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Violence and Deprivation: Arendt and the Pervasiveness of Superfluous Life

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Overview: This paper teases out several strands of Arendt’s view of human superfluousness. Relating this idea to issues of stateless persons and terrorism, I argue the links between superfluousness and violence in her work are far closer than is often thought.

Keywords: Arendt, superfluousness, violence, statelessness, terrorism, femicide, biopolitics

Panel 33-16: Arendtian Themes

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Violence and Deprivation: Arendt and the Pervasiveness of Superfluous Life

Emma R. Norman

This paper emerges from, and engages with, the current proliferation of discussions concerning Arendt’s views on sovereignty, humanity, and superfluousness. Tracing some of the different strands of her notion of human superfluousness, I look at how the exclusion and deprivation inherent in the idea of superfluousness is reflected in, and illuminated by, contemporary questions surrounding stateless persons, and several key experiences of terrorism. I argue that the strong and radical connections this notion has with Arendt’s concept of violence deserve more emphasis than it has hitherto received. For the link between superfluousness and the biopolitical ‘administration of bare lives’ undertaken increasingly by our political institutions and practices not only permits the justification of the use of violence. It can also be seen as a veiled but highly dangerous form of violence itself. And, if this is the case, it is not only stateless persons, illegal migrants and political detainees who are rendered superfluous by contemporary poietic politics, but ordinary citizens too.

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.¹

It is not easy to swiftly map out Arendt’s conceptual landscape or isolate any part thereof. Arendt’s own view of her work was not a whole and coherent political theory, but a series of ‘trains of thought,’ the tracks of which sometimes intersect, but also occasionally

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diverge. Her many commentators have nevertheless found more intersections than Arendt perhaps envisaged, illuminating what Margaret Canovan has called “an elaborate and orderly spider’s web of concepts, held together by threads that were none the weaker for being hard to see… this means that one cannot understand one part of her thought unless one is aware of its connections with all the rest.”

The point is a fair one and applies as much to her notion of human superfluousness as it does to many of her other political ideas.

This paper explores Arendt’s notion of superfluousness in some detail by examining certain threads that connect it with other notions central to her complex web of concepts—without which superfluousness is hard indeed to comprehend. These include her dual notion of sovereignty, the way this impacts on how far human rights can be guaranteed, her singular conceptualization of violence as distinct from power, and her ambivalent attitude toward the concept of humanity. The first half of this paper discusses the way these concepts combine to delineate the idea of “human superfluousness.”

It is well-known that the implications of Arendt’s argument are as clear for questions concerning stateless persons and refugees today as they were in the 1920s, 30s and 40s—if not more so. However, while she linked the starkest form of superfluousness to the “radical evil” emanating from the Nazi and Stalinist totalitarian regimes, the poignancy of this concept is not restricted to such extreme cases of violence and deprivation. The central argument of this paper is that, if the underlying emphasis Arendt placed on deprivation is read closely with her views on violence, then the concept of superfluousness

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may have a wider reach and deeper hold on contemporary political life and political communities than she intimated.

In developing this argument, the second half of this paper examines where Arendt’s views on superfluousness can shed additional light on some pressing practical issues today. I explore two avenues where the concept reaches well beyond the deprivations inherent in statelessness. The first concerns the way the War on Terror has displayed an enormous capacity for creating human superfluousness, not only for the detainees of Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, but at a general level. The second example is just as telling of the pervasiveness of the superfluous life. The cases of the femicides in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico over the last 16 years demonstrate how superfluousness can be generated and perpetuated not only against those who have been stripped of their citizenship status, but also against groups of ‘ordinary’ citizens within a state, too.

### Superfluousness and Deprivation

[T]he not-so-hidden aim of totalitarianism is the deliberate attempt to make human beings qua human superfluous, to transform human beings in order to eliminate their humanity—to destroy their plurality, spontaneity, natality, and individuality.  

Most commentators on Arendt emphasize their own constellation of concepts that reveal the key position her views on superfluousness occupy in her thought. Richard Bernstein, for example, juxtaposes radical evil with the banality of evil and thoughtlessness. Dana Villa

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draws close links between Arendt’s reflections on radical evil, terror and superfluousness.\(^5\) Patrick Hayden situates it *vis-a-vis* the concepts of the right to have rights, thoughtlessness, plurality, power and freedom.\(^6\) And Bridgit Cotter concentrates on the decline of the nation-state, sovereignty and the right to have rights.\(^7\) This paper begins along lines similar to the last approach, but takes this particular thought-train a couple of stops further by pursuing its connections with Arendt’s unique understanding of violence and her ambivalence toward the concept of humanity. Using these concepts as focal points helps to reveal several complex dimensions in the idea of superfluousness.

