

THE POLIS AND ITS ANALOGUES IN THE THOUGHT OF HANNAH ARENDT

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Criticized as a nostalgic anachronism by those who oppose her version of political theory and lauded as symbol of direct democratic participation by those who favor it, the Athenian polis features prominently in Hannah Arendt's account of politics. This essay traces the origin and development of Arendt's conception of the polis as a space of appearance from the early 1950s onward. It makes particular use of the Denktagebuch, Arendt's intellectual diary, in order to shed new light on the historicity of one of her central concepts. The article contends that both critics and partisans of Arendt's use of the polis have made the same mistake: they have presumed that the polis represents a space of face-to-face immediacy. In fact, Arendt compared the polis to a series of analogues, many of which are not centered on direct exchanges between political actors and spectators. As a result, Arendt's early work on the polis turns out to anticipate many of the concerns of her later work on judgment, and her theory of the polis becomes a theory of topics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Neither the old nor the new dictionary of the history of ideas has an entry dedicated to the concept of the polis. Doubtless the word is too parochial, too Greek to warrant installation as the term of art for a category of thought that unites such a diversity of interests. There are other terms—such as “city” or “the political”—covered in those dictionaries that, having more effectively denuded themselves of their etymological origins and being less historically particular, occupy the conceptual space that “polis” otherwise might. Yet the persistence of the polis as a topos for thinking far beyond its historical instantiation in the ancient world is striking. Indeed, it is perhaps precisely the tension between the very particular denotations of the term in Greek antiquity, on the one hand, and the variety of times and places onto which the term has been foisted, on the other, that is responsible for the recurrent force of the term. No matter how acute that tension has become, however, conceptions of the political as such have still not been severed entirely from the Greek experience of the city-state. The

conceptual afterlife of that experience is, thus, a phenomenon of intrinsic interest for intellectual historians.

Ever since Aristotle argued that human beings achieve themselves most fully in the polis and contended that a polis should be large enough to be self-sufficient but not so large that it cannot be taken in at one view or addressed by a single orator, the history of transpositions from the polis to its analogues has been both long and distinguished.¹ Thus the Romanist Fergus Millar argues that late republican Rome should be understood as a constitutional anachronism, a polity the size of modern Italy (and larger) that attempted to function through the direct democratic institutions of a polis, a city-state.² The historian of political thought J. G. A. Pocock has argued not only that the theory of the polis is both the most original form of political theory itself and the basic constitutional template for the Italian city-states, but also that Harrington's *Oceana* is a "dispersed polis" and that the Scottish Enlightenment "replaced the polis by politeness," such that republican political thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be understood as an inquiry into limits on the spatial and temporal extension of the polis.³ What is more, the Hellenist Josiah Ober—perhaps the most prominent contemporary historian of classical Athens—contends that the direct democratic experiences of the fifth- and fourth-century BCE Athenian polis remain paradigmatic even for

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a and 1326b.

² Fergus Millar, *The Crowd in Rome in the Late Republic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998). Millar's particular contention that late republican Rome was in significant ways directly democratic has not persuaded everyone, but the notion that the polis is an appropriate lens through which to view Rome has a wider constituency—indeed, Millar appropriated that idea from T. J. Cornell, "Rome: The History of an Anachronism," in A. Molho, K. Raafaub, and J. Emlen, eds., *City-States in Classical Antiquity and Medieval Italy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991). One also sees an investigation into the specificity of the Roman polis experience in the likes of Robert Morstein-Marx's *Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 74; *idem*, "Machiavelli, Harrington and English Political Ideologies in the Eighteenth Century," in *idem*, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 114; and *idem*, "Cambridge Paradigms and Scotch Philosophers: A Study of the Relations between the Civic Humanist and Civil Jurisprudential Interpretation of Eighteenth-Century Social Thought," in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 242. It is no coincidence that Pocock has revealed in the 2002 afterword to the *Machiavellian Moment* that "the recent political philosopher whose work has the greatest resonance for me [was] the late Hannah Arendt." See *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 573.

corporations' survival in today's knowledge economy.⁴ What is striking in these examples (and their number could be multiplied) is the irony that even in the moment of its apparent obsolescence the paradigm of the polis has a peculiar conceptual power to describe new phenomena.

Few thinkers in modern intellectual history have been as closely associated with the topos of the polis as Hannah Arendt. Famously, the polis stands at the center of her seminal contribution to twentieth-century political theory—namely *The Human Condition* (1958). In that text, the Greek polis represents the very possibility of politics itself. As Arendt describes it, that possibility depends on “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.”⁵ There are some scholars who take the centrality of the polis in Arendt's analysis of the modern human condition as evidence that her work is essentially nostalgic.⁶ Generally

⁴ Josiah Ober's contention that the Athenian polis remains paradigmatic today is most conspicuous in his recent work—such as *A Company of Citizens: What the World's First Democracy Teaches Leaders about Creating Great Organizations* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2003); and *idem*, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008)—but it is important to note that in such works Ober is building on foundations laid in *idem*, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), where he extracted a portrait of democratic practice from the Demosthenian corpus, and in *idem*, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens: Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), where he deepened his account of Athenian democracy by comparing democratic practice to the largely antidemocratic initiatives in Athenian political theory.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 198–9.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power,” *Social Research* 44/1 (1977), 3–24. Even earlier, there was Noel O'Sullivan, “Hannah Arendt: Hellenic Nostalgia and Industrial Society,” in Anthony de Crespigny and Kenneth Minogue, eds., *Contemporary Political Philosophers* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1975), 228–51. See also George McKenna, “Bannisterless Politics: Hannah Arendt and Her Children,” *History of Political Thought* 5/2 (1984), 333–60. Richard Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 69, has accused Arendt of a kind of “polis envy,” echoing remarks made by Jean Elshtain at the 1988 APSA convention—as cited in Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 174. Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 293–4, argues that Arendt's secular political agenda forced her to secularize the Athenian polis inappropriately so as to use it as a standard against which to measure other political initiatives. In comparison to the definition of the political given by Carl Schmitt, Willibald Steinmetz, “Neue Wege einer Historischen Semantik des Politischen,” in “Politik”: *Situationen eines Wortgebrauchs im Europa der*

speaking, however, Arendt specialists have concluded that her dedication to the polis is not exclusive, and does not prevent her from a direct engagement with modern political realities. Thus scholars have perceived a tension between ancient and modern in Arendt's work, but not a debilitating one.

Just so, Seyla Benhabib perceives a rift in which "Hannah Arendt, the stateless and persecuted Jew, is the philosophical and political modernist," while "Arendt, the student of Heidegger, is the antimodernist Grecophile theorist of the polis and of its lost glory"—even as, in the end, she wants to make a case for Arendt's modernity.⁷ Likewise, Jacques Taminaux has raised the question of whether Arendt's understanding of politics is purely performative and informed solely by the Greek model, but he concludes that Arendt is highly conscious of the need to, as he puts it, "redeem" action for modern political theory.⁸ Equally, even as George Kateb begins his monograph on Arendt with an attempt to emphasize the strangeness of Arendt's conception of the polis, he goes on to argue that "direct citizen participation is the element common to her ancient and modern commitments."⁹ Margaret Canovan is most decisive, saying simply that it is one

Neuzeit (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2007), 12, associates Arendt with Karl Löwith as a purveyor of "eine letztlich am antiken polis-Ideal orientierte Verständigung über die Grundlagen des Gemeinwesens." In the opinion of Patricia Springborg, "Arendt, Republicanism, and Patriarchalism," *History of Political Thought* 10 (1989), 523, "claims to the mantle of Roman power had an obvious legacy in the Third Reich and its characteristic forms, *dictator*, Kaiser reincarnating *caesar* and *imperator*. Claims to the legacy of Athens were less dangerous, though no less fantastic. Hannah Arendt, iconoclast and unmasker in respect to the former, is nevertheless a contributor to the latter tradition in its specifically German form. That she found the New Republic in the United States is not inconsistent, nor does it Anglicize her." For his part, Josiah Ober, *The Athenian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 145, has argued that "Arendt's polis was an ahistorical ideal, based in large part on her own reading of Aristotle's *Politics*."

