Politics, History, Freedom

Arendt, Foucault and the Politics of Genealogy

David Owen

University of Southampton

Just as in our personal lives our worst fears and best hopes will never adequately prepare us for what actually happens—–because the moment even a foreseen event takes place, everything changes, and we can never be prepared for the inexhaustible literalness of this “everything”—–so each event in human history reveals an unexpected landscape of human deeds, sufferings, and new possibilities which together transcend the sum total of all willed intentions and the significance of all origins. It is the task of the historian to detect this unexpected *new* with all its implications in any given period and to bring out the full power of its significance. (Arendt, 1994, 320)

Nb. natality and birth of child, and then life of child – birth calls for response, shift from potential to actual

Hannah Arendt’s reflections on the Eichmann trial and Michel Foucault’s reflections on the Iranian revolution remain subjects of controversy. These were hardly their only forays into commentary on current events; on the contrary, and it is not my concern here to offer evaluation or apologia in relation to these engagements. Rather I start by mentioning them in order to draw attention to a shared sensibility in their work, namely, a concern with trying to disclose both what is novel in our present and the ways in which its novelty is occluded. This commitment comes with risks as Eichmann and Iran engagements illustrate, but it is a risk both embraced, not least since Arendt and Foucault share a scepticism towards the value of the kind of explanatory or normative theories we find in political science or political philosophy precisely because they see the conceptual approach of these theories as blocking the appearance of what it is new rather than working to make it visible as an object of evaluation. When Arendt remarks, at the start of *The Human Condition*, ‘What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.’ (1958: 5?) or when Foucault identifies his approach with ‘reflection on “today” as difference in history and as a motive for a particular philosophical task’ (1997: 309), they are highlighting their commitment to developing the concepts required to disclose the constitution of the present, a task that each sees as exemplifying and serving human freedom.

My aim in this essay is to explore how Arendt and Foucault each works through the requirements of this commitment in terms of the relationship between politics, history and freedom. I begin by sketching their respective relations to Heidegger and Nietzsche in order to lay the foundations for an exploration of each thinker’s diagnosis of the present and their responses to it. I conclude by considering their approaches in comparison to each other.

1. The Background: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Modernity

Heidegger and Nietzsche are central figures for Arendt and Foucault, thinkers with whom they stand in intense agonist relationships, recognizing both that the work of these two philosophers is a condition of the possibility of their own work and that their own work involves a critical relationship to these predecessors. Arendt’s debt to Nietzsche is clear but less acknowledged in her texts (Villa, 2008; Benhabib, 2018), while for Foucault, it is the relationship to Heidegger that, while clearly present, is less directly referenced (Sluga, 2005; Nichols, 2014). For the purposes of this inquiry, however, it will suffice to make clear the contours of these critical relationships for each of Arendt and Foucault. It is no part of my concern here to address the question of what relative degree of influence Heidegger or Nietzsche had on Arendt or Foucault, rather my focus is on the function of their relationships to these thinkers for their own projects. I will begin with Heidegger because it is in relation to what each sees as problems with Heidegger’s project that their relationships to Nietzsche can be situated.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger offers a powerfully original combination of transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutics as an approach to posing what he sees as the crucial, but elided or forgotten, question of the meaning of Being. His strategy is to address this question by way of an analysis of the kind of being exhibited by human beings, what Heidegger will call *Dasein*, as the beings for whom the question of the meaning of Being (i.e., what makes beings intelligible *as* beings) is a question and which exhibits a preontological (mis)understanding of Being in its everyday engagements with other entities. The centrality of Heidegger to Arendt and Foucault emerges from the anti-Cartesian stance that his phenomenological investigation of Dasein establishes in which human beings are always already situated within a realm of practices and practical involvements that disclose the world within which human beings make sense of themselves. Dasein’s mode of encounter with other entities is that of engagement with them as ready-to-hand (or, if they break down, unready-to-hand), not as isolated objects that are present-at-hand in the way that the Cartesian picture presupposes. Equipment in this sense is encountered as ‘for the sake of’ and discloses potentials and possibilities of practical going on in the world. This world of ‘being-in’ into which Dasein is thrown is, at the same time, a world of ‘being-with’, that is, it is a world in which Dasein experiences itself as with ‘Others’ (or, in Heidegger’s equivalent phrase, *das Man*). Alongside ‘thrownness’ and ‘projection’ which refer to our being in the world as something that matters to us and opens a realm of possibilities for acting, Heidegger introduces the additional category of ‘fallenness’ to refer to the subsumption of Dasein in the publicness of *das Man* – which marks out a condition of inauthenticity:

