



H. ARENDT'S INTERPRETATION OF NATURAL AND ARTIFICIAL IN THE POLITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF *THE HUMAN CONDITION*

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Modernity, in philosophical and sociological literature, has “traditionally” been presented as the age when artifacts supplant nature and destroy the originally given natural environment. The process of modernization, from this point of view, is the process of *de-naturalization*. This widely shared conviction has basically been questioned by Hannah Arendt. During the centuries of modern age, in the detriment of the commonly created and uphold human world, process of *re-naturalization* has been taking place, Arendt argues. This means, from other aspect, that modernity is the age of world-alienation. It is one of the results of modern science that human beings lose their confidence in the reliability of their senses. The Arendtian critique of modernity, which has deeply been influenced by Martin Heidegger's philosophy, takes a difference between the notions of Earth and world. In Arendt's theory technology enhances the processes of re-naturalization. The problem of the relation of natural and artificial, in *The Human Condition* (1958), has been inserted in two narratives; one of them is the narrative of cultural criticism and another is that of political philosophy. These narratives have been embedded in different contexts borrowing ambivalences and inconsistencies to Arendt's argumentation.

Keywords: artifact, fabrication, modernization, nature, technology.

Introduction

The first step of reconstruction of the relation for “natural” and “artificial”, in *The Human Condition* is the contextualization of this problem. There are different contexts which Arendt's theory can be inserted in. The first of them is the special intellectual climate of the Weimarian Germany which was the theatre of Arendt's intellectual socialization. She was deeply influenced by the German cultural criticism of the inter-war period. Germany represented a special case in the history of European modernity. In this country, from the turn of the 19–20th centuries onwards, the crisis of modernity and that of modernization had overlapped one another (Felken 1988: 240). German cultural criticism interpreted the situation in the terms of dichotomy: *culture–civilization, life–spirit, community–society, organic–mechanical* etc. Behind

these antithetical notions was a basic dichotomy between the world of nature and that of human produced artifice. It was not by chance that ecological approach, strongly inspired by cultural criticism, emerged in the inter-war Germany (Bramwell 1989: 175–208).

It cannot be denied that Arendt's thought had been tainted by the inter-war German cultural criticism which her master, Heidegger himself belonged to, albeit his philosophy was deeply original and his achievement towered above the average level of the contemporaneous cultural criticism (Zimmerman 1990: 3–137).

The problem of the relation of natural and artificial realms, in the thought of Arendt, had been modified by her new experience acquired in America. The American intellectual climate and her impressions concerning American everyday life constituted further contexts of her political thought (Young-Bruehl 1982; Pitkin 1998: 99–104). Arendt's situation, in this respect, was similar that of the emigrant thinkers of the Frankfurtian school. During the 1950s when she was writing *The Human Condition* the impact of her first imprint, i.e. the years spent in the inter-war Germany, appeared to be stronger; the book was a telling evidence of it. *The Human Condition* was some kind of a story of decline (in German *Verfallsgeschichte*); it described the disappearance of the political from the modern world. One of her interpreters, Seyla Benhabib, rightly called Arendt a reluctant modernist (Benhabib 1996). But the situation was not as simple as that. The fabric of the book had been interwoven from different threads by Arendt. Her tripartite phenomenology based on the notions of labour, work and action stood to the opposite of the dichotomy of the *social* and the *political* (Pitkin 1998: 177). The notion of action gave a potential way out from the fatalism of cultural criticism, but Arendt exploited this chance only in her later book written on revolution (Arendt 1990).

The main topic and aim of this paper is to reconstruct Arendt's ambivalent intellectual position presented in *The Human Condition* concerning of the relation of natural and artificial realms. It is my initial hypothesis that Arendt transformed the interpretation of this dichotomy inherited from the German cultural criticism. Her image of modernity and its technology was different from the one elaborated by her predecessors. This novelty could not be achieved without the impact of Heideggerian philosophy – that is an undeniable fact (Villa 1996: 171–202). But the ideas of Heidegger were incorporated by Arendt in context of a political philosophy based on the notion of plurality. *The Human Condition*, at last analysis, had been burdened with deep ambivalences; but these proved to be fruitful ones letting her theory open for further elaboration.