**Superfluousness, Sovereignty and the ‘Inalienable’ Rights of Man**

Arendt’s notion of human superfluousness is thoroughly bound to different kinds of deprivation and the modes of exclusion these produce. She introduced the concept in the context of the proliferation of stateless persons\(^8\) where redrawing the international boundaries in Europe after the First World War had deprived millions of either a home territory to be repatriated to, or a new state that would offer them naturalization. In the face of the sheer numbers of refugees at the time, the age-old right to asylum was effectively


\(^8\) Which, for most purposes, she equates with refugees in that they are *de facto* stateless. See Arendt, *Origins*, 281. I follow her in using the terms interchangeably here.
abandoned and the legal process of naturalization broke down internationally to the point where even naturalizations that had already been accepted were cancelled.\textsuperscript{9} Being stateless, then, did not just deprive a person of belonging to a territory, it deprived them of occupying a clear “niche in the framework of the general law.”\textsuperscript{10}

The dilemma of stateless persons threw the tensions between several political and legal idea(l)s into sharp relief. First, what Arendt called ‘people’s sovereignty’ (freedom from colonial despotism embodied in the right of a people to collective self-determination) was seen to clash with ‘state sovereignty’ (“in which each state has absolute jurisdiction within its own borders and only within them”\textsuperscript{11}). The enormous number of refugees meant that, if it were not trumped, people’s sovereignty was in danger of constantly threatening the established legal and political order, challenging state sovereignty in the process. In the 1920s, 1930s and beyond, the states of Europe responded by soundly re-exerting their authority over the stateless—an authority that was constrained, in Arendt’s view, only by pragmatic concerns until the rise of totalitarianism swept even those restrictions away.\textsuperscript{12}

“Theoretically, in the sphere of international law, it had always been true that sovereignty is nowhere more absolute than in matters of emigration, naturalization, nationality and


\textsuperscript{11} Cotter, “Hannah Arendt,” 97.

\textsuperscript{12} Including, to some extent, many nontotalitarian European states—particularly regarding the role of the police in dealing with stateless persons. See Arendt, \textit{Origins}, 283-88.
expulsion.” This led Arendt to muse on the probable correlation between how far a regime had been ‘infected’ with totalitarianism and how often it exercised its sovereign right to denationalize.

At this point a second tension emerges to add to the picture of how successive layers of exclusion and deprivation transform into the condition of being rendered superfluous. Depriving stateless persons of legal membership in a state after WWI did not merely dispossess them of their physical homes, and lead to the loss of a sense of belonging to a rooted homeland, or of the cultural world they had carved for themselves there. It also ruled out the possibility of them ever finding another home or territory of their own. Arendt saw this as the most primary deprivation of all: the loss of a place in this world, a loss that renders opinions insignificant and actions ineffective.

In becoming stateless, persons are additionally robbed of the only entity that could guarantee a set of minimum rights, rendering them extremely vulnerable to any kind of abuse and deprivation, since they have no legal status either in their own countries or abroad. Arendt’s complaint was with the claims to the so-called universal and inalienable qualities of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, and for the same reasons, later the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These rights had been classified as ‘inalienable’ since they were meant

13 Arendt, Origins, 278.

14 Arendt, Origins, 294

15 Arendt, Origins, 296.
to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them… The stateless people were… convinced… that loss of national rights was identical with loss of human rights.\(^{16}\)

This part of her logic leads to the argument that the victory of state sovereignty over people’s sovereignty can transform multiple experiences of loss into rendering persons superfluous and disposable. The state has the last word on who and what kinds of persons have legal status and will be protected, and whose human rights will be suspended or negated. Unable to send refugees back to their now nonexistent homelands and unwilling to assimilate or naturalize them into their own sovereign nations, the idea of internment camps for large groups of stateless persons became (and still is\(^{17}\)) the “routine solution”\(^{18}\) along with a temptation to resort to excessive policing and arbitrary rule.\(^{19}\)

Here is where the implications of ‘losing one’s place in the world’ truly start to emerge. The plight of the stateless “is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed, but that nobody wants even to oppress them… only if they remain perfectly “superfluous,” if nobody can be found to “claim”


\(^{17}\) From 2001-2008 the Australian government shipped asylum seekers to offshore camps on Nauru island (see Cotter, “Hannah Arendt,” 106) and Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. Both were shut in 2008, but the Christmas Island detention center remains open to deal with Australia’s policy of mandatory detention for unauthorized aliens. Administrative detention of refugees and asylum seekers is widespread in Europe and the U.S. in restrictive detention centers and sometimes in prisons.


them, may their lives be in danger.”20 They are, in short, deprived of the most fundamental right of all: “the right to have rights.”21 Successive layers of deprivation coalesce finally into total exclusion from the international “family of nations,” first juridically, then morally and ultimately through the destruction of individuality,22 which obliterates the spontaneity and natality that form the human capacity for beginning something anew and uncaused. Superfluousness thus goes beyond experiencing loneliness and uprootedness.23 It is the experience of being totally cut loose from reality; of being isolated physically, socially and psychologically from the common human world of men.

Many commentators identify Arendt’s idea of superfluousness with the telos of the totalitarian project, the essence of which was terror and the aim of which was to render human beings into something other than human, mere “specimens of the human animal”24 through the horrors of the death camps. This radical, ‘end-stage’ of superfluousness refers to the point where once-human individuals were turned into unremembered, replaceable,


22 See Arendt, Origins, 447-55.

23 See Arendt, Origins, 474-9. Uprootedness can be a precursor to superfluousness, but is not equivalent to it (475).

24 Arendt, Origins, 455, 464. See also Villa, Philosophy, Terror, Politics, 6, passim.
nonpersons, indistinguishable from each other, and stripped of any solidarity: “superfluous human material” to be liquidated if conditions are thought to require it, making their “murder as impersonal as the squashing of a gnat.”25 When such groups are not claimed by a sovereign authority able to enforce the protection of their rights, they “are treated as if they no longer existed, as if what happened to them were no longer of any interest to anybody, as if they were already dead.”26

Evidently the ‘living dead’ of the Nazi and Stalinist concentration and annihilation camps were the epitome of Arendt’s notion of superfluousness, but I am not convinced that the pertinence of the concept today is restricted either to such extreme cases, or to the experiences and status of statelessness as these are traditionally understood. The reasons for this lie partly the links between this concept and violence in Arendt’s lexicon, and in her ambivalence toward the way “humanity” as a universal concept can be abused.

