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HANNAH ARENDT AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY: A DISPLACED ENCOUNTER*

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ABSTRACT

Despite the recent revival of interest in Weimar political theology to rethink the relationship between religion and politics, one name is hardly ever mentioned in these debates: Hannah Arendt. Arendt's apparent silence on this issue is peculiar because not only did she intellectually mature in the Weimar context and did she personally know many of the protagonists of the Weimar political theology debate, but also and especially because Carl Schmitt's famous thesis that all political concepts are in reality secularized theological concepts is obviously diametrically opposed to Arendt's idea of a self-contained politics. This paper argues that the reason why Arendt did not intervene directly in this debate is that she was mainly concerned with deconstructing the more encompassing claim that politics requires a force external to it, the origins of which she traces back to Plato's attempt to transform political action into a mode of fabrication. It will be shown that the main target of Arendt's political thought is therefore not political theology, but what we could tentatively call "political technology."

KEYWORDS: Hannah Arendt, Weimar Political Theology, Secularism, Martin Heidegger, Technology.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a rather unexpected revival of interest in the relationship between religion and politics. The confidence liberal democracy gained after the collapse of communism soon suffered a serious blow following the resurgence of various religious movements reclaiming their rightful place in the public sphere or even openly declaring their hostility to the secular political order. So, while the beginning of the 90s witnessed a sudden upsurge of optimism about a future era of global stability, prosperity and democratization, even leading some to herald “the end of history,”¹ the outburst of religious violence in the Balkans, the Middle East, India and many other places in the world and, especially, the events of 9/11 and its aftermath made it clear that the defeat of the socialist alternative did not lead to the abandonment of eschatological hopes altogether. The sudden return of the religious on the political scene urged scholars to seriously reconsider the Enlightenment view that the forces unleashed by modernity would eventually totally deprive religion of its power to capture the political imagination. More specifically, the question was raised whether it had not been an illusion to believe that one could have a political order that is not authorized by some transcendent absolute. Perhaps, then, theocracy merely represents liberal democracy’s repressed double that appears on the surface as a kind of *deus ex machina* at times when it becomes manifest that democratic rule is actually founded on a set of aporetic concepts.

A large part of this debate has been framed in terms of what is called “political theology.” But although, as Heinrich Meier’s argues, “political theology is as old as faith in revelation, and will continue to exist (...) as long as faith in God who demands obedience continues to exist,”² there is nevertheless clearly a focus on how this concept gained currency in the writings of Weimar intellectuals such as Franz Rosenzweig, Ernst Kantorowicz, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Leo Strauss and Karl Barth. The revival of interest in Weimar political theology can be partly explained by the fact that certain analogies can be made between the socio-political and intellectual climates surrounding the Weimar Republic and our own era. Some radical thinkers, such as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, see clear signs that liberal democratic regimes are increasingly organizing

1 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). Interestingly, Fukuyama’s recent waning optimism about a global victory of political liberalism and the free market system is not so much inspired by the return of the religious, but by the prospect of a sweeping biotechnological revolution. Fukuyama’s belief that only a strengthening of state powers could safeguard society from the perils of comprehensive genetic engineering nevertheless shows just how far he has drifted away from the position he originally defended in *The End of History*. See: Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (London: Profile Books, 2002).

2 Heinrich Meier, “What is Political Theology?” *Interpretation* 30 (2002): 79.

what he calls a “permanent state of exception” as to wage war on their internal and external enemies outside the boundaries of positive law.³ Such an approach allows him, for example, to draw an analogy between the enactment of the US Patriot Act and the Nazi regime’s suspension of the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Weimar constitution or, even more radical, between detention camps such as Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib and the Nazi extermination camps. While this may sound too dramatic or even completely outrageous, one should nonetheless bear in mind that, today, democratically elected regimes are, often under the banner of “peace and security,” involved in armed conflicts all around the globe and that there are currently more stateless and displaced people than during World War II. The relative ease with which the Nazi party could dismantle the legal framework of the liberal Weimar Republic and establish a totalitarian regime should in any case remind us of the inherent fragility of the liberal democratic system and the political and civil rights it is supposed to safeguard.

