Hannah Arendt, Biopolitics and the problem of violence: from animal laborans to homo sacer

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Since Auschwitz, nothing has ever happened that could be lived as a refutation of Auschwitz…To live with the sensation of helplessness: today, probably this is the moral state in which, by resisting, we could be faithful to our times.

Imre Kertész

The contemporary experience of the political ‘as’ violence

It would be hard to find another thesis in political theory less questioned than the traditional identification of violence and politics. This is true to such an extent that the possibility of a non-violent politics may seem chimerical, likewise that of tracing a conceptual distinction between power and violence. Even if it is true that not all violent phenomena are political phenomena, we tend to feel quite certain that there could be no politics without violence. As we know, Hannah Arendt is among those very few thinkers in contemporary political theory who refuses the strict identification of politics and violence, arguing that violence is not necessarily inherent to the political, and that violence and power are not the same. In works such as The Human Condition and On Violence, Arendt sought to demonstrate that while power is spontaneously generated by concerted action among a plurality of citizens, violence is mute; its effect is to disperse, silence and isolate people, disrupting the civic bonds between them. While power is not a means to some further end, being the very stuff that unites political actors
in a public realm, violence is paradigmatically instrumental. While power may generate a provisional consensus, one that does not prevent the possibility of dissent and contestation, pure violence is destructive, being incapable of creating new relationships and free agreement.

In this paper, however, I do not intend to discuss Arendt’s analysis on the philosophical equation of politics and violence, nor to explore the implications of her distinction between power and violence for a radically democratic politics. I want to explore, instead, Arendt’s diagnosis of the present, in which politics tends to be transformed into a wide variety of violent phenomena, so that, nowadays, we almost always experience the political ‘as’ violence. After all, Arendt’s thesis that power and violence are not the same does not contradict her view that, throughout Western history – and perhaps even more so in the present day – politics has been frequently experienced as violence. For example: Preventive wars have been declared by countries that represent themselves as absolute good fighting absolute evil, in order to prevent possible future evil deeds. The USA, among other countries, has disregarded previous international juridical agreements, asserting its political and economic hegemony in an ever more violent and insecure world. Suicidal fundamentalists, secret organizations and even the regular armed forces of states launch terrorist attacks. The twentieth century began with the deployment of chemical and bacteriological weapons which rapidly became more and more lethal, culminating with nuclear weapons able to destroy all life on the planet. States have enacted repressive policies against immigrants and refugees, as well as against political movements that organize unemployed, non-conformists of all sorts, displaced and homeless people, among many other ‘undesirable’ social groups. Last but not least, consider the whole mass of human beings who cannot be integrated into the capitalist system of globalised production and consumption. Considering these different contemporary experiences of politics ‘as’ violence, I want to ask: is there any
connection between them? Has Arendt anything to say in order to render these phenomena more comprehensible?

I believe that the answer is positive. To start answering these questions I would like to propose that we consider the notion of biopolitics – by no means an Arendtian category. My suggestion is that this notion provides a missing link that can help us connect Arendt’s reflections concerning the tragic fate of the political in the modern age, in *The Human Condition*, with her analysis of totalitarian regimes, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In other words, I think that the notion of biopolitics can allow the Arendtian diagnosis of the present to illuminate the contemporary spread of violence and the growing meaninglessness of the political in our bureaucratised, mass- and market-oriented representative democracies, that is, our actually existent democracies.