Superfluousness, Violence and Human Life

The link between violence and Arendt’s arguments on superfluousness is unsurprising given her subject matter. Yet the two concepts are rarely examined together (as concepts) explicitly in the interpretive literature, or unraveled in tandem as closely as they could be. Even Giorgio Agamben’s work on biopolitics and sovereignty, which takes Arendt as one of its cues and which I draw from below in places,27 neither discusses Arendt’s conception of

25 Arendt, Origins, 443 [emphasis added].

26 Arendt, Origins, 445.

27 Several of the ideas linking Arendt’s views on violence and Agamben’s ‘administration of bare lives’ in this section were developed in conversation with my former student Melisa Chavez back in 2006.
violence (though he explores many others), nor mentions her notion of superfluousness. However, his development of an alternative to this concept—*homo sacer* (sacred man)—captures some central elements of superfluousness so well and articulates its biopolitical significance so strongly that it should not be overlooked.

Arendt famously conceptualized violence in opposition to power—in part to expose the peculiarity of the close Clausewitzian connection between war and politics and the modern concept of politics-as-domination that underpins the classic Weberian notion of the state. While recognizing that in practice governments frequently combine the exercise of power and violence, her worry was that the conceptual differences are habitually missed.

Violence, for Arendt, is often a result of the absence, or loss, of power, where power is conceived not in its traditional senses of ‘domination,’ ‘command and obedience,’ or ‘an instrument of rule,’ but as something that emerges when a plurality of people act together in concert. Power is never the property of an individual and its existence depends on a group remaining together. It is an end in itself located in the living person, not in the things or institutions we fabricate.

As almost the precise opposite, violence is distinguished by being instrumental, a mere means to reach a specific end, and requires implements to multiply the natural strength of its perpetrator(s). Psychologically, “impotence breeds violence,” while


29 Arendt, *On Violence*, 44.
politically, “loss of power becomes a temptation to substitute violence for power.”\textsuperscript{30} Through its ability to isolate, it can destroy power by depriving people of acting together and rupturing the bonds of solidarity. Yet violence is simultaneously incapable of providing a substitute for power.\textsuperscript{31} It merely results in its patent lack.\textsuperscript{32}

Clearly the connection between physical forms of violence and the many deprivations of superfluousness is a straightforward one. What is interesting, and less straightforward, is the way in which nonphysical\textsuperscript{33} manifestations of violence are brought into play in creating the conditions for superfluousness of a particularly pervasive kind. It is here that Arendt’s thought-train on violence and superfluousness intersect with the tracks of one dealing with politics and the\textit{ vita activa}. Depriving persons of their unique identities and places in this world can itself be seen as an essentially violent set of acts, regardless of whether the deprivation is achieved by using physical violence or even whether it, in fact, leads to physical suffering or not. For, the deprivation caused by isolating human beings results in the destruction of plurality—and with it any possibility of generating a public realm—thus eliminating the potential for all forms of action, including action in concert.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{30} Arendt, \textit{On Violence}, 54.


\textsuperscript{32} Arendt, \textit{On Violence}, 54.

\textsuperscript{33} Or not ostensibly physical, at least—including structural and psychological violence.

\textsuperscript{34} Arendt, \textit{Origins}, 474-5.
Substituting making (poiesis, fabrication) for acting (praxis) is also intrinsically violent for Arendt, since mastering necessity implies the use of force and violence. The focus on the instrumental life, on the creation of tangible things rather than the revelation of human distinctness and solidarity, is symptomatic of the way ‘the rise of the social’ permits the character and function of the private realm to seep into, and pervert, public life. It is not long before “the victory of animal laborans” follows, where the means-ends logic of work becomes increasingly difficult to separate from the labor of biological survival. And wherever “life, and not the world, is the highest good of man,” instrumental means-end relations tend to solidify into the mechanics of poietic ‘political’ structures. Under these conditions, viewing persons in their “abstract nakedness of being nothing but human,” and viewing the job of government as preserving and administering the bodily functions and biological survival of the population, or parts thereof, become possible.

The connections between this biopolitical argument and the production of superfluous lives are immediately obvious. The central point recalls the earlier discussion of state sovereignty. The instrumentality of this kind of administrative ‘politics’ permits those who wield the state apparatus to frame the criteria for what counts as ‘human life’ and to decide to whom it applies and what, or who, should be excluded. A similar position

35 See Canovan, Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation, 165.

36 Arendt, Human Condition, 320.

37 Arendt, Human Condition, 318.

38 Arendt, Origins, 300.
underpins Agamben’s argument that state sovereignty is not primarily conceived as a way of providing protection for citizens. Its key function is to manage lives and bodies biopolitically, through policies such as public health, drug prohibition or immigration. It is this function of state sovereignty that places it, paradoxically, as the main guardian of human life at the same time as it endorses its holocaust.