In utilizing public means of transport and in making use of information services such as the newspaper, every Other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into a kind of Being of ‘the Others’, in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the ‘they’ is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as *they* shrink back; we find ‘shocking’ what *they* find shocking. The ‘they’, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness. (*Being and Time* 27: 164)[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is in relation to this condition of fallenness that Heidegger introduces that idea of authenticity as not being subsumed by *das Man* but of sustaining one’s difference in one’s relations with Others, that is, of experiencing one’s experiences as mine, as my own; it is in this context that Heidegger will introduce the thought that authenticity involves a (resolute) relationship to the ever-present possibility of one’s own death.

Perhaps the first point to highlight in reflecting on Heidegger’s early work represented in *Being and Time* is the tension between its phenomenological ambition to provide an account of the a priori transcendental conditions of Dasein’s mode of Being and its hermeneutic approach to this task which involves attending and offering an interpretation of Dasein that is, as the references to public transport and newspapers make clear, historically situated and hence an interpretation of an historical mode of Dasein’s being-in-the-world (including its being-with-others). A second and related tension is that when Heidegger presents the question of the meaning of Being that he addresses as a question that has been subject (since Plato) to a process of forgetting, he is not only drawing attention to what he takes to be the way in which the history of philosophy has elided what Heidegger calls ‘ontological difference’ (the distinction between Being and beings, the ontological and the ontic) but implicitly also to a historical process in which the ways in which this forgetting is manifest has shifted and altered. Yet, precisely because of its transcendental ambitions, *Being and Time* is itself an act of eliding this history.

What is referred to by Heidegger as ‘the turn’ (*die* *Kehre*) that his thinking undergoes after *Being and Time* is, in part, a response to these tensions and the question of modernity as involving a distinctive mode of forgetting of the meaning of Being comes increasingly to the fore, notably in the essays ‘The Question concerning Technology’ and ‘The Age of the World Picture’. It is, however, an irony that Heidegger’s mode of analysis operates at a very high level of abstraction from the practices and everyday engagements in which the processes that he takes himself to discern are manifest. This feature may encourage his increasing tendency to speak of the spread of the technological world-picture in terms of ‘enframing’ and ‘destining’ as a (tyrannical, imperializing) mode of revealing Being that both seeks to overcome/eliminate other modes of revealing and, at the same time, is a mode of revealing that conceals Being such that, under its aegis, human beings may come to see themselves simply as ready-to-hand instruments for use. It also appears that, for Heidegger, the ability of human beings to contest or challenge this picture is increasing shut down.

Although Arendt and Foucault will draw on Heidegger’s thinking, they share the concern that Heidegger’s failure to address the historical practices and processes that shape our present leaves his analysis unmoored from the necessary ground of such an investigation of the present. This point is critical to both Arendt and Foucault and accounts in large part for their respective turns towards what, following Foucault, we may call the project of an historical ontology of ourselves in which the key critical task becomes that of disclosing how we have come to be characterised by a specific mode of being and its implications for us. It is here that Nietzsche becomes significant because Nietzsche’s work provides an exemplar of how to do philosophy in a way that is both grounded and historical, and hence provides a level of diagnostic specificity that can orient us towards our present, disclose a world to us, in such a way as to be action-guiding (if not action-determining). Particularly important here are *The Gay Science* for its wide-ranging analyses of central practices of human culture (art, religion, science) and diagnosis of the challenge facing Nietzsche’s present that he glosses in terms of ‘the death of God’ and the problem of nihilism, and *On the Genealogy of Morals* which attempts to provide a non-reductive historically-based account of how the cultural constellation that generates this challenge is forged from the yoking together of other developments that arose in relation to other problems and had different functions. There is little doubt that Nietzsche’s work also provides a range of specific insights concerning the modern condition that, variously, resonate with Arendt and with Foucault, but Nietzsche’s primary significance is, I propose, as an exemplar of how to do philosophy in a historical mode.

