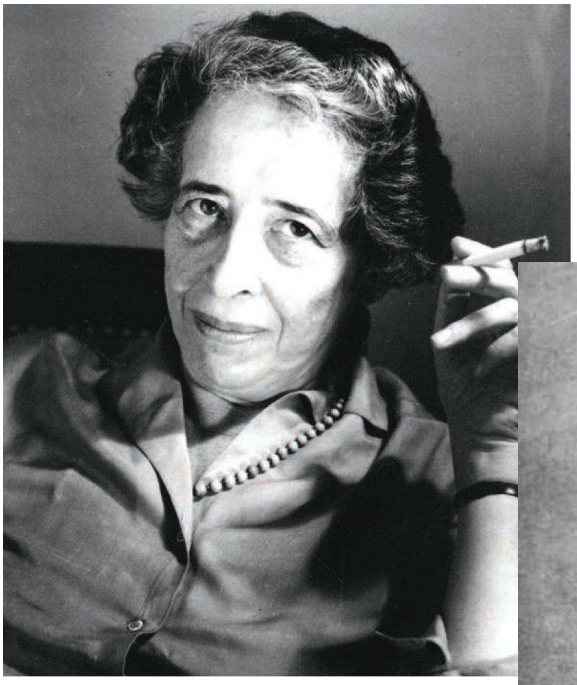
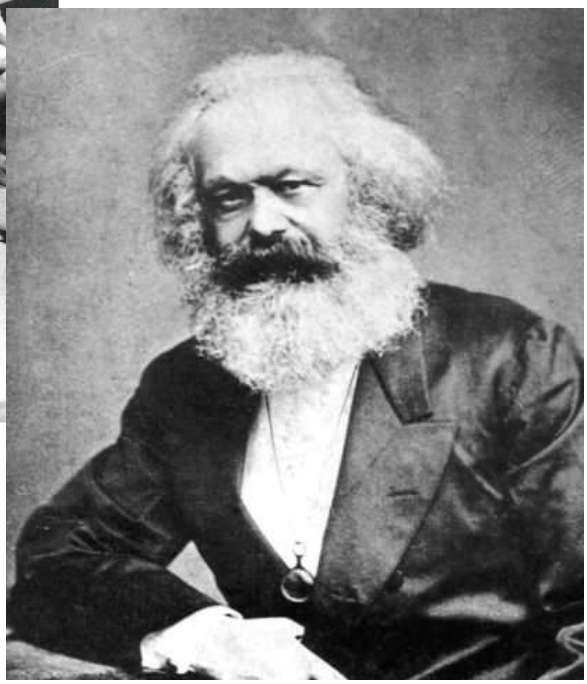
What is Politics?

An Answer by means of a Review
of Hannah Arendt's Critique
of the Ideas on Politics of Karl Marx





Master Thesis Political Philosophy

Lambert Pasterkamp

FINAL VERSION

Master Thesis

Student:	**Lambert Pasterkamp**
Student number:	**S0809101**
Supervisor:	**Dr. P. Nieuwenburg**
Co-reader:	**Dr. M.A. de Geus**
Study:	**Political Science (track Political Philosophy)**
Department:	**Institute of Political Science**
University:	**Leiden University**
Date:	**10 June 2013**
Word count:	**19.959 words (including notes)**

Table of Contents

Introduction

Originally, I was curious about continental political thinking because of the fact that it receives little or no attention at my discipline Political Philosophy. Most theories considered were of Anglo-Saxon origin. I knew some continental philosophers who really challenged me, but those were not political thinkers. I wondered; what would continental political philosophy be like? My attention was drawn to Hannah Arendt. Starting to read her works, I discovered that she examines a question that also intrigues me: how can it be that economy seems to dominate our modern lives and even our politics? Where does that domination of economics come from? Moreover, is it possible to practice politics that does not have economy as its primary focus? These questions make the reading of Hannah Arendt very interesting.

In particular, it is fascinating because Arendt does not fit into standard categories of contemporary political philosophy. It could not be said that she is a liberal, nor a Marxist, nor a communitarian. For the close reader of Arendt however, this is not what matters. Reading the theories of Arendt feels like going beyond the above mentioned categories. Something is mentioned here which precedes being a liberal or otherwise. The works of Arendt are about politics itself.

In this thesis the necessity of reconsidering politics itself will become apparent. With that, Arendt tries to defend politics because she wants to defend humankind. Politics becomes a fundamental issue for Arendt because the human condition itself is threatened. That is also the core of Arendt's critique of Karl Marx. In his theory, which in a way is archetypal for modernity according to Arendt, some fundamental mistakes are made; some mistakes that threaten our human being. Arendt reconsiders these and criticizes them and this will be the subject examined in this thesis. It will be the Arendtian critique moreover, that finally leads back to the just mentioned questions.

The following question will guide this thesis: *What is Hannah Arendt's philosophy of politics as revealed by means of the examination of her interpretation and critique of Karl Marx on this subject?* This question will be answered by means of several sub-themes. The first chapter will outline Arendt's conception of politics as a problem, especially with attention to her book *The Human Condition*. This chapters shows how Arendt, faced with urgent historical conditions, does trace these events back to Marx and even further beyond, to the Western tradition of political philosophy.

The second chapter will consider Arendt's interpretation of Karl Marx. This thesis will

not deal with Marx' thoughts itself, but it deals with the Arendtian interpretation of Marx. This is relevant, because Arendt has an idiosyncratic understanding of Marx, one that is embedded in her conceptual framework. After this, the third chapter presents the Arendtian critique of Marx.

Once this critique is clear, the concept of politics of Arendt herself can be considered. This will be done in chapter four. For the ideas on politics, Arendt refers back to the ancient Greeks. Politics for Arendt means a realm of human freedom. In chapter five this concept will be deepened by looking to the philosophical backgrounds of it. It will turn out that Arendt with her ideas on politics takes position towards the idea of politics as means to an end on the one hand and politics as a problem in itself on the other hand.

In chapter six Arendt's ideas on politics will be discussed. A critical review of the Arendtian kind of freedom will be given. Also it will be stated that Arendt starts from an assumption that quite a lot contemporary philosophers do not share.

The thesis will be ended with a conclusion that answers the before mentioned research question. The subject of this thesis was chosen because it provides the possibility to fundamentally reconsider politics itself. What is politics? To answer this question, Arendt criticizes Marx from a concept of politics derived from an era that pre-dates ours. Back to the basics and beyond even those, that is the characteristic of Arendt's work. More than just reconsidering politics, this provides the ability to fundamentally reconsidering our own time and being, which actually is exactly what philosophy is, in its true form.

1. The Human Condition

Sometimes great historical events demand reconsideration of inherited structures or traditions. In these cases, such events force us to impeach things, which until then, were familiar to us. Are the things we considered good really that good? Such a striking 'event' occurred for political theorist Hannah Arendt with the appearance of totalitarianism during and before World War II. Arendt asked herself what might have caused totalitarianism. She undertook a huge study into this subject in her famous book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). However, after publishing this work she noticed a 'serious gap', which was the lack of an adequate analysis of Bolshevik ideology (Kohn, 2005: xi). Arendt noticed that this ideology has connections with Karl Marx and the political theory of Marxism. This was quite interesting because Marxism is not a peripheral phenomenon in the tradition of Western political philosophy; it provides a contribution to it that cannot be overlooked.

In a proposal to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, Arendt explained that new philosophical research after her *Origins* book would provide 'the missing link' between commonly accepted categories of political thought and the present uncommon political situation of the Western world (Kohn, 2005: xii). Therefore, Arendt began to read the works of Karl Marx. The more she read, the more she began to criticize his work. This resulted in another famous book, *The Human Condition* (1958)[1]. In preparation for this work, Arendt held some lectures around the subjects of Marxism, politics, Western political tradition, et cetera. These have recently been bundled by Jerome Kohn in the book *The Promise of Politics* (2005)[2]. A final book of importance for this topic is Arendt's book *Between Past and Future* (1954)[3]. This work discusses political and philosophical questions like 'what is freedom?' or 'what is authority?'.

It is not accidental that Arendt explores precisely these questions. In her work it becomes clear that while there might not be a direct link between Bolshevik totalitarianism and Marx, Marx' work could have formed a negative condition for the emergence of Bolshevism (Kohn, 2005: xiv). It could be said that Marx ended a tradition, that he broke the authority of the tradition. This 'end of the tradition' (and therefore the lack of traditional boundaries) culminated in the cruelties of totalitarianism. The Western tradition had ended. Therefore its ideas had no longer authority for the present. That is why Hannah Arendt had to ask herself

[1] In the following text referred to as 'HC'.
[2] In the following text referred to as 'PP'.
[3] In the following text referred to as 'PF'.

the fundamental questions like ‘what is freedom actually?’ again.

Moreover, Arendt had to reconsider the human being and his condition. The tradition had ended and some essential insights had certainly lost their authority. Nevertheless, did not the tradition itself already lack some necessary insights? Why else could the tradition lead to ‘Marx’? To reconsider this and give rise to refreshed thinking about *the human condition*, Arendt wrote her book with that same name. What comprises the human being? What is politics? What is freedom? These questions resulted for Arendt in an extensive critique of Marxism as expounded in the above named books.

Criticizing tradition

Beyond a criticism of Marxism, Arendt dealt also with philosophical concepts of the Western tradition itself. This is clear from the other striking events that got her philosophical attention. Questions about our political and philosophical tradition are raised not only by horrifying totalitarian regimes, but also by events in modern science. Arendt starts her book *The Human Condition* by mentioning the launch of the first satellite. She calls this launch of an ‘earth-born object made by man’, an event ‘second in importance to no other’ (HC: 1). She demonstrates that people link this event with man’s escape from the earth. This idea is striking for Arendt, because it is totally new. People in history possibly might have spoken of the body as a prison for the soul, but ‘nobody in the history of mankind has ever conceived of the earth as a prison for men’s bodies’ (HC: 2). Arendt asks: why do men want to flee the earth?

Modern science has huge implications for our daily life. Moreover, ‘the situation created by the sciences is of great political significance’ says Arendt (HC: 3), and this proposition is especially true if the human condition *itself* is subject to change. According to Arendt the ‘earth is the very quintessence of the human condition’ (HC: 2). But what if modern sciences are focused on trying to flee the earth? This may symbolize a fundamental defect of the inherited thinking and of our philosophical tradition. Again, a fundamental reconsideration of the human condition is needed. Why could there possibly be men wanting to flee the earth? What actually are we as human beings?

This consideration of our condition results in a critique, not only of Marxism, but also of the inherited tradition that brought us our actual condition. Arendt starts criticizing our complete Western tradition of philosophical and political thought on some central features, in particular the thinking about the human condition. What Arendt intends in her *The Human Condition* is not an answer on the given events of totalitarianism and the launch of the first

satellite. Rather, she is planning to consider the question 'what we are doing?' (HC: 5). To answer this question she has to reconsider the origins of our tradition, which she traces back to Socrates and Plato, as well as its further development.

Vita activa

Considering the question 'what are we doing?' in her book *The Human Condition* Arendt unfolds a range of human *activities*, which she calls the *vita activa*. This life of activities is distinguished from the life of *contemplation*, the *vita contemplativa*. Later on, that distinction will take on importance. How does Arendt conceptualize this *vita activa*? Arendt posits three distinct forms of human activity, three 'fundamental human activities' (HC: 7), which are labour, work and action. Each of these activities is fundamental, according to Arendt, because they correspond to 'one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man' (HC: 7). The condition corresponding to labour is life itself, the condition corresponding to work is worldliness and the condition corresponding to action is that of the plurality of men.