⁷ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), xxxviii–xxxix.

⁸ Jacques Taminaux, "Performativité et grecomanie?," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53/2 (1999), 191–205.

⁹ George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984), 1 and 7. Comparable finesses can be observed in J. Peter Euben, "Arendt's Hellenism," in Dana Villa, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 151–64, where "Arendt is a dramatist of modernity who no more aims to return to ancient Athens than Sophocles aimed to return to the Athens of Theseus" (161) and where, in the end, Arendt, like Benjamin, "is a pearl diver whose aim is not to resuscitate the past or renew extinct ages, but to introduce crystallizations of rare beauty and profundity into the lives we share with each other" (163); and in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), where the contemporary resonance of Arendt's polis-orientation is illustrated with the example of the Solidarity leader Adam Michnik, who "released from

of her principal aims to demonstrate that Arendt's "theory of action, like the rest of her political thought, is rooted in her response to totalitarianism and is not an exercise in nostalgia for the Greek polis."¹⁰

One might reasonably suppose that this debate is both well formed and settled, given that it is almost exclusively nonspecialists, on the one side, who raise the question of whether Arendt's conception of politics was debilitatingly classical, and specialists, on the other, who answer that—despite her significant investment in Greek antiquity—her account of politics is not outmoded in the modern world. I shall argue, however, that this debate between ancient and modern has hidden an unwarranted assumption that has largely been shared by both sides—namely the assumption that Arendtian politics is concerned exclusively with spaces of appearance in which orator and auditor, actor and spectator are immediately present one to another. There is no doubting that immediacy of interaction was important for Arendt's account of politics, but the assumption that there must be such immediacy for there to be politics at all is incorrect. The chief aim of this essay will be to demonstrate that, if one follows the sequence of transformations of the Athenian polis in Arendt's thought, one finds her augmenting (but not rejecting) the immediacy of the polis with various forms of mediation. To describe matters in such terms is not to suppose that there exists some kind of opposition or mutual exclusivity between immediacy and mediation in Arendt's thought. Clearly, phenomena encountered immediately within the parameters of the here and now can also be—and almost always are—mediated in a host of different ways. The claim is rather that, as Arendt conceives of it, the polis is itself not only a zone of immediate, unpredictable, and evanescent phenomena but also a mechanism for instantiating and comparing phenomena across the broadest swathes of time and space. Thus I shall claim that the literal topos of the polis (its boundedness in space) becomes a figurative topos, a repository towards which the imagination can direct the greatest possible diversity of present, past, future, and counterfactual material.

Although some of the work on Arendt's conception of the polis has been of a very high quality, no one has yet made significant use of Arendt's *Denktagebuch*. In the present intellectual historical investigation of Arendt's concept of the polis, the *Denktagebuch* is the key new evidentiary resource. Found in Arendt's New York apartment upon her death in 1975, conserved in the Deutsche Literaturarchiv Marbach, and recently edited for publication by Ursula Ludz

prison . . . received a prize, which he chose to dedicate to one project: having the works of Hannah Arendt translated into Polish to help the Poles orient themselves for life in the world after the Warsaw Pact" (xxxii).

¹⁰ Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 2.

and Ingeborg Nordmann, the *Denktagebuch* is a very rich source, particularly for those historians who are interested in the time, context, and order in which concepts appear. The published text brings together twenty-nine “notebooks” covering the period from 1950 to 1973. Overwhelmingly written in German, composed of quotations and meditations that range from a few words to a few pages, arranged sequentially by month (with the exception of one notebook which is dedicated solely to Kant), and for the most part indexed by topic, the *Denktagebuch* constitutes just over eight hundred pages of material that often sheds a highly revealing light on Arendt’s sources and the sequence of her conceptual transpositions. Almost three-quarters of the total is dedicated to the eight years preceding the appearance of *The Human Condition* in 1958. As a result, the *Denktagebuch* is particularly helpful for the purpose of tracing the origin, evolution, and character of Arendt’s conception of the polis.¹¹

I shall make three broad claims in the course of this article. First, one ought to situate Arendt’s interest in the polis in the context of the historical moment in which it first appeared. That context was the period immediately following the publication of her *Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951. At that time, she was particularly interested in a kind of distinctive individuality that would be capable of combating the rise of mass society—a development that, in her analysis, was a crucial component in the emergence of modern totalitarianism. Second, one ought to understand Arendt’s conception of the polis in terms of its evolution through the 1950s, and not simply in terms of its most famous exposition in 1958. Her conception of the polis evolved dramatically through the 1950s, and the original equation of the polis with politics itself spawned a whole series of conceptual analogues (from Homeric poetry to modern historicism), many of which dispensed with the immediate interactions that almost all interpreters have presumed are at the core of Arendt’s investment in the polis. Third, one ought to recognize that these emphases on distinctiveness and mediated interaction establish a strong conceptual connection between the early work on the polis and the later work on judgment. Some scholars have argued that the shift in emphasis from polis to judgment was indicative of an unresolved contradiction in Arendt’s work between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*. In light of the conceptual connection identified here, however, we can see that Arendt herself made it possible to explore this fertile tension further.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann, 2 vols. (Munich: Piper, 2002). For further discussion of the *Denktagebuch* see Pierre Bouretz, “Hannah Arendt—L’Atelier d’un Penseur,” *Le Magazine littéraire* 445 (2005), 52–4; and Sigrid Weigel, “Poetics as a Presupposition of Philosophy: Hannah Arendt’s *Denktagebuch*,” *Telos* 146 (Spring 2009), 97–110. Stressing the intensity of Arendt’s engagement with other thinkers, Bouretz speaks suggestively of the *Denktagebuch* as a “processus d’émancipation” (54).

II. ATHENS AS PARADIGM

Arendt's original conceptual investment in the polis followed the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951. Canovan is right that Arendt saw in the Greek polis a potential response to what she regarded as the quintessentially modern problem of totalitarianism. When we look closely at the sources cited in the *Denktagebuch* in the early 1950s, however, we find that Arendt was not so much interested in reasserting the importance of participation in politics as she was driven by a desire to create spaces in which individuals might distinguish themselves. It is significant that her initial interests in the Greek city-states were routed through Max Weber's account of slavery in the ancient world (in February 1952) and Jacob Burckhardt's critique of the polis (in July 1953). In the *Denktagebuch*, these engagements flank the earliest assertion of the decisiveness of the polis for political theory generally, which appears in June 1953.¹² Arendt never invested heavily in a historical investigation of the direct democratic institutions that made Athens famous and her reliance in *The Human Condition* on the historian Fustel de Coulanges to supply a sense of the ordinary Athenian citizen's involvement in politics was both thin and late-coming.

Indeed, in *The Human Condition* we do not find Arendt engaged in a detailed discussion of the direct democratic institutions of classical Athens. There is no close examination of the kind of participation and reciprocity made possible by the *dicasteria* with juries numbering in the hundreds, the *boulē* with its five hundred citizens deliberating on matters of state, or the *ekklesia* with its thousands of citizens gathered in the Pnyx. If one looks more closely at Arendt's analysis of the "twofold function" of the polis, one sees no direct emphasis on the traditional republican or civic humanist arguments in favor of participation and alternation of ruling and being ruled. Instead, Arendt stressed the connection between the polis and distinctiveness. As she put it, the polis increased "the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness." Likewise, the second purpose of the polis "was to offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech" by institutionalizing collective remembrance of the distinctive.¹³

This interest in the distinctive is evident in the deepest source for Arendt's reception of the polis considered as a historical entity at Athens in, chiefly, the fifth and fourth centuries BCE—namely the socioeconomic work of Max Weber. Over

¹² Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 183 and 1: 402. We encounter Arendt's first decisive association of the polis with the political as such in *Denktagebuch*, 1: 379: "was wir politisch nennen, entsteht mit der Polis" ("What we call 'political' arose with the polis") and "so wird in der polis das Ausserordentliche der 'basileia' zum Durchschnittlichen" ("in this way, what was extraordinary in the monarchy became average in the polis").