My interpretive approach is inspired by Giorgio Agamben’s work, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, in which he argues that Arendt and Foucault were the first contemporary thinkers to understand the radical changes undergone by the political in modern times. According to Agamben, these changes culminate in the Nazi and Stalinist extermination camps with the reduction of citizens to the ‘bare life’ (*nuda vita*) of *homo sacer*, the prototype of a man whose murder would not be a crime. According to Agamben’s researches, the *homo sacer* was an old and rather obscure juridical figure of Roman law, designating a man excluded from both divine and human legislation. In other words, the *homo sacer* – the sacrificial man – embodied the paradox of belonging to the code of the Roman law only by virtue of his total exclusion from it. As such, the *homo sacer* was deprived of any legal protection against anyone who attempted to murder him, providing that this murder was not supported by legal procedures or religious rites. Thus, the paradox of simultaneously pertaining and being excluded of the political domain is the paradigmatic structure of biopolitics, a feature that
would also explain the reason why at the very moment that the enforcement of life became the focus of political affairs, political genocides became ever more increased, as noticed by Michel Foucault. Surely, this is not the place for extensive commentary on Agamben, nor will I attempt to compare thinkers as different as Arendt and Foucault. Rather, I would like to stress a convergence in Arendt, Foucault and Agamben’s reflections, in terms of a biopolitical diagnosis of the present. I believe that the introduction of the notion of biopolitics into Arendt’s thinking enables us to better understand the correlation between the most important manifestations of contemporary political violence: the extraordinary violence of totalitarian disaster, and the ordinary violence of our mass- and market-democracies, corroded by the loss of any radical political alternative to both capitalism and socialism. Although this involves the risks of reading Arendt beyond Arendt, I believe that I remain faithful to the core of her own thinking in interweaving her thought with decisive political experiences of the present.

To justify introducing the notion of biopolitics where it does not originally appear, we need to understand the sense in which biopolitical violence has become the common denominator of contemporary politics, establishing tragic continuities between modern mass representative democracies and totalitarian regimes. This idea has to be carefully developed since Arendt considered totalitarianism to be an unprecedented form of government, one that broke with all previous forms such as dictatorship, tyranny or despotism. Arendt’s account of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism analyses the structural characteristics they shared and which distinguished them from all other political regimes. Without challenging Arendt’s distinctions, I want to argue that biopolitical violence has become the common factor underlying our contemporary political experiences – that is, to refuse too simplistic an opposition of totalitarianism and mass democracies. Slavoj Zizek has aptly described the ideological use of the concept of totalitarianism as a
spectre whose possible resurgence is used to undermine any radical political alternative. The misuse of this notion results in a sort of political blackmail: it is better to accept the inequalities and absurdities of capitalism than to abolish it through what is figured as the only alternative, totalitarian politics. However, I believe Zizek goes too far when he detects this ideological misuse of the notion of totalitarianism in Arendt’s reflections; after all, her own critical analysis of totalitarianism never meant to uncritically endorse liberal democracy. Arendt was never dismissive of what orthodox Marxists call ‘bourgeois liberties’, much to the contrary; however, it is also clear that her sympathies relied on the so-called ‘council system’, which sprung each time politics was fully embraced by active citizens in the core of modern revolutions. In other words, if the council system is not intrinsically contradictory to democracy, to the rule of laws and to the system of rights, nevertheless it is not identical to liberal and representative democracy as we know it today. Therefore, analysing treacherous continuities in the historical situation of both totalitarianism and liberal democracies, a crucial aspect of Arendt’s and Agamben’s analyses, does not imply that liberal democracy equals totalitarianism, nor does it mean that actual liberal democracy is the only antidote to totalitarianism. In other words, I believe that the concept of totalitarianism still provides a fundamental way of understanding the totalitarian dangers that surround our actually existing democracies, and this should help us to rethink and reconsider the meaning of democracy. Accordingly, what matters in the present time is to understand the perverse biopolitical mechanisms through which human beings have been incorporated into, and excluded from, the political and economic spheres in contemporary democracies and in totalitarian regimes.

