom, the exercise of which in Arendt is synonymous with power, and such power takes place, quite as Scholem (1971) put it, publicly, in the community.

To Foucault, in contrast, freedom means the capacity to think differently and to conceive of ourselves differently, different from the requirements of subjectification, of becoming an 'autonomous' subject through confessing and truth telling and thereby producing knowledge required for the biopolitical management of the living. The liberty Foucault (1997) finally leaves us with consists of *thought* practices and *self*-practices; liberty to Foucault is 'an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life' (p. 319), 'a permanent critique of our historical era' (p. 312), a 'critical ontology of ourselves', it is 'work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves' (p. 316). It is a liberty that remains preoccupied with the self, if not confined within the limits of the *vita contemplativa*. Foucault's way of interrogating history and exposing allegedly universal, necessary, rational or emancipatory features of modernity as being not only historical but also inherently ambiguous provides us with a tremendously helpful prerequisite to analyse the logic of modern biopolitics. It is hard to see, however, how this self-centred, philosophical conception of liberty could point at an alternative conception of politics, one that enables us not only to analyse but also to overcome biopolitics.

The concept of natality, I have argued, takes us a step further, offering an alternative understanding of politics, life, and temporality. Human life here is



understood not as a moment in an endlessly racing process whose laws are to be executed on the individual, nor as a manageable entity but as the time span between birth and death. Time is not the medium for the execution of supra-human processes but the interval that provides the chance to perform activities for their own sake. Politics, finally, would be understood not as the management of populations or the acceleration of economic or scientific progress but as acting in concert together with others, and the purpose of politics would not be to enhance the quality of some collective entity, to create a better species or to maintain the dynamics of the economy, but to make the world a home.

## Notes

This article has benefited greatly from discussions in different contexts, particularly with my long-term seminar on biopolitics at the University of Hannover, the ECPR workshop on 'Mapping Biopolitics', and the Jewish Studies reading group at the University of Washington, Seattle. I would like to thank the participants in these groups for in-depth and inspiring discussions. Particularly, I would like to thank Richard Block, Barbara Duden, Bronislaw Szerszynski, Michael Rosenthal and Karen Litfin for substantial comments and encouragement.

1. Agamben (1998) has pointed out that the Greeks had no single word for 'life' but the two terms '*bios*' and '*zoe*'. Unlike the contemporary use of the prefix 'bio' in terms such as 'biology' or 'biopolitics', '*bios*' denoted the life one was living whereas '*zoe*' comprised the physical aspects of being an animal, a living thing.
2. Here, as in many instances, the German version of *Origins* which has not so much been translated but rather rewritten by Arendt herself, is much sharper and stronger compared to the earlier English version. Whenever I refer to the German version, it is for this reason.
3. A comprehensive study on the historical development of what Arendt calls processual thought, namely the idea of progress and its relation to the notion of one single mankind as the subject of improvement, can be found in André Taguieff (2001). Taguieff's study basically confirms Arendt's thesis that processual thought forms one of the problematic continuities between the core features of modernity and totalitarianism.
4. Cited and translated from the German version. In the English version, Arendt (1968) simply states that in Marx and Darwin the law has changed its meaning from expressing a 'framework of stability' to expressing 'the motion itself' (p. 464).
5. For a comprehensive overview on the respective notions of temporality in the different stages of the work of Foucault see Michon (2002).
6. Arendt's account is partly paralleled by Ivan Illich (1992), who also presents a history of 'life', but stresses even more the cultural construction of this notion. According to Illich, in the 1970s and 80s, 'life' became a new fetish. It appears as 'a life', a precious substance which has to be preserved and managed by institutions, experts and professionals. Similar to Arendt, whom he does not explicitly refer to, he holds that the construct of 'life' is filling a void created by modern scientific society. However, he

does not deal with what makes Arendt's story on the rise of 'life' so troubling: the connection to totalitarianism.