The given activities form a hierarchical order according to Arendt. Labour is the lowest form of human activity, while action is the highest. This hierarchy is based on human freedom. Arendt defines labour as the kind of activity that is most subject to necessity. Labouring activities correspond to 'the biological process of the human body' (HC: 7) and that is the reason the condition of life itself corresponds with this activity. Labour is needed to sustain life, to sustain the body. Therefore, Arendt can conclude that labour is an activity only worthy for its inherent benefit. It is *necessary* and therefore, the man who is labouring is not free. The Latin term Arendt uses for the labouring man is *animal laborans*.

As Arendt often does, she gives the example of the ancient Greek polis. For the ancient Greeks, labour belonged to the realm of the household. The household was understood as the private sphere in which the works of necessity had to be done. It might be unimaginable for us, but for the Greeks the sphere of economy also belonged to this realm. Economy is the sphere of earning money and sustaining life with this money. In other words, it is subject to necessity. Labour was not public, it was private.

A higher kind of activity that Arendt distinguishes is the activity of work. Besides labouring for keeping oneself alive (being able to live in houses, being able to eat bread, etc.), there could be human activities which add something to this world. Arendt talks about the creation of an 'artificial' world, different from the natural world as it is given to us. In the activity of work, men create something, which is not made for the reason of sustaining life

itself. Work is the kind of activity that 'bestow[s] a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time' (HC: 8). When, for example a beautiful concert hall is built, or someone creates a beautiful chair crafted from wood, something 'extra' is added to the world.

Beside the given condition of life and the earth itself, man makes this artificial world. (Note the Arendtian vocabulary. 'Earth' is the given situation, part of our fundamental human condition, while 'world' is something made 'in between' humans. Men themselves shape the world as the 'in between' in which they live and act. Earth therefore corresponds to the activity of labour. Of course work and action are someway bound to that same earth, but not entirely. The activities of work and action in particular are bound to a 'world'.) The Latin term corresponding to men doing the activity of work is *homo faber* (men using tools). The *homo faber,* instead of the *animal laborans*, can add a relative durability to the product of his work. In the activity of work, something can be created that will last for a time, maybe even longer than the creator's life itself will endure. This is crucial for Arendt, because by adding durability to his life, men can flee the futility of the human mortal life.

Not even work is the highest kind of human activity, this highest position belongs to action according to Arendt. Within action, our human nature and our human identity realise their full advantage. Action is a distinct human sphere, namely the sphere of speech and deed. Men disclose their identities in the words they say; in how they deal with human plurality in their speech. And they disclose themselves in the deeds they do, the actions they undertake. The activity of action is the one in which men come together and live together. Action is the sphere of dealing with human plurality; dealing with the fact 'that men, not Man, live in the earth and inhabit the world' (HC: 7). While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, Arendt states that plurality 'is specifically *the* condition (...) of all political life' (HC: 7). Action is entirely necessary because we are all different. The only way, in which we are all the same, Arendt says, is the fact that nobody is the same as anybody else. The realm of action will turn out to be essential when it is considered how Arendt understands politics.

The Western tradition

It is relevant to mention another distinction here that Arendt makes. She distinguishes between the *modern age* and the *modern world.* The modern age began in the seventeenth century and came to an end in the twentieth century. '[P]olitically the modern world, in which we live today', Arendt states, 'was born with the first atomic explosions' (HC: 6). And it is in

this world that men speak about fleeing the world when a satellite is launched, something that Arendt calls 'world alienation'. *The world is no longer our home.* Why is that?

According to Arendt, this world alienation has everything to do with the *vita activa.* More precisely, this is the result of a particular understanding of the *vita activa* and its counterpart, the *vita contemplativa*. Our term *vita activa* 'is loaded and overloaded with tradition', according to Arendt: 'It is as old as (but not older than) our tradition of political thought' (HC: 12). This tradition 'eliminated many experiences of an earlier past that were irrelevant to its immediate political purposes and proceeded until its end, in the work of Karl Marx, in a highly selective manner' (HC: 12). Arendt traces the historical roots of the *vita activa* back to the ancient Greek, as she does with all her philosophical concerns. According to Arendt, our philosophical and political tradition began with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. For reflection on our tradition therefore, it can be very productive to compare ourselves with a pre-Socratic world, as do other philosophers like Nietzsche and Heidegger.

According to Arendt our understanding of the *vita activa* grew out of a specific historical constellation. This constellation is the 'trial of Socrates and the conflict between the philosopher and the polis' (HC: 12). Before that, the term *vita activa* meant a life 'devoted to public-political matters' (HC: 12). However, due to the conflict between the philosopher and the *polis*, the connotation of this term changed. Arendt states that there were three ways of living a free life in the ancient Greek city-states.[4] These are a life enjoying bodily pleasures; a life devoted to matters of the polis; and a life devoted to contemplation. The second one represents the *bios politikos (vita activa)* in the ancient Greek thought, while the third represents the *bios theõretikos (vita contemplativa).*

In her book *The Promise of Politics*, Arendt frames this as a conflict between philosophy and politics. As already stated, the origins of this conflict lay in the condemnation of Socrates by the city council of Athens. This condemnation of Socrates namely made Plato doubt the validity of *persuasion.* After all, persuasion – the persuasion of Socrates' judges who condemned him to death – was 'responsible' for the early death of Plato's tutor. Persuasion is however, quite a weak translation of the Greek *peithein,* which meant a specific political form of speech in which political cases could be handled without the use of violence or compulsion. In addition, Plato became very suspicious about the Greek *doxa.* The notion of *doxa* is quite significant in this thesis. Arendt explains this concept as follows:

[4] Purposely I speak about a free life. A life under necessity, like that of a slave, or a live devoted to keeping one-self alive, was seen as not fully human. Moreover, also one of the three forms of freedom was not seen as fully human.

> 'To Socrates, as to his fellow citizens, *doxa* was the formulation in speech of what *dokei moi*, that is, "of what appears to me." (...) It was not (...) subjective fantasy and arbitrariness, but was also not something absolute and valid for all. The assumption was that the world opens up differently to every man according to his position in it; and that the "sameness" of the world, its commonness (...) or "objectivity" (...), resides in the fact that the same world opens up to everyone and that despite all differences between men and their positions in the world – and consequently their *doxai* (opinions) – "both you and I are human." (PP: 14).

Beside that, Arendt explains that *doxa* did not only mean opinion, but also had a connotation of splendour and fame. In this way it was related to the realm of politics. This realm of politics was the public sphere in which everyone who was able to (keep in mind that only the free men were), could give his *doxa*, and therefore show himself and obtain splendour and fame. Arendt explains: 'To assert one's own opinion belonged to being able to show oneself, to be seen and heard by others' (PP: 14).

The conclusion might be drawn, following Arendt, that having seeing Socrates condemned via a majority outvoting him, Plato began to look for 'absolute standards' in his philosophy. Plato wanted to introduce these absolute standards into the realm of human affairs; into politics. Plato created an opposition of truth and opinion and brought this into the realm of human affairs. It is exactly this move that made the realm of philosophy – the realm of envisioning eternal truths and the absolute standards – and the realm of politics – the realm of *peithein* and *doxa* – clash. For in the polis everything was decided by speech and deed, by *doxa* and *peithein*, which stood in manifest opposition towards the Platonic 'eternal truths'. This meant a clash between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*.

What was the result of this conflict? According to Arendt in her book *The Promise of Politics* this conflict ended in a defeat of philosophy. That means: the outcome of the clash meant that philosophy was put back into its own realm. Philosophy not allowed to rule over politics. Therefore, the *vita contemplativa* became a strict separate domain, beside the *vita activa*. '[O]nly through the famous *apolitia*, the indifference and contempt for the world of the city (...) could the philosopher protect himself against the suspicions and hostilities of the world around him', says Arendt (PP: 26).

However, paradoxically this attitude of *apolitia* historically coincided – probably not coincidentally according to Arendt – with the decay of the Athenian polis life. With the disappearance of the city-state, the understanding of *vita activa* as a life of political *action* disappeared too, as Arendt states. Consequently, the clash did not only result in a defeat of philosophy. In the end, politics as a separate realm was 'defeated' as well. In the tradition this resulted in the understanding of the *vita contemplativa* as superior to the *vita activa*.

The defeat of politics as a separate realm however is a controversial statement. Think for example of Machiavelli (*The Prince*) and his time in which politics was quite a vital, independent realm of action. The intrinsic worth of politics for Machiavelli seems to get and to keep power. To him, politics is not an activity just being subject to necessity; it is more something like a game, worth playing in itself.[5]

The fall of politics

The remaining question is: how could the *vita contemplativa* become superior? The superiority of contemplation in our tradition is not so much Christian in origin, according to Arendt, it can already be found in Plato's political philosophy. Arendt clearly states that 'the whole utopian reorganization of polis life [according to Plato's eternal truth] is not only directed by the superior insight of the philosopher but has no aim other than to make possible the philosopher's way of life' (HC: 14).

It has to be said that this is quite a strong statement again. Arendt does not prove that Plato was the only, let alone the first, initiator of this. It can be said she undertakes quite a selective reading of the pre-Socratic philosophy, as well as of Plato and Aristotle, and there is doubt about whether Plato on his own can be hold responsible for the distinct position of philosophy. The further question is whether the philosophers view indeed became so important in the Western tradition. Remind Machiavelli again, or Thomas Hobbes. Was the *vita contemplativa* indeed that influential, or was this actually only the case for academics and monks?

However, with the downfall of the polis and the rise of Christianity across Europe, the changed understanding of the *vita activa*, inspired by Plato, still was consolidated. This happened according to Arendt by the Christian demand of a *quiet* life (which indeed is a life of contemplation) and its orientation towards the afterlife. Within Christianity, through leading authors like Augustine and Aquinas, this dominance of the *vita contemplativa* survived into the modern age. This implied also that the *vita activa* became defined more and more from the *vita contemplativa.* The *vita activa* completely lost its particular *political* understanding. Action downgraded to the realm of necessity. The only sphere left for freedom was the *vita contemplativa*; contemplation; a life besides activities. The classical understanding of politics, that of the Greek polis, with its strict separation of a private and public sphere, disappeared and made place for another; one that Arendt will heavily criticize

[5] See Machiavelli (1532) *The Prince.*

in the works of Karl Marx.

Resuming, it can be stated that Arendt defines our tradition, which begun in the works of Plato, as follows: There exists a strict separation of the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. Moreover, because of the hierarchy of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa,* the latter, in our tradition, always was conceptualized from the former. This resulted in the lack of distinction *within* the *vita activa*. Rather than thinking of the *vita activa* in terms of political action, it is seen as the complete collection of human activities, all done under necessity. It is this tradition that came to an end in the works of Marx, according to Arendt. Marx turned the tradition 'upside down': he changed the hierarchical order of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. Moreover, in the reading of Arendt, Marx explicitly elevated one of the kinds of activity within the *vita activa*. Unfortunately, it was the lowest one.

2. Arendt's interpretation of Marx

The previous chapter outlined how Arendt reconsiders the human condition after facing 'the end of the tradition'. This chapter focuses on Arendt's interpretation of Marx, in whose works Arendt situates the end of the tradition. Note that this chapter thus principally deals with an *interpretation*, and not with *critique*, which will be the subject of chapter three. This is necessary, because it will turn out to be the case that Arendt has a very particular, idiosyncratic understanding of Marx. This understanding is shaped by her particular concepts and philosophical framework.

It will reveal that Arendt situates the end of the Western political tradition in two major 'changes' Marx made in his works. First of all, Marx turns the traditional hierarchy between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa* upside down. Second but no less important, in the reading of Arendt, Marx reduces the entire *vita activa* – and maybe even the *vita contemplativa* - to labour. Marx thereby changes the traditional definition of man as *animal rationale* into that of *animal laborans*. This implies the end of the Western tradition of political philosophy, according to Arendt.