Moreover, to consider totalitarianism as a disruptive event in Western history is by no means to deny the possibility of understanding it as a historical phenomenon – in Arendt’s terms, as the crystallization of
different historical elements that have become constitutive of late modern politics and, therefore, also have something to do with liberal democracies. In other words, although totalitarian regimes should not be considered as the necessary culmination of modernity, neither are they mere accidents. To recall Zygmunt Bauman’s Arendt-inspired analysis, totalitarianism has to be understood in a historical context involving the conjunction of modern science and technology, bureaucratic administration and mass murder, all of which may be united by the desire to purify and embellish the so-called ‘garden of politics.’ One should not forget that if such a desire is much less present in liberal democracies than in totalitarian regimes, both of them share a substantially similar historical background. It is not a matter of bluntly refusing democracy and modernity, but of considering that it is not by chance if many of the historical elements that crystallized in totalitarian regimes still remain present in our actually existing democracies: racism, xenophobia, political apathy and indifference, economic and territorial imperialism, the massed use of lies and violence to dominate whole populations, the multiplication of the displaced and the stateless, the political and economic superfluousness of huge masses of human beings. Under these conditions we should be attentive not only to the possible appearance of new totalitarian regimes, but also to quasi-totalitarian elements at the core of our mass democracies, as observed by Agamben. At the end of her analysis of totalitarianism, Arendt herself warned of the standing danger of totalitarian measures to ‘solve’ contemporary political dilemmas:

The danger of the corpse factories and holes of oblivion is that today, with populations and homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think of our world in utilitarian terms. Political, social, and economic events everywhere are in a silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous. … The Nazis and the Bolsheviks can be sure that their factories of annihilation which demonstrate the swiftest solution to the problem of
overpopulation, of economically superfluous and socially rootless human masses, are as much of an attraction as a warning. Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man.⁶

Towards the notion of biopolitics in Arendt’s thought

What does it mean to characterize the present equation of politics and violence in terms of biopolitics? And how can this non-Arendtian notion make sense within Arendt’s work? Let us begin with the first question. My contention is that the distinguishing mark of the political from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present day is the following paradox: the elevation of life to the status of the supreme good combined with the multiplication of instances in which life is degraded to the utmost. I believe, therefore, that the constitutive element of the political in the present is the reduction of citizenship to the level of ‘bare life’, as Agamben understands it. Human life is thus politicised, divided between life included and protected by the political and economic community and life excluded and unprotected, exposed to degradation and death.⁷

Investigating changes in the way power was conceived of and exercised at the turn of the nineteenth century, Foucault realized that when life turned out to be a constitutive political element, managed, calculated, and normalized by means of biopolitics, political strategies soon became murderous. Paradoxically, thinks Foucault, when the Sovereign’s prerogative ceased to be simply that of imposing violent death, and became a matter of promoting the growth of life, wars became more and more bloody, mass killing more frequent. Political conflicts now aimed at preserving and intensifying the life of the winners, so that enmity ceased to be political and came to be seen biologically: it is not enough to defeat the enemy; it must be exterminated as a danger to the
health of the race, people or community. Thus Foucault on the formation of the modern biopolitical paradigm at the end of the nineteenth century:

…death that was based on the right of the sovereign is now manifested as simply the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain or develop its life. Yet wars were never as bloody as they have been since the nineteenth century, and all things being equal, never before did regimes visit such holocausts on their own populations. But this formidable power of death… now presents itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life that endeavours to administer, optimise, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations. Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital. It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed. And through a turn that closes the circle, as the technology of wars have caused them to tend increasingly toward all-out destruction, the decision that initiates them and the one that terminates them are in fact increasingly informed by the naked question of survival. (…) If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of a recent return of the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population.⁸

Expressed in terms of biopolitics, the death of the other does not imply only my own security and safety; inasmuch as the death of the other is the ‘death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal)’ it has to be understood as ‘something that will make life in general healthier; healthier and purer.’⁹ In On Violence, Arendt argued a similar thesis concerning the violent character of racist and naturalist conceptions of politics: ‘Nothing could be theoretically more dangerous than the tradition of organic thought in political matters’; if power and violence are interpreted in terms of biological metaphors this can only produce more violence, especially where race is involved.
Racism as an ideological system of thought is inherently violent, indeed murderous, because it attacks natural ‘biological’ data that, as such, cannot be changed by any power or persuasion, so that when conflicts become radicalised all that can be done is to ‘exterminate’ the other.\footnote{10}