My hypothesis is, concerning the subject of this paper, that the ecological connotations of *natural–artificial* dichotomy, in *The Human Condition*, were subordinated to the requirements of her political philosophy. She was worrying, first of all, not about the dominance of technology but the threat of *re-naturalization* (Villa 1996: 201) which, transposing it to the terms of political philosophy, for her, embodied the victory of natural necessity over liberty.

Arendt's theory on the relation of natural and artificial

The Human Condition earlier was considered as the *opus magnum* of Arendt. Lately, her monographer, Margaret Canovan has questioned this opinion (Canovan 1992: 99–154). The political ontology explained in the book was based on a phenomenological approach rooted in the German *Existenz*-philosophy. What does it mean to be human being? This question was a point of departure for Arendt's thought-train. Which are the basic characteristics of human condition? This second question led her to the main dilemma: in which way had human condition been influenced by the emergence of modernity?

Arendt's starting point is the alteration of human condition caused by new space technology; in the prologue of the book she deals in detail with the possible consequences of the fact that an Earth-born artificial object, a satellite, had been launched into the space in 1957. This event was a shock for American public opinion because this satellite had been constructed by Soviet engineers. This meant a turning point in the history of humanity, Arendt argues. It indicated that human beings, who are Earth-bound creatures, try to undo this tie and leave their natural habitat to find an Archimedean point out of the Earth, somewhere in Universe. The search for an extraterrestrial Archimedean point, Arendt argues, involves a radical modification of human condition so far having been determined by the circumstances of our native planet:

“The earth is very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice. The human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms” (Arendt 1958: 2).

This quotation is important because it refers to the basic notions of the Arendtian ontology in which human persons are endowed with the ability of special activities related to different ontological spheres of reality. First of all, we live in nature and the life of humanity as one of the biological species of Earth is based on its metabolism with nature. Human race, in this respect, shares the fate of all animal species of our planet (Arendt 1958: 84). It consumes the goods offered by nature reproducing its biological existence. Human being, on this existential level, is an *animal laborans* imprisoned in the endless repetitive cycles of consumption and production. *Animal laborans* does not create any lasting or durable entity but devours the natural goods or, in more advanced historical phases, produces things required for the maintenance of its biological existence but their way comes to an end in the human stomach.

Humanity is really one of the animal species but there is a difference by which it is standing to the opposite of other animal races; it is able to withdraw itself from the power of natural laws ensuring the balance among the species of earthly habitat. It is able to reproduce itself as a biological race in never-ending expanding cycles endangering the sensitive ecological equilibrium of the Earth. Human race, as a collectivity

of *animal laborans*, is one of the animal races, but undeniable that it is the most dangerous one of all. *Labor*, summarizing this train of thought, is a mere animal activity in the ontology of Arendt.

The next level of human existence is the sphere of *work*. *Homo faber* is a tool-making and tool-using agent who is capable to create lasting and durable things (Arendt 1958: 136–137). The *differentia specifica* of human existence is owned by *homo faber*; he is the creator of human world which is the home and dwelling place for the plurality of human beings. (In this paper I am not going to use a gender-neutral terminology. Speaking on Arendt it would be anachronistic.) Human person, as *homo faber*, is really an individual and not an anonymous element of human race. The activity of work results in creation of things and institutions. They constitute the human world which is the “in-between” relates and separates human beings at the same time. *Homo faber* is a creator of artificial things and the world created by his hands is the terrain of human artifice.