From an Arendtian perspective, the management of life is violent in that it rules out the free development of identities and modes of being-in-the-world. Yet it is also violent in that the superfluous status that administrative tasks impose upon human life permits the justification of the use of violence against certain human groups according to the way the definition of “humanity” is manipulated. And, as we shall see later, it can often be manipulated to exclude certain parts of the population and, ultimately, render them disposable—even, indeed especially, when that definition is based on ‘natural,’ biological criteria.

Given that “humanity, politically speaking, does not reside in the natural fact of being alive; politically, humanity depends on artificial legal and political institutions to protect it,” for Arendt, any effort to naturalize the human condition becomes dangerous, since it attempts to destroy the ‘human’ characteristics of life. For these characteristics are

39 Especially illuminating on this point is the interview of Agamben, “Una biopolítica menor: Entrevista con Giorgio Agamben,” in La administración de la vida: estudios biopolíticos, edited by Javier Ugarte Pérez (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2005).


not conferred by our biological condition but by our opinions and actions that permit us to contribute to the world both our individual uniqueness and the human bonds of togetherness that assure our humanity. Arendt argued strongly that the rise of the social where only one interest rules (“either classes or Man-kind, but neither man nor men”\textsuperscript{42}) so reflected in the work of Marx, stripped the concept of human (what she often called ‘man’) of all its “higher capacities” which were no longer required to connect individual life with the life of the species...What was not needed, not necessitated by life’s metabolism with nature, was either superfluous or could be justified only in terms of a peculiarity of human as distinguished from other animal life—so that Milton was considered to have written his \textit{Paradise Lost} for the same reasons and out of similar urges that compel the silkworm to produce silk.\textsuperscript{43}

Framing the criteria for what counts as a human life by making all its nonbiological qualities superfluous or natural peculiarities of the species \textit{homo sapiens} leads to conceptualizing “human life” as a life that is unqualified beyond the level of mere existence,\textsuperscript{44}—‘bare life’ (\textit{vida nuda}; \textit{zoē}) in Agamben’s now-familiar lexicon. Here necessity reigns supreme. Creativity, or beginning a causal chain anew, the very driving force of the human \textit{artifice}, is obscured and explained away as a natural, organic aberration. This hijacking of the signifier “human” and reducing it to processes of production and consumption—to the point where it is totally dehumanized—lies at the heart of what Arendt meant by “making human beings as human beings superfluous (not using them as means to an end, which leaves their essence as humans untouched and impinges only on

\textsuperscript{42} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, 321

\textsuperscript{43} Arendt, \textit{Human Condition}, 321

\textsuperscript{44} Arendt, \textit{Origins}, 301.
their human dignity; rather, making them superfluous as human beings)."\(^{45}\) All that is left is
an animalized life in which distinguishing one’s uniqueness, the continued survival of a
recognized identity,\(^{46}\) and encountering plural others, are made all but impossible.

It is in this way that political institutions and practices based on the administration
of bare lives can be seen as the source of a veiled, but insidious form of violence in the
Arendtian sense of being an instrument, or means, to achieve a specific end. There are two
elements that can be derived from her argument here that rest on two corresponding ends
used to justify violent means. The first end is the aim of rendering superfluous (and
therefore disposable) the lives of supposedly ‘superfluous humans’ (stateless persons,
refugees, political detainees, illegal migrants) as anomalies that do not fit the legal-political
framework. They can thus be viewed as undeserving of political attention, or their very
existence poses an insurmountable challenge to the legal-political framework. This aim
renders superfluous ‘some of the people all of the time’ so to speak.

But a similar argument also applies to a second, parallel, end. Through deciding on
which criteria comprises the kind of “human life” it is capable of managing effectively, the
sovereign state is also able to render superfluous that part of all human beings that falls
outside of the criteria chosen. For Arendt, this includes all those things beyond “the animal
reaction and fulfilment of functions,”\(^{47}\) although she restricts this claim to totalitarian

67-8 [emphasis added].

\(^{46}\) See Arendt’s discussion of the dog with a name. Arendt, Origins, 287.

\(^{47}\) Arendt, Origins,457
systems. Yet the implications of Agamben’s argument, and Foucault’s before him, suggest that this dimension of superfluity contains within it the tendency to pervade far beyond the cases of totalitarianism.

The point is captured best in Agamben’s resurrection of the Roman juridical figure of *homo sacer*. A criminal with the status of *homo sacer* was paradoxically both excluded and included by the law: no law would protect him from being murdered by anyone who attempted to do so, so long as the murder was not carried out according to legal procedures or for the purpose of religious sacrifice. Exemplifying the bare life of the living dead in the Nazi and Stalinist death camps, the main claim here is that such exclusion and deprivation makes *homo sacer* “the prototype of a man whose murder is no crime,” to borrow Andre Duarte’s phrase. His existence is thoroughly superfluous and disposable, and anyone doing him harm is not considered or held to be legally or morally responsible for their action against him.