Marx' reversal

Marx was influenced by the philosophy of Hegel. Hegel's philosophy of history is thus relevant to understand here. According to Hegel, a 'world spirit' leads the path of history. This Spirit makes history move forward in a dialectical way. Dialectic, in particular in Hegel's case, is a term that needs explanation. The continuance of history is understood by Hegel as a constant three step-process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. A simplified explanation goes as follows: a certain stage in history (thesis) always gives rise to its antipode (antithesis), out of which a higher stage will come forward (synthesis). This process is understood by Hegel as the self-fulfilment of that Spirit. So, according to Hegel there is constant improvement in history. This improvement is the Spirit of history, which is a transcendent subject. This Spirit is an autonomous one, fulfilling itself through history.

Marx was influenced by the Hegelian dialectic, but soon he became one of Hegel's most critical students. In the text 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie' of the young Marx (1843), he criticizes Hegel on his dialectic, and proposes his own version of a dialectic. Arendt interprets this text and states that Marx objected to Hegel that '[t]he dialectic of the world spirit does not move cunningly behind men's backs (...) but is instead the style and

method of human action' (PP: 70-71). What lies behind this, is the often mentioned 'turning upside down' of the philosophy of Hegel by Marx: the reversal of the Hegelian dialectic. This reversal means, in the words of Arendt, that Marx thinks that rather than that the '"absolute" revealed itself (...) we can realize the absolute' (PP: 71). This is possible if at least we know the laws of that dialectic. In other words: Marx made the dialectic of Hegel 'into a method' (PP: 74). In the ideas of Marx, people *can realize history by themselves.*

Marx indeed describes his departure from Hegel as an inversion, a 'turning everything on its head' (Arendt, PP: 71). What is even more urgent in this case is that this Marxian reversal implies a reversal of the traditional categories of the Western tradition of political philosophy. The life of the mind, the realm of the spirit (or Spirit), lost its hierarchical position in favour of the life of activities. The Spirit of history becomes a spirit, and it is no longer located in a transcendent, mental world, but in the world of human people and his activities. Marx makes men the makers of history, situating the 'spirit' of history in his Marxian 'base' (*Basis*), which influences the 'superstructure' (*Überbau*).[6] Marx turns the hierarchy of the tradition upside down.

This means, according to Arendt, that tradition loses its authority, which is the beginning of the end of the tradition. She says: 'What has occurred in modern thought, via Marx on the one hand and Nietzsche on the other, is the adoption of the framework of tradition with a concurrent rejection of its authority' (PP: 73). Marx adopts the framework – he takes over the concepts - of the Western tradition, but discards its order and part of its content. This means, he fills in the framework of tradition rather arbitrarily; according to his own 'favours'. The strict hierarchical oppositions are no longer 'holy' for Marx. Therefore, Arendt states:

> 'Tradition, authority, and religion are concepts whose origins lie in pre-Christian and Christian Rome; they belong together (...). The past, to the extent that it is passed on as tradition, has authority; authority, to the extent that it presents itself as history, becomes tradition; and if authority does not proclaim, in the spirit of Plato, that "God [and not man] is the measure of all things," it is arbitrary tyranny rather than authority' (PP: 73).

When man himself becomes 'the measure of all things', rather than God or Platonic, transcendent concepts, this tradition – which rests on authority and religion (both things *external,* transcendent to men) – comes to an end. And when the authority of tradition is

---

[6] See, among others, the text *'Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie'* (Marx, 1859). Marx believed that the 'higher' domains of humanity, such as politics, religion, philosophy and art, are shaped as a result of the forces and the relations of production in each specific era. He thus believed that the 'base' (*Basis*) determines the 'superstructure' (*Überbau*) (both Marxian concepts). This theory is known in philosophy as historical materialism. Marx thus believed that whatever change in the superstructure was necessary, it had to come from the base. He therefore thought a proletarian revolution (a revolution in the base) was necessary to change the system.

broken while it continues as an empty shell, it becomes tyrannical, states Arendt. This brings the argumentation back at the beginning of the previous chapter and the subject of totalitarianism. How could our tradition bring forward totalitarianism, in particular Bolshevism? That is explained because the end of the tradition in the works of Marx formed a negative condition, a vacuum, for the appearance of tyrannical regimes (PP: 74).

Marx broke the authority of tradition, after which its framework survived as an empty shell. And this could give way to the 'arbitrary tyranny' of Bolshevism. This is what Arendt states when she says that '[b]y turning dialectic into a method', - Marx made the dialectical fulfilment of history of Hegel into a task for mankind - 'Marx liberated it from those contents that held it within limits and bound it to substantial reality' (PP: 74). Neither traditional wisdom, nor religion, binds political theory any longer. Consequently Arendt therefore states that this Marxian thinking 'opens a path onto truly ideological thinking' (PP: 74). However, Arendt has to defend Marx here against an all-too radical attack. She says in favour of Marx, that these consequences were still unknown to Marx himself. Rather it was Marxism which ran off with Marx' ideas.[7]

With his reversal, Marx also changed the 'working area' of truth. Arendt states: 'Marx rejects the idea that action in and of itself, and absent the cunning of Providence, cannot reveal truth, or indeed produce it' (PP: 76). That of course was the idea in the Western tradition of political philosophy. In the tradition, politics was merely understood as the regulating sphere of human activities in order to make possible and even 'safeguard' (Arendt) the contemplative life of the philosophers or the contemplative life of Christians towards God. Action itself had nothing to do with truth: the meaningfulness of truth strictly belongs to the sphere of the *vita contemplativa*.

Marx thus rejects this idea that action cannot reveal truth. He makes action, or rather labour, as will turn out later, the engine of human development as well as the engine of reality. No longer has Divinity to fulfil history and humankind, but men have to do this by themselves. Men have to *create* history; moreover, men have to create *themselves*.[8] This also implies a particular task for the philosopher, according to Marx, thereby retaking the task of the philosopher that Plato once wanted. The philosopher can think of the world, he can interpret it, but rather than only thinking (*vita contemplativa*) he has to change it. The

[7] Arendt says the following about Marxism: 'What we call Marxism in a specifically political sense scarcely does justice to Marx's extraordinary influence on the humanities. That influence has nothing to do with the method of vulgar Marxism – never employed by Marx himself – which explains all political and cultural phenomena from the material circumstances of the production process' (PP: 72).
[8] See 'Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie' (Marx, 1843).

philosopher's thinking must have practical implications (thus in the *vita activa*). This becomes particularly clear in Marx 'Theses on Feuerbach', of which the eleventh sounds: 'Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it' (Marx, 1845).

Animal laborans

A second relevant point that Arendt reads in Marx' work is that about the status of labour. In Arendt's understanding, Marx – following the modern approach- fails to see the distinction of labour, work and action *within* the *vita activa* and thereby he completely reduces it to the activity of labour. How could this be?

As is known, according to Marx, history is a process driven by class interests. Arendt considers this as following: 'What makes history comprehensible is the clash of interests; what makes it meaningful is the assumption that the interest of the laboring class is identical with the interest of humankind (...)' (PP: 78). What is entirely new in the philosophy of Marx is that this interest – something material in the words of Arendt – is linked to the essential humanity of man. Above that, it is decisive that Marx links interest 'not so much to the laboring class' but that he links this to 'labor itself as the preeminent human activity' (PP: 79).

For Marx, according to Arendt, labour itself thus is the interest of humankind. This means, as Arendt understands Marx, a new definition of man. The essence of man is not seen, by Marx, in his rationality (*animal rationale*, as man was understood in the tradition), nor in his ability to produce objects (*homo faber*), nor in his being a creature in the likeness of God (*creature Dei*); Marx situates the essence of man in his labour. Exactly in labour, 'which tradition', writes Arendt, 'had unanimously rejected as incompatible with a full and free human existence' (PP: 79). Marx makes exactly that sphere to the core of humanity, of which the tradition believed no free and full human existence is possible within it. According to Arendt, in doing so Marx defined the human being as an *animal laborans*, a labouring animal. Again, this is a quite strong Arendtian conclusion. Marx himself defined the human being as a *productive* being (Wolff, 2010: § 4.1), not as a labouring being. The human being must produce his substantial needs in order to live and enjoy his life.

But how could Arendt then state that Marx reduces man to an *animal laborans*? The key to that conclusion lies in that term 'productive' for Arendt. According to Arendt, it was Marx who was the first clearly articulating that labouring activity itself possesses 'productivity'. 'This productivity', Arendt writes, 'does not lie in any of labor's products but in the human "power," whose strength is not exhausted when it has produced the means of its own

subsistence and survival but is capable of producing a "surplus," that is, more than is necessary for its own "reproduction"' (HC: 88). Something more than strictly necessary for surviving is produced – this is the human surplus. The human labour power (*Arbeitskraft*) can produce extra products. The extra products need to be consumed. This cycle of production and consumption – thus a constant reproduction – however, is nothing more than the production of life itself.

Arendt states so, when she says that the human labour power is only 'measured and gauged against the requirements of the life process for its own reproduction'. The productivity 'resides in the potential surplus inherent in human labour power, not in the quality or character of the things it produces' (HC: 93). So, productivity by Marx is nothing more than adding extra things to the cycle of life, according to Arendt. This entire human surplus becomes incorporated in the cycle of life, the cycle of production and consumption. Seen from this viewpoint all labouring done is "productive", because it all 'produces' life.

For a right understanding it is good to know that Marx thought that in his utopia people would do all kind of labouring activities voluntarily, just to fulfil their being. Arendt brings forward Marx' famous example of Milton producing *Paradise Lost* for the same reason a silk worm produces silk (HC: 100, note 36). For Marx, all human activities then will come forward by, and a passage of Arendt is quoted here, '"man's metabolism with nature" in whose process "nature's material [is] adapted by a change of form to the wants of man," so that "labour has incorporated itself with its subject," (HC: 98-99).

Considering this, Arendt draws the conclusion that 'labor and consumption are but two stages of the ever-recurring cycle of biological life'. Whatever is 'produced' by this kind of labour activity is 'meant to be fed into the human life process almost immediately' (HC: 99); it is immediately incorporated and consumed. In Marx' ideal world, according to Arendt, nothing more is done than the activity of man *as the life-process itself*: this is the ever-returning cycle of labour and consumption. No more activities are undertaken than those that life itself provides and that sustain life.

This is quite abstract, but what is the case according to Arendt, is that Marx made 'productivity' (labour that results in certain products as things that can be consumed) and in particular labour productivity, to the core of his philosophy. This human labour power produces nothing more than. It produces merely *its own reproduction*, states Arendt. In other words, nothing is added to the world in the sense of work and action, as defined by Arendt. Everything has become part of Life itself, and so in his activities man is never freed from 'repeating it all over again' and he therefore remains permanently captured in an "eternal

necessity imposed by nature" (HC: 102-103). In the end, this means that the process of life and the activity of labour will become one and the same, because within the frame of reference of labour power 'all things become objects of consumption'.

In this context Marx' ideal of socialist society has to be kept in mind. Arendt explains that this ideal society of Marx indeed is a state of affairs in which all human activities derive naturally from human nature 'as the secretion of wax by bees for making the honeycomb'. This means that 'life will no longer "begin for [the laborer] where [the activity of laboring] ceases"' (HC: 89, note 21). The Arendtian conclusion then however is, that *Being and Living will have become one and the same.* Then, man is indeed nothing more than a metabolism with nature.

Now it becomes clear that this movement – in the words of Arendt a transformation of mankind into man as *animal laborans* – stands in direct opposition towards the world of the ancient Greeks. In the world of the ancient Greeks man was understood as fully human and fully free when he was free from necessity, which meant free from labour and work and able to *act*. For Arendt that means adding something to this world. However, when productivity becomes the new fulfilment of humanity, '[w]e are left with the rather distressing alternative between productive slavery and unproductive freedom', according to Arendt (HC: 105).