It is against this background that we can turn to look at Arendt’s and Foucault’s own responses to our modernity, before finally turning to consider them in relation to each other.

1. Arendt, Totalitarianism and Political Freedom

If it is the job of the historian to disclose what is new and its significance, it is also to attend to the main danger posed by what is new to our lives together. For Arendt, these two norms of scholarship come together in the case of totalitarianism as the central experience of her time. With respect to the first, she writes:

The originality of totalitarianism is horrible, not because some new "idea" came into the world, but because its very actions constitute a break with all our traditions; they have clearly exploded our categories of political thought and our standards for moral judgment.

While in relation to the second, Arendt remarks: ‘Its victory may coincide with the destruction of humanity; wherever it has ruled, it has begun to destroy the essence of man.’ (1958: viii) Arendt’s concern to try to get a grip of this phenomenon has, for her concern that human beings should be able to affirm the world they inhabit and make, high stakes:

To the extent that the rise of totalitarian governments is the central event of our world, to understand totalitarianism is not to condone anything, but to reconcile ourselves to a world in which such things are possible at all. If we want to be at home on this earth, even at the price of being at home in this century, we must try to take part in the interminable dialogue with the essence of totalitarianism. (U & P

In reflecting on Arendt’s approach to the diagnosis of totalitarianism as a genuinely novel form of rule and the response to it that she offers in articulating politics as the form of human activity which totalitarianism negates, I want to draw attention to the structure of her argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and in *The Human Condition*, and their relations to Nietzsche and Heidegger respectively, as a way of working out the character of this argument.

It has not, to my knowledge, been noticed that the structure of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* bears a striking similarity to that of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Nietzsche begins his preface to the *Genealogy* by highlighting the point that the task on which he is engaged is one of self-understanding (‘We are unknown to ourselves, we knowers’ GM P s.1) and Arendt equally locates her enterprise in this terrain:

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, a process of self-understanding. (U& P 310)

More pertinent to my immediate concerns though is the genealogical approach that each takes to engaging in this task of self-understanding. Each work is composed of three parts and presents the subjects of the first two parts are independent phenomena those distinct logics are then yoked together to yield a further phenomenon that is the focus of the third part. In the case of Nietzsche, the first essay on the slave-revolt in morals offers an account focused on the forging of a novel view of subjectivity and a reconceptualization of the good and its grammar (good/evil, not good/bad), the second essay addresses the development of bad conscience and a moralised view of guilt via a focus on promising, responsibility and punishment, before the third essay show how the two are combined in the articulation of the ascetic ideal and the understanding of morality that it establishes, and Nietzsche aims to demonstrate the danger that the triumph of the ascetic ideal poses by arguing that its own internal logic drives us towards nihilism. The case of Arendt’s *Origins* is messier and more complex in part because her understanding of the phenomenon changes and develops across the course of writing as Tsao (2002) has detailed. Yet despite the discontinuities that the books fraught composition introduces, we can still discern elements of a similar pattern of argument to Nietzsche. Arendt asserts the presence of such a pattern in her reply to Voegelin when she identifies her approach thus:

What I did … was to discover the chief elements of totalitarianism and to analyse them in historical terms, tracing these lements back in history as far as I deemed proper and necessary. That is, I did not write a history of totalitarianism, but an analysis in terms of history; I did not write a history of antisemitism or of imperialism, but analysed the element of Jew-hatred and the element of expansion insofar as these elements were still clearly visible and played a decisive role in the totalitarian phenomenon itself. The book, therefore, does not really deal with the “origins” of totalitarianism – as its title unfortunately claims – but gives a historical account of the elements which crystallised into totalitarianism, this account is followed by an analysis of the elemental structure of totalitarianism movements and domination itself. The elementary structure of totalitarianism is the hidden structure of the book, while its more apparent unity is provided by certain fundamental concepts which run like red threads through the whole. (1953: 77-8)

There may be, as Tsao (2002) suggests, a fair degree of post-hoc rationalisation in this claim but it is not, I think, a false picture of her intent or even of her achievement. Part 1 on antisemitism is, in part, an historical analysis of how an ideological fantasy concerning the Jews and international power could emerge from the historical transformations of the position of Jews in relation to state finances and as a non-national, inter-European element in the context of the decline of the European nation-state. Part 2 accounts for imperialism in terms of the insertion of the economic logic of expansion embraced by the bourgeoisie into national politics: ‘Imperialism was born when the ruling class in capitalist production came up against national limitations to its economic expansion.’ (1958: 126) This development is linked to the decline of the nation-state to which Arendt had already drawn attention in her account of antisemitism but here it is both given more attention as Arendt elucidates its centrality for the development of ‘race-thinking’ and for the unbalancing of the inter-state politics of Europe as power became ‘the only content of politics’ and ‘expansion its only aim’ (1958: 138).

:

As a group, Western Jewry disintegrated together with the nation-state during the decades preceding the outbreak of the first World War. The rapid decline of Europe after the war found them already deprived of their former power, atomized into a herd of wealthy individuals. In an imperialist age, Jewish wealth became insignificant; to a Europe with no sense of balance between its nations and of inter-European solidarity, the non-national, inter-European Jewish element became an object of universal hatred because of its useless wealth, and of contempt because of its lack of power. (1958: 15)

Antisemitism and fantasy of conspiracy

Imperialism and fantasy of racial hierarchy

In Arendt, the first part offers and account of the emergence of antisemitism (not simply religiously sanctioned hatred of the Jews) as a distinctive feature of the modern nation-state and modern society, the second part focuses on imperialism and the development of ‘race-thinking’ by way of a rapacious colonial expansionism, before she turns to

1. Totalitarianism and its conditions as novel
2. How did this arise?
3. Break with tradition, what totalitarianism discloses is the problem of failure to recognize plurality, natality and action [crudely] – why tradition did not provide resources to resist… continuity…
4. Task – genealogy of totalitarianism… reconstruction of vita active and vita contemplativa
5. Foucault, Biopolitics and Ethics
6. Regional ontologies (M&C, Birth of Clinic, and wider OT)
7. Disciplinary power to biopolitics
8. Care of the self

Foucualt ‘regional ontology’

, but before we turn to this relationship, we need to continue with the Heideggerian relations.

In the case of Arendt, there are at least two further central issues that she takes Heidegger’s work in *Being and Time* to fail to think through. The first is that Heidegger simply brackets and sets aside the fact of human embodiment, remarking that “this ‘bodily nature’ hides a whole problematic of its own, though we shall not treat it here” (*Being and Time* 23: 143). In setting aside the embodiment of Dasein, Heidegger’s analysis thereby abstracts away from a central feature of its being which concerns both the differentiation of distinct dimensions of Dasein’s being in the world. The second is that she sees Heidegger’s focus on *das Man* as captured by a modern picture of Dasein’s being-with-others in terms of something like the national culture of a *Volk*. This is present when, for example, Heidegger remarks:

By ‘Others’ we do not mean everyone else but me—those over against whom the ‘I’ stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself—those among whom one is too… By reason of this *with-like* Being-in-the-world, the world is always the one that I share with Others. (*Being and Time* 26: 154–5)

Heidegger’s treatment of this picture of being-with-others as *the* mode of being-with-others forecloses other possibilities that Arendt sees as vital to an understanding of the human condition. These two limitations of Heidegger’s analysis come together in a third way that is damaging for philosophical reflection, on Arendt’s view, in occluding the significance of natality for our analysis of Dasein’s being in the world.