7. However, I do not share Kristeva's (2001) view that Arendt pursues a vehement defence of life in *The Human Condition*. Kristeva does not sort out the different meanings of the term 'life' in this book.
8. Arendt's critique of the idea of progress and processual thought clearly draws from Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Concept of History' (1968). The affinities and differences between Arendt's and Benjamin's conception of temporality would, however, require another study.

## References

- Agamben, G. (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Allen, A. (2002) 'Power, Subjectivity, and Agency: Between Arendt and Foucault', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 10(2): 131–49.
- Arendt, H. (1958) *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Arendt, H. (1968) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt.
- Arendt, H. (1968/1993) *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin.
- Arendt, H. (1970) *On Violence*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt.
- Arendt, H. (1981) 'Es gibt nur ein einziges Menschenrecht', in O. Höffe (ed.) *Funk-Kolleg Praktische Philosophie/Ethik: Reader zum Funk-Kolleg*, pp. 152–66. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Arendt, H. (1996) *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft: Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, totale Herrschaft*. Munich: Piper.
- Arendt, H. (2005) *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken.
- Benhabib, S. (1996) *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Benjamin, W. (1968) *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken.
- Braun, K. (2001) '(K)Eine Denkerin der Vermittlung? Gesellschaftstheorie und Geschlechterverhältnis im Werk von Hannah Arendt', in G. A. Knapp and A. Wetterer (eds) *Soziale Verortung der Geschlechter: Gesellschaftstheorie und Feministische Kritik*, pp. 132–56. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot.
- Duarte, A. (2005) 'Biopolitics and the Dissemination of Violence: The Arendtian Critique of the Present'. Available at: <http://hannaharendt.net/research/biopolitics.html>
- Foucault, M. (1980) *The History of Sexuality. Vol. I: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1988) 'The Political Technology of Individuals', in L. H. Martin, H. Gutman and P. H. Hutton (eds) *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, pp. 145–62. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Foucault, M. (1997) 'What Is Enlightenment?', in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984, Vol. 1*, pp. 303–19. New York: The New Press.
- Foucault, M. (2000) 'Governmentality', in J. D. Faubion (ed.) *Power: Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954–1984, Vol. 3*, pp. 201–22. New York: The New Press.

- Foucault, M. (2003) *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976*. New York: Picador.
- Gerodetti, N. (2005) 'Biopolitics, Eugenics and the Use of History'. Paper presented at ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Granada, April.
- Gordon, N. (2002) 'On Visibility and Power: An Arendtian Corrective of Foucault', *Human Studies* 25(2): 125–45.
- Illich, I. (ed.) (1992) *In the Mirror of the Past: Lectures and Addresses 1978–1990*, New York: Marion Boyars.
- Isaac, J. C. (1996) 'A New Guarantee on Earth: Hannah Arendt on Human Dignity and the Politics of Human Rights', *American Political Science Review* 90(1): 61–73.
- Kristeva, J. (2001) *Hannah Arendt*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Michon, P. (2002) 'Strata, Blocks, Pieces, Spirals, Elastics and Verticals: Six Figures of Time in Michel Foucault', *Time & Society* 11(2/3): 163–92.
- Milchman, A. and Rosenberg, A. (eds) (1998) *Postmodernism and the Holocaust*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Reynolds, L. (2005) 'The Genetic Modification of the Agro-food System and the Transformation of the Biopolitical'. Paper presented at ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, Granada, April.
- Scholem, G. (1971) *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*. New York: Schocken.
- Szerszynski, B. (2005) *Nature, Technology and the Sacred*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Taguieff, A. (2001) *Du progrès: biographie d'une utopie moderne*. Paris: Librio.
- Villa, D. R. (1992) 'Postmodernism and the Public Sphere', *American Political Science Review* 86(3): 712–21.
- Young-ah Gottlieb, S. (2003) *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

KATHRIN BRAUN is Professor of Political Science at the University of Hannover, Germany. Her current research is on new forms of governance in the policy area of bioethics and the life sciences and on biopolitics, human rights, and democracy. ADDRESS: Institute of Political Science, University of Hannover, Schneiderberg 50, D-30 167, Hannover, Germany. [email: k.braun@ipw.uni-hannover.de]