As to the second question – how the notion of biopolitics may fit into Arendt’s work: we find an answer encapsulated in Arendt’s thesis regarding the ‘unnatural growth of the natural,’ a peculiar formula meant to capture the main historical transformations of the modern age.\footnote{11} This notion comprehends a range of different historical phenomena stemming from the Industrial Revolution, such as: the transformation of man into a beast of burden, a living being attached to the activities of labouring and consuming; the widening of the realm of human ‘life processes’ (that is, labouring and consuming), to the point that life itself becomes the supreme good and the furtherance of these processes (which centre on the private interests of \textit{animal laborans}) the most important object of politics; the requirement of the continuous production and consumption of goods in ever increasing abundance, so that nature is reduced to a stock of natural resources – a stock abused to the point where its self-reproducing character is endangered; the promotion of labouring activity to the status of the most important human activity. In this process the public sphere is transformed into a social one, that is, a market for economic exchanges based on a cycle of ceaseless production and consumption. From the nineteenth century onwards, then, the political realm has been overrun by individual, social and economic interests, which today we see massed in the form of international corporations, coercive international trade regimes, financial globalisation and free-market ideologies. This results from politics becoming the activity of managing the production and reproduction of \textit{animal laborans}’ life and happiness. To put it in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s terms, the industrial and financial powers of the present produce not only commodities, but also subjectivities, needs, social relations, bodies and
minds, since they actually produce the producers.\textsuperscript{12} Arendt does not mean to affirm that before the nineteenth century there was a still intact public sphere, uncorrupted by social needs or economic interests and not tainted by sheer violence. The point of the matter is to specify that after the Industrial Revolution politics became almost exclusively concerned with the life and interests of the \textit{animal laborans}, a shift that redefined the character and the intensity of political violence. \textbf{Most importantly, it should be noticed that these political changes are not exclusive to capitalism, but also fully applied to socialist regimes.}\textsuperscript{13}

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Politically, perhaps the most salient consequence of this historical process is that we do not know if there is even any space left for the establishment of new and radical political alternatives, since all state policies – above all in underdeveloped countries – are always subject to the decidedly unstable flows of international financial investments, stock-exchange fluctuations and global financial institutions such as the World Bank. The changes associated with the development of global capitalism imply many specifically contemporary losses, if we follow Arendt: the loss of the political as a space of freedom, replaced by requirements of economic necessity; free and spontaneous action replaced by predictable, conformist behaviour;\textsuperscript{14} the subordination of public and shared interests to those of private lobbies and other hidden pressure groups, freed from public vigilance by the withering of the public realm; the submission of all political opinion to the supposedly inexorable laws of market economics; the substitution of violence for the power won through persuasion; \textit{the weakening of the citizen’s ability to consent and to dissent, our ability to act in concert replaced at best by the solitary experience of voting; the reduction of the political arena to disputes among bureaucratic and oligarchic party machines; with a compliant media depicting those who do not accept their game-rules as ‘anarchists,’ ‘rioters,’ even ‘terrorists.’} The ‘citizen’ consumes in the democratic-supermarket: choose from a strictly limited variety of political brands,
with no option to question the political options on offer. (And what would the question be when all political parties declare that their aim is to protect citizens’ interests and quality of life?) As Agamben argues, to question the limitations of our political system has become more and more difficult since politics has been declared as the task of caring for and administering bare life. In this situation, traditional political distinctions (right-left, liberalism-totalitarianism, private-public) have lost their intelligibility, since all political categories are subordinated to the demands of bare life.\(^{15}\)