It is, however, no exaggeration to assert that it is particularly the current popularity of the writings of the German theorist of law and one time Nazi supporter Carl Schmitt which has fueled the current revival of interest in Weimar political theology. Arguing that all politics is merely the continuation of theology by other means, Schmitt famously contended that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”⁴ Although Schmitt denied that the juridico-political discourse can be described in directly theological terms, he was convinced that the liberals’ denial of *any* connection between these two discourses made them ill-equipped to counter the threat of factional violence or even civil war that impended over the profoundly divided Weimar Republic. Schmitt was especially worried that the liberals’ ignorance of the possibility of the arrival of some exceptionally threatening event kept them from developing a consistent theory of emergency powers that could protect the legal order in times of extreme peril. More specifically, Schmitt pointed out two fundamental defects in the liberal theory of the state.⁵ Firstly, certain of its essential principles, such as the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances, impede the state from clearly deciding *who* has the power to proclaim a state of exception and take the necessary measures to restore law and order. Secondly, since the exception is that which cannot

3 See especially: Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).

4 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology. Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. G Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 36.

5 Both critiques are captured in the following quote: “The essence of liberalism is negotiation, a cautious half measure, in the hope that the definitive dispute, the decisive bloody battle, can be transformed into a parliamentary battle and permit the decision to be suspended forever in an everlasting discussion.” (Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 63)

be subsumed under a preexisting legal norm, it is impossible to appeal to codified law to determine in advance *what* must done to suppress extremely dangerous threats to the legal order. The first line of Schmitt's *Political Theology*, "[s]overeign is he who decides on the exception,"⁶ should be read as containing a remedy for both these defects of the liberal state. By reintroducing a concept of sovereignty that explicitly assumes the existence of a human sovereign ruler who can proclaim the state of exception and, if necessary, suspend the law, Schmitt claimed to have found a viable alternative for liberalism's bureaucratic rule-bound formalism. It is here that the paradigm of political theology shows its pertinence to political theory. Since "the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology,"⁷ for Schmitt, it can only be met by an equally powerful sovereign decision, which, "looked at normatively, emanates from nothingness"⁸ and hence resembles divine creation *ex nihilo*.

It is striking to note, however, that one name is hardly ever mentioned in reconstructions of the Weimar political theology debate. Although probably the most important political thinker to have emerged out of the intellectual environment of Weimar Germany, Hannah Arendt is usually not considered relevant to this issue. Admittedly, Arendt was considerably younger than most of the protagonists mentioned earlier. Still, given her unremitting defense of the autonomy of the political, it seems downright implausible that she would not have been interested in a thesis such as Schmitt's which implies that modern politics is merely theology dressed up in secular clothes. Moreover, Arendt was personally acquainted with some of the debate's main figures such as Walter Benjamin and Leo Strauss, which makes it even more unlikely that she would not have been familiar with at least the main positions in this debate. It remains nevertheless telling that recent tentative attempts to explore the relationship between Arendt and thinkers such as Strauss and Schmitt are compelled to frame their stories in terms of an "unspoken" or "hidden" dialogue.⁹ Peter Eli Gordon has therefore correctly observed that such comparisons are bound to remain speculative as long as one does not first consider a more obvious question: "Why does Arendt's conception of political life *not* conform to the terms of political theological debate?"¹⁰ We will argue here that the reason why Arendt didn't confront these theologico-political alternatives

6 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

7 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

8 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 31-32.

9 See for example: Samuel Moyn, "Hannah Arendt on the secular," *New German Critique* 35 (2008): 72; Ronald Beiner "Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: the uncommenced dialogue," *Political Theory* 18 (1990), 239; Andreas Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary. Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 194.

10 Peter Eli Gordon, "The concept of the apolitical: German Jewish thought and Weimar political theology," *Social Research* 74 (2007): 856.

head-on because she was mainly concerned with deconstructing the more encompassing claim that politics requires a force external to it, the origins of which she traces back to Plato's attempt to transform political action into a mode of fabrication. It will be therefore be made plausible that the main target of Arendt's critique of Western political thought is not political theology, but what we could tentatively call "political technology."