The third and highest stage of human existence, in the ontology of Arendt, is the level of action taking place in the world of things created by *homo faber*. Action is the most specifically human activity; to act and to be free is the same, Arendt concludes. In opposition to labor and work, it is not possible to act lonely. A lone human being is capable to satisfy his biological needs and he is even able to create things, but only action constitutes the plurality of human beings. Action is unimaginable without speech (Arendt 1958: 176). Action without speech ends in violence and ceases to be real human action which creates and maintains the web of inter-subjective plurality. Human condition is consummated by action which makes human being, to some extent, similar to God who creates from nothing.

Arendt has frequently been accused with *spatial essentialism*; i.e. different activities, in her theory, must strictly be restricted to different places. Human condition, in her argumentation, is rooted in labor, work and action. Labor is conditioned by life, work is conditioned by world and action is conditioned by human plurality. These triads are supplemented by antithetical notion-pairs. The field of human existence is divided into *private realm* and *public realm* which must be divided from each other. Private realm is the terrain of life-sustaining labor while public realm is that of action. World-creating work is in an intermediate position; *homo faber* works in the private realm but the fruits of his activity enrich the public realm, our common and shared world.

What has to do the Arendtian ontology explained above briefly with our main topic concerning the relation of natural and artificial realms? Many, we can say. In the triad of labor–work–action are embedded two antithetical notion-pairs: *necessity–liberty* and *social–political*. These dichotomies are related to each other: necessity stands as a synonym for the social, liberty stands as a synonym for the political. This static analytical framework has been enlarged by Arendt with an historical approach extending from the Greeks to the rise of modernity.

The notion of the social, in *The Human Condition*, is one of the central categories. It appears in the unit 7 (Arendt 1958: 38–50) and remains an important reference point

to the end of the book. The social is associated with the notion of natural and the political is associated with the idea of artificial during the argumentation. There is, at last but not at least, a further key notion intertwined with the social and the rise of modernity; it is the category of *process*.

Process is one of the fundamental ideas not only of *The Human Condition* but of all Arendtian oeuvre. Although it mostly is used alone, it really belongs to the antithetical notions-pairs inherited from the cultural criticism and for which she shows a peculiar interest. Process is the antithesis of action which needs free, undetermined human individuals being able to initiate new beginnings in the world. Process is the sequence of changes predetermined by an inner impersonal law regulating the order of these changes. The ensuing events of a process are links in a cause–effect chain where the later states of temporal development are casually determined by the former ones. The realm of processes is a terrain of necessity. It is not too difficult to notice that Arendt here emulates the Kantian theory concerning the opposition of the empires of natural necessity and human freedom. Process, in the Arendtian use, is more than a well definable notion of natural sciences because she uses it as a metaphor covering the negative side of modernity. Process involves fluidity, ephemerality and futility which, in her theory, are standing in opposition to durability, endurance and lastingness which are the characteristics of the man-created artificial world.

Process, with slight exaggeration, seems to be the public enemy number first for Arendt because it endangers the spatial economy of human existence based on the strict division of private and public realms. Process is an outer enemy which has been attacking the artifice of human civilization from its outset. Human being, in the Arendtian anthropology, a process-launching, process-stopping and process-regulating creature; it is the keeper of natural processes. Nature is a theatre of processes; more precisely, *nature is totality of processes*. The most special human ability is that of reification which empowers human beings to create a lasting world to dwell at. It is evident, albeit he is her main imaginary philosophical opponent in the book, that Arendt owes much to Karl Marx. The chapter III (Arendt 1958: 79–136), as it comes clear from the first sentence, intends to be a Marx-critique but, as Hanna F. Pitkin warns us (Pitkin 1998: 127–134), Marx is her unacknowledged debtor.