Since ‘capitalism has become one with reality,’ we are condemned, in Marina Garcés’ words, ‘to make choices in an elective space in which there are no options. Everything is possible, but we can do nothing.’\(^{16}\) Even the practices and discourses of the so-called anti-globalisation movements – ‘another globalisation is possible’ and the like – are largely unable to create real alternatives to the economic realities they are intent on confronting.\(^{17}\)

These historic transformations have not only brought more violence to the core of the political but have also redefined its character by giving rise to biopolitical violence. As stated, what characterizes biopolitics is a dynamic of both protecting and abandoning life through its inclusion and exclusion from the political and economic community. In Arendtian terms, the biopolitical danger is best described as the risk of converting *animal laborans* into Agamben’s *homo sacer*, the human being who can be put to death by anyone and whose killing does not imply any crime whatsoever.\(^{18}\) When politics is conceived of as biopolitics, as the task of increasing the life and happiness of the national *animal laborans*, the nation-state becomes ever more violent and murderous. If we link Arendt’s thesis from *The Human Condition* to those of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, we can see the Nazi and Stalinist extermination camps as the most refined experiments in annihilating the ‘bare life’ of *animal laborans* (although these are by no means the only instances in which the modern state has devoted itself to human
Arendt is not concerned only with the process of the extermination itself, but also the historical situation in which large-scale exterminations were made possible — above all, the emergence of ‘uprooted’ and ‘superfluous’ modern masses, what we might describe as *animal laborans* balanced on the knife-edge of ‘bare life.’ Compare her words in ‘Ideology and Terror’ (1953), which became the conclusion of later editions of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

> Isolation is that impasse into which men are driven when the political sphere of their lives… is destroyed… Isolated man who lost his place in the political realm of action is deserted by the world of things as well, if he is no longer recognized as *homo faber* but treated as an *animal laborans* whose necessary ‘metabolism with nature’ is of concern to no one. Isolation then become loneliness… Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicality, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all.\(^\text{19}\)

Thus, the conversion of *homo faber*, the human being as creator of durable objects and institutions, into *animal laborans* and, later on, into *homo sacer*, can be traced in Arendt’s account of nineteenth-century imperialism. As argued in the second volume of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, European colonialism combined racism and bureaucracy to perpetrate the ‘most terrible massacres in recent history, the Boers’ extermination of Hottentot tribes, the wild murdering by Carl Peters in German Southeast Africa, the decimation of the peaceful Congo population – from 20 to 40 million reduced to 8 million people; and finally, perhaps worst of all, it resulted in the triumphant introduction of
such means of pacification into ordinary, respectable foreign policies. This simultaneous protection and destruction of life was also at the core of the two World Wars, as well as in many other more local conflicts, during which whole populations have become stateless or deprived of a public realm. In spite of all their political differences, the United States of Roosevelt, the Soviet Russia of Stalin, the Nazi Germany of Hitler and the Fascist Italy of Mussolini were all conceived of as states devoted to the needs of the national *animal laborans*. According to Agamben, since our contemporary politics recognizes no other value than life, Nazism and fascism, that is, regimes which have taken bare life as their supreme political criterion are bound to remain standing temptations. Finally, it is obvious that this same logic of promoting and annihilating life persists both in post-industrial and in underdeveloped countries, inasmuch as economic growth depends on the increase of unemployment and on many forms of political exclusion. Of course, the notion of biopolitics implies that the economical *per se* is not the main or the unique factor in explaining human wastage, since genocides also depend on racism, religious beliefs, national rivalries and the like. Rather, the argument is that under biopolitical conditions contemporary human slaughter is implemented and justified on the basis of strengthening and securing the life and values of the *animal laborans*, to which purpose huge parcels of human masses are reduced to the underprivileged status of *homo sacer*.