II. THE PROBLEM OF THE ABSOLUTE

Gordon suggests that the beginnings of an answer to the question why Arendt didn't directly address the claim of political theology "can only be found by revisiting some of the political-theological alternatives that appeared on the scene during Arendt's formative years in Weimar Germany."¹¹ However, reading the opening lines of 'Religion and Politics,'¹² a short essay Arendt wrote in the early 50s, makes one think otherwise. Here we see clearly that for Arendt it was not the Weimar debate but the then much discussed theory that communism is a secular or political religion that "brought 'religion' back into the realm of public-political affairs" and "put the almost forgotten problem of the relationship between religion and politics once more on the agenda of political science."¹³ It therefore seems more reasonable to assume that the beginnings of an answer to Gordon's question is contained in this essay.

As a response to the question as to whether the struggle between the West and communism is basically religious in nature, Arendt argues that those who consider communism a "political religion" or a "secular religion" have failed to grasp both the essence of totalitarianism and the political meaning of secularism. Arendt thinks that Erik Vögelin's historical approach to this issue as elaborated in his *The New Science of Politics*¹⁴ overlooked the novelty of communist regime's appeal to the "Law of History" as the extra-political source of its authority. In 'Ideology and Terror,' the concluding chapter to her magnum opus *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,¹⁵ Arendt argued that the Law of History which this regime pretends to strictly obey is not the secular version of revealed divine law because, firstly, the law of History is not considered permanent or eternal but unfolds historically and, secondly, because the law of History is applied directly to men without first

11 Gordon, "The Concept of the Apolitical," 856.

12 Hannah Arendt, "Religion and Politics," in: *Essays on Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. J. Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 368-390.

13 Arendt, "Religion and Politics," 368.

14 Eric Vögelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), especially 107-132.

15 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 593-616.

being translated into positive laws. To call communism a political religion merely because it also invokes a source of authority that is not man-made is therefore, in Arendt words, “an entirely undeserved compliment.”¹⁶ Such a misunderstanding could only arise because we are accustomed to think that a political order necessarily requires religious sanctification in some form or another. But, Arendt suggests, “the long alliance between religion and authority does not necessarily mean that the concept of authority is itself of a religious nature.”¹⁷ Hence, what the rise of totalitarianism brought to light regarding this issue is not that it is simply impossible to imagine a political order that doesn’t find its ultimate source of authority in religion, as Vögelin argues, but rather that it seems even more difficult for a secular politics to discard the more basic requirement of an extra-political absolute, a requirement that religion *also* meets.

Arendt’s definition of secularism in the political sense is quite straightforward. It means “no more than that religious creeds and institutions have no publicly binding authority and that, conversely, political life has no religious sanction.”¹⁸ Historically, the alliance between church and state was only forged after the downfall of the Roman Empire when the church assumed Rome’s political heritage. The church left political power to the worldly sovereign ruler, but gave itself the authority that was previously the perquisite of the Roman Senate. It was the great achievement of the French Revolution to break this alliance between church and state and to open up the possibility of a genuine secular politics. The French revolutionaries, however, fell back on a religious vocabulary at the very moment when they thought they could separate religion and politics once and for all. Robespierre’s cult of the Supreme Being and the more than obvious connection between the notion of the General Will and that of God’s Will are only the most unequivocal examples of the fact that the question of a divine absolute is not so easily disposed of. With reference to Rousseau, Arendt points out in *On Revolution* that even the French revolutionaries thus eventually came to realize once more that “the trouble was that to put the law above man and thus to establish the validity of man-made laws, *il faudrait des dieux*, ‘one actually would need gods.’”¹⁹ But again, far from accepting that such failed attempts to found a purely secular political order attest to the inescapability of political theology, Arendt maintains that what was bound to appear in revolutions was not the problem of a religious absolute but the question of the absolute as such. If she thought that the political catastrophes of the modern age represented the final stage of a long-standing marriage between politics and the idea of the absolute, a

16 Arendt, “Religion and Politics,” 371.

17 Arendt, “Religion and Politics,” 372.

18 Arendt, “Religion and Politics,” 372.

19 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1973), 184.

marriage which for several centuries was sanctified by the Christian church, then the key question is rather how and why the idea that the political realm requires external foundations was originally forged.