It is the chapter IV of the book (Arendt 1958: 79–175) in which Arendt analyses the notion of work. It seems to prove our first impression because here she follows the well-trodden traditional path of German cultural criticism. Modernity, at least in its first phase, for her, means the victory of *homo faber* who, under the guidance of *means-end rationality*, began, in ever-increasing amount and speed, to produce large variety of artificial things. *Homo faber* seemed to become the master of the Earth who continuously expands the reach of his power over his environment. The activity of fabrication inherently entails the element of violence directed against lifeless and living nature. To fabricate something inevitably means to remove things from their natural surroundings or to kill living organisms. However, Arendt remarks, if you need a chair you have to fall a tree, if you want to fabricate metallic things you have to remove the necessary ores from the depth of Earth and to transform them applying

special methods (Arendt 1958: 139). Fabrication inevitably results in launching artificial processes or stopping natural processes; which of them is applied in the concrete case it depends on the end or aim existing in the mind of the fabricator. *Homo faber* objectifies everything. He is not able to do in other way because the construction of human world inevitably involves an over-all reification of nature. Nature appears as object standing oppose to human subject.

World created by the *homo faber* is a necessary precondition for the existence of human plurality. However, the emergence of the *homo faber* in the early modernity, in the Arendtian theory, brought with itself a radical change of attitudes concerning nature:

“This element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication and *homo faber*, the creator of human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature. The *animal laborans*, with its body and the help of tame animals nourishes life, may be lord and master of all living creatures, but he still remains the servant of nature and the Earth; only *homo faber* conducts himself as lord and master of the whole Earth. Since his productivity was seen in the image of a Creator-God, so that where God creates *ex nihilo*, man creates out of given substance, human productivity was by definition bound to result in a Promethean revolt because it could erect a man-made world only after destroying part of God-created nature” (Arendt 1958: 139).

This quotation suggests that the Arendtian interpretation of modernity follows the conventional explanations in which the essence of the modern times is an ever-growing expansion of the world of human artifacts. This tenet – the predominance of the artificial-technological sphere over nature – is the starting point of current green thought (Hayward 1994; Szerszynski 2005) and it really seems to be fit for our common sense. Is it not an unarguable solid empirical fact that nature has been diminishing and human-made artificial world has been expanding for centuries? But Arendt gives a special twist to the conventional narrative of cultural criticism. The second phase of modernity entails the victorious rise of *animal laborans* who embodies the natural part of human being ensuring the futile, perishable goods of consumption needed for the mere biological survival of humanity as one among other animal species. The thing-character of the artificial world created by the irresistibly expanding technology is melting away in an ever growing speed. Natural processes are flooding the lasting artificial constructions of human existence. Their Trojan horse, paradoxically, is the same technological productivity which has created the world of lasting things; in the second phase of modernity it annihilates its own creature. It, telling the truth, sounds oddly. Our common sense suggests that productivity is in a close connection with the advancement of technology. But Arendt's interpretation departs from the conventional meaning; productivity, in her thought, is a special form of fertility and as such it is a natural force embodied in human labor (Arendt 1958: 101–109). In the second phase of modernity, with the process of production taking ever greater place in everyday life, labor constituting the metabolism of human race with nature comes to power.

The process of production for the sake of consumption and the process of consumption for the sake of production are different sides of the same coin, and they belong to the terrain of nature in spite of the fact that they are maintained by complicated technological apparatuses. Arendt puts forward an astonishing and strange assertion: rationality needed for construction of machines and getting involved in launching artificial processes, *an sich*, for her, is an animal and not human ability. Rationality, in her argumentation, a special modified kind of animal instinct, whose function is to find the necessary means to reach the shared end of all living organisms; the maintenance of their biological existence (Arendt 1958: 284). The “humanization” of rationality comes to pass when it is applied for creating of a common human world which is our lasting and durable home, a dwelling place for the plurality of men. It is the end result of the work of *homo faber*, whose products, in contrast to the labor of the *animal laborans*, do not fall to prey of the everlasting cycles of human metabolism with nature.