¹³ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 197.

a year before Arendt's first decisive expression of the centrality of the Greek polis for all subsequent political experience and expression in the Western tradition, we find in February 1952 the sudden intrusion of a brief but decisive pairing of Weber's discussion of slavery in his *Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (in Hellmann and Palyi's 1923 edition) and Aristotle's discussion of slavery in the *Politics*. Arendt classified the entry under *Arbeit*, "labor," which places the passage alongside two previous entries on the concepts of *Arbeit* in Hegel and Marx.¹⁴ After the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, Arendt intended to continue her research in a book project on the "Totalitarian Elements in Marxism." The engagement with Weber, therefore, was part of an investigation into the sociology of labor that—she thought—would allow her to conceptualize the distinctive qualities of Marxism as a body of thought. As Margaret Canovan has skillfully demonstrated, the work on Marxism was transformed in the course of 1950s into *The Human Condition*, the first part of which is—of course—a revisionist interpretation of the Marxian concept of labor.¹⁵ That Weber should have a role to play in Arendt's appropriation of the polis as a figure for thought is therefore indicative of the way that her political-theoretical masterpiece of 1958 emerged out of her controversial history of totalitarianism.

The most important point to take from Arendt's early discussion of Weber is that she did not choose Athens as an icon for political theory merely because she was enamored of its direct democratic institutions and blind to the structural issues that prevent Athens from being an uncontroversial model—issues such as the exclusion of women, slaves, and foreigners from citizenship. She began referring to the Athenian case not because it was politically ideal but because it revealed so clearly the basic possibilities for human activity. In Arendt's understanding, labor, work, and action were distinguished along class lines in Athens. In dialogue with Weber, she confected the notion that the Greeks thought of labor itself as slavery. For the Greeks, she reported, "labor *is* slavery, irrespective of its instantiation in law."¹⁶ Immediately before her assertion in the *Denktagebuch* that "Arbeit *ist* Sklaverei," Arendt referenced Weber's opinion that slaves in Greece were free in their economic activity and only had to pay their masters a rent. From here, Arendt intuited the proposition that "only the slave was a laborer, and every laborer was a slave."¹⁷

Thus the crucial thing was not the juridical status of being enslaved, nor even perhaps the constitutional position of being a noncitizen, but rather the sheer physical drudgery of an existence dedicated to the maintenance of bare life—a

¹⁴ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 106, 112.

¹⁵ Canovan, *Hannah Arendt*, chap. 3.

¹⁶ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 183: "Arbeit *ist* Sklaverei, unabhängig von ihrer Legalisierung."

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1: 182–3: "nur der Sklave war ein Arbeiter, und jeder Arbeiter war ein Sklave." Original emphasis.

reduction of being to metabolism. Weber was likewise a source for Arendt's insight that human enslavedness to metabolism can consist in a labor not only of production, but also of consumption. She was later struck by Weber's description of Athens as a "pensionopolis" complete with a "proletariat of consumers" and by his insistence that ancient cities were more "centers of consumption than of production." For Arendt, this critique of metabolism explained why "Aristotle sees the question not with regard to justice for the slaves—are the slaves not just as good as free men, or similar?—or relative to the nature of the slaves, but rather relative to the condition of human life."¹⁸ Confinement of a being to the processes of production and consumption prevented the development of a capacity to be fully human.

Arendt emphasized the phenomenological dimension of slavery: on the one hand, the life of the slave could only be measured in terms of "bodily degradation"; on the other, the slave was presented as a creature with "no possibility of *archein* (beginning)—of freely enacting and beginning anew."¹⁹ Notionally (if not actually), the slave was defined by its life in labor as an *animal laborans*, while the *banauosos*, the artisan, was excluded from politics and absorbed in the world of objects and commodities. For Arendt, only the independent male head of household was afforded access to the stages of democratic duty on which he could distinguish himself in word and deed. One might say that Arendt's Athens was an icon for political theory not on account of its putative status as the realization of a utopia, but rather precisely because its founding sins afforded the political scientist an unobstructed view of human being expressed purely in terms of labor *or* work *or* action.

Arendt's quest for distinctiveness as a response to the homogenizing tendencies of modernity led her not only to Weber but also to Jacob Burckhardt. In particular, she felt the need to respond to Burckhardt's assertion that the polis institutionalized a kind of demotic tyranny. In the *Denktagebuch* entries of July and August 1953, she reported working through the three volumes of Burckhardt's *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*. Her immediate reaction was to explain how political structures with "tyrannical tendencies" like the *poleis* could have nonetheless produced so many distinctive individuals. She contended that this paradox had deeply unsettled Burckhardt.²⁰ The Swiss historian had concluded that the vaunted Athenian direct democracy ought to be understood as a denial of the right to opt out of politics by sending representatives.²¹ Characterizing the polis as

¹⁸ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 37, 66 n.

¹⁹ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 183. The emphasis on "bodily degradation" comes from Aristotle, *Politics*, 1258b35 ff., discussed in Arendt, *Human Condition*, 81–2.

²⁰ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 402.

²¹ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, ed. O. Murray, trans. S. Stern (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1999), 47.

merely talkative, Burckhardt went so far as to cite the famous line from Herodotus imagining a Persian critique of Greek logomania. As Burckhardt related, in the Herodotean account, Cyrus the Elder confided to a Spartan messenger that he was “not afraid of a people who have a place in the middle of their cities”—an *agora*—“where they meet to deceive each other with false oaths.”²² Arendt rejected outright Burckhardt’s attempt to draw on the Persian elision of the difference between discursive negotiation and mere haggling.

In the context of Burckhardt’s critique of the polis, it appears natural to conclude that Arendt accepted that compactness—being centered on a very particular here and now—was the defining feature of the polis. Burckhardt for one emphasized the strict limitations of the polis. He found its *autarkeia*, “self-sufficiency,” stifling given that the ideal population of a polis was estimated to be no more than ten thousand citizens (although the actual number of citizens—as distinct from inhabitants—in democratic Athens is often estimated to have been around thirty thousand).²³ As noted above, Aristotle opined that the polis needed to be large enough to achieve self-sufficiency, but small enough that a single speaker could address the citizenry.²⁴ Arendt herself acknowledged that the Greeks “were quite aware of the fact that the polis, with its emphasis on action and speech, could survive only if the number of citizens remained restricted.”²⁵ Even more explicitly, she said in *On Revolution* that “freedom itself needed therefore a place where people could come together—the *agora*, the market-place, or the polis, the political space proper.”²⁶ Moreover, the evidence in favor of the opinion that Arendt’s was a political theory predicated on the spatial compactness of the ancient city-state appears decisive when we find her insisting that “only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power”—in the specifically Arendtian sense of the capacity to act in concert—“remain with them.”²⁷

Yet Arendt’s interest in spatial and temporal compactness is not as all-consuming as it might appear. Her resolution of the paradox that troubled Burckhardt (the paradox that the polis seemed to be not only powerfully conformist but also extraordinarily adept at producing distinctive individuals) constituted an early anticipation of a theory of topics that would become more

²² Herodotus, 1.29; cited in Burckhardt, *Greeks*, 52.

²³ Burckhardt, *Greeks*, 54; in turn, Burckhardt cites Strabo, 14.5.19.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1326b3–25: “the best limiting principle for a state is the largest expansion of the population, with a view to self-sufficiency that can well be taken in at one view.”