III. POLITICAL TECHNOLOGY

In her essay 'What is Authority?'²⁰ Arendt argues that if the word and concept of authority are Roman in origin, it was Plato who in *The Republic* first introduced the idea that the political realm should be ruled by a force external to it. Plato's decision to write a political treatise on the ideal form of government was largely motivated by his experience of Socrates' trial and execution. For Plato this event showed that persuasion, the common Greek way of handling public affairs, was an unreliable method to incite citizens to act according to the good. Plato suggested that the compelling force of self-evident truths offers a much more effective principle for guiding men. True statements are beyond dispute and opinion and can therefore be invoked to enforce obedience without endless discussions and without the need to resort to external means of violence. According to Plato only the philosopher is capable of perceiving the truth, so it was clear to him that only philosophers are eligible to rule the polis. Plato's philosopher-king is not a tyrant though. A tyrant rules in accordance with his own will, while the philosopher-king remains bound by a force that transcends him and the realm of human affairs altogether. In other words, the compelling power does not lie in the person of the philosopher-king, but in the ideas of reason which the latter is able to perceive. This is the lesson contained in Plato's famous allegory of the cave. The philosopher is the one who is able to escape from the dark cave and finally perceive the clear sky and contemplate the ideas as the essences of all beings. He only becomes the philosopher-king when he returns to the cave and uses his knowledge of the ideas to rule his fellows who are still bound to their shady existence inside the cave. It is in this sense that Arendt can conclude that "the essential characteristic of specifically authoritarian forms of government –that the source of their authority, which legitimates the exercise of power, must be beyond the sphere of power and, like the law of nature or the commands of God, must not be man-made– goes back to this applicability of the ideas in Plato's political philosophy."²¹

It is almost impossible to imagine a more plain denial of the timelessness of political theology. Not only does Arendt argue that authoritarian rule, of which the alliance between church and state was merely one historical

20 Hannah Arendt, "What is authority?" in: *Between Past and Future*, intro. J. Kohn (London: Penguin, 2006), 106-115.

21 Arendt, "What is Authority?," 110.

manifestation, was first introduced to the tradition of Western political thought in Plato's *The Republic*, she also points out that the idea that politics cannot function without some form of religious sanctification can be traced back to Plato's invention of a system of rewards and punishment in the afterlife as a deterrent to impose transcendent standards on the multitude.²² The belief in some form of continuation of "life" after death is of course as old as man himself, but it was Plato's brilliance to give this idea an explicitly political function. Since he realized that only the few would be capable of grasping the truth of the ideas, he invented the doctrine of hell and described it as a place where those would be punished who do not voluntarily submit themselves to the authority of the ideas. It is therefore no surprise, Arendt argues, that it was Plato who coined the word "theology" and made it "part and parcel of 'political science'."²³

In *The Human Condition* Arendt acutely remarks that "the greater part of political philosophy since Plato could easily be interpreted as various attempts to find theoretical foundations and practical ways for an escape from politics altogether."²⁴ The frailty of human affairs, which according to Arendt finds its clearest expression in the inherent unpredictability and irreversibility of political action, has always perplexed the Western philosophical tradition. Because political action, the sharing of words and deeds, always goes on between a plurality of actors, its main outcome is irreducibly uncertain. The one who acts is "never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer,"²⁵ Arendt is never tired of repeating, by which she means that the one who initiates an action is never sure in advance that he or she will accomplish what he or she had in mind. It is this contingency that permeates the public realm which has always baffled the tradition of political philosophy and which incited Plato to look for a more solid ground for political action in the first place. We have seen that Plato attempted to escape this predicament by submitting political action to the authority of the ideas of reason. What is even more important, though, is that in 'What is Authority?' Arendt also points out that Plato was heavily inspired by the figure of the craftsman when he suggested that the use of ideas as standards or yardsticks for behavior provides a way to put politics on more solid grounds. When producing an object the craftsman is also guided by an inner idea or blueprint of the artifact he wants to create. Moreover, in contrast to the actor who is imbedded in a context of plurality and who is therefore never sure about the outcome of his actions, the craftsman controls the production process from the beginning until the

22 See: Arendt, "Religion and Politics," 380-383 and Arendt, "What is authority?," 108-111 and 129-135.

23 Arendt, "What is Authority?," 131.

24 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 222.