Some critical notes can be made here. For Marx both production and freedom accompany in his socialist ideal. The producing man then *is* a free man. Once labour has become just a natural part of human active live, man is no longer subject to necessity because labour lost its coercive character. The alternative Arendt presents might be too rigid. Rather Marx and Arendt have different concepts of freedom.

Revaluation of politics

What does all this mean for Marx' concept of politics, which is – by the interpretation of Hannah Arendt – looked after? The Western tradition understood politics as inferior to contemplation. And there were more 'red lines' through the thinking on politics during the tradition, according to Arendt. One of these is thinking of politics as a matter of ruling and being ruled. The major Marxian 'shifts' however ended the tradition, including that concept of ruling and being ruled. In the works of Marx, as Arendt states, '[n]ot only does the concept of law recede into the background (...); it is altogether eliminated, because all positive legal systems, according to Marx, are ideologies, pretexts for the exercise of rule of one class over another' (PP: 87). Just because politics can be an instrument to realize class oppression, Marx eliminates it all together. He opposes class divisions in society and has in mind a socialist

ideal of everybody being equal. The only law Marx wanted to recognize is the law of history, which is a law of progress and fulfilment, affordable trough revolution.

What Marx did, concludes Arendt, is 'reinterpreting the tradition of political thought and bringing it to its end'. He thereby did not challenge 'philosophy but its alleged impracticality' (PP: 91). Marx drew the consequences from Hegel's philosophy 'that action or *praxis*, contrary to the whole tradition, was so far from being the opposite of thought, that it was the true and real vehicle of thought, and that politics, far from being infinitely beneath the dignity of philosophy, was the only activity that was inherently philosophical' (PP: 91-92). Instead of going back to an ideal of the Greek polis – something Arendt would have liked to see – the ideas of Marx mean a revaluation of politics. What does this revaluation of politics imply, according to Arendt?

Marx wants to achieve a communist ideal, which is a classless society. Within this society, rule and domination disappear. In the communist utopia, there is a strict equality of all people, no distinct classes, no oppression nor rule or domination. Marx thereby states, in the words of Arendt, that 'mere *administration*, in contrast to *government*, is the adequate form of men living together under the condition of radical and universal equality' (PP: 77; *italics* mine). This is a decisive distinction between the thoughts of Arendt and Marx. According to Marx, politics can be understood as mere administration in his ideal society. For Arendt, this means a deathblow to politics itself, as to freedom and the essence of humanity.

In the next chapter it will be explained why exactly Marx' understanding of politics is a deathblow to politics, according to Arendt. The Arendtian critique of Marx will thus be considered.

3. Arendt's critique of Marx

The previous chapter outlined the particular Arendtian understanding of Karl Marx. Subsequently, this chapter will consider Arendt's critique of Marx. As noted in the previous chapter, the point that worries Arendt the most in Marx' work is the dominant position that labour gets in the *vita activa*. According to Arendt, Karl Marx – and with him more leading thinkers in the Western tradition - fails to see the *promise of politics,* which is the promise of human freedom.

The critique of Arendt can be summed up in three points each one deriving from the previous one. First, Arendt criticizes Marx for giving labour such a dominant position within the *vita activa*. In doing so, and this is the second point, Marx sails, so to speak, along the waves of his time. Modernity namely brings a spectacular rise of what Arendt calls the social sphere. This social sphere is responsible for the great urgency of labour in modern times. However, rather than to observe the danger of it, in his philosophy Marx stimulates the growth of this social sphere. The danger of doing so is that it will exclude human freedom, according to Arendt. Marx even goes so far (and this is the third stage of Arendt's critique) that he states that the social sphere can finally overrule the private as well as the public sphere, resulting in a withering away of the state. Of course, this final stage is the complete antipode of Arendt's thinking.

The rise of labour

As said in chapter two, some questions remain open about the 'new definition' of man, that of man as *animal laborans.* How could Marx arrive at the idea that labour has become so important, while thereby opposing the complete Western tradition? Arendt situates the roots of Marx' idea in the modern age. In the modern age something arose, which Arendt calls a 'spectacular rise of labor from the lowest, most despised position to the highest rank' (HC: 101).

This rise of labour was not an exploration of Marx himself. That is showed by the following phrase of Arendt: '[T]he seemingly blasphemous notion of Marx that labor (and not God) created man or that labor (and not reason) distinguished man from the other animals was only the most radical and consistent formulation of something upon which the whole modern age was agreed' (HC: 86). Arendt takes Marx as exemplary for the modern age. Because Marx is the most radical and consistent of all, he seems for Arendt the right one to pile

criticism on.

The question then is, what made possible the 'spectacular rise' of labour in the modern age and thus its dominant place in the works of Marx? This spectacular rise began 'when Locke discovered that labor is the source of all property', says Arendt (HC: 101). This was followed by Adam Smith, who declared labour as the source of all wealth and its final stage was found in Marx's system, in which 'labor became the source of all productivity and the expression of the very humanity of man' (HC: 101). Why did those concepts of property, wealth and productivity become so significant? Arendt says that from the seventeenth century onwards there was an unprecedented process of growth of property, activities, et cetera. The concept of growing and process 'became the very key term of the new age as well as the sciences (...) developed by it' (HC: 105).

The concept of process became fundamental in the understanding of life. Arendt then points to the fact that of all human activities distinguished by her, '*only labour is unending, progressing automatically* in accordance with life itself and outside the range of wilful decisions or humanly meaningful purposes' (HC: 105-106; *italics* mine). Above this, and as mentioned in chapter two, Arendt shows that for Marx labour is the reproduction of life and that begetting is the production of foreign life. This respectively assures the life of the individual and the life of the species. With these ideas, Marx' thoughts are in line with many other theorists who all think of life as giving birth. That is because this is the theory of the modern age, says Arendt.

However, only in Marx' work there is an equation between productivity and fertility, 'so that the famous development of mankind's "productive forces" into a society of an abundance of "good things" actually obeys no other law and is subject to no other necessity than the aboriginal command, "Be ye fruitful and multiply," in which it is as though the voice of nature herself speaks to us' (HC: 106). In this Marxian theory life, fertility and labour become one and the same, exactly as the earlier citation about Milton and the silk worm implies. Life-activity becomes labour-activity, and therefore labour becomes *the* dominant activity within the *vita activa*. Moreover, in this Marxian theory, labour becomes also the *blessing* of life, as Arendt shows. The labouring life thus becomes the rhythm in which the human being 'enjoys' his activity. Arendt explains this intrinsic connection between labour and joy as follows:

> 'The blessing of labor is that effort and gratification follow each other as closely as producing and consuming the means of subsistence, so that happiness is a concomitant of the process itself, just as pleasure is a concomitant of the functioning of a healthy body. The "happiness of the greatest number," into which we have generalized and vulgarized the felicity with which earthly life has

> always been blessed, conceptualized into an "ideal" the fundamental reality of a laboring humanity' (HC: 107-108).

Marx, as archetype of the modern age, makes an ideal of the labouring life. Even more strongly, he *reduces* (the essence of) human life to the mere activity of labour. He literary does so, according to Arendt, when he speaks about "productive forces of society", aiming at the living human organism (HC: 108).

According to Arendt, this means a generalization as well as a vulgarization of the human species. Almost no place is left for exactly those human activities (work and action) that make the human being honourable and that lift him above being merely part of a biological process. According to Arendt, Marx strictly focuses on the *process* of creating a surplus, but not on the *quality* or character of that surplus. For Marx 'the question of a separate existence of worldly things, whose durability will survive and withstand the devouring process of life, does not occur (...) at all', says Arendt (HC: 108).

The rise of the social

Before Marx could describe humans as *animal laborans* however, still another historical development was necessary. This is the rise of a social sphere. Arendt describes this development as inherent to the modern age. And while it is not obvious in *The Human Condition*, a major critique of Marx is that he fails to see the problematic side of this rise. Or, even more strongly, that he wants to extend the development of a social sphere until its apotheosis in a communist utopia in which both private and public realms are absorbed by this social sphere. Also the emphasis Marx put on productivity cannot be fully understand without the rise of the social sphere.

In the previous section, it was said that Arendt saw a certain development in the thinking about labour, responsible for its rise within the *vita activa*. This was the development of property to wealth, and from wealth to productivity. Marx' works formed the final stage in this, in which labour was declared as the source of all productivity and the expression of the very humanity of man. With the shift from property to wealth, a crucial step was taken that made Marx' works possible. Note that there is a fundamental difference between property and wealth. Property is person-bound, while wealth is not. It is not without reason that Arendt states that Locke's concepts 'were still essentially those of the premodern tradition' (HC: 115). Property for Locke was still an "enclosure from the common", so that a private sphere was needed (HC: 115). Rather, this becomes altogether different when the 'leading interest' is moved from property towards the growth of wealth. This growth of wealth is not related to

individual persons, but towards a group as a whole.

Arendt says: ‘Only if the life of society as a whole, instead of the limited lives of individual men, is considered to be a gigantic subject of the accumulation process can this process go on in full freedom and at full speed (...)’ (HC: 116). Thus, it seems to be a functional requirement of history, of modern times, that men do no longer act as individuals, only concerned with private survival, but as “member of the species”, as *Gattungswesen*, as Arendt quotes Marx (HC: 116). The individual lives become absorbed into a collective life (“socialized mankind”), and then this collective life can follow its own “necessity’, which is ‘its automatic course of fertility in the twofold sense of multiplication of lives and the increasing abundance of goods needed by them’ (HC: 116).

The rise of the social is a functional requirement of modern age, but in Arendt’s work it remains unclear what exactly made the social sphere itself rise. In any case, this rise is typically modern, as Arendt states that the ‘disappearance of the gulf that the ancients had to cross daily to transcend the narrow realm of the household and “rise” into the realm of politics is an essentially modern phenomenon’ (HC: 33). In my reading of Arendt, she starts from the presumption that the social sphere rose as a functional requirement of modern labour. Arendt states that ‘emancipation of labour’ preceded the emancipation of the working class, rather than being a consequence of it (HC: 47). The rise of modern labour as well as the ‘constantly growing social realm’ might be linked with what Arendt calls the ‘constantly accelerated increase in the productivity of labor’ (HC: 47).

There are some reasons for this, first of all the division of labour, which preceded the industrial revolution. A second reason can be seen in the mechanization of the labour process. But in the end, both these processes have their foundation in modernity. Arendt gives a number of causes for the rise of modernity, summed up by Passerin d’Entreves (2006: Ch. 3). These include: the waves of expropriation started during the Reformation, the invention of the telescope challenging the adequacy of the senses, the rise of modern sciences (Bacon) and philosophy (Descartes) and subsequently the rise of a conception of man as part of a process of Nature and History.

These developments changed the way labour is seen as well as the activity of labour itself. This resulted in the end in a ‘constantly accelerated increase’ in the productivity of labour (which of course was also a result of the process-thinking). For this increasing productivity it was necessary that the boundaries of public and private were broken in favour of a social realm. This social realm could serve the wants of the increasing labour productivity better, and thus a social realm came about. Once ‘born’, it might be clear that this social system does

sustain itself as Arendt states that ‘labor and consumption are but two stages of the same process’ (HC: 126).

The social sphere according to Arendt is a modern appearance that overrules the old-known dichotomy between the private and the political sphere. It means that the activities that were understood as private in the ancient world, so the activities of the household, rise into a common sphere. Of course, this resulted in a blurring of the old distinction between private and public/political. The household and so its institutions like the economy and labour, becomes common in the modern age, resulting in a disappearance of the public sphere.