Modernity, in the Arendtian interpretation, at least for a long term, brings forth a paradoxical situation. During the first steps, in the centuries of early modernity, the victory of *homo faber* seems to be final and irreversible but it is pretence, just a temporary illusion. The emerging gigantic machine of human technology does not contribute to the upkeep of the lasting artificial human world; it serves to fulfill the needs of consumption, in other words, it ensures, in an ever-expanding cycles, the undisturbed functioning of the processes of human metabolism with nature. Humanity, at this level, is really one of the animal species; it is rational, clever, acute-minded but animal-like. The products of the ever and ever more sophisticated machine-technology are being annihilated during the processes of consumption. They are being subjugated to the biological necessities of life-maintenance. A paradox confronts us, Arendt argues. Consumption gets accomplished by human persons but it de-individualizes and fetters them in the shackles of biological necessity depriving them from the possibility of becoming free individuals. They lose the chance for action, for bringing about something new which is the essence of human liberty. Consumption for the sake of consumption prompted by modern technology serves the biological reproduction of human race which is an aggregate of faceless consumers and it, at least in this respect, is no more than an aggressive animal species which is extremely dangerous for nature. The world of technology, in Arendtian philosophy, is a pseudo-world lacking any durability and tangibility; its things continuously disappear in the whirl of everlasting and meaningless fluidity. Modern humanity has become, borrowing the Heideggerian term, one of the “world-poor” animal races condemned to live forever in a fluid reality and exposed to the laws of biological necessity. Arendt describes modernity as the age of *re-naturalization* and stamps technological world as a pseudo-artifact (Villa 1996: 201).

As the main consequence of the take-over of process, during the later centuries of modernity, the objects of the man-made world lose their durability and the world ceases to be world, the home of human beings who, without world to dwell at, become some kind of modern nomads wandering in a formless reality.

Totalitarianism and Arendt's criticism on process

Following the argumentation of *The Human Condition* concerning the relation of natural and artificial we arrived to a turning point where the narrative of cultural criticism converts into the narrative of political philosophy. It is crucial important because the contextualization of Arendt's train of thought in her oeuvre, for the comprehension of this turn, seems to be inevitable. That is why we have to focus, for a while, our attention to Arendt's previous book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which the author has already put forward the problem of the relation of natural and artificial realms of human existence. The reconstruction of the ramifying chain of ideas of this lengthy and controversial book is beyond our possibilities but it does not seem to be necessary. It is enough, for the aim of this paper, to remind that the main narrative of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a getting free of processes which demolish the building of European nation-states erected in the former centuries. In the nation states, in the terms of the Arendtian political philosophy, an artifice of public realm as a stage for action had been created and maintained. But the aggressive unleashed processes of the 20th century destroyed this artificial public realm.

The direct antecedent of the decline of the nation states, in the argumentation of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, is imperialism which appears as unstoppable self-generating process. It is very similar to the processes taking place in nature. In the framework of a new historical constellation a cycle of a positive feed-back emerges in which imperialism, bureaucracy, racism, anti-Semitism and the pan-movements mutually reinforce each other and, as the main consequence of this process, a new political form appears: it is the totalitarianism (Arendt 1967: 123–305). Pitkin points out that the Arendtian description on the genesis of totalitarianism focusing on the notion of process gives a pre-figuration of the idea of social explained in *The Human Condition* (Pitkin 1998: 70).

It is important concerning the subject of this paper that totalitarianism was the end-result of the processes of re-naturalization. For the introduction of this unprecedented political form an arsenal of new technologies was needed. They were, on the one hand, modern telecommunication technologies (press, radio, etc.) and, on the other hand, psycho-technologies (ideologies) and organizational–institutional technologies (bureaucracy). The first precondition of totalitarian regimes was the annihilation of human personality based on human spontaneity and invested with capability of free action (Arendt 1967: 455). The intention of totalitarianism was to deprive human beings from their identity and change human race into one of the animal species. The aim of the totalitarian experimental re-naturalization was paradox because it tried to immortalize human race at the cost of killing human individuality. Totalitarianism, for Arendt, is the main evidence what extreme consequences may be brought into being by the processes of re-naturalization.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt is conspicuously silent about totalitarianism; the term itself appears only once during the argumentation (Arendt 1958: 216). But the implicit presupposition of the book is Arendt's deep conviction that, in spite of the defeat of Nazi totalitarianism, the threat is not over; the processes of re-naturalization are endangering the shrinking terrain of artificial, man-made world. The only warran-