25 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190.

end. Therefore, Arendt writes, in Plato “[t]he ideas become the unwavering, ‘absolute’ standards for political and moral behavior and judgment in the same sense that the ‘idea’ of a bed in general is the standard for making and judging the fitness of all particular manufactured beds.”²⁶

Two years later, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s critique of Plato’s suppression of political action will be extended to a critique of the entire tradition of Western political thought. In *The Human Condition* Arendt distinguishes between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, in which she in turn distinguishes the three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. Whereas in the ancient Greek city state action was considered to be the highest human faculty, the philosophical and Christian traditions’ higher estimate of contemplation degraded the *vita activa* to a secondary position and blurred the distinctions within the *vita activa*. The modern reversal of the contemplative life and the active life didn’t, however, rehabilitate political action to the primary status it formerly enjoyed, but merely made work the highest activity of man. This set-up makes one suppose that contemplation and work derive from completely different or even incongruent experiences, which might explain why Arendt in ‘What is Authority?’ still cautiously suggests that Plato was merely *helped* by the analogy of the craftsman in his attempt to bring action under the authority of the ideas. In *The Human Condition*, however, Arendt goes one step further and endorses the view that contemplation *as such* derives from the production experience:

It is not wonder that overcomes and throws man into motionlessness, but it is through the conscious cessation of activity, the activity of making, that the contemplative state is reached. (...) [T]he very fact that the philosopher’s speechless wonder seemed to be an experience reserved for the few, while the craftsmen’s contemplative glance was known by many, weighed heavily in favor of a contemplation primarily derived from the experiences of *homo faber*.²⁷

Dana Villa has convincingly shown that Arendt’s insight that contemplation is merely an epiphenomenon of the production experience is much indebted to her former teacher Martin Heidegger.²⁸ From the early 20s on, Heidegger argued that for the metaphysical tradition as a whole “the primordial sense of being is being-produced.”²⁹ Heidegger’s project of the destruction of

26 Arendt, “What is Authority?,” 110.

27 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 303-304.

28 Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger. The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

29 Martin Heidegger, “Phenomenological Interpretations in Connection with Aristotle,” in: *Supplements: From the Earliest Essays to Being and Time and Beyond*, ed. J. van Buren (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 144.

metaphysics could consequently be understood as an attempt to retrieve this productionist origin of metaphysics from oblivion and show how deep it has penetrated our understanding of being. Heidegger explored this productionist metaphysics in many different directions which, moreover, are not always consistent with each other. Two major directions could be pointed out though, which for convenience could be said to roughly correspond to what is called Heidegger's early thought and the late Heidegger, his thinking after the so-called *Kehre* or "Turning."³⁰ Early Heidegger argued that a renewed phenomenological reflection on our everyday dealings with technical instruments allows us to reconsider the basic assumptions of modern philosophy, especially its subject-object dualism and its orientation toward epistemological problems. Later Heidegger argued that the West's forgetting of this origin of its fundamental ontological concepts paved the way for a reified understanding of being which would eventually culminate in the present full-fledged technological understanding of being in which all entities become raw material for the subject's will to power. In other words, later Heidegger no longer considered *Dasein's* tendency to project the production experience on its understanding of being as such to be a structural feature of everyday being-in-the-world, but unmasked it as a historically instituted event that obscured the original experience of being as presencing in favor of a reified experience of being as a permanently present ground.

A careful reading of *The Human Condition* would reveal that Arendt's phenomenology of human activities and her historical account of the fate of the *vita activa* in the modern age are to a large extent indebted to Heidegger's critique of productionist metaphysics, but with this essential difference that whereas Heidegger thinks it has led to a forgetting of being as presencing in favor of an inauthentic understanding of being as a permanently present ground, Arendt argues that the predominance of the activity of fabrication has obscured the understanding of political action to the point of oblivion. Therefore, what Arendt's critique of what she calls "the traditional substitution of making for acting"³¹ reveals is that all significant concepts yielded by the tradition of political philosophy are, pace Schmitt, not secularized theological concepts, but decontextualized technological concepts:

How persistent and successful the transformation of action into a mode of making has been is easily attested by the whole terminology of political theory and political thought, which indeed makes it almost impossible to

30 For a detailed discussion of this issue, see: Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity. Technology, Politics, Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), especially 150-190.