If we turn to Foucault’s relationship to Heidegger, the picture is in some ways more difficult to discern and subject to a wide diversity of interpretations (see Sluga 2005 for an overview and intervention). Dreyfus (1989) discerns parallels between Heidegger’s analysis of Being and Foucault’s analysis of Power. Nichols (2014) argues that while Foucault’s relationship to Heidegger undergoes several changes over the course of his philosophical career, his final works on ‘care of the self’ show a deep connection to Heidegger’s existential analysis of care (*Sorge*). A difficulty for these views is that a central concern of Foucault’s late work is the relationship of power, freedom and autonomy that he thematises in terms of ‘"the paradox of the relations of capacity and power."’ (2003?: 317) which does not cohere with the Heideggerian reading. It is, however, plausible to argue that Heidegger’s anti-Cartesian approach is integral to Foucault’s focus on the *praxis* of practice with regard to the formation of subjectivity from at least *Discipline and Punish* and sets up a central problem in his work that leads to the ‘ethical’ turn in his final works. Like Arendt, however, Foucault’s work implies a critical relationship to Heidegger’s inability to develop an historical ontology of ourselves and it is to reading Heidegger in conjunction with Nietzsche that this critical reflection drives him.

note three things that I propose may be seen as held in common between them.

The first is a concern with trying to make sense of the world that is disclosed to us by attending to such actions and events, and to what this reveals about ourselves. Arendt addresses this in terms of ‘thinking’. Thus, at the start of *The Human Condition*, she writes: ‘What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.’ (1958: 5?) Foucault puts it a slightly different way when he situates himself in relation to Kant’s essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* as introducing ‘reflection on “today” as difference in history and as a motive for a particular philosophical task’ (1997: 309) and explicates this in terms of his project of a ‘critical ontology of ourselves’ (1997: 319). The second is that this task is one of disclosing and understanding the character of our present in terms of a historical mode of being in the world. Both share a scepticism towards the value of the kind of empirical or normative theories we find in political science or political philosophy in helping us with this task, which .

The third is that this task of has some kind of internal connection to freedom.

Arendt --

Foucault WE --

My goal in this essay is to make good on the claim that we can see these 3 things ….

freedom

What is shared is the commitment to

what is , but the question he proposes has a similarly deceptive simplicity:

The work of Arendt and Foucault is, I argue, fundamentally shaped by their engagements with Heidegger and Nietzsche, and perhaps specifically by the conjuncture marked by these two thinkers whom each works both through and against. In this article, I aim to establish certain points of similarity and difference between Arendt and Foucault against an analysis of each in relation to this shared background in order to ask how a dialogue constructed between them might inform our approach to political theory.

1. A Shared Background?

For Hannah Arendt, the central task is

1. Arendt, Totalitarianism and the Human Condition
2. Foucault, Biopolitics and the Care of the Self
3. Freedom, Politics and the Tradition
4. Thinking in Public

1. It is hard not to hear this as an ontological version of Mill’s reflections on conformity:

In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, everyone lives under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns themselves, the individual or the family do not ask themselves, what do I prefer? Or, what would suit my character and disposition? Or, what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play and enable it to grow and thrive? They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? what is usually done by person of my station and peculiar circumstances? or (worse still) what is usually done by persons of a station and circumstance superior to mine? I do not mean that they choose what is customary in preference to what suits their own inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination excepts for what is customary. Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done; peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct are shunned equally with crime, until by dint of not following their own nature they have no nature to follow: their human capacities are withered and starved; they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own. Now is this, or is it not, the desirable condition of human nature? (On Liberty, ref.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)