When politics is reduced to the tasks of administering, preserving and promoting the life and happiness of *animal laborans* it ceases to matter that those objectives require increasingly violent acts, both in national and international arenas. Therefore, we should not be surprised that under a biopolitical paradigm the legality of state violence has become a secondary aspect in political discussions, since what really matters is to protect and stimulate the life of the national (or, as the case may be, Western) *animal laborans*. In order to maintain sacrosanct ideals of increased mass production and mass consumerism, developed
countries ignore the finite character of natural reserves and refuse to sign International Protocols regarding natural resource conservation or pollution reduction, thereby jeopardising future humanity. They also launch preventive attacks and wars and disregard basic human rights, for instance, in extra-legal detention camps such as Guantánamo. Some countries have even considered imprisoning whole populations, physically isolating them from other communities, in a new form of social, political and economic apartheid. In short, in a biopolitical age states permit themselves to impose physical and structural violence against individuals and regimes (‘rogue states’) that supposedly interfere with the security and growth of their national life process.

If, according to Arendt, the common world consists of an institutional in-between meant to outlast both human natality and mortality, in modern mass societies we find the progressive abolition of the institutional artifice that separates and protects our world from the forces of nature. This explains the contemporary feeling of disorientation and unhappiness, likewise the political impossibility we find in combining stability and novelty. In the context of a ‘waste economy, in which things must be almost as quickly devoured and discarded as they have appeared in the world, if the process itself is not to come to a sudden catastrophic end,’ it is not only possible, but also necessary, that people themselves become raw material to be consumed, discarded, annihilated. In other words, when Arendt announces the ‘grave danger that eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption,’ we should also remember that human annihilation, once elevated to the status of an ‘end-in-itself’ in totalitarian regimes, still continues to occur – albeit in different degrees and by different methods, in contemporary ‘holes of oblivion’ such as miserably poor Third World neighbourhoods and penitentiaries, or in underpaid and slave labour camps, always in the name of protecting the vital interests of animal laborans.
To talk about a process of human consumption is not to speak metaphorically but literally. Heidegger had realized this in his notes written during the late thirties and mid-forties, later published under the title of *Overcoming Metaphysics*. He claimed that the difference between war and peace had already been blurred in a society in which ‘metaphysical man, the *animal rationale*, gets fixed as the labouring animal,’ so that ‘labour is now reaching the metaphysical rank of the unconditional objectification of everything present.’ Heidegger argued that once the world becomes fully determined by the ‘circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption’ it is at the brink of becoming an ‘unworld’ (*Unwelt*), since ‘man, who no longer conceals his character of being the most important raw material, is also drawn into the process. Man is “the most important raw material” because he remains the subject of all consumption.’ After the Second World War and the release of detailed information concerning the death factories Heidegger took his critique even further, acknowledging that to understand man as both subject and object of the consumption process would still not comprehend the process of deliberate mass extermination. He saw this, instead, in terms of the conversion of man into no more than an ‘item of the reserve fund for the fabrication of corpses’ (*Bestandestücke eines Bestandes der Fabrikation von Leichen*). According to Heidegger, what happened in the extermination camps was that death became meaningless, and the existential importance of our anxiety in the face of death was lost; instead, people were robbed of the essential possibility of dying, so that they merely ‘passed away’ in the process of being ‘unconspicuously liquidated’ (*unauffällig liquidiert*). The human being as *animal laborans* (Arendt), as *homo sacer* (Agamben), or as an ‘item of the reserve fund’ (Heidegger) – all describe the same process of dehumanisation whereby humankind is reduced, by means of contemporary technological implements, to the bare fact of being alive, with no further qualifications. As argued by Agamben, when it becomes impossible to differentiate between *biós* and *zós*, that is, when bare life is
transformed into a qualified or specific ‘form of life,’ we face the emergence of a biopolitical epoch. So, when States promote the animalisation of man by policies that aim at both protecting and destroying human life, we can interpret this in terms of the widespread presence of the *homo sacer* in our world:

‘If it is true that the figure proposed by our age is that of an unsacrificeable life that has nevertheless become capable of being killed to an unprecedented degree, then the bare life of *homo sacer* concerns us in a special way… If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *hominæ sacrī*’. Biopolitical violence is the result of a naturalized conception of the political, found both in totalitarianism and the quasi-totalitarian elements of modern mass democracies. For Arendt, all forms of naturalising the political threaten the political artifice of egalitarianism, without which no defence and validation of human freedom and dignity are possible. Arendt’s analysis of the terrible experience of refugees, of those interned in different kinds of concentration camps, of those left with no home and all those who have lost a secure place in the world, showed her that nature – and, of course, human nature – cannot ground and secure any rights or, indeed, any democratic politics. This revealed the paradox inherent in a naturalistic understanding of the Rights of Man, since once those rights ceased to be recognized and enforced by a political community, their inalienable character simply vanished, leaving unprotected the very human beings that most needed them: ‘The Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable… whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of a sovereign state.’

The loss of the Rights of Man *qua* rights of the citizen did not itself deprive a human being of his/her life, liberty, property, freedom of expression or freedom to pursue his happiness. The real predicament for people in these circumstances is that they ‘no longer belong to any
community whatsoever. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them’. The core of her argument is not that man outside the political sphere automatically looses the character of humanity, but that without the political decision to protect and enforce human rights under egalitarian political conditions there can be no other outcome than the devaluation of human life. In other words, nationalistic and racialised biopolitics has produced a huge mass of people denied what Arendt termed the ‘right to have rights,’ that is, the ‘right to belong to some kind of organized community’: ‘Man, it turns out, can lose all so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity’. The ‘abstract nakedness’ of merely being a human being is no substitute for the artificial character of the pacts freely entered into by active citizens. By analysing the dynamic of the extermination camps, Arendt understood that humanity is an attribute that goes categorically beyond the notion of the human being as a mere natural living being: ‘man’s “nature” is only “human” insofar as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man.’ Humanity, politically speaking, does not reside in the sheer natural fact of being alive; politically, humanity depends on artificial legal and political institutions to protect it. The Arendtian rejection of understanding the human being as a living being in the singular, as well as her postulation of human plurality as the condition of all genuine politics, depend on her thesis that politics has to do with the formation of a common world in the course of people’s acting and exchanging opinions. Politics depends on the human faculty of opinion, our capacities to agree and disagree, so that what is mysteriously given to us by nature ceases to be politically decisive. For Arendt, equality is not a natural given, but a political construction oriented by the ‘principle of justice’. It is the result of agreement to grant one another equal rights, based on the assumption that equality can be forged by those who act and
exchange opinions among themselves and thus change the world in which they live.\textsuperscript{38}

Agamben’s thesis goes even further than Arendt’s. He finds that modern biopolitics is contained already in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, inasmuch as these rights constitute the very inscription of naked life into the political-juridical order. According to Agamben, in the 1789 Declaration natural bare life is both the foundational source and the carrier of the rights of man, since a man’s bare life – or, more precisely, the very fact of being born in a certain territory – is the element that effects the transition from the \textit{ancien régime}’s principle of divine sovereignty to modern sovereignty concentrated in the nation state:

It is not possible to understand the ‘national’ and biopolitical development and vocation of the modern state in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries if one forgets that what lies at its basis is not man as a free and conscious political subject but, above all, man’s bare life, the simple birth that as such is, in the passage from subject to citizen, invested with the principle of sovereignty.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{Conclusion}

