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ARENDT AFTER MARX: RETHINKING THE DUALISM OF NATURE AND WORLD

Battle of the Prometheans

The relevance of Hannah Arendt to contemporary debates about environmental problems is far from self-evident, and it is not unusual for her to be characterised as irrelevant to the concerns of the political ecology movement. Her perspective, in Simon Swift's words, is "out of sorts with the consciousness of impending ecological catastrophe that defines our times" (Swift 2009, 136), an incongruity that some ecofeminists have attributed to the "male-stream" character of her thinking, which apparently blinded her to "the possibility of the integrative view of the relation of society and nature which feminism is currently developing" (O'Brien 1981, 110). The explanation for these assessments is readily at hand, for Arendt's philosophy seems to revolve around a rigid dichotomy of nature and culture, organic life and human worldliness; and her hierarchy of activities – labour, work, and action – is partly ordered according to the degree of distance from the physical demands of nature which the higher activities express.

The lowly status of nature and the "life process" in Arendt's thinking comes through particularly strongly in her critique of Marx, though we shall see in a moment that her opposition to him was misguided. While Arendt stressed the need to fight the way "nature forever invades the human artifice", she accused Marx of adopting the opposite perspective – a "consistent naturalism" which led him to confuse the categories of labour and work, envisaging the end of capitalism as the unfettering of labour's natural productive power and, with abolition of class society, the "withering away" of what for Arendt is the highest expression of freedom – political action (Arendt 1958, 100, 108, 45, 60, 306, 313; 1968, 18-21; 1990, 61-6). Although labour,

in Arendt's definition, answers to the necessities of life, she noted that the fertility of labour – like nature itself – can be increased to yield a surplus. In Arendt's view Marx was so impressed by the extraordinary productivity of the industrial proletariat that he mistook the accelerated production of life's necessities for the triumph of "work" – that is, for the ascendance of the higher, "unnatural" world-building activity of *homo faber* (1958, 87-8, 108).

According to Arendt (1958, 99-100, 321) this confusion also prevailed in the opposite direction. Thus Marx (1976b, 8) criticised the language of the Gotha Programme for describing labour as the "source of all wealth", overlooking the fact that labour, as Marx corrected it, "is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labour power". Marx similarly seemed to reduce work to labour when he described *Paradise Lost* as the expression of Milton's "nature" (1969, 401); and Engels (1951, 75) perpetuated this error by attributing the artistic skills of Raphael, Thorwaldsen, and Paganini to the evolutionary adaptation of labourers to their environment, and the biological inheritance of the capacities thus acquired.

Marx was right to describe labour in terms of a natural and eternal "metabolism between man and nature" (Marx 1976a, 133, 198ff, 284, 290), Arendt concludes, but wrong to extrapolate from this "a process of natural history" or "the economic law of motion of modern society", which would lead organically from the natural force of necessity to the higher activity of freedom. Searching Marx for the intellectual precursors to the totalitarian belief in the existence of irresistible laws of economic or racial evolution, Arendt thought she had found the seeds of both Bolshevik and National Socialist ideologies: "when Marx stated that labour is the most important activity of man, he was saying in terms of the tradition that not freedom but necessity is what makes man human" (2002, 290). For Marx, Arendt

claims, “man is essentially a natural being endowed with the faculty of action (*ein tätiges Naturwesen*), and his action remains “natural” because it consists of labouring – the metabolism between man and nature” (1968, 39).

Arendt’s interpretation of Marx, of course, is not without blemish. Her claim that Marx confused the process-like character of labour with the superior fabricating activity of work is credible only if we ignore Marx’s distinction between alienated and liberated labour. If this was a wilful omission on Arendt’s part, then we can see why Pitkin (1998, 163) might accuse her of “appropriating something very like his fundamental notion of alienation while denying its existence in Marx and fiercely attacking him for having omitted that notion”. Because Marx condemned capitalism for reducing the worker to an animal, Parekh explains, “the criticisms Marx makes of capitalism are substantially similar to those Arendt levels against Marx” (Parekh 1979, 90). Hence Arendt’s remark in *The Human Condition* that “unskilled work is a contradiction in terms” (1958, 90) echoes the footnote to Marx’s discussion of concrete and abstract labour in *Capital* where Engels comments on the advantages of the English language: “Labour which creates use-values and is qualitatively determined is called ‘work’ as opposed to ‘labour’; labour which creates value and is only measured quantitatively is called ‘labour’, as opposed to ‘work’.” (Engels in Marx 1976a, 138 n16) For Marx, in other words, it is the commodification of productive activity under capitalism which reduces work to labour, and this alienated labour serves not so much the process of life as “the life-process of capital” (Marx 1976a, 425). It is in “an unplanned society geared only to the accumulation of wealth”, Parekh continues in his defence of Marx, that “material production becomes, like the processes of nature, autonomous, self-propelling, cyclical, and coercive” (1979, 90).