31 See especially: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 220-230.

discuss these matters without using the category of means and ends and thinking in terms of instrumentality.³²

A few examples of key political concepts which Arendt traces back to their productionist origin will make this claim more tangible. The concept of *rule*, the idea that it is inevitable that in a political community some are entitled to command and the others destined to obey, goes back to Plato's belief that to achieve something it is necessary that the one who takes the initiative remains the sole master of the process he or she has set in motion. This he could only achieve by untying the two interconnected modes of action, *archein* (to begin) and *prattein* (to achieve). While according to ancient Greek understanding the one who begins an enterprise is utterly dependent upon others for it to be achieved, Plato turned these into two entire different activities. Knowing what to do became the perquisite of the ruler, while the ruled were merely supposed to execute orders. This division lies not only at the basis of what in the philosophical tradition will become the fundamental difference between theory and practice, but also of the different forms of government that are distinguished in political thought: monarchy (rule by one), oligarchy (rule by the few), democracy (rule by the many). It is clear for Arendt that the production process serves as the model for this division between knowing and doing. The production process inherently comprises two stages: first, conceiving the model or *eidos* of the artifact to be produced, and then gathering the required tools and materials and setting to work. It is, moreover, obvious that this division also inspired Plato to draft a blueprint of an "ideal" state in *The Republic*, which would remain thereupon the model of all later political utopias.

Another important political concept whose origin Arendt traces back to the production experience is that of *violence*. The fact, so obvious to *homo faber*, that one cannot create an artifact without first violating or negating a part of existing reality has always inspired political thought. That it is almost impossible for us to see politics not as a coercive means to realize a higher end just shows how deep the notion of violence has penetrated the tradition of political thought. The central assumption of liberal democracy that politics is merely an instrument to achieve stability, security, and economic prosperity or to protect the rights of the individual is only the most recent manifestation of the prevalence of the means-end scheme in politics. Arendt points out that in Marx, on the other hand, violence became the content of political action as such. Puzzled by the observation that in a context of plurality an individual actor almost never achieves what he intends, while the total sum of actions comprising history nevertheless seems to lead to a meaningful end, Marx suggested that this was due to the fact that the realm of history was only the superstructure of the realm of production in which

32 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 229.

man is master of his products. Once the proletariat has seized the means of production man will finally be able to “make” history the same way as he makes tangible objects.

Finally, the Western tradition’s attempt to escape from politics by transforming action into a mode of fabrication also lead to the introduction of the notion of *sovereignty* in political thought. The pre-Platonic Greek belief that the realm of plurality *is* the realm of freedom always struck the philosophical tradition as absurd. The fact that the actor is never able to predict the outcome of his/her actions always made it desperately look for an alternative conception of freedom, one that would allow man to retain his self-sufficiency and mastership. The model was once more found in the craftsman who works in absolute isolation from others and who therefore at all times remains in control of the production process. The omnipotent God who in the story of Genesis created the universe out of nothing and Plato’s demiurge who in the *Timaeus* fashioned the world by taking the eternal Ideas as a model are merely the most obvious examples of sovereign figures who were depicted by analogy to the craftsman.

IV. THE MIRACLE OF ACTION

Only after one has digested Arendt’s critique of what we could tentatively call “political technology” does it become comprehensible why she did not engage directly in the political theology debate despite the fact that the thesis that politics is necessarily founded on religious premises obviously ruins the prospects of a self-contained politics. If the idea that politics necessarily requires external foundations, whether it be the ideas of reason or divine law, originated in Plato’s attempt to transform action into a mode of fabrication, then political technology seems to be the main obstacle to such an autonomous politics the exposure of which would at the same time free politics from the shackles of theology. The hold which the tradition of political technology has on our political imagination also makes it comprehensible why Arendt’s defense of a self-contained politics has perplexed her admirers and adversaries alike. Since political action has always been understood as a form of *poiēsis* it has indeed become virtually impossible to think about politics without using concepts that find their ultimate origin in the production experience. It seems that we simply no longer dispose of a vocabulary that could give such a self-contained politics any meaningful content.

However, some commentators have pointed out that Arendt also uses religious language to describe precisely the essence of such an autonomous

politics. It is indeed “legendary,” Samuel Moyn remarks, that “in *The Human Condition* she refers to the possibility of new beginnings involved in political action as *miraculous*.”³³ It seems, moreover, rather ironic that Arendt invokes precisely a concept that Carl Schmitt has referred to as the best evidence for the persistence of political theology. For Schmitt, we recall, the sovereign decision cannot be traced back to anything external or prior to itself, like a norm or a rule, and therefore seems to “emanate from nothingness.”³⁴ On the contrary, in Schmitt’s view the sovereign decision doesn’t operate under preestablished norms or laws because it constitutes their ultimate origin. It doesn’t require an extensive analysis to notice some striking similarities between Schmitt’s notion of the groundless sovereign decision and Arendt’s free political act that, as she has it, “break[s] through the commonly accepted and reach[es] into the extraordinary, where whatever is true in common and everyday life no longer applies because everything that exists is unique and *sui generis*.”³⁵ It should be no surprise then that some critics have not refrained from accusing Arendt of defending a theory of decisionism that comes dangerously close to the one espoused by the Nazi jurist.³⁶