Arendt characterizes the social sphere as ‘modern equality’, one that is ‘based on the conformism’, which is only possible ‘because behaviour has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationship’ (HC: 47). The social sphere is an equalizing force, bringing everyone under the same functions, laws and requirements. In addition, so was the case with labour, as became clear previously. The social realm might be a function, or a functional requirement for modern labour. At the other side, modern labour is also a function of the social realm. Life in the modern age becomes ‘functional’. Life becomes equalized with a ‘function’ in the system, the social realm, a function that can be fulfilled by labour.

Of course, live as a function leaves less space for working activities and even less for human action. ‘It is decisive’, says Arendt, ‘that society, on all its levels, excludes the possibility of action, which formerly was excluded from the household’ (HC: 40). Society namely asks of each of its members ‘normalized behaviour’, that is accountable, controllable and predictable behaviour. This is done by the imposing of all kinds of rules, according to Arendt. In this way, this requested behaviour excludes spontaneous activities or men who want to make great achievements on their own.

The described ‘normalized behavior’ of course stands in direct contradiction with Arendt’s conception of the human condition. Following the ancient Greeks, she states that exactly action is the most determining of human activities. That is the activity in which human freedom is situated. Labour is the activity that is subject to necessity; the *animal laborans* is not free! Next to this, the human plurality is overruled by the enormous overweight of the social sphere of modernity.

It might be good to step aside for a moment. Earlier Passerin d’Entreves said that Arendt fails to see the good things that modernity brought about. Again, to me Arendt is too pessimistic about modernity. Society might ask normalized behaviour of its members, but we still live in a society which is probably more pluralist than ever before. Further, modernity brought us the emancipation of quite a lot of minorities or disadvantaged groups that

previously were not able to act at all. What Arendt is pointing at is that *action*, as meant in her idiosyncratic connotation, is threatened in modern times. Arendt does make some good critical points, but this is point is exaggerated. Action, also in the Arendtian sense is still possible and does still happen. Also modernity has had its famous political moments of action: think of Churchill, Martin Luther King, De Gaulle and several other politicians and political events that forever will remain part of the history, the world we live in.

Marx and the social sphere

In the continuation of the Arendtian analysis, another striking point appears. What is even worse namely, that when men are equalized and 'normalized' into a big social sphere, indeed the way that could lead to 'Marx' and totalitarianism is clear. In the end it was Marx who could give rise to totalitarian ideas in which the complete human condition was changed, and many people had not been treated with dignity. However, where exactly is that link with Marx? What is the position of Marx and Marxism towards the social sphere?

Arendt criticizes Marx heavily on this theme. Arendt situates human freedom in the possibility of action, in the political life. But Marx, also striving for human freedom, situates it in an ideal-type of the social sphere. He thereby makes it unto a vehicle of his philosophy and tries to make it into a complete life-covering system. For the precise link of the social sphere and Marx' philosophy, his idea of human labour power, as described in chapter two, has to be mentioned again. With this notion, Marx describes his idea that within labour the human species creates or gives birth to Life itself. Arendt literally says so, when she states that 'Marx stressed (...), and especially in his youth, that the chief function of labor was the "production of life"', and that he 'therefore saw labor together with procreation' (HC: 88, note 20).[9]

Having said this, Arendt goes further by stating that such a frame of reference creates a "socialized mankind" – a Marxian term – whose only goal is the entertaining of the life process itself. And this, says Arendt, is 'the unfortunately quite unutopian ideal that guides Marx's theories' (HC: 89). According to Arendt, Marx uses terms like *vergesellschafteter Mensch* or *gesellschaftliche Menschheit* to describe this goal of socialism. She points in this context, among others, towards the tenth thesis on Feuerbach of Marx, which states: 'The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society or social humanity' (Marx, 1845). Arendt understands this as an elimination of the gap

[9] Arendt does refer here to Marx' texts *Deutsche Ideologie*, p. 19 and 'Wage, Labour and Capital', p. 77.

between the individual and the social existence of man, 'so that man' and again she quotes Marx, "in his most individual being would be at the same time a social being [a *Gemeinwesen*]"' (HC: 89, note 21).

Withering away

Subsequently, Arendt's critique of Marx' ideas about politics needs to get attention here. Marx' enthusiastic 'use' of the social sphere does almost result in a disappearance of the public realm and thus of politics. For Marx the rise of the social is ideal if it makes possible a situation where the oppressive character of labour does fade in favour of a situation in which labour could be done like a hobby. To realize this, a proletarian revolution is needed. When this is realized, indeed, the public realm, the state and thus politics will "wither away", according to Marx.[10] This is at odds with Arendt's ideas that exactly politics is the greatest human expression of the *vita activa*. With the disappearance of politics, human greatness, moreover human freedom will disappear too.

What is even more striking: modernity with its social sphere and modern developments already bring this classless and stateless society itself. The social sphere namely, since its rise in modernity, indeed does equalize people. This is done by bringing everyone into one social body whose existence is dependent of the continuance of labour on the one side and consumption on the other. Next to this, modern developments more and more 'replace government by that "administration of things" which according to Engels [Marx' compeer] was to be the hallmark of socialist society' (HC: 131, note 82). To a socialized humankind, which is the result of the rise of the social sphere, only politics as administration is helpful.

The only thing that politics has as its final goal in such a system is the sustaining of the system itself. And this could be done by mere administration. Politics too becomes a vehicle of sustaining Life itself; it becomes a vehicle of the sustaining of the social system in such a way that it can endure and constantly bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. Politics does not any longer *need* to be an arena in which men can show their great speech and deeds (like the polis). This, in the first place, is because within a socialized system the focus is no longer the individual but the endurance of the system as a whole. And in the second place because politics has also become a function of the life cycle itself. An understanding of politics as enclosing the own identity is not functional at all, and so this disappears. This all means for Arendt a flagrant reduction of the human condition and the

[10] See HC: 45 and PP: 89.

human identity. That is because man’s highest capacities lay enclosed in the realm of politics, according to her. In order to see why, in the next chapter Arendt's concept of politics will be considered.

4. Arendt's concept of politics

Arendt criticizes Marx, and with this criticism some fundaments of the Western tradition of political philosophy. She reconsiders the common understanding of politics in the tradition, thereby specifically attacking the withering away of the complete realm of politics in the works of Marx. However, somehow this withering away of the complete realm of politics stands as a symbol for the complete Western tradition of political thought since Plato. As noted in previous chapter, what is left of the political thinking of our tradition in Marx is the understanding of politics as 'merely administration'. This also meant the end of the tradition according to Arendt. The question then is: what concept of politics does Arendt proposes? Against the bankruptcy of the tradition, a new horizon needed to be sketched. Arendt thus comes up with her own concept of politics, inspired by the ancient Greeks.

Human freedom

The first and most important characteristic of Arendt's concept of politics is that politics provides freedom. It might even be said that politics is the *practice* of human freedom. Regarding her ideal-type of politics, the Greek polis, Arendt states that '[b]eing free and living (...) were, in a certain sense, one and the same' (PP: 116). According to Arendt, humans have the ability to undertake action, to undertake 'a new beginning'. In this ability, human freedom is situated by Arendt. She says: 'Action is unique in that it sets in motion processes that in their automatism look very much like natural processes, and action also marks the start of something, begins something' (PP: 113).

Added to this, Arendt explains that the Greek notion of politics was associated with a two-fold definition of freedom. First, those people that were able to come together in the polis had to be 'liberated from domination by life's necessities' – a reason why slavery, force, ruling and oppression played serious roles as preconditions for the existence of the polis (PP: 117). And second, the men in the polis were *free* men who acted 'as equals among equals, commanding and obeying one another only in emergencies – that is, in times of war – but otherwise managing all their affairs by speaking with and persuading one another' (PP: 117). The inherent link of politics and freedom by Arendt will be mentioned later, but first a closer look has to be taken to some other features, of the Arendtian concept of politics. These four features are, as will become clear, closely linked to freedom too.

Greatness and individuality

To understand Arendt's concept of politics requires an understanding of her vocabulary, as well as her references to the ancient Greeks. One of these references is the meaning of politics as a secured place for human greatness. This is the first feature that is mentioned. The undertaking of action namely, the start of new things, is a principal feature of Arendt's philosophy. Arendt explains another time with a reference towards the polis: 'The polis had to be founded to secure for the grandeur of human deeds and speech an abode more secure than the commemoration that the poet had recorded and perpetuated in his poem' (PP: 124).

In politics, human greatness can find its expression. Politics is important because the human species can express its greatest abilities through it. Politics in the Arendtian sense is a realm of action, in which men transcend Life and become greater than only their metabolism with nature (remind how Marx understands man according to Arendt). By politics, a *world* can be made on this earth, in which the human being transcends animals. Accordingly, man can give his being a meaning higher than just being part of Life or nature.

This point is related to a second feature, namely that politics is characterised by Arendt as 'a space of appearance'. Arendt calls the polis 'the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly' (HC: 198-199). In politics, men can show their true identity. 'In acting and speaking', Arendt writes, 'men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world' (HC: 179). The example of the Greek polis also teaches us that politics demands each man to be the best among his fellows; politics stimulates man to excel.

But why should we like to have such a space of appearance? What can we expect from this, further than an abstract notion of human freedom? To these questions two answers can be given, which reveal another two features of the Arendtian concept of politics. One is about the notion of truth, the other about the unpredictability of the world we live in.

Perspective and objectivity

It is significant to consider why we would like to have a space for human speech and deed. One reason for this, refers back to the given notions of *doxa* and *peithein* in chapter one. 'The point is', says Arendt, 'that we know from experience that no one can adequately grasp the objective world in its full reality all on his own, because the world always shows and reveals itself to him from only one perspective, which corresponds to his standpoint in the

world and is determinate by it' (PP: 128). *Doxa* was the Greek notion for everyone's particular perspective of the world, while *peithein* was the dialogue and persuasion *between* men *about* their perspectives. Arendt states: 'Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides' (PP: 128-129).

A third feature of Arendtian politics thus implies that politics is the sphere of dealing with each one's individual perspective and the idea that nobody on his own can grasp the world in its objectivity. The world appears to each one, and those appearances are different. Politics implies the recognition of the fact that there is no single, objective insight in the world, but that there is difference in *doxa*. It implies that power and rule always need to be a matter of plurality: of men rather than man. Applied to politics this means that not one man can bring the 'truth' to all others and thereby rule over them.

Maybe that is not what Plato and Aristotle aimed for, but if Arendt is right they disrespected exactly this *plural* character of politics in their days. No one can state to have the complete truth, which implies that despotism, nor the autocracy of the philosopher-king, is a form of politics. This brings us to the conclusion that Arendt brings this concept of politics into contention against totalitarianism, especially where it has its origins in Marxism. Politics for Arendt is always a matter of human *plurality*, something *in between* man, so that it can never be the adoption of a historical law or the performance of the (enlightened) ideas of one man. Totalitarian regimes therefore are by definition not political.

The world as home

Another reason why the space of appearance is relevant is the possibility to deal with the uncertainty of the world we live in. Although labour became so dominant in the modern age and although the 'instrumentalization of action' (Arendt), action itself never completely was and could be eliminated from this world. There is always some action, and this has consequences. A principal characteristic of human action, according to Arendt, needs to be stated here. Human action always has certain implications which could not be foreseen and that maybe even were not wanted.

In particular in the modern age, with its 'enormous enlargement of human capabilities' (HC: 232) action has huge implications. In action 'processes are started whose outcome is unpredictable, so that uncertainty rather than frailty becomes the decisive character of human affairs' (HC: 232). It might be good to keep in mind examples such as atomic bombs or the launch of a satellite. Especially the example of the satellite brings us back to the beginning of

this thesis. In the first chapter, it was mentioned that Arendt analysed the example of the launch of the first human satellite as *that the world maybe is no longer our home*. People feel alienated from the place they inhabit.