To conclude this text, I would like to underline how much Arendt’s principal reflections on totalitarianism still remain relevant nowadays, especially when we remember the feeble character of actually existing democracies. Rephased in biopolitical terms, the core of Arendt’s diagnosis of the present is that whenever politics has mostly to do with the maintenance and increase of the vital metabolism of affluent nation states, \textit{animal laborans} is on the verge of being degraded still further: to the status of \textit{homo sacer}, bare and unprotected life that can be delivered to oblivion and death. Our common sense understanding of politics as the administrative promotion of abundance and the happiness of the human being as \textit{animal laborans} is in fact correlated with economic and political
exclusion, racialised prejudice, violence and even genocide against the
naked life of *homo sacer*. Arendt thus sheds light on our current
dilemmas, providing us theoretical elements for a critical diagnosis of the
present as well as for opening new possibilities for collective action in
the world. Arendt was a master of chiaroscuro political thinking, never
blind to always open possibilities of radically renovating the political,
nor, by brutal contrast, to the intrinsic connection between political
exclusion and violence under a biopolitical paradigm. If we wish to
remain with Arendt and the hope of a politics of freedom and equality,
then we must reflect on and pursue new spaces and forms of political
association, action and discussion, wherever and whenever they may
subvert the tedious multiplication of the same in our administered,
covertly and overtly violent present.

Arendt proposed no political utopias, but she remained convinced
that our political dilemmas have no necessary outcome, that history has
not and will not come to a tragic end. Neither a pessimist nor an optimist,
she wanted only to understand the world in which she lived in and to
stimulate our thinking and acting in the present. It is always possible that
radically new political constellations will come into our world, and
responsibility for them will always be ours. If we wish to remain faithful
to the spirit of Arendt’s political thinking, then we must think and act
politically without constraining our thinking and acting in terms of some
pre-defined understanding of what politics ‘is’ or ‘should’ be. In other
words, I believe that the political challenge of the present is to multiply
the forms, possibilities and spaces in which we can act politically. These
may be strategic actions destined to further the agendas of political
parties concerned with social justice. They can also be discrete,
subversive actionsfavoured by small groups at the margins of the
bureaucratised party machines, promoting political interventions free of
particular strategic intentions, since their goal is to invite radical
politicisation of existence. Finally, there are also actions in which ethical
openness towards otherness becomes political: small and rather inconspicuous actions of acknowledging and welcoming, of extending hospitality and solidarity towards others.

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1 Arendt was most interested in non-violent politics, such as civil rights movements, civil disobedience and passive resistance. See “Civil Disobedience” and “Thoughts on politics and revolution” in Crisis of the Republic. New York, Harvest-Book, 1972.

2 The concept of ‘biopolitics’ was proposed by Michel Foucault in his History of Sexuality, vol. one (trans. Robert Hurley, New York, Vintage Books/ Random House, 1990). With this concept, Foucault aimed at clarifying the political shift happened at the beginning of the nineteenth century, according to which bare life became the core of multiple State policies whose aim are to enforce and stimulate the life of the citizens or to plainly destroy it.


4 Zizek, S. Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Four Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion, London, Verso, 2001, p. 3.


I do not espouse Agamben’s thesis of biopolitics as the ontological core of the political in the Western world. See Andrew Norris’ “The exemplary exception”: Philosophical and political decisions in Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, *Radical Philosophy*, no. 119, May-June 2003.


According to Arendt, ‘Expropriation, the initial accumulation of capital – that was the law according to which capitalism arose and according to which it has advanced step by step. (…) But if you look at what has actually happened in Russia, then you can see that there the process of expropriation has been carried further. An you can observe that something very similar is going on in the modern capitalistic countries, where it is as though the old expropriation process is again let loose.’ See Arendt, H. *Crisis of the Republic*, pp. 211-212.


Agamben, G. *Homo Sacer*, p. 86.


Arendt, H. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 185. With such horrifying precedents, one should not be surprised if tribal genocides still happen in Rwanda as elsewhere.


28 Brazilian extermination groups do not target their victims for political, criminal or any other particular reason: it suffices that these are poor and helpless people on the fringes of society, with no means to claim justice and whose murder is usually taken to be statistically predictable anyway. On the evening of 29 March 2005, 29 people were randomly murdered in Nova Iguaçu, a poor Metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro.


30 Heidegger, M. ‘Overcoming Metaphysics,’ p. 87 and p.84.


33 Agamben, G. *Homo Sacer*, p. 114f.


38 See Arendt, H. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 301.