²⁵ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 43. Arendt herself adopted the Greek position and determined that “the larger the population in any given body politic, the more likely it will be the social rather than the political that constitutes the public realm.”

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963), 31.

²⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 201. See also, Arendt, *On Revolution*, 275.

explicit in her later work—and that overcame the supposition that immediacy of interaction between citizens was in some sense both necessary and sufficient for political life. Burckhardt had been particularly troubled by the Solonic injunction that abstention from factional disputes was unlawful and could be punished.²⁸ In response, Arendt argued that Burckhardt fundamentally misunderstood the political function of *doxa*, “opinion.” As she said, the solution to the paradox of a tyranny that nonetheless produced an extraordinary number of distinctive individuals “is easily revealed, if one correctly understands *doxa* (the *dokei moi*, the it-seems-to-me) and combines it with *agon*.” In her opinion, *agon*—the struggle to be the best—prevented conformism. Against Burckhardt’s anxiety about the inability to opt out of politics embodied in Solon’s injunction, Arendt argued that “Greek freedom” itself was a function of the “polis-coercion,” *Polis-Zwang*, of being forced to have an opinion.²⁹ Thus the pressure to involve oneself in politics was not a pressure to conform but rather a pressure to distinguish oneself by articulating an original and judicious political position.

Arendt certainly consulted other historical authorities on the ancient city-states. Fustel de Coulanges’s classic nineteenth-century work on *La Cité antique* was another significant source—particularly for Arendt’s understanding of the life of the Athenian citizen. As she explained the rise of the philosophical notion of *skholē* as a freedom from the business of the polis in *The Human Condition*, Arendt added that Fustel de Coulanges’s work contained “an excellent description of the everyday life of an ordinary Athenian citizen, who enjoys full freedom from labor and work.”³⁰ Thus Fustel de Coulanges corroborated Arendt’s June 1953 contention that the polis made ordinary—and everyday—what had been extraordinary under the rule of the *basileus*.³¹ In particular, the Frenchman emphasized the layering of magistracies. In addition to new democratic institutions, he argued, many of the older religious offices remained. The number of offices was such that “one could hardly take a step in the city or in the country without meeting an official.” Moreover, “these offices were annual; so that there was hardly any man who might not hope to fill some one of them in his turn.”³² Arendt certainly recognized that the Athenian polis sponsored direct democratic practices that emphasized participation and reciprocity in ruling and

²⁸ As Aristotle reported it, “when there is civil war in the city, anyone who does not take up arms on one side or the other shall be deprived of civil rights and of all share in the affairs of government.” Aristotle, *Constitution of Athens*, 8.5.

²⁹ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 402.

³⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 14.

³¹ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 379.

³² Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws and Institutions of Greece and Rome* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 329.

being ruled. But Weber and Burckhardt are earlier and more decisive sources than Fustel de Coulanges. Fostering distinctiveness was her primary interest.

With her emphasis on distinctness, Arendt belongs in an intellectual tradition that emphasizes the significance of aesthetics without presuming that aesthetics is simply a study of beauty considered as a value. This is a tradition that investigates *aisthesis* as a series of capacities to perceive similarity and difference in a variety of registers. Distinction is precisely that paradoxical process by which diverse phenomena are brought into a proximity that is a delicate balance between the similarity that renders them comparable and the difference that keeps them distinct. Thus Arendt's interest in Athenian *agon* as the *zoon politikon's* pursuit of distinction denoted an interest in the similarities and differences characteristic of words and deeds (rather than, for example, the statistical data of biometrics or the rates of economic productivity). *Aisthesis* as a classical foundation for the modern philosophical concerns of phenomenology is what pulled Arendt back to Athens. This conception of *aisthesis* was, thus, an antidote for what she took to be the "science-of-large-numbers" *indistinctness* of totalitarian tendencies in the twentieth century.

III. ANALOGUES OF THE ATHENIAN CITY-STATE

The Athenian polis is the most famous of the icons that Arendt put forward for those situations in which human beings could distinguish themselves in word and in deed, but—as scholars have noted—there were number of other such icons. The chief purpose of this essay is to push beyond the assumption that Arendt's interest in the Athenian polis and its analogues was an interest solely in those spaces of appearance in which actors and spectators might appear directly before one another and were not separated in either space or time. That Arendt saw more in the polis than the immediacy of direct democratic politics becomes evident when one examines all those things that, in her mind, were analogous to the polis. In the order of their appearance in her work, there are seven such analogues: the Roman *res publica* (September 1952), sophistic antilogy (June 1953), Herodotean cultural history (July 1953), modern historicism (April 1954), Homeric poetry (May 1954), Greek *nomos* (August 1955), and the councils of the 1956 Hungarian revolution (in an article published in the February 1958 issue of the *Journal of Politics*). To trace the sequential elaboration of these analogues between September 1952 and February 1958 is to construct an approximation of the inquiry sequence that led to the famous representation of the polis in *The Human Condition*.

In Arendt's comparison of the Roman *res publica* to the polis, it was the second of the functions of the polis—and not the first—that dominated. That is to say, for her the *res publica* not only was capable of establishing a public stage on which individuals might distinguish themselves, but also was a vehicle for retaining,

memorializing, distinctive contributions to Roman history. As Arendt put it, “the polis was for the Greeks as the *res publica* was for the Romans, first of all their guarantee against the futility of individual life.”³³ Modern Romanists—such as Robert Morstein-Marx, for instance—sometimes use Hellenist accounts of interactions between mass and elite in the polis to analyze Roman public practices like the *contio* (where individuals such as Cicero might have the opportunity to distinguish themselves before the gathered *populus*). Arendt, by contrast, believed that the distinctiveness of Roman publicity lay more primarily in its expansiveness—both temporally in the form of collective memory and spatially in the form of the *pax Romana*—and not in its compactness.³⁴

Thus, when Arendt conceived of the spatial extension of Roman publicity, she contrasted it decisively with that of the Greek poleis. When Cicero said in *De re publica* that the tyrant is a wild beast, “who wants to have no community of laws, no society of humanity [*humanitatis societatem*] between himself and his fellow citizens, nor ultimately with the entire human race,” Arendt interjected immediately—in her September 1952 gloss—that “*humanitas* is that humaneness [*Menschlichkeit*], that humanness [*Menschhaftigkeit*] that first arises in society” and that “the true difference between the Greeks and the Romans lies here.”³⁵ It was the extension beyond the bounds of the polis that struck Arendt as radical. Likewise, when Cicero suggested that *imperium* only became lasting through a combination of *gloria* and *benevolentia sociorum*, it was the extension beyond the walls of the *urbs* implicit in the *socius* that Arendt took as decisive for Rome’s ability to succeed where Athens had failed—namely in establishing a political community both spatially extended and temporally enduring.³⁶ For her, Roman law was the clearest symbol of this success. In her account, Roman law functioned as the possibility of inclusion in the body politic, by which she meant the gradual—if painful and contested—extension of the rights of Roman citizenship beyond the polis of the Roman city-state itself.

³³ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 56.

³⁴ On Arendt’s debt to the Romans more generally see Dean Hammer, “Hannah Arendt and Roman Political Thought: The Practice of Theory,” *Political Theory* 30/1 (2002), 124–49. In his *Mass Oratory and Political Power in the Late Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Robert Morstein-Marx does hint at the historical time experienced by participants in the *contio*. See also Joy Connolly, *The State of Speech: Rhetoric and Political Thought in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 23.

³⁵ Cicero, *De re publica*, 2.26: “qui sibi cum suis civibus, qui denique cum omni hominum genere nullam iuris communionem, nullam humanitatis societatem velit.” Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 255.

³⁶ Cicero, *De officiis*, 3.88; Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 447. Jacques Taminaux has spoken of “the advantage of Rome over Athens,” from Arendt’s perspective—Jacques Taminaux, “Athens and Rome,” in Villa, *Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, 173.