Politics can be the exact realm in which men deal with the uncertainty of the world, according to Arendt. Politics can provide us a *home*. This is the fourth mentioned feature of Arendtian politics. Being a 'remedy against the irreversibility and unpredictability of the process started by acting' is, as Arendt states, 'one of the potentialities of action itself' (HC: 236-237). That is made possible because by action and speech man expresses his interest. The expression of these interests creates a web of human relationships. 'These interests', writes Arendt, 'constitute, in the word's most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together' (HC: 182). This inter-est thus shapes a common middle within a group of people, raised and maintained by a web of human relationships which is built by speech and deeds.

Some critical questions need to be asked here. Arendt seems to suppose that interests bind together and even that there is a common interest. However, this is quite a controversial statement. And if people have different interests, an assumption on which modern political life is based, can these different interests indeed provide human relationships? Arendt does make the step from interest to relationship too quick. Something that is inter-est, can also divide people for example. Something more than only interest is needed to create a political community. For example an order of meaning or a common will to work together as well as to accept each political individual. That 'cement' for a political community lacks in the works of Arendt.

In any case, the web of relationships is important for Arendt. This namely, can also be told as a story. 'Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story', says Arendt. In other words: '[T]he stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer' (HC: 184). Within the big story of the web of relationships, people can tell the little story of their life. Against the background of the greater story, the disclosure of the individual being obtains meaning. This greater story is the world in between us, shaped by politics. Politics can create a safe sphere in a world that is unpredictable and uncertain to us.

However, politics therefore needs to be understood as a distinct activity corresponding with a distinct realm in the human condition, rather than as just an activity subject to necessity (pre-modern understanding) or a function of the social sphere (modern understanding). As this

does not happen Arendt states, - as the modern understanding of living together indeed gets an intellectual monopoly - the desert will remain. In the epilogue of *The Promise of Politics* Arendt states the following remarkable words: 'The modern growth of worldlessness, the withering away of everything *between* us, can also be described as the spread of the desert' (PP: 201). This is what is announcing itself in totalitarian movements or in some bare, clinical modern scientific developments: the world is no longer our home; the desert spreads.

Phronesis

In the beginning of this chapter the inherent link of politics and freedom was mentioned. Freedom exists in (political) action, for Arendt. How is this freedom conceptualized? How exactly can speech and action be related to freedom? This link goes via the Greek concepts of *peithein* and *doxa* as explained earlier, and the concept of *phronesis*. The concept of *phronesis* has a connotation of insight, but actually – as a lot of other Greek idioms – it has no good equivalent in our modern languages. Arendt gives it the meaning of insight of the political man. This insight into a political issue 'means nothing other than the greatest possible overview of all the possible standpoints and viewpoints from which an issue can be seen and judged' (PP: 168).

This *phronesis* gives the link to freedom. *Phronesis* makes it possible for a man to have many insights. It enables him to consider many standpoints and therefore know the world better than he could know by himself alone. This is in itself a kind of freedom contends Arendt: insight in the world enables one to consider all standpoints and therefore provide him freedom of (mental) movement. In addition, at the same time, these insights enable him to excel. Arendt writes: 'In the case of the polis, the political man, given the characteristic excellence that distinguished him, was at the same time the freest man: for thanks to the insight that enabled him to consider all standpoints, he enjoyed the greatest freedom of movement' (PP: 169). Great action and speech are thus made possible by the political 'insight' of man. *Phronesis* thus seems to enclose two kinds of freedom: an intellectual one, as well as a practical one.

It is crucial to recognize that this freedom is only made possible by the existence of *men*; a *man* on his own cannot be free according to Arendt: 'The individual in his isolation is never free; he can become free only when he steps out into the polis and takes action there' (PP: 169-170). Politics is needed as a realm in which humans have the possibility to be free. Therefore, politics is literally of vital importance! Whether such a sphere exists or not, has huge consequences for the human being. '[H]uman beings in the true sense of the term can

exist only where there is a world', states Arendt (PP: 176). And the existence of a true world is only possible by true plurality of the human race secured in a realm of action and politics.

It is not by chance that Arendt argues in favour of precisely the polis-concept of politics, as sketched in this chapter. With this, she responds to the historical conditions she lives in. In the next chapter it will be examined why exactly Arendt brings forward her concept of politics. Also its underlying philosophical concepts will be explained.

5. Philosophical backgrounds

In most of her theorizing, Arendt deviates from - or even criticizes the Western tradition of thought. She does so with her particular concept of the human condition; with the colouring of the concept of politics; and with the distinct understanding of the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*. What brings Arendt to such a distinct concept of politics? What are the underlying philosophical positions of Arendt's thoughts? In this chapter, these questions will be considered, and this will be done by answering two main questions. First, the background of Arendt's writing will be unfolded. She writes in the 1950's about these subjects. Why does she respond to Marx, who wrote some hundred years earlier? Second, it will be asked what philosophical concepts underlie Arendt's thinking.

The problem of politics

In chapter one, it was stated that Arendt starts her book *The Human Condition* with the launch of a satellite into the universe. More broadly, a number of scientific developments got her attention and made her reflect on what is actually happening in our world. In particular, the first atomic explosion was one of these striking developments. With this explosion, a new era began, which Arendt calls the modern world. 'I do not discuss this modern world, against whose background this book was written', says Arendt at the beginning of her *The Human Condition* (HC: 6).

What then is the purpose of her book? Arendt describes it as the following: '[A]n analysis of those general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed.' Further, Arendt want to investigate what she calls 'world alienation' in order to 'arrive at an understanding of the nature of society as it had developed and presented itself at the very moment when it was overcome by the advent of a new and yet unknown age' (HC: 6).

This shows that the modern world is a yet unknown era for Arendt. She cannot explain or oversee it. Rather she wants to make clear what exactly characterized the time *before* the rise of the modern world. In doing so, she also examines the conditions of the vacuum that arose after the end of the tradition. This will possibly give some ideas about the condition of our being, as well as the fundaments of our era. This is relevant because in the first chapter it was concluded that the modern age could be characterized as a time in which people do not feel

any longer *at home* in this world. Earlier it was stated that Arendt saw politics as the possibility to shape a home in this world. When people do not any longer feel at home, this reveals a fundamental problem of politics. The phenomenon of people that feel no longer at home in this world is a *political* problem. So it is in (the conception of) politics that the analysis of the problem has to be made, possibly in order to restore the 'world' as home.

Modern world experiences

Arendt analyses some events that reveal this problem of politics. Certain experiences make it quite hard for modern people to feel at home in a world, shaped by modern politics. These are the experiences of oppression and brute force. The experiences of totalitarian governments on the one side, and 'the monstrous development of modern means of destruction' on the other, make us doubt the meaning of politics at all, says Arendt (PP: 109). Is it really possible to attain freedom by or even *in* politics, as is the meaning of politics according to Arendt? Are freedom and politics not rather opposites of each other? The named experiences, totalitarianism and (atomic) destruction, 'are the fundamental experiences of our age', says Arendt, 'and if we ignore them, it is as if we never lived in the world that is our world' (PP: 109-110).

We have to consider these experiences seriously. But Arendt opposes the common conclusions drawn from these experiences as if politics has no meaning any more. That is because Arendt suggests another concept of politics than the one that was usual in our tradition. Since antiquity, no one has believed the meaning of politics to be freedom. But Arendt does, and with this she gives counterweight to the aforementioned doubts about the meaning of politics. Before Arendt's philosophical understanding of politics itself can be considered however, the origins of the political problem have to be described.

As pointed out earlier, Arendt marks the fact that in modern times the state becomes merely a function of the social sphere, of the sustaining of Life itself. In 'Introduction into Politics' (a text in *The Promise of Politics*) Arendt states that the 'monstrous growth of the means of force and destruction' (the possibility of atomic weapons and wars, in which the modern world was born) was possible 'not only because of technological inventions, but also because political, public space had itself become an arena of force (...)' (PP: 147).

That politics had become an arena of force itself can be viewed as a consequence of the modern age. 'The question of the meaning of politics today', says Arendt, 'concerns the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the public means of force used for such ends' (PP: 146). With 'such ends' Arendt refers back to the end of protecting the social sphere, which is

Life itself, and the end of protecting human freedom. Arendt speaks about this as the 'the soil of modernity' out of which our world has grown (PP: 146). The state became the "processor of force", to protect Life itself. Today the possibilities of force however – and this characterizes the modern world – are grown outside our span of control. Brute force 'has become so monstrously powerful that it threatens not only freedom but life as well' (PP: 146-147).

This draws a picture of the modern world as well as its problematic political conditions. We live in a modern world, which is characterized by the possibilities to use force that has grown outside our span of control. This modern *world* grew out of the 'soil of modernity' of the modern *age*. This brought us the understanding of politics as a means to protect the social sphere and Life itself. This urgent situation generates the political question – 'What is politics?', the question this thesis concerns – is topically quite relevant today.

The character of politics

What is the character of politics? Or more elaborate, what is politics itself? That is a key question of political philosophy. During our tradition, since Plato, politics was understood in a way, or in ways, that Arendt opposes. Arendt states that '[b]oth the mistrust of politics and the question as to the meaning of politics are very old, as old as the tradition of political philosophy' (PP: 114).

Equally as old as these questions are the given answer to it, and Arendt notes that 'almost all the definitions in our tradition are essentially *justifications.*' And to put it even more clear: '[A]ll these justifications or definitions end up characterizing politics as a means to some higher end' (PP: 114-115; *italics* mine). Even modern kinds of politics that have freedom as a goal are captured in this structure of means and end. Arendt opposes this, because she thinks about politics as a realm *of* freedom. She thereby opposes the complete Western tradition of political philosophy, from Plato[11] until Marx, which thinks of politics as means.

However, in the works of Marx and in the modern world, there is still even more decline in the thinking on politics in the eyes of Arendt. In the works of Marx namely, politics becomes entirely mistrusted. For Marx, politics is a vehicle of class division and oppression. He therefore wants to eliminate politics, next to which Marx thinks that the state automatically will wither away in a communist system. With this philosophy Marx ends the Western tradition resulting in what can be mentioned as a 'vacuum'. In this vacuum, the

[11] Plato is called 'the father of political philosophy in the West' by Arendt (see PP: 130).

modern world emerges, and in this modern world, thoughts about politics as means, as well as thoughts about politics as a problem itself, come up again. Both considered conceptions of politics start from the wrong axioms, according to Arendt (PP: 152):

> 'In our current crisis, the prejudices that stand in the way of a theoretical understanding of what politics is really about involve nearly all the political categories in which we are accustomed to think, but above all they pertain to the means/end category that regards politics in terms of an end purpose lying outside of politics, as well as to the notion that the substance of politics is brute force and, finally, to the conviction that domination is the central concept of all political theory'

This makes clear that Arendt has a debate on politics on two fronts. In her analysis of the modern world, as well as with her own concept of politics, Arendt in the first place opposes Marx. This is her first 'front', and in this she opposes an understanding of politics as the problem itself and thus the opinion that it is better to get rid of politics and live without it. On the second place, she also criticizes the tradition of Western political philosophy that could lead to the thinking of Marx. The traditional understanding of politics as a means to an end is the second front that Arendt opposes with her concept of politics.[12]

Now the first theme of this chapter, the background of Arendt's writing, has been considered, the second can be closely examined: what are the philosophical fundaments of Arendt's concept of politics? What fundaments does it rest on? To answer this question some basic philosophical concepts underlying Arendt's concept of politics will be examined. Four fundamental concepts will be discussed: that of Life and Being, Freedom, and that of Meaning. To me, these concepts form the fundaments for Arendt's thought

Life and Being

One of the fundamental points of critique of Arendt towards Marx previously unfold was that Marx reduces man to mere part of the biological process of Life. Man is, as Arendt understands Marx, nothing more than metabolism with nature; he is nothing more than part of the biological life-process, which means that he just labours and consumes. In the eyes of Arendt, this is a flagrant reduction of man in his being. According to Arendt, man can transcend his state of merely being part of life by work and above all by action. Bikhu Parekh summarizes the thoughts of Arendt, when he states that labour assimilates man to nature, while work and action distinguishes him from it (Parekh, 1979: 68-69).