The basic idea here extends our understanding of superfluity and intersects again with the earlier discussion concerning the glaring fact that the rights of man, which are the very mechanisms supposed to protect one’s basic humanity, are meaningless once a person is moved beyond the remit of the protection only acceptance in a sovereign state can give. Yet the claim can be pushed further. The type of exclusion that so detaches groups of people from the protection of their basic human rights often simultaneously functions as a justification for doing additional physical violence to them, occasionally to the point of

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49 Duarte, “Biopolitics and the Dissemination of Violence,” 2 [emphasis added].
justifying that their total annihilation is somehow rationally or even morally valid. The point is borne out via the case of the death camps by both Arendt and Agamben and needs no further emphasis here. However, the contemporary applicability of this reading of superfluousness to the War on Terror, and the femicides of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico is worth noting.

The Pervasiveness of Superfluous Life

Superfluoussness and Humanity in the War on Terror

Arendt’s position on the concept of humanity vied between her lamentation of the loss of the “higher capacities” that make human life meaningful and her simultaneous recognition of “the terror of the idea of humanity” in that it leads logically to the disturbing prospect that humankind is universally responsible for all the crimes humans have committed. This ambivalence and her warning against absolutes in politics shed additional light on the way we understand some of the experiences of the current War on Terror. Indeed, several elements in this particular conflict seem to have been designed to produce superfluous life of different kinds, and then attempt to justify destroying it, as much as was the case in Auschwitz or Buchenwald.

For Duarte, viewing the end of government as the administration of bare lives makes it possible for states to “permit themselves to impose physical and structural violence against individuals and regimes that supposedly interfere with the security and growth of their national ‘life process.’” In fact, a biopolitical outlook does more than


51 Duarte, Biopolitics and the Dissemination of Violence, 8.
permit the imposition of such violence; it attempts to justify it. Arendt was, I think, rather more aware of this problem than Agamben makes out. The problem Arendt identified concerns the use of “humanity” as an abstract universal employed to justify ‘political actions’ performed in the name of the good of the whole human community.

The general point, as Patricia Owens remarks, is not far removed from Carl Schmitt’s famous claims highlighting the ways in which states can usurp the universal concept of humanity for particularistic ends in The Concept of the Political. Both he and Arendt emphasized the problems encountered in defining “humanity” as a universal category since it can be used as a means to justify the further end of excluding parts of the whole to the point where it becomes possible to contemplate annihilating them without assuming legal or moral responsibility for doing so. “It is quite conceivable,” wrote Arendt, “that one fine day a highly organized and mechanized humanity will conclude quite

52 Agamben claims, for example, that “Arendt establishes no connection between her research in The Human Condition and the penetrating analyses she had previously devoted to totalitarian power (in which a biopolitical perspective is altogether lacking),” Homo Sacer, 10. It is not altogether lacking, just not fully formed or integrated with the more complex parts of her later political argument. But her discussions about the abstract nakedness of human being, the problems with using humanity as a moral universal and the idea of rendering persons superfluous itself all lay considerable groundwork in Origins for an understanding of biopolitics as antipolitics.


55 Though their reasons for stressing this were very different. Schmitt insisted that the political, and by extension group identity formation, required the distinction between friend and enemy, a recognition of which is obscured and weakened by any appeal to liberal universal categories such as “humanity” that seek to eliminate distinction.
democratically—naturally by majority decision—that for humanity as a whole it would be
to liquidate certain parts thereof.”

In fact, Schmitt’s extension of the concept of the enemy in Theory of the Partisan
(1962) develops the pivot of a position even closer to Arendt’s on this than his earlier work
indicated. In contrast to other types of enemy, Schmitt’s description of the “absolute
enemy” is a belligerent who acts on the basis of an enmity to “all mankind” grounded on
abstract notions of justice and which serve to denounce their enemy as a criminal, or even
inhuman. This category describes those who

see themselves obliged/forced to annihilate their victims and objects, even morally. They
have to consider the other side as entirely criminal and inhuman… Otherwise they are
themselves criminal and inhuman. The logic of value and its obverse, worthlessness,
unfolds its annihilating consequence, compelling ever new, ever deeper discriminations,
criminalizations, and devaluations to the point of annihilating all of unworthy life.

Taken together with the catastrophic consequences Arendt warns of when absolutes
such as good and evil—and, by extension, human and inhuman (i.e., superfluous,
disposable outlaw)—are brought into politics, the relevance of these observations to the
way the War on Terror has been justified discursively by both sides is disturbingly clear.
The obvious example is the oft-cited speech in which Bush actually defined the ‘axis of
evil’ in terms of the pockets of behavior deemed unworthy of inclusion in the “civilized
[human] world.”

North Korea is a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction [WMD],
while starving its citizens. Iran aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror,
while an un-elected few repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom… The Iraqi regime
has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This


is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens—leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections—then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world. States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking WMD, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic.\footnote{G.W. Bush, “President Delivers State of the Union Address, January 29th” Accessed on Feb 27, 2009. Available from: http://bioterrorism.slu.edu/bt/official/president/statements/12902.pdf}

The introduction of absolutes in the way the rhetoric has on both sides is in danger of producing precisely those conditions for creating a context in which the exclusion of groups (or individuals purported to represent them) from “worthy human life” naturally leads to sanctioning their murder or torture (or providing a just cause for military aggression) which is not seen as a crime but a moral duty; a crusade: conditions in which superfluousness is already being invoked.