Her later meditations on Rome developed this notion that the peculiarly Roman genius lay in extending the *res publica* both spatially and temporally. In lectures from 1953 and 1954, she emphasized the unique, unrepeatable, and yet enduring quality of Roman constitutional foundation.³⁷ In a 1959 essay (later reprinted in *Between Past and Future*), she linked the concept of authority to the Roman experience of continuing to participate in the founding of the state by observing the *mos maiorum*.³⁸ In her 1963 book *On Revolution*, she argued that the institutions embedded by the American Revolution constituted a kind of rebirth of the Roman experience of authority—and, once again, the key aspect of that experience is extension, duration in time.³⁹ Thus, in Arendt's view, the Roman space of appearance extended far beyond the boundaries of the Forum.

Less than a year after Arendt's first attempt to grasp the—for her purposes most telling—difference between Athens and Rome, one finds her going beyond the political-theoretical treatments of the polis that she had found in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* and in Aristotle's *Politics*. Without mentioning her first Marburg seminar with Heidegger in the winter semester of 1924–5 (which took Book VI of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as a point of entry into Plato's *Sophist* and thereby to the fifth-century BCE Athenian experience of the relationships among rhetoric, sophistic, and dialectic), Arendt made the following curt observation in June 1953: “the two *logoi* of the Sophists—this is the authentic philosophical-political discovery of the polis.”⁴⁰ For Arendt, the sophistic capacity to speak both for and against a proposition derived from one of the essential components of politics as such—namely plurality. That the textual remains of the sophistic movement (such as the *Dissoi Logoi*, for example) often reproduced only two sides of the case was, Arendt argued, already a “logical distortion.” Each and every matter has multiple sides and the process of discursive negotiation that is politics is preoccupied with the disclosure of that multiplicity. Failing to reproduce Heidegger's summer semester 1924 stipulation that rhetoric ought to be understood as a *dūnamis* (power, possibility) and not as a *technē* (art), Arendt went on to argue that the discipline dealing with this multiplicity is rhetoric.⁴¹ In any case, what we have here is the implication that the literal spaces

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, ed., Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 49.

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking, 1968), 120 ff.

³⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 200 ff.

⁴⁰ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 390: “zu den zwei *logoi* der Sophisten: Dies ist die eigentlich philosophisch-politische Entdeckung der Polis.”

⁴¹ Compare Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 391; Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Philosophie* (Frankfurt a.M.: V. Klostermann, 2002), 114; and Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b25.

of the Athenian polis—the Pnyx and its ilk—are themselves remnant signs of a deeper perspectivism that was, in point of fact, simply a practice (therefore, ephemeral) and that was more appropriately handled by the sophists than by Plato. Difference of perspective is particularly palpable in the polis, but such difference is a phenomenon that can only be fully documented in the long run when the greatest diversity of responses to a problem can be accreted from different times and places.

The process of accretion from different places and times is a quintessentially historiographic problem, and it is therefore not surprising that Arendt should have taken various components of historiography to be analogues of the polis. If the polis was a means of bringing words and deeds together such that they might form some kind of whole (greater than the mere sum of its parts), then what Arendt termed the *Volk* in the *Denktagebuch* was actually a more primitive approximation of what one might call the conceptual function of the polis. For her (as she noted in July 1953), Herodotus' account of cultural history turned on the structural integrity of a cultural fabric achieved in time on account of the coming together of word and deed in poetry. Thus, "in Herodotus, who had the concept of the barbaric (and hence a concept of the Hellenic), there emerges for the first time a people out of deeds," so that "what founded the Greek people is not the polis—not the foundation of the city, nor an event either—but rather the deeds [*die Taten, πραγματα*] by which the descendants, in so far as they remembered them, distinguished themselves from other peoples."⁴² The emphasis on distinctiveness is—as we have seen—old, but the point that historical agents acting in isolation from one another are capable of achieving a kind of distinctiveness as a collective is new.

The constitution of a people considered as a space of appearance (a congeries of actions against which the words and deeds of new generations can be measured) in the cultural histories of Herodotus prepared Arendt for a more daring recognition of modern historicism as a kind of replacement for the polis. At first (in September 1953), Arendt argued that the kind of "cunning" exhibited in history according to Hegel was a realization of Michelet's project of writing a history of humanity considered as a single individual and that such projects rely on an elimination of the kind of plurality that the sophists had rightly perceived at the heart of politics.⁴³ Within a year, however, by April 1954, Arendt was planning to conclude a book (only the second part of which was eventually written, becoming *The Human Condition*) with a discussion of *Philosophie und Politik* that turned on the phrase *Geschichte als "Ersatz" der Polis*.⁴⁴ What she meant to suggest by

⁴² Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 400.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1:453.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:482–3.

saying that history might be thought of as a “replacement” for the polis was that whereas antiquity conceived of politics as the true medium of history (a path to immortality by means of exemplary words and deeds), modernity—since Hegel and Marx—conceived of history as the true medium of politics (a dialectical motion that could never be completed in a single lifetime).⁴⁵ The transition from ancient to modern involved a broadening of the frame of reference. For the ancients, the qualities of an exemplary action would be manifest, whereas the modern historicist would conceive of an action’s true meaning as concealed, only to be unfolded over time by the cunning of history.

The very next entry in the *Denktagebuch* (dated to May 1954) extended the notion that historicism supplanted the polis into a hypothesis that the polis supplanted poetry. Poetry itself brought a particular kind of space into being—*sie schafft einen Raum*. Thus the polis supplanted not only Achilles but also Homer, the mode in which Achilles might be remembered. Homer constituted a more capacious public square than the *agora*, however, for Homer could bring the absent and the dead into contact with the present and the living. In a way that was different from the literal space of the Pnyx, the figurative “space” of poetry was “permanent.” For Arendt, Homer was a pre-classical rhetorical institution, a prototype for “the guarantee of always-being-seen [*Immer-gesehen-Werdens*], even after death.”⁴⁶ The *Vita activa* (Arendt’s own German translation of *The Human Condition*, which appeared in 1960) corroborated this sense in which Homer was an institution that did not suffer from the spatial and temporal limitations of literal co-presence.⁴⁷ Indeed, much later in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (delivered at the New School in 1970), Arendt would note that the poet—she was thinking of Homer—is figured as a blind man precisely because he is free from whatever is most close at hand. The blind poet was, thus, free to forge a kind of community (and, indeed, a kind of space of appearance) that did not require an immediate reciprocity between speaker and listener.⁴⁸

Yet it would be wrong to conclude precipitously that between 1952 and 1958 there was an easily verifiable movement from a conception of the polis as a highly compact space of immediate proximity and exchange to one in which the polis was a kind of cultural space where individuals could be party to the same historical process without ever encountering each other. One ought rather to conclude that Arendt’s perceptions of similitude to the polis in the 1950s

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1:480–1.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1:483–4.

⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Vita activa: oder, vom tätigen Leben* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960), 191.

⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 68.

oscillated—now emphasizing immediacy, now mediation. Hence it occurred to her both that for the Greeks the word “polis” could refer to the laws of the city-state that distinguished it as a juridical entity and that the law, in turn, could stand for the boundary beyond which the city-state had no jurisdiction. As she noted, one learns from the origin of the word *nomos* that “it was quite literally a wall, without which there might have been an agglomeration of houses, a town (*asty*), but not a city, a political community.” For the Greeks, she believed, *nomos* established a real, contiguous, and limited geographical territory beyond which lay anarchy. Thus, when one used the word “polis” in the sense of *nomos*, one was referring to a necessarily circumscribed geographical entity.⁴⁹

All of this—the comparisons of the Athenian polis to the Roman *res publica*, sophistic antilogy, Herodotean cultural history, modern historicism, Homeric poetry, and Greek *nomos*—demonstrates that Arendt invested in the idea of the polis in order to think comparatively about spaces of appearance that were predominantly classical, but also at times distinctively modern. Arendt did regard modern historicism as disastrous, but she certainly did not believe that modern societies possessed only corrupted versions of the antique experience of the polis. Thus a survey of analogues for the polis in Arendtian thought through the 1950s must deal with her interest in the council systems generated—spontaneously, in her opinion—in the context of modern revolutions, an interest that emerged decisively in February 1958 with her examination of the Hungarian Revolution.⁵⁰

In *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt went on to extend her conception of the polis to cover the various forms of council system generated by the revolutionary moments that in her mind distinguished the modern age. Her concept of revolutionary action drew together a sequence of modern moments in which direct democracy had been practiced or contemplated. Arendt regarded the French *sociétés révolutionnaires* after 1789, the Jeffersonian wards of the early American republic, the Parisian *communes* of 1871, the Russian *soviets* of 1905 and 1917, the German *Räte* of 1918 and 1919 (for which Arendt’s husband, Heinrich Blücher had fought and of which Arendt herself had a distinct recollection), and the Hungarian councils of 1956 as spontaneous direct democratic responses to revolutionary conditions.⁵¹ And it was certainly no coincidence that *On Revolution* closed with an invocation of the polis. Yet even here, in such an

⁴⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 63–4. Further investigation of the concept of *nomos* in Arendt and Schmitt has been undertaken recently in Hans Lindahl, “Give and Take: Arendt and the *Nomos* of Political Community,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32/7 (2006), 881–901.

⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, “Totalitarian Imperialism: Reflections on the Hungarian Revolution,” *Journal of Politics* 20/1 (1958), 5–43.

⁵¹ Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 27–8: “Hannah Arendt remembered being taken along by her mother, who was an ardent admirer of Rosa Luxemburg, to the first excited discussions among the Königsberg circle of the news from Berlin that there had been an uprising.

explicitly direct democratic and participatory context, Arendt placed particular emphasis on the distinction that could be achieved through the polis and its analogues. At the end of the book, she recalled that Theseus, the founder of Athens, had claimed that what “enabled ordinary men, young and old, to bear life’s burden” was the polis, “the space of men’s free deeds and living words, which could endow life with splendor—*τον βιον λαμπρον ποιεισθαι*.”⁵²

Arendt’s depiction of the council system in *On Revolution* was about as close as she ever came to sketching an ideal set of political institutions. She was very reluctant to move from the historical record to an abstract list of qualities that would distinguish such direct democratic institutions. She ventured to say that a polity constituted on the foundation of the council system she advocated would be one in which “the joys of public happiness”—the sheer enjoyment of political participation for its own sake—“and the responsibilities for public business would then become the share of those few from all walks of life who have a taste for public freedom and cannot be ‘happy’ without it.” She supposed that neighborhood associations consisting of those willing to participate would send individuals up a pyramid of councils until they constituted a council existing at the level of the state itself. But then she broke off resisting what she categorized as a “temptation” to be more explicit.⁵³ Because of her desire to establish a clear distinction between “work,” on the one hand, and “action,” on the other, Arendt strove to avoid anything that approximated a constitutional blueprint. A polity, she argued, could not be built like a machine, and she left the details of this council system to those who would be faced with institutionalizing it in real historical time.

Arendt did argue that the council system was predicated on a localization of politics, such that participation (which would foster words and deeds) could become more common than representation (which would tend to promote interests). And it is true that, when she came to judge the case of the Hungarian councils that sprang up in the course of the 1956 revolution against the Soviets, Arendt tended to assume that the experience of politics—the experience of action—could be rekindled under modern conditions through the construction of small, face-to-face councils in which orators and auditors were immediately present to each other. Indeed, when Arendt said that “the formation of a council . . . turned a more or less accidental proximity into a political institution,” it is

As they ran through the streets, Martha Arendt shouted to her daughter, ‘You must pay attention, this is a historical moment!’”

⁵² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 281. Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*. The key Greek term here (*lampron*) means not simply “splendid” but also “bright, radiant, limpid, clear, distinct.”

⁵³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 279–80.

reasonable to suppose that for her the crucial quality of spontaneity was related to the mundane fact of spatial propinquity.⁵⁴

Yet what the multiplicity of analogues of the polis in Arendt demonstrates is that, although spatial and temporal propinquity is certainly one set of conditions of possibility for the phenomena that she is interested in, face-to-face relationships between citizens were far from the only focus in her account of politics. As we have seen, the clearest examples of Arendt's interest in direct democratic institutions occur in 1958 or later. Pre-dating that interest is an emphasis on creating spaces in which distinctiveness could become memorable. Thus she also believed that Homeric poetry and the Roman *res publica* were both examples of cultural spaces in which distinctiveness could overcome the temporal and spatial limitation of its performance and become an enduring part of the political space in which actions were undertaken. In order to inquire further into this less-well-understood aspect of the space of appearance it is necessary to go beyond the analogues of the polis that Arendt explored in the 1950s. Further evidence of Arendt's interest in the ways in which the space of appearance reaches beyond the limits of the here and the now is to be found in Arendt's writings on judgment, culture, and topoi.

IV. SPACES OF APPEARANCE

When, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt defined the polis not as “the city-state in its physical location” but rather in terms of “the organization of [a] people as it arises out of acting and speaking together,” she drew upon the concept of the “space of appearance” in order to anchor this notion of a kind of being with others that is not dependent upon a particular locale. In turn, she approximated a definition of the “space of appearance” by saying—as indicated above—that the polis is “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.” She went on to say that the space of appearance would exist potentially “wherever people gather together, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.” When human beings disperse or when they cease to come together for the purpose of distinguishing themselves in word and deed on matters of public importance, the space of appearance is no more.⁵⁵

This account of the space of appearance in *The Human Condition* appears to be unequivocal and explicit on the requirement that citizens must come together in the same place and time in order to generate a space of appearance, but the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 267.

⁵⁵ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 198–9.

account is not unequivocal and the requirement is not as simple as it seems. The “space of appearance” is the phrase that Arendt used to denote in a generic fashion all of those analogues of the polis that have been discussed in the previous section. The term “space” lies at the heart of the phrase, and when interpreting that word readers tend to default automatically to concrete examples such as the Athenian Pnyx or the Roman Forum—literal spaces that can be and have been described with an archaeologist’s concern for measurement. At times, however, the term “space” can only be understood figuratively in Arendt, as for example in her statement that poetry brings a kind of *Raum*, “space,” into existence. The task now is to understand more precisely what Arendt meant when she used the term “space” figuratively, and there are three aspects of the later evolution of the Arendtian polis and its analogues that are most important at this point: judgment, culture, and the concept of topos.

A great deal has been written recently about Arendt’s theory of judgment, but what Arendt said about judging is almost never used for the purposes of revealing what she understood by the term “polis.” In part, this is because in his otherwise excellent edition of her 1970 lectures on Kant’s political philosophy, Ronald Beiner stated that “it is in an article by Arendt entitled ‘Freedom and Politics,’ published in 1961, that we first encounter the idea that Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* contains the seeds of a political philosophy distinct from, and indeed opposed to, the political philosophy associated with the *Critique of Practical Reason*.”⁵⁶ In fact, the decisive shift in Arendt’s attitude towards Kant as a political thinker occurred between 1955 and 1957. The adjustment in chronology is significant here because it establishes a close proximity between the work on the polis and that on judgment. I argue that many of the interests in the polis were transferred to judgment in August of 1957, when the *Denktagebuch* records the results of a close reading of Kant’s Third Critique.