Andreas Kalyvas, for example, argues that it is precisely through the metaphor of the miracle that a silent agreement is reached between Arendt and Schmitt concerning the myth of the closure of any political theology: “While Arendt used the term ‘miracle’ to portray the indeterminate, spontaneous dimension of the faculty of new beginnings, Schmitt deployed the same term to characterize the radical, disruptive effects of the sovereign constituent decision.”³⁷ Such an interpretation does, however, not withstand a more attentive reading of both Schmitt’s and Arendt’s writings. As Schmitt states very clearly in *Political Theology*, it is not the sovereign decision which is miraculous, but the *exception*: “The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology.”³⁸ Our reading of Arendt therefore sheds a different light on this matter. If Schmitt argues that the sovereign is the one who can redeem the legal order from the extreme perils brought about by the exception, and subsequently describes this situation as a quasi-divine event in which an omnipotent Lawgiver counters a miraculous intervention in the existing order of the world, then in Arendtian terms this amounts to

33 Moyn, “Hannah Arendt on the Secular,” 95; emphasis added.

34 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 32.

35 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 205.

36 See for example: Martin Jay, “The Political Existentialism of Hannah Arendt,” in: *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 237-256 and Richard Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), especially 62-69.

37 Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 209. See also: Andreas Kalyvas, “From the Act to the Decision. Hannah Arendt and the Question of Decisionism,” *Political Theory* 32 (3) (2004): 320-346.

38 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

nothing less than yet another attempt to suppress the unpredictability and irreversibility intrinsic to political *praxis* by submitting it to the dominance of *poiēsis*. It is indeed striking that Schmitt defines the exception in almost exactly the same terms as Arendt defines the “miracle” of action. Both the exception and political action are supposed to bring about consequences which cannot be anticipated in advance and whose boundlessness pose a threat to the existing legal order. It is, moreover, difficult not to think of Schmitt’s invocation of a quasi-divine sovereign ruler when reading Arendt’s contention that “[t]he belief in a ‘strong man’ who, isolated against others, owes his strength to his being alone is either sheer superstition, based on the delusion that we can ‘make’ something in the realm of human affairs (...) or it is conscious despair of all action (...).”³⁹

Bonnie Honig, on the other hand, has understood perfectly well that Arendt endows political action with miraculous qualities insofar it could create entirely new political realities when performed in the context of “exceptional circumstances like police states, martial law, deep alienation, or in the midst of political transitions or realities.”⁴⁰ Honig seeks to show that Schmitt’s use of the miracle metaphor to describe the aporetic figure of the exception as a situation in which the law is legally suspended by the sovereign is also open to other interpretations that could re-inscribe it in a political theology that stands firmly in the democratic tradition. Arguing that in Franz Rosenzweig’s theology the exceptional event revealed in the miracle functions rather like a indeterminate sign that invites popular receptivity and interpretation than as a clear and present danger that summons the sovereign to make a firm decision, Honig suggests that it is plausible that Arendt found inspiration for her notion of pluralistic action, the power of the people to act in concert, in the same Jewish tradition as Rosenzweig did.⁴¹ However, aside from the fact that we are quite certain that Arendt didn’t have access to the same rabbinical sources from which Rosenzweig drew his inspiration and that it is hence more convincing to assume that she was influenced by Heidegger’s dialectic of the authentic and the inauthentic in her attempt to conceptualize political action as an immanent rupture and present it as an alternative to the traditional understanding of the sovereign decision as a transcendent rupture,⁴² it is also not very likely that Arendt was directly influenced by Rosenzweig in her rehabilitation of political action. As Peter Eli Gordon has argued, the

39 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 188.

40 Bonnie Honig, “The Miracle of Metaphor. Rethinking the State of Exception with Rosenzweig and Schmitt,” *Diacritics* 37 (2-3) (2007): 82.