[12] Note that both understandings of politics that Arendt opposes are alive in the modern world. People see politics as the execution of force and violence and therefore see it as a problem itself. In this attitude, it could be said, 'Marx' is still alive. Others just see politics as a means to protect life or the social sphere (paradoxically with help of brute force but also to protect people against brute force). They thus understand politics as a means to an end.

What lies behind this, is the Arendtian idea that man, or actually *men*, are in fundament not just being part of nature or of Life. Arendt makes a distinction between Life and Being! She criticizes Marx for considering this as the same. W.A. Suchting (1962) states this point in an article on Marx and Arendt. From Arendt's viewpoint she states that Marx '[l]ike Bergson and Nietzsche' is 'a glorifier of "life" as the dynamic creator of all values; he identifies Life and Being' (Suchting, 1962: 49). These are words of Arendt herself, where she states that Marx, Nietzsche and Bergson are the 'greatest representatives of modern life philosophy' inasmuch as 'all three equate Life and Being' (HC: 313, note 76). Arendt states that this equation is the result of the dominance of introspection of these philosophers. By looking to the inwardness, life indeed will appear as Everything.

However, with this, all these philosophers fail to see the possibilities of a *world,* something outside man. They fail to see action as a distinct category, says Arendt. Therefore, they fail to see that Life and Being are not necessarily equated. The 'ultimate point of reference' for those philosophers 'is not work and worldliness any more than action; it is life and life's fertility', says Arendt (HC: 313, note 76). Those philosophers do not see the possibilities that *men,* rather than *man* have; they fail to see *the promise of politics*.

This distinction correlates with another character of Arendt's thinking about the human being. In the Arendtian distinction labour and working activities are inherently linked to the human body and do belong to the private sphere. This view deviates from that of Marx, who considers the body and its activities as public. Nancy Schwartz (1979) does point to this difference. She points at Marx' concepts, who speaks of the human body as part of nature, which means a "socialized" or "humanized" nature for Marx (Schwartz, 1979: 260). For Marx the private sphere ideally fades away; it ceases to exist. For Arendt however, only then the human being becomes part of a public world when he enters the realm of politics. Only action/politics is a public matter. Work and labour are private matters concerning activities correlated with Life. Action transcends Life; it is more than just 'biology'. Politics and Life cannot be equalized, according to Arendt.

A final matter concerning the distinction between Life and Being, is the distinction Arendt makes between *earth* and *world*. Earth is one of the given conditions for human life. Man inhabits the earth. However, according to Arendt men (not man) have the ability to build a world, an *in-between* that transcends the mere earthly Life. During the modern age however, the sphere of world disappeared more and more in favour of that of earth. The *durability* of the place we live in suffers under the modern age: the world as a home disappears in favour of a space of an endlessly repeating kind of activity: that of being part of the life cycle. Without

the sphere of a *world* however, there can be no meaning or value. Szernszynski (2003: 2012) points at this, and says that 'the most fundamental problem of consumer capitalism is not simply that it threatens the 'earth' through resource use, pollution and habitat loss, but that it threatens the 'world', without which there can be no meaning or value' (Szernszynski, 2003: 212). Life and Being are not the same, according to Arendt. The providence of meaning in this life is a matter of Being. When Life and Being are equalized, the meaning of life disappears.

Freedom

Another fundamental concept, one that is related to the notion of Being, is that of freedom. Freedom even is the most important concept in the political philosophy of Hannah Arendt. But what does she mean when she speaks about freedom? Meanwhile, it might have become clear that Arendt has another concept of freedom than was usual in the Western tradition of thought. Arendt characterizes freedom, as explained previously, as the human ability to *act*, to start something new from itself on. 'The miracle of freedom', Arendt says, 'is inherent in this ability to make a beginning, which itself is inherent in the fact that every human being, simply by being born into a world that was there before him and will be there after him, is himself a new beginning' (PP: 113).

The idea of freedom as identical with beginning, is strange to us, Arendt explains. That is because 'according to our tradition of conceptual thought and its categories, freedom is equated with freedom of the will, and we understand freedom of the will to be a choice between givens or, to put it crudely, between good and evil' (PP: 113).

In the traditional understanding, freedom therefore was not situated in action or politics, but solely in the renouncing of action and a 'withdraw from the world' (Arendt) into the self, avoiding action and politics altogether. Freedom was situated in the *vita contemplativa*, and not in the *vita activa*. Arendt states that the basic error of this idea 'seems to lie in that identification of sovereignty with freedom which has always been taken for granted by political as well as philosophic thought' (HC: 234). It was Marx being the first modern thinker who seriously situated freedom in the *vita activa*. However, he did so with disastrous consequences, according to Arendt.

Meaning of life

Previously the concept of Being was considered and it was promised to get back on this point. Now the concepts of Being and Freedom have been considered separately. However,

they are connected together as well for Arendt. As became clear, the sphere of action transcends Life and it has to do with Being. In my opinion, Being can be understood, quite abstractly, as the essence of everything. The essence is highest or truest form of existence. And for humans this is certainly not Life according to Arendt. The essence of the human being is something different than given in the life-process. In essence, the human being is *more than life*. This surplus is the promise of politics, the promise of action.

This could be further explained by another difference Arendt makes, that between being a *what* and being a *who*. Everything is a *what*, corresponding to his being part of Life. But the true essence of human being lies enclosed in his being a *who*. 'In acting and speaking', Arendt states, 'men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice' (HC: 179). Parekh summarizes this, as that action is the expression of an agent's uniqueness or individuality (Parekh, 1979: 69).

In my opinion, Arendt's idea of the disclosure of a 'who', touches to her concept of Being. The human essence is not situated in being part of a life-process or in being part of nature, but in his being a who; one being able to act and to speak. With this, the meaning of life is given too for Arendt. However, this is controversial, as will be explained in the next chapter.

This difference of Life and Being comes up again in the debate on humanity between Marx and Arendt. Parekh states this as that Marx understands the human beings together as if they have one interest, while Arendt starts from a fundamental human plurality (Parekh, 1979: 75). This implies that for Marx the human essence lies in his species being; in being part of humanity. Arendt takes a totally different starting point when she takes the individual in his uniqueness as fundamental.

Jennifer Ring (1989) summarizes this opposition of Arendt to Marx from Arendt's viewpoint as follows: 'To acquiesce to cyclicality and impermanence is to capitulate to nature and biology'. For Arendt this 'involves the loss of something distinctively human', she says (Ring, 1989: 433). According to her, not his being part of a species, but his being a unique individual, being a *who*, does define the Being of a human. Action is thus fundamental for the human being, and when this is threatened, as did Marx, the human being himself is threatened.

6. Discussion

In this chapter Arendt's concept of politics and especially its fundamental assumptions will be discussed. The question of this thesis is 'what is politics?' and Arendt provides an answer that is quite honourable. This chapter however, will reveal that some of its fundaments are controversial. First the concept of freedom of Arendt will be discussed. Arendt seems to have an understanding of freedom in which freedom exists only for the few and moreover, only by grace of the lack of freedom of the many. Further, the assumption of the moral character of our world on which Arendt's concept of politics is based, will be attacked.

Whose freedom?

Freedom is of fundamental importance for Arendt. However, it seems characteristic of her concept of freedom, that it is not possible for everyone. In *The Human Condition,* Arendt states that in the Greek polis the price for absolute freedom from necessity, in a sense, was life itself (HC: 119-120). In order to be free as political man, the heads of the Greek households had to enslave people to do the works of necessity for them. Numbers of people had to be *forced* to labour. These people therefore were not free at all, in order to make possible the free life of the few *political animals.* Only they were enabled to do other things: act and think, and in a sense, become *immortal.*

However, it might thus be said that the Greek freedom was only possible by the *non-freedom* of the many. Arendt nowhere attacks or denies this; rather she agrees with it. Notwithstanding the fact that she calls this elimination of the burdens of life by enslaving people into pain and necessity 'darkness', she considers it as 'natural' and 'inherent in the human condition' (HC: 119). Does Arendt indeed believe that true freedom is only possible for the 'happy few'? Does she show here a Nietzschean concept of considering the goal of humanity in its highest instances?

Earlier it became clear that freedom is part of Being for Arendt. If not everyone is able to be free, not everyone is able to have a relation with this Being, rather than only with Life. How could the feeling with the realm of Being then be a fundamental character of humankind? Arendt seems to do exactly that thing she criticizes Marx for, namely reducing (part of) the human species to nothing more than Nature or Life. Arendt indeed does prove this; she draws the distinction whether one is *truly* human *within* the human species itself. About the ancient Greek notion of humanity, Arendt says: 'The distinction between man and

animal runs right through the human species itself: only the best (...) and who “prefer immortal fame to mortal things,” are really human; the others, content with whatever pleasures nature will yield them, live and die like animals’ (HC: 19).

This is highly controversial and it may be doubted whether not the complete concept of politics that Arendt proposes falls down if one refuses to accept this controversial assumption about freedom. Arendt’s concept of politics is based on a controversial notion of freedom, and it can thus be doubted whether the Arendtian concept of politics can be supported consistently together with modern Enlightened values like equality and inalienable human rights.

Politics and justice

Another controversial matter is the lack of concern for justice in the work of Arendt. Also Passerin d’Entreves (2006) states so, and says that Arendt is even unable to account for justice. This is striking, because in the modern Western tradition of political philosophy justice is one of the most important issues. Just think about the leading work *A Theory of Justice*, by John Rawls (1971), which states that justice ‘is the first virtue of social institutions’ (1971: 3). Quite a lot influential political philosophers think about justice. With his book, Rawls opposes authors with, as he calls it, teleological thinking (like that of Aristotle and of utilitarianism), but these authors also owe themselves to justice. Significant debates in contemporary political philosophy consider justice, for example a debate during the 80’s between Rawls and communitarians like Michael Sandel. However, in the mentioned works of Arendt justice is almost never named or implied as a relevant notion in politics.

Rather than being a political issue itself, justice seems to be a pre-political condition for Arendt. The core issue of politics is freedom, as was mentioned. In *Introduction into Politics* (PP) Arendt says that this freedom ‘does not require an egalitarian democracy in the modern sense, but rather a quite narrowly limited oligarchy or aristocracy’. This limited political space is ‘an arena in which at least a few or the best can interact with one another as equals among equals’. But this equality, says Arendt, ‘has, of course, nothing to do with justice’ (PP: 118). Within the realm of politics, men already act as equals among each other. No debate about justice is necessary to arrange this realm, nor is justice a necessary issue to debate in politics.

There are several reasons why justice is not political for Arendt. First of all, the character of politics in the theory of Arendt plays a role here. For Arendt, politics is not a means to an end, but a goal in itself. To bring or establish justice is already a goal and the danger of seeing politics as a means to that end appears immediately. Politics is not about justice or about

anything else in particular. Rather it is a realm of action that has intrinsic worth.

Second, this has everything to do with Arendt's reversion to the ancient Greeks. As known, after 'the end of the tradition' and after experiences with totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century, Arendt tries to reconsider what we are actually doing. Therefore, she refers back to a world *before* our tradition, in order to answer these questions on the *origins*. This implies that she goes back to a situation that might even *precede* justice. Justice is a concept that is heavily coloured by our tradition. It got its moral charge from our tradition of Platonism, Christianity, Augustine, Aquinas, Kant and the Enlightenment. In particular Christian influences polished this concept into a worldview of good and evil. Arendt however, gets back to a world before this tradition and thus a world before that one that gave such a crucial place to justice.