ty against this threat is the miraculous human ability of action. Arendt, in the chapter V (Arendt 1958: 175–248), gives a meticulous explanation of action. But this train of thought remains an inclusion in the argumentation of the book. In the last chapter Arendt seems to return to the narrative of decay; in the last unit of the book she forebodes the victory of the animal laborans:

“We saw before that in the rise of society it was the life of the species which asserted itself <...>. Socialized mankind is that state of society where only interest rules, and the subject of this interest is either classes or man-kind, but neither man or men. The point is that now even the last trace of action in what men were doing, the motive implied in self-interest, disappeared. What was left was a “natural force”, the force of the life process itself, to which all men and all human activities were equally submitted <...> and whose only aim, if it had aim at all, was survival of the animal species man” (Arendt 1958: 321).

Conclusions

The problem of the relation for artificial and natural has been fit into a double narrative in *The Human Condition*; it partly belongs to the narrative of cultural criticism, partly belongs to that of political philosophy. The stronger narrative, in this book, is the first one. The notion of action furnishes a passage to the realm of political philosophy in which the notions of artificial and natural are invested with a special meaning differing from the one accustomed in cultural criticism. It is not so difficult to notice in the Arendtian train of thought the parallels with the motifs of the Heideggerian critique of modernity (Villa 1996: 171–202), but Arendt puts them into a philosophical context different from Heidegger’s one. The aim of Arendt is not to tell the history of forgetting of Being (in German *Seinsvergessenheit*) but to outline a political philosophy based on the notion of human plurality.

However, in the closing chapter, Arendt returns back to the narrative of cultural criticism, albeit giving a special meaning to the notions of natural and artificial. It is re-naturalization, for her, and not human construed artifice which embodies the main threat of modernity. She more fears for the fading out of action from the world than the pollution of the environment.

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H. ARENDT NATŪROS IR ARTEFAKTO INTERPRETACIJA ŽMOGAUS BŪKLĖS POLITINĖJE FENOMENOLOGIJOJE

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Santrauka

Filosofinėje ir sociologinėje literatūroje modernybė „tradiciškai“ buvo pristatoma kaip epocha, kai artefaktai išstumia gamtą ir griauna pirminę natūralią aplinką. Šiuo požiūriu modernizacijos procesas – tai *denatūralizacijos* procesas. Šį plačiai paplitusį įsitikinimą iš esmės ginčijo Hanna Arendt. Pasak jos, moderniosios epochos šimtmečiais bendrai kurto ir puoselėto žmogaus pasaulio nenaudai vyko *renatūralizacijos* procesas. Kita vertus, tai reiškia, kad modernybė – tai pasaulio atskirties epocha. Viena iš moderniojo mokslo pasekmių yra ta, kad žmonės praranda pasitikėjimą juslėmis. Arendt modernybės kritika, giliai paveikta Martino Heideggerio filosofijos, atskiria Žemės ir pasaulio sąvokas. Arendt teorijoje technologija sustiprina renatūralizacijos procesus. Natūros ir artefakto santykio problema *Žmogaus būklėje* (1958) buvo įterpta į du naratyvus; vienas jų – tai kultūrinės kritikos naratyvas, o kitas – politinės filosofijos naratyvas. Šie naratyvai įsitvirtino skirtinguose kontekstuose, Arendt argumentacijai suteikdami dviprasmiškumą ir neatitikimų.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: artefaktas, gamyba, modernizacija, gamta, technologija.

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