41 Honig, “The Miracle of Metaphor,” 82-83.

42 Consider for example Heidegger’s contention in *Being and Time* that “[a]uthentic existence is not something which floats above falling everydayness; existentially, it is only a modified way in which such everydayness is seized upon.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row), 224.

spirit of utopia, which Rosenzweig was seeking in Jewish sources, was in his writings “not a utopia of politics, but a utopia *without* politics.”⁴³ In his reconstruction of Rosenzweig’s *The Star Of Redemption* Gordon convincingly shows that Rosenzweig held a dim view of politics, describing it as piteous spectacle of violence and ruin from which the Jewish people did good to withdraw itself. Gordon subsequently argues that since “Arendt’s most salutary insight was that political theology only holds us in its grip if we bring to politics an expectation of metaphysical or ‘eternal’ peace of a sort that worldly politics seems forever unable to satisfy,” she “consciously and consistently rejected the political-theological legacy of her German-Jewish contemporaries.”⁴⁴

Furthermore, where in *The Human Condition* and *Between Past and Future* Arendt situates the introduction of the concept of sovereignty in the post-tragic Greek *polis* when Aristotle and especially Plato transformed spontaneous pluralistic action into a mode of making after the model of the artisanal production process, starting from *On Revolution* she extended this analysis as to include the theological notion of the omnipotent divine will. However, this doesn’t mean that she “relocated the birth of sovereignty”⁴⁵ from Athens to Jerusalem or Rome, as Kalyvas argues, but rather that she became aware that, as she argued in *On Violence*, “this ancient vocabulary was strangely confirmed and fortified by the addition of the Hebrew-Christian tradition.”⁴⁶ Honig convincingly shows that the Hebrew tradition contains resources to “rethink emergency politics in the state of exception in more democratic terms.”⁴⁷ But Arendt’s fierce criticism of the introduction of the Judeo-Christian notion of the divine will in political theory and practice as a conceptual tool to explain the sovereign event inherent to the foundation of new political bodies strongly suggest that she nevertheless refrained from following such an alternative theologico-political course. When the men of the 18th century revolutions found themselves confronted with the problem of legitimizing the foundation of an entirely new political order, they found inspiration in the image of a God who created the universe *ex nihilo*. This image of a sovereign divine legislator who remained outside and prior to his creation, “Hebrew in origin,”⁴⁸ was transposed to the sovereign people who in a “state of nature,” and thus prior to historical time, took the free decision to create a new political community. The onto-theological imprint of this analogy should be more than clear. Faced with the enigmatic question of how a people, who don’t yet exist as a people, can fashion themselves as a new political community, the image of a divine demiurgic intellect merely

43 Gordon, “The Concept of the Apolitical,” 867.

44 Gordon, “The Concept of the Apolitical,” 874.

45 Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary*, 214.

46 Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York/London : Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), 39.

47 Honig, “The Miracle of Metaphor,” 79.

48 Arendt, *On Revolution*, 189.

offered a ready-made model that “can *explain*, give a logical account of, the existentially inexplicable.”⁴⁹ For Arendt, however, this doesn’t simply imply that the divine Creator was invoked as a *deus ex machina* to solve theoretical perplexities, but that this theological discourse strengthened and partook in the Greek production paradigm.

However, this nevertheless leaves us with the main issue in question here: why, then, did Arendt still use a theological term to characterize the new beginnings involved in political action? If we recall Arendt’s harsh verdict on the tradition of Western political thought that it brought us to a situation in which “it is almost impossible to discuss these matters without using the category of means and ends and thinking in terms of instrumentality,”⁵⁰ this should not come as too great a surprise though. For those who are accustomed to think the creation of the new in the public realm as the work of a sovereign ruler who redesigns society through force, Arendt’s idea of political *praxis* as a way to inaugurate a new beginning through words and deeds indeed sounds hopelessly utopian. Regarding Schmitt’s use of the word “miracle” to designate the advent of an exceptional event and Arendt’s decision to use this same word to characterize the new beginnings involved in political action, we can therefore merely say that there is probably much irony in Arendt’s remark that only “from the viewpoint of *homo faber*, it is like a miracle, like the revelation of a divinity, that meaning should have a place in this world.”⁵¹

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49 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego/New York: Harcourt, 1978), 208.

50 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 229.

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