A third reason can be stated here, correlating with the second, which reveals again a Nietzschean preoccupation of Arendt. Both philosophers, Nietzsche and Arendt, orient themselves on a world that predates ours. Both situate themselves at the end, or even after the Western tradition. Nietzsche thereby destructs the moral categories of this tradition, which according to him are shaped by Christianity and a Platonic perception of the world.[13] Nietzsche then, refers back to the ancient Greek world and exchanges the absolute categories of good and evil for the relative categories of good and bad. This brings the final measurement of everything from something absolute (Platonic ideas, God) to something relative (the human world). This also changes the connotation of justice.

Arendt, like Nietzsche, cannot join the modern debates in (contemporary) political philosophy that are still set up in the traditional concepts, carried by a morality that has ended. Justice, to Arendt, is a term too much influenced by exactly that tradition that has ended. Rather, she orients on a tradition that preceded ours, in which justice is not that important in politics.

Moral reality

The previous discussion about justice brings forward an even more fundamental level of Arendt's philosophy. On the basis of the positions - that of Arendt, Nietzsche and the ancient Greeks on the one hand, as well as that of authors in the Western tradition - lay different claims about our reality. For Nietzsche and the ancient Greeks the world itself is *not morally charged*. This is showed in Nietzsche's distinction between good and evil on the one hand and

[13] See his 'On the Genealogy of Morality' (Nietzsche, 1887).

good and bad on the other, of which he chooses the second. And it is also pointed at when Nietzsche states that God is dead. We no longer have absolute moral standards and categories; we are thrown back on ourselves.

Arendt too seems not to start from the assumption of a morally charged world. The metier of politics for Arendt is freedom, but this is not freedom to choose between good and bad – in other words, to make *moral* choices – but freedom *as action*. This action seems not to be bound to a rule in order to be free (such as the categorical imperative of Kant, which makes acting, freedom and morality linked), but Arendt situates the freedom in the possibility of acting itself.

Moreover, not one of the features of politics that were mentioned in chapter four refers to any moral notion. Human greatness, disclosure of identity, perspective on the world and creating a home: none of these suggests that politics is a kind of morally charged action within a reality defined by good and evil.

Answering Being

The previously mentioned assumption about the moral character of this world is a foundation of Arendt's thought that is disputable. Opposing to Arendt, I and many others think that good and evil are inherently part of this world; they are genuine forces in our reality. Subsequently that would mean that all (political) action is always morally charged. Everything done by political action therefore is meaningful. Against the background of the big story of good and evil, the human being indeed has to *act*, has to live his little life story in the responsibility of his Being. This responsibility obtains meaning because it is situated to the background of good and evil. The human life thus forms an answer to the given conditions of Being.

From such a viewpoint, it can be doubt whether politics for Arendt can be meaningful when she is not a moral absolutist. To what meaningful background the human action can obtain meaning when there is no absolute moral reality? Certainly for Arendt the answer to this question is related to her concept of Being. The question then is what exactly Being is. Arendt seems to give her final answer to that question at the end of *The Human Condition*. Here she opposes the immortality that Christianity gave individuals to that immortality that ancient Greek politics gave individuals: human life immortality versus worldly immortality. About the victory of the first, Arendt says:

> 'Historically, it is more than probable that the victory of the Christian faith in the ancient world was largely due to this reversal, which brought hope to those who knew that their world was

> doomed, indeed a hope beyond hope, since the new message promised an immortality they never had dared to hope for' (HC: 314).

Here lies the fundamental abyss between the ancient Greeks and Arendt on the one hand and Christianity on the other: hope for the few or hope for the many.

Life seems to suggest that only the latter is right. But as Arendt also stated, Being is more than Life; what matters is Being. For Arendt, Being seems to be the possibility to become immortal in this world by action. The deepest level of the human being is that he can disclose himself as an individual by action in a world that is constantly (re)shaped by that action and its (unforeseen) consequences. This means that man can *become one who has helped to build or influenced the world, influenced History.*

However, does Arendt not go along here with Marx' reversal of the Hegelian dialectic? She herself seems to pass something like Providence as well. But in light of the just given objections, that endangers the answer-character of the human life. Can the human being still answer to Being when in the end he himself is the measure of all things? This question remains an open question, but these objections make it highly dubious whether Arendt can account for an adequate concept of freedom and human essence.

That does not alter the point that it can be concluded that politics is in essence an answer to Being. Politics is the sphere of human action, and with this the human being transcends Life and relates himself to the sphere of Being. In any case, this answering character of the human being shows that politics is a matter of essence.

Conclusion

The question that guided the process of this thesis was: what is Hannah Arendt's philosophy of politics as revealed by means of the examination of her interpretation and critique of Karl Marx on this subject? The thesis started with an introduction to Arendt's thinking, as well as background against which her thinking was developed. Arendt asks herself the fundamental question, as other philosophers do, what is happening in her time. How can totalitarian regimes like Bolshevism appear? How can it be that some people think aloud of the possibility of fleeing the earth? These questions bring Arendt to a reconsideration of our time. And our time, she concludes, is characterized by the end of a tradition. That tradition ended in the works of Marx, Arendt discovers. Marx generated some major changes in the tradition, but he drew the wrong conclusions from it. This results in a huge critique of Marx by Arendt.

What were the changes Marx made, and on what points did Arendt criticized him? It was explained that Arendt characterizes the Western tradition of thought since Plato as that of a superiority of the *vita contemplativa* above the *vita activa.* This means that thinking, philosophy and contemplation (religion for example) are seen as superior to acting. Moreover, it means that human freedom was strictly located within the *vita contemplativa*, while the complete *vita activa* was seen as being subject to necessity.

Conceptualizing the complete *vita activa* as activities of necessity is mistaken, according to Arendt. She distinguishes three kinds of activities *within* the *vita activa*, in hierarchical order: action, work and labour. In particular that first activity does hold the option of freedom according to Arendt. With the appearance of the modern age, however, things became even worse. The complete *vita activa* was reduced to the activity of labour, as Arendt understands it. And the man responsible for the philosophical substantiation is Karl Marx.

This responsibility exists in two lacks of insight of Marx. On the one hand Marx fails to see the *liberticidal* character of the rise of the social, and on the other hand he fails to see the *promise of politics*. Marx completely abolishes the realm of action – which is the realm of human freedom according to Arendt – thereby depriving man part of his essence or being on the one hand, and creating a path for extremities like world-alienation and totalitarianism on the other hand. According to Arendt, Marx reduces man to an *animal laborans* and therefore deprives him of freedom.

A pressing conclusion of this thesis however, is that Arendt not only criticized Marx, but

the tradition that he ended as well. This is the tradition, that begun with 'the father of political philosophy in the West', Plato, and which is characterized by an abyss between philosophy and politics, with a domination of the first. That resulted in a distrusting attitude towards politics, because of which fundamental characteristics of it were overlooked. These characteristics are given by Arendt in her concept of politics. This concept, first of all, provides us some points of critique towards our tradition. Second, it enables us to critically review our own time and state of politics, in which the ideas that Arendt opposed are still alive. Third, it helps us to reconsider the 'crisis of our time', as the modern world might be characterized, in a fundamental way, and it may provide the possibility to overcome this.

Arendt's concept of politics is characterized by freedom. Furthermore, politics can be the expression of human greatness (which Marx thus 'abolishes') and it creates a space of appearance to reveal man's unique identity. Politics is the space of Being, rather than the space of Life, which appears in the activity of labour. Moreover, Arendt considers two more characteristics of her concept of politics. In her eyes, politics is linked to 'insight': persuasion with others enables one to have a better view of this world and therefore be a man with more practical knowledge. Finally, politics is a way to deal with the fundamental uncertainty of this world; it creates a home for humans on this earth.

With her concept of politics Arendt attacks two common understandings of politics. The first one sees politics as means to an end. This was the dominant or the almost sole understanding of politics during the Western tradition. The second understanding that Arendt attacks, which is present in Marxism, is the one which sees politics as a problem itself.

In this thesis, Arendt was criticized on some points. Her concept of freedom appeared as too narrow, as if the 'answer to Being' is possible for only the few. That is because freedom is bound to the political for Arendt, rather than that she remains the ability to human freedom open to other activities or even the *vita contemplativa* as well. Related to this point is how Arendt thinks of the character of our reality and thus how she considers the value of justice. For Arendt our reality is not morally charged. Therefore politics is not moral action and so justice does play almost no role in it. That makes that Arendt gives a particular 'answer' to Being, one that is debatable in my opinion.

And what can be concluded about politics itself? Might all the previous bring us to the Arendtian conclusion that the history of the West shows a constant decline on the thinking of politics? This can be defended. First, 'history' took a wrong turn when Plato wanted philosophy to rule politics, resulting in a total abyss between the two. Then the 'philosophers-way-of-life' became dominant and politics was understood as 'merely' subject to necessity;

politics downgraded in reputation.

It became even worse in the modern age with the rise of the social, which blurred the distinction of separate realms of life: the private and the public. Marx did form the anticlimax by equalizing productivity and the human identity, thereby reducing man to an *animal laborans*. This anticlimax however, meant the end of the tradition and it brought us the modern world, which is still worse in this matter: it is characterized by alienation and brute (political) force. Politics still takes the blame.

This indeed can be given as a summary of the Arendtian analysis of the history of political philosophy. However, this pessimistic view of Arendt is not prescriptive for the future. It is not without reason that Arendt reverts to the ancient Greeks. She does revert because something really important is considered here, something that Arendt wants to rescue. What is mentioned here is human freedom, which is worth fighting for. This Arendtian struggle is promising and it gives counterweight to a pessimistic view as just unfold. Because, to end with a quote of Arendt in a conclusion of a lecture "The History of Political Theory" (PP: 201), it is 'precisely because we suffer under desert conditions we are still human and still intact; the danger lies in becoming true inhabitants of the desert and feeling at home in it.'

Bibliography

Primary works of Arendt

HC - Arendt, H. (1998)[1958] *The Human Condition* (second edition), London: University of Chicago Press

PF - Arendt, H. (1968)[1961] *Between Past and Future (revised edition),* New York: Viking Press

PP - Arendt, H. (2005) *The Promise of Politics*. Edited and with an Introduction by Jerome Kohn, New York: Schocken Books

Other literature

Hill, M.A. (ed.) (1979) *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World,* New York: St. Martin's Press

Kohn, J. (2005) 'Introduction by Jerome Kohn', in Arendt, H. (2005) *The Promise of Politics.* Edited and with an Introduction by Jerome Kohn, New York: Schocken Books

Marx, K. (1843) 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', *Marxists' Internet Archive* on www.marxists.org

---- (1845) 'Theses on Feuerbach', *Marxists' Internet Archive* on www.marxists.org

Parekh, B. (1979) 'Hannah Arendt's critique of Marx', in Hill, M.A. (ed.) (1979) *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World,* New York: St. Martin's Press

Passerin d'Entreves, M. (2006) 'Hannah Arendt', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, on http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arendt/

Rawls, J. (1971) *A Theory of Justice*, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

Ring, J. (1989) 'On Needing Both Marx and Arendt: Alienation and the Flight from Inwardness, *Political Theory,* Vol. 17, No. 3 (Aug., 1989), pp. 432-448

Schwartz, N.L. (1979) 'Distinction between Public and Private Life: Marx on the Zõon Politikon', *Political Theory,* Vol. 7, No. 2 (May, 1979), pp. 245-266

Suchting, W.A. (1962) 'Marx and Hannah Arendt's The Human Condition', *Ethics*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (Oct., 1962), pp. 47-55

Szerszynski, B. (2003) 'Technology, performance and life itself: Hannah Arendt and the fate of nature', *Sociological Review,* Vol. 51 (2), pp. 203-218

Wolff, J. (2010) 'Karl Marx', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, on http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marx/