The origin and character of Hannah Arendt’s theory of judgment is a complex story that I have examined in detail elsewhere.⁵⁷ The roots of the theory go back to earlier engagements with Hegel’s *Logik* in December of 1952 and Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in July and August of 1953, engagements that are both recorded in the *Denktagebuch*. Nevertheless, it was Arendt’s rereading of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft* in August 1957 that was most decisive. Immediately before the publication of *The Human Condition*, therefore, Arendt was moved to investigate a theme that many scholars think of as being at the center of a different—and perhaps contradictory—research agenda, one that headed away from the *vita*

⁵⁶ Ronald Beiner, “Hannah Arendt on Judging,” in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 101.

⁵⁷ See David L. Marshall, “The Origin and Character of Hannah Arendt’s Theory of Judgment,” *Political Theory* (forthcoming).

activa and towards the *vita contemplativa*. The simultaneity of the interests in the polis and in judgment is an indicator, however, that the two interests were closely related.

Some sense of this relation is manifest in Arendt's stipulation in August 1957 that "the condition of possibility for judgment is the presence of others, publicity."⁵⁸ Judgment, which for Kant had been a capacity to think the particular in terms of the universal, is reliant in large part on a power of taking the viewpoints of others into account. Soon after Arendt's stipulation that the presence of others was crucial to judgment, she cited Kant's famous treatment of *sensus communis* in §40 of the Third Critique. In a much-cited passage that Arendt also subsequently emphasized, Kant contended that

under the *sensus communis* we must include the idea of a sense *common to all*, i.e., of a faculty of judgment which, in its reflection, takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of all other men in thought, in order, *as it were*, to compare its judgment with the collective reason of humanity.⁵⁹

What we have here is a continuation of Arendt's interest in the sophistic experience of politics, in the diversity of perspectives that reveal a phenomenon in its fullness.

Arendt would cite the same sentence from Kant in her 1970 New School lectures that formed the basis for Beiner's 1982 posthumous edition. In a striking refashioning of the lexicon that glosses the Greek polis as a space of appearance, Arendt argued in those lectures that "the condition *sine qua non* for the existence of beautiful objects is communicability," with the result that "the judgment of the spectator creates the space without which no such objects could appear at all."⁶⁰ The exposition of judgment in her 1970 lectures on Kant is a revision of what in *The Human Condition* had been termed the "space of appearance." Arendt went on to say that "the larger the scope of those to whom one can communicate, the greater is the worth of the object."⁶¹ Thus Arendt related Kant's hope that "by thus viewing my judgments impartially from the standpoint of others some third view that will improve upon my previous insight may be obtainable." In this way, Kant hoped "to view the object afresh from every side."⁶²

In the Kantian formulation, however, the insistence that the space of appearance facilitates direct exchanges becomes not simply unnecessary but problematic. Kant insisted that in order for taste to become judgment proper

⁵⁸ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 570: "die Bedingung der Möglichkeit der Urteilskraft ist die Präsenz der Andern, die Öffentlichkeit."

⁵⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §40; cited in Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 1: 579, and then again in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 71. Original italics.

⁶⁰ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 63.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 42.

one must compare one's own "judgment with the possible rather than actual judgments of others." For this reason, Kant argued that judgment is utterly reliant on the faculty of imagination, which in this context was the faculty of making present that which is absent.⁶³ Not merely Kantian, Arendt's understanding of imagination also inherited Heidegger's phenomenological reinterpretation of the Greek language of experience. Thus Arendt compared the faculty of imagination to the faculty of *nous* identified by Parmenides as that faculty "through which you look steadfastly at things which are present though they are absent."⁶⁴ Appearance itself under these conceptual conditions no longer connoted the kind of immediate presence one presumed it must when one heard Arendt say that the space of appearance was a place in which I appear before others as they appear before me. As Anaxagorean *phainomena*, appearances are "a glimpse of the nonvisible." Or, as Arendt transliterated it, "by looking at appearances . . . one becomes aware of, gets a glimpse of, something that does not appear."⁶⁵ In this way, exemplarity (itself crucial for the faculty of judgment) was a function of the epistemological necessity of superimposing particulars on entities that do not appear in order to perceive them.

Imagination, thus, could overcome the tyranny of spatial and temporal particularity that hitherto had seemed to be one of the advantages of the space of appearance qua the Pnyx or the Forum. As Arendt explained, imagination "transforms an object into something I do not have to be directly confronted with but that I have in some sense internalized."⁶⁶ Immediacy imposes a tyranny of the here and now, and it is liberating to propose that

only what touches, affects, one in representation, when one can no longer be affected by immediate presence—when one is uninvolved, like the spectator who was uninvolved in the actual doings of the French Revolution—can be judged to be right or wrong, important or irrelevant, beautiful or ugly, or something in between.⁶⁷

It is crucial to recognize not simply that this—more Kantian—vision of politics is quite different from the Periclean one she articulated in parts of *The Human Condition*, but also that there were elements of the earlier treatment of the polis that were integrally involved, and were being transformed, in this move towards Kant.

Representation was indeed the antonym—within an Arendtian frame of reference—of participation. Her republican reputation leads to the impression

⁶³ Ibid., 67.

⁶⁴ Parmenides, fragment 4; cited in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 80.

⁶⁵ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 80.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 67.

that she was an implacable enemy of representation and that she looked incessantly for ways of reconstituting the participatory democracy the Greeks were supposed to have enjoyed at Athens. Indeed, Arendt was very much of the opinion that handing over to others the responsibility for representing oneself in public was a fundamental mistake. One ought not to assume, however, that her opposition to representation in some cases meant that she imposed a ban on it in all cases. In her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, she viewed representation as absolutely essential to cognitive processes embedded in politics at the deepest level. For Arendt, manifesting oneself in the public sphere was not simply a matter of self-expression. It was always already a mediated process of self-representation. It was nothing other than a process—guided by rhetoric, or a mode of inquiry akin to rhetoric—of representing oneself in public as a distinctive perspective, one among others.

Further evidence of the transfer of Arendt's interests in the polis to a new emphasis on judgment can be found in an article on "Kultur und Politik," which was originally published in 1959 and was then revised as "The Crisis in Culture" for *Between Past and Future* (1961). In that article, Arendt proposed that judgment established a connection between the polis considered as a literal space in which politically distinctive actions are manifested and the polis considered as a figurative space in which those actions are transformed into works of art that remain conceptually powerful even after the disappearance of the agents who undertook them. In this transitional essay, Arendt saw a close connection between the realms of politics and culture, and it is here that we should look to understand the relationship between the political space of the Pnyx and the cultural space of a Homeric poem.

Kant's discussion of judgment had, of course, been a discussion of *aesthetic* judgment and Arendt was conscious of the fraught connection between aesthetic and political forms of judgment. For this reason, the turn to Kant for the purposes of investigating the phenomenon of judgment in 1957 was followed, in the wake of the publication in the following year of *The Human Condition*, by a more concerted investigation of the tension between those forms of human performance that qualified as political action, *praxis*, and those forms that constituted artistic production, *poiesis*. In *The Human Condition*, she introduced her treatment of the polis with a consideration of Pericles' claim that "the polis . . . gives a guaranty that those who forced every sea and land to become the scene of their daring will not remain without witness and will need neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words to praise them." The polis, in this account, was itself a structure for and practice of remembrance.

A year later, in "Kultur und Politik," Arendt took up the Thucydidean representation of Pericles' claim in the Funeral Oration that the polis was capable of dispensing with Homer because it was capable of ensuring its own

immortality in memory.⁶⁸ She placed particular emphasis on the previous chapter in Thucydides' history, a chapter in which Pericles had said of the Athenians that *philosophoumen aneu malakias kai philokaloumen met' euteleias*. Arguing that the phrase was all but untranslatable, she later transposed the sense of Pericles' utterance as "we love beauty within the limits of political judgment, and we philosophize without the barbarian vice of effeminacy."⁶⁹ Arendt thought this passage was symptomatic of a deep tension in Athenian thought between culture and politics, between the *poiesis of homo faber* on the one hand and the *praxis* of the *zoon politikon* on the other. Pericles had boasted that it was not the poets and the artists but rather "the organization of the polis that secures the public space in which greatness may appear and may communicate, and in which a permanent presence of people who see and are seen, who speak and hear and may be heard, thus assures a permanent remembrance."⁷⁰ The suspicion was that the artists lived within the worldview of the artisan and would thus treat political processes as if they were artistic processes. For Arendt and, she believed, the political practitioners of Athens (if not its political theorists) this would be catastrophic because in political action she thought it ruinous both to employ force rather than persuasion and to think in terms of means and ends rather than principles.