In places those conditions have been created already. “Shorn of law and convention, treated as a purely ‘natural’ creature—a beast—man was left naked and shivering, a vulnerable, miserable creature, prey to hostile forces.”\footnote{Jeremy Isaacs is talking here of the Isaacs, Democracy in Dark Times, 79.}
survivors of the Nazi death camps, but the image he captures is just as revealing of the superfluous status of the political detainees at Guantánamo,\textsuperscript{61} in Afghanistan and was especially reflected in the photographs and videos of torture and abuse of prisoners occurring in Abu Ghraib released in 2004. While the charges and convictions against the perpetrators of this criminal violence were eventually made, the spectre of \textit{homo sacer} and his superfluous status is still disturbingly evident.

At least before the publicization of the abuses in Abu Ghraib, to many military and U.S. governmental officials who were in contact with the prisoners, the detainees were not far from being perceived as beings who could be killed (or tortured) but whose death (or abject suffering) would not imply any crime.\textsuperscript{62} It is clear that the officials involved considered their actions of extreme physical and psychological torture somehow either justified or at the very least unlikely to result in punishment, since the actions were not deemed to be worth fully hiding. Several prison officials had snapshots taken of themselves standing next to, or sitting on top of, pyramids\textsuperscript{63} of bound, naked, alive-but-dehumanized prisoners as if they were of no more consequence than the forgettable monuments one stands next to for snaps taken on any routine summer vacation. What is so shocking about

\textsuperscript{61} For a superb exploration of many of the questions arising from the justification of violence in the context of the War on Terror, and especially in the case of Guantánamo, see Judith Butler, \textit{Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence} (London: Verso, 2004).

\textsuperscript{62} Though it is now well-documented that where abuses did result in death, care was often taken to cover up the cause of death and fabricate the appearance of more ‘responsible’ behavior.

\textsuperscript{63} This is significant. That they were ordered to form a ‘human pyramid’ and felt they had no choice but to comply, to only be able to react, is reflected in the very center of Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi’s characterization of the living dead of the death camps. See Villa, \textit{Politics, Philosophy, Terror}, 23-9.
these photographs is precisely their graphic revelation of how human beings can be rendered completely superfluous as human beings.

There are some important differences, however, between this context and that of totalitarianism. As Villa points out with regard to the Nazi death camps, “[t]o live and die in the camps... is to be deprived of one’s appearance in the world, to be absolutely erased from the realm of appearances and (thus) memory.”64 The dissemination of the pictures of the abuses in Abu Ghraib into the international public realm, to some extent, did reinsert the superfluous prisoners there and elsewhere back into ‘the world of men,’ to the point where the perpetrators of violence were forced to assume legal responsibility for their actions. Until the publicity emerged, the Geneva Convention was unable to guarantee the basic human rights of the detainees for precisely the reasons behind the criticisms Arendt levelled at the Rights of Man.65 Yet some protective elements of this international agreement started functioning again despite their challenge to state sovereignty. Not all detainees were “perfectly superfluous,” their erasure from the world of men was not absolute. Just how far the international community, or specific states or organizations within them are able or willing to “claim” the detainees back from their superfluous status remains to be seen, however—as does the success of President Obama’s plans to close down Guantánamo at the end of 2009.

The treatment of political detainees exemplifies the violent means justified by the type of end I earlier referred to as the aim of rendering superfluous and disposable the lives

64 Villa, Politics, Philosophy, Terror, 20.

65 In that, because most of the provisions of the Convention were seen to clash with U.S. views of its state sovereignty and national security, only one Article was ultimately observed in the case of Guantanamo in the wake of the USA Patriot Act.
of so-designated ‘superfluous humans’ as anomalies that do not fit the legal-political framework. Yet the casting of the ‘evil’ enemies implicated in the War on Terror seems to capture the parallel end of seeking to render superfluous that part of all human beings that falls outside of a definition of ‘humanity’ specifically manipulated to exclude a great swathe of people globally. It is this low-grade superfluousness that is, perhaps, the most pervasive of all in its insidious aim to justify widespread violence and dehumanization in the name of traditional national or regional security. Yet it is also the case that new, and similarly pervasive forms of the superfluous life are emerging in some of the alternative contexts created by globalization.

The Femicides of Ciudad Juarez

While Arendt left aside an exploration of private forms of violence, including interpersonal and domestic violence, in her study of this concept, this has not reduced the value of her work when examining violence and power struggles through a gender lens.66 One significant case in point, though it has received scant attention from an Arendtian perspective, concerns how the phenomenon of femicide has been experienced in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico since 1993. Generally understood as “the misogynous killing of women by men,”67 the term femicide was coined by Caputi and Russell and defined as being “on the extreme end of a continuum of antifemale terror that includes a wide variety of verbal and


physical abuse, such as rape, torture, sexual slavery… Whenever these forms of terrorism result in death, they become femicides.⁶⁸