Arendt did not want merely to repeat the Greek dichotomy between culture and politics. The point she made was that the Kantian account of judgment depicts a faculty mediating between what, in her account, the Greeks took to be two distinct spheres of cultural and political activity. In an argument that subsequently was to become famous, Arendt contended that Kant's account of aesthetic judgment could indeed be appropriated as an account of political judgment. As she put it in 1959, "both judgments of taste and political judgments are decisions."⁷¹ As with the early statements on judgment, Arendt concentrated in 1959 on the way in which the presence of others is crucial for the production of Kant's *erweiterte Denkungsart*, his "enlarged way of thinking." The point was to become habituated to placing one's own reaction to a phenomenon in the context of the reactions of others in such a way that "subjective private conditions" could be minimized.

⁶⁸ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 197—glossing Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.41.

⁶⁹ Hannah Arendt, "Culture and Politics," in *idem, Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 186. See Hannah Arendt, "Kultur und Politik," *Merkur* 12 (1959), 1129. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 214; Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.40.

⁷⁰ Arendt, "Culture and Politics," 188–9; "Kultur und Politik," 1131–2.

⁷¹ Arendt, "Culture and Politics," 199; "Kultur und Politik," 1134, 1143.

Arendt concluded “Kultur und Politik” by arguing that the polis itself could not actually ensure the continued presence of the absent and the dead “through ceaseless narrative commemoration” and that the “productive objectification” of the poets and artists was essential to the extension of the space of appearance back into the past.⁷² Arendt was heading towards the notion that the richest, most revealing, most perspicuous space of appearance was that in which the greatest possible diversity of exempla—both contemporary and past—were combined in a topos that revealed possible as well as actual modes of distinctiveness. Thus what we find in the 1959 treatment of culture and politics is that Arendt was highly conscious of the tension between the two, but that her interpretation of the polis established a strong connection between them. The political space of appearance is reliant on the cultural space of appearance, and vice versa.

Finally, in November 1969 and then again in the first volume of *The Life of the Mind* (published posthumously in 1978), Arendt turned to what she called “the topos of thinking.” As she said, if one asks the question of where one is when one is thinking, then one must answer “neither in the public realm where we are concerned with the world and with what is common to us, nor in the private where we are concerned with our own and with what we want to hide from the world.”⁷³ The space of thinking as she both theorizes and practices it is, in point of fact, properly topical—in the traditional rhetorical sense—in that it is a space given a certain figurative extension by those distinctive phenomena that have been remembered. Generated in particular heres and nows but honed and transformed by successive acts of remembering in a vast range of other places and times, such topoi are in fact the last of the analogues of the Arendtian polis.

Arendt’s use of the particular term “topos” is late and sparing. It is, nevertheless, the best term to focus on when one is attempting to gauge the nonliteral meaning of “space” in Arendt’s thought in the 1960s. One encounters the term in the *Denktagebuch* in November 1969. In an entry marked “Main task” (probably the main task to be achieved in *Thinking*, the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*), Arendt asked the question of where one ought to localize thinking, an issue that she took Plato to have addressed, unsatisfactorily, in *The Sophist*. In the *Denktagebuch*, this became a concern with how to speak about “the topos of thinking.” In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt attempted to move more decisively

⁷² Arendt, “Culture and Politics,” 191, 202; “Kultur und Politik,” 1145. On Arendt’s misgivings about the capacity of Athens to fulfill completely the two functions of the polis, see Roy T. Tsao, “Arendt against Athens: Rereading *The Human Condition*,” *Political Theory* 30/1 (2002), 97–123.

⁷³ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 2: 753.

beyond the spatial presumption of all questions beginning with “where.”⁷⁴ As Arendt put it in *Thinking*,

perhaps our question—Where are we when we think?—was wrong because by asking for the topos of this activity, we were exclusively spatially oriented—as though we had forgotten Kant’s famous insight that “time is nothing but the form of inner sense, that is, of the intuition of ourselves and of our inner state.”⁷⁵

Thinking is precisely a form of being that involves going beyond the limitations of the polis conceived of as a literal space, but the irony is that such thinking is also historically associated with the polis, for the sophists foreshadowed the *topos noētos* of the philosophers (and were indeed characterized as wanderers). Judgment as an *erweiterte Denkungsart* is precisely one of the means of absenting oneself from purely local circumstances for the purpose of examining the qualities of a phenomenon against the background of a wider sample of comparable phenomena. Thus, as the polis oscillated in Arendt’s mind between a literal space and a figurative one, she broadened her interest in the topos to the *topos noētos*.

The distance between the polis as a zone dedicated to direct democratic activity and the topos is considerable, but there is an intelligible conceptual connection. For Arendt, what emerged out of an agonistic culture was not a group of individuals so much as a congeries of controversial topoi, around which debates accreted. Thus, in reality, the “space” of the “space of appearance” was often a topos, a place of debate that has become a commonplace, a reference point for a culture of disputation. What is more, the figurative sense of “space” that emerges here is a purely relational one. There is no abstract, Euclidean space that underlies and coordinates the topos. Each “space” is centered on a phenomenon or cluster of related phenomena, while each “axis” is simply some particular kind of comparability and each “distance” is simply a distance between two or more judgments. As a result, we can say that there is a good deal more continuity between Arendt’s early accounts of the *vita activa* and her later accounts of the *vita contemplativa*.

⁷⁴ Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 2: 749, 753, 757; and *idem*, *The Life of the Mind*, 2 vols. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 1: 97, 201.

⁷⁵ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 1: 201. Stephen Schneck is therefore right to intuit that for Arendt “the space of the polis . . . is not empty but structured and full of meaning,” and right to suggest that Arendt’s understanding of space might be usefully traced back to phenomenological receptions of Kant in the early twentieth century. See Stephen Schneck, “A Question of Space: Max Scheler and Hannah Arendt on the Place of the Person,” in *idem*, ed., *Max Scheler’s Acting Persons: New Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 157, 165.

V. CONCLUSION

I have argued that the icon of the polis continues to hold many thinkers and writers in thrall. Arendt herself certainly had a predilection for the polis and its analogues. Those who have read Arendt have often misread her debt to the polis, however. Many who have an affinity for the polis (perceiving in it an intensity of public life that they prize and desire) have latched onto Arendt's apparent defense. Others who have an aversion to the polis—taking it as a symbol of the panoptic intrusion of the state into the lives of its citizens—have likewise emphasized Arendt's advocacy. But both reactions betray a mistaken presupposition about what Arendt took to be the necessary and sufficient conditions for politics. For all her investment in direct democratic practice, Arendt was deeply aware of the myriad ways in which politics as a mode of being extends far beyond the limited parameters of the here and now. For her, concepts themselves were spaces of appearance, zones of sensitivity in which individua joined by similitude map out the distances that lie between them when they are not resolved into the abstraction of a definition or a statistically generated mean. If Arendt effected an aesthetization of politics, it was in this sense. She made judgment the central political faculty and conceived of judgment as an ability to perceive the world in terms of fields of exempla—topoi. And these topoi are the most distant analogues of Arendt's original conception of the polis. Indeed, such topoi are themselves spaces of appearance.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ For further analysis of these themes see David L. Marshall, *Vico and the Transformation of Rhetoric in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).