The entire context surrounding the femicides in Juárez is fraught with obfuscation, which makes it difficult to cite any ‘facts’ with much confidence in their accuracy. Misrepresentations have also been rife in the media, which has shown a keen interest in attributing the lion’s share of the blame to the dark side of NAFTA and the maquiladoras that have sprung up like mushrooms overnight along the border in its wake. In fact, the majority of the murdered women and girls that are officially acknowledged as victims of femicide were not in the employ of maquiladoras at the time of their deaths.⁶⁹ As of early 2009, the figures published by different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) list the number of femicides in and around Cd. Juárez at between 400-500 women and girls, most between the ages of 10-30, with 250 missing.⁷⁰ Domestic violence and narco-trafficking-related violence is cited as responsible for a large part of this figure. The vast majority of


the women were kidnapped, brutally tortured, raped, murdered, mutilated and dumped half-naked in the desert outskirts of the city.\footnote{Luevano, “Theological Challenge,” 62-3.}

In spite of the problems in verifying and interpreting the data, it is the reactions to the femicides that intimate just how pervasive the experience of the superfluous life can be. The phenomenon has seized the attention of the international media and human rights organizations primarily because of the way in which the authorities (on both sides of the border) have been unable or unwilling to ensure that the crimes are investigated thoroughly. Over 100 cases remain officially unsolved, and evidence suggests that many of those cases that have been closed identified the wrong perpetrator. Furthermore, there seems to be scant progress in slowing the murder rate. While around 30 femicides per annum has been normal for the last decade, more than 25 women were found murdered and dumped in Cd. Juárez following the established pattern between January and July 2008.\footnote{Amnesty International, “Mexico: Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review,” Fourth session of the UPR Working Group of the Human Rights Council, February 2009, AMR 41/038/2008.}

The femicides have all been committed within a class of women or girls for whom social, economic and psychological deprivation is already way of life whether they work in the maquiladoras or not. Many have been forced to the industrial bordertown from their homes in more rural parts of Mexico in search of work. The vulnerability of this group does not, by itself, render them superfluous, but it has paved the way toward it by excluding this group from the full protection of the law. As a result of the lack of interest and/or impotence and inefficiency of the authorities, a culture of fear has evolved, in which the safety and survival of all is questioned in the face of such unpunished violence.
There are several contributing reasons for the less-than-thorough response of the authorities that perhaps should be mentioned. Some concern police negligence\footnote{See “Mexico: Justice fails in Ciudad Juarez and the city of Chihuahua,” \textit{Amnesty International, USA.} February 22, 2005. AMR 41/007/2005. Accessed on March 10, 2009. Available at \url{http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?id=5AB197BCFE37D92D90256FB600689A74&lang=es}.} and the lack of resources, investigative training, and virtually nonexistent forensic procedures used by the Mexican authorities in the 1990s. As a result, the United States and international organizations have provided funding, training, investigative consultation and profiling services. Other reasons include the closed character of the criminal justice system in Chihuahua which makes it vulnerable to corruption.\footnote{See Sylvia Moreno, “Unresolved Murders of Women Rankle in Mexican Border City: New State Officials Seek Justice in Hundreds of Bungled Cases,” \textit{Washington Post}, December 16, 2005: A30.} Further difficulties involve intimidation, violence and corruption either by elements of organized crime toward the authorities and witnesses, or by the police toward witnesses, lobbyists and families—bearing out Arendt’s observation that the likelihood of police brutality increases the more crimes remain unsolved.\footnote{Arendt, \textit{On Violence}, 98, fn 75. Recall the argument that “impotence breeds violence.” \textit{On Violence}, 54.} A more structural explanation for the proliferation of femicides in Juárez, as well as the lukewarm response to their resolution, is what Kathleen Staudt calls “male backlash in gender power relations,”\footnote{Kathleen Staudt, \textit{Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear, and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juarez} (El Paso: University of Texas Press, 2008), 41. Staudt is the only scholar to date who draws from an Arendtian framework of power and violence in her treatment of the Cd. Juarez femicides.} as a result of the change in the domestic balance of power stemming from the introduction of women into the formal labor force.
In spite of all these reasons, what cannot be concealed is the way that for so many years the Mexican authorities attempted to cover up, failed to solve or reduce, downplayed or even ignored the disappearances, the murders and the murdered even after the international spotlight was turned on Cd. Juárez. This is another example of how the conditions can be created for rendering human beings superfluous as human beings, but it is especially interesting for demonstrating the new ways in which this concept can be applied in a globalized ‘world of men.’

The similarities with many of Arendt’s observations about superfluousness in Europe are striking. “The decision of the statesmen to solve the problem of statelessness by ignoring it is further revealed by the lack of reliable statistics on the subject. This much is known, however: while there are one million ‘recognized’ stateless, there are more than ten million so-called ‘de facto’ stateless.”\(^{77}\) But this time it is happening from a position inside the state, and in a globalized context where the boundaries of the nation-state are not quite as sharply defined as in the first half of the twentieth century. This has an effect on how the tactics of exclusion and deprivation function. The excluded “ultimately become just as outlawed in their own country as the stateless and the homeless”\(^{78}\) in the sense that they are somehow existing outside of the protection of the law their nationality should guarantee as a result of their place inside the state. Arendt thought that this could only happen in a system that was already extremely arbitrary, organized and totalitarian. But Cd. Juárez is one example that shows how in a globalized world this is no longer necessary. The

\(^{77}\) Arendt, *Origins*, 279.

vulnerabilities of statelessness are not required if state sovereignty is already weakened and other deprivations render groups vulnerable in different ways. Neither are they required if the mechanisms of human rights malfunction in such a way that neither the home state nor international organizations are able to “claim” those nonpersons who fall through the cracks. One possible implication of the contentions I have made here, however, is that the cracks that can potentially lead to new postmodern ‘holes of oblivion’ will continue to open up within states as well as between them.

This is where my position aligns for a moment with Hayden’s recent claim that the deprivations of global poverty normalized by the structural conditions of global capitalism lead to a systematic exclusion of the global poor from the common human world that renders them increasingly superfluous. 79 The point to add here is that a globalized world, in which the boundaries between states and their sovereign domains are becoming increasingly porous and spatially decentered, appears to provide many conditions for the proliferation of new forms of rendering human beings superfluous. It certainly seems to be significant that the femicides are occurring along a highly permeable border where the sovereign power of expulsion from one side, and sanctioned belonging on either side has traditionally been almost impossible to enforce with success.

The context of fear surrounding the Cd. Juárez femicides has not yet reached what I earlier called the ‘end-stage’ of superfluousness in that the past or potential victims are not yet seen as persons whose murder would not be a crime. However, if it looks like a particular crime is not being taken seriously by the political and legal authorities of a state, and if the punishment for that crime remains systematically and openly unenforced or

enforced arbitrarily—for whatever reason—in a way that fails to deter further criminal activity, then it may not be long before the end stage is reached. And for nearly the last 12 months, the escalating violence in Cd. Juárez and other Mexican border cities as a result of territorial clashes between rival narcotrafficking organizations and with the Mexican military might be a sign that it is coming.

Plainly this leads back into ongoing issues of state sovereignty and the Mexican state’s control of the monopoly of the use of violence over its own territory and people (as well as how the monopoly of the use of violence by the U.S. state over its own territory has been challenged by terrorist activities, and terror itself). At the present time, there can be no question that the ends are thought to justify violent means of wresting back state control from the drug lords in the Mexican case, and the terrorists and their harbourers in the case of the U.S. But, taken together with the current border violence, the Cd. Juárez femicides certainly serve to highlight the continuing pertinence of Arendt’s observation, quoted at the beginning of this paper. The many and varied reasons obstructing the Mexican state’s ability, or willingness, to ‘claim’ the women exposed to such large-scale femicide have indeed made it seemingly “impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man.” As such, the temptation to substitute power with violence—even if out of sheer desperation—must indeed be strong.

Conclusion

Like it or not, Arendt’s warning quoted at the beginning of this paper remains pertinent: we are still not free from the temptations of totalitarian solutions to sociopolitical problems.

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80 Arendt, Origins, 459.
where they appear to be irresolvable by nonviolent means. But the conclusions of this argument, I think, extend the point even further. For the superfluous life is not only generated in highly organized and efficient administrative state systems. It can also emerge from conditions where statehood has been incompletely formed and where the administrative framework is inchoate and often highly defective. This means that even Agamben’s state administration of bare lives might not always function as smoothly or systematically as he suggests. But superfluousness is still generated.

Following Arendt’s conception of violence, state impotence breeds violence. It also breeds exclusion, and taken together, these elements create the conditions for potentially rendering small and large groups of human beings superfluous as human beings without needing to render them stateless. This state impotence or inefficiency could be in the form of an inability to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks, as in the case of the War on Terror in the U.S. or the U.K., or the ongoing battle with terrorist activity in Northern Ireland or Spain. It can also surface under the guise of an inability to fend off interventions that destroy its sovereignty, such as weapons inspections in Iraq or humanitarian intervention elsewhere. Or it can manifest in an incapacity to deal with large-scale crime as exemplified by the Juárez femicides, or powerlessness to control organized criminal elements within the state that destroy its monopoly of control over violence.

While the kind of superfluousness Arendt’s thought illuminates emerged from totalitarian ideals driven by the need for total domination, I have shown here that other practices today are capable of generating forms of superfluous similar to that experienced by the stateless in the interwar period and the Nazi and Soviet death and concentration camp interns. The rhetoric of absolutes, driven by fear and an ever-increasing need for security, is one such practice that, in conditions of political impotence like those mentioned
above, risks creating a very pervasive form of superfluousness that is no less dangerous for its low-grade quality. The more low-grade it is, the less likely it will be identified. Security policies and related apprehension and detainment practices are dogged with impotence and inefficiency when they are applied along permeable borders and become increasingly harsh, and sometimes violent as a result. All these feed into the conditions within which human superfluous is not just possible, but likely. For as state sovereignty is challenged as much by the forces of globalization as by the forces of terror or intervening states or organizations, so too are national and human rights.

Arendt believed that a state rendering large portions of its own, acknowledged population could only happen in the very last stages of totalitarianism—in other words, a very strong state system. However, we seem to be witnessing that something very similar can be a consequence of weak state structures too. In the case of the Cd. Juárez femicides, a web of factors—including misogyny, globalization and porous borders (as regions of impunity and hard security measures), lack of resources, and highly inefficient state structures—ultimately combine to render persons superfluous. The right to rights might well be a genuine ideal in many countries, but if the state structure is unable to enforce this in an egalitarian manner, thus reclaiming the superfluous, then the consequences are not too far removed from those that occur when a state is unwilling to enforce them. It is in this way that superfluousness can be generated and perpetuated not only against those who have been stripped of their citizenship status, but also against citizens within a state, too.