If Arendt's interpretation of Marx was flawed, where does this leave our assessment of their Green credentials? The logical answer is that Arendt and Marx were united in their Prometheanism, with neither thinker offering a non-productivist understanding of our relationship to the natural world. Had Arendt read Marx correctly, in other words, she would have agreed with his enthusiasm for the pace with which capitalism had developed the forces of production, since these forces were the means for asserting the anthropological supremacy of humans as fabricators and actors. In the *Grundrisse*, for instance, Marx had praised "the great civilising influence of capital", famously condemning "nature-idolatry" as a barrier against "the all-sided development of production", and describing a future communist society in which both the natural environment and humans' own nature would be subjugated to "the absolute movement of becoming" – the goal being the "full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as of humanity's own nature". (Marx 1973, 409-10, 488) Though Arendt (1958, 104-5, 117-8, 5) claimed that Marx was so consistent in his conception of humans as *animal laborans* that he could only theorise emancipation from labour as "unproductive freedom" – as a "society of labourers without labour", as she felicitously put it – the parallel between her own thinking and Marx's comments on the division between a "realm of necessity" and a "realm of freedom" (Marx 1981, 958-9; 1973, 701-6) cannot be denied. Both thinkers therefore seem lost to the ecological cause: "Arendt's concept of nature is therefore as 'blind' as Marx's", David Macauley (1996, 120) writes. "Though she speaks about 'nature's fertility', there is little room for it to exist as a fertile idea with social or political import."

Re-evaluating Marx and Arendt

The dialogue between Marx and Arendt would clearly come to an end here, were it not for the fact that numerous studies of Marx's writings over the last couple of decades have argued *against* this interpretation of his work, drawing attention instead to aspects of his thinking that have anticipated the insights of environmental sociology and human ecology. At the same time, perceptive readers of Arendt have begun to detect in her writings themes that suggest that she also may have something important to offer to Green politics and philosophy. In what follows I want to bring these two interpretations together, and to argue for a rethinking of the dualism of nature and culture that is specifically informed by Arendt's own work.

Though what G. A. Cohen called the "primacy of the productive forces thesis" (2000, 134ff) seems to place historical materialism on collision course with environmental concerns, Marx and Engels's frequent comments on the tendency for capitalist social relations to transgress the ecological limits to production demonstrate that they were well aware of the dependence of human beings on the natural environment (Marx and Engels 1998, 37; Marx 1976a, 637-8; Marx 1975, 327-8; Marx 1981, 950; Engels 1951, 82). In his eagerness to dissociate himself from Malthus's ahistorical theory of population growth and resource scarcity, Marx insisted on using economic categories and terminology that didn't always reveal the full extent of his ecological understanding (Perelman 1996). But he and Engels wrote passionately in protest against the damage inflicted by the capitalist mode of production on the natural environment, urban ecology, and workers' health (Vaillancourt 1996), and the tentative images offered by Marx of a communist society suggest a vision of self-realisation that is certainly compatible with a more leisurely

and less resource-intensive mode of production than our own (Soper 1996; Hughes 2000).

One should also note, in passing, that there are sufficient ambiguities in Marx's early writings to justify a naturalist reading of the 1844 *Manuscripts*, where the remedy for alienated labour seems to be theorised not as the transcendence of human nature but rather its mediation. As Benton (1993, 48) argues, Marx did not demand that work be completely disconnected from the satisfaction of physical needs, but that it "not be performed under the dominion of immediate physical need". Marx also wrote liberally in the *Manuscripts* in favour of the cultivation of human sensitivity, condemning capitalism for replacing "the physical and intellectual senses" with "the sense of having", while at the same time despairing of the way growth in production was accompanied by "bestial degeneration and a complete, crude and abstract simplicity of need" (1975, 352, 359). Biological activities like "eating, drinking and procreating" were "genuine human functions", he acknowledged, but they became the instincts of a mere "animal" when, "abstracted from other aspects of human activity and turned into final and exclusive ends", they compelled men and women to accept repellent labour (1975, 326-7).

Arendt, as already noted, was highly critical of what she believed was Marx's obsession with humanity's eternal "metabolism with nature", but the idea that human and non-human nature is something that should be mediated rather than conquered, subdued or repressed, is also a neglected thread in Arendt's account of the human condition. Sean Sayers has argued that Arendt "treats with disdain and contempt the labour which meets consumer needs", depicting "those who perform it as in effect a sub-human species, *animal laborans*" (2003, 117-18). But Arendt's theory of the *vita activa* describes a hierarchy of activities whose "lower" forms are redeemed when

individuals are able to combine them with higher ones, meaning that both labour and the consumption needs it satisfies acquire human dignity when they are not, to repeat Marx's apt phrase above, "abstracted from other aspects of human activity and turned into final and exclusive ends".

In *The Human Condition*, for example, Arendt writes of how labour, and the physical needs it serves, is fundamental to the vitality of human life, expressing a "driving force whose urgency is unmatched by the so-called higher desires and aspirations of man", and which energises the *vita activa* on all its levels so as to "prevent the apathy and disappearance of initiative which so obviously threatens all overly wealthy communities" (1958, 70-1). This is also why Arendt saw no logic in recreating the social divisions of the ancient city state by making some people labour with necessity while others played with freedom, for the individual, she recognised, "cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity" (1958, 121). Referring to Homer's account of how Paris and Odysseus contributed to the construction of their own houses, Arendt noted that the same activity could be a sign either of "slavishness" and "subjection to necessity" or of "sovereignty" and "greater independence", depending on whether "sheer survival" (the lot of the slave) or the "self-sufficiency of the Homeric hero" is the motive and goal at stake (1958, 82-3 n7). As long as we can complement our labour with higher activities, in other words, the meaning of that labour is more than the meaningless preservation of life. As Arendt summarises this interplay of necessity and freedom, life and world:

the perfect elimination of the pain and effort of labour would not only rob biological life of its most natural pleasures but deprive the specifically human life of its very liveliness and vitality... That the life of the rich loses in vitality, in closeness to the “good things” of nature, what it gains in refinement, in sensitivity to the beautiful things in the world, has often been noted. The fact is that the human capacity for life in the world always implies an ability to transcend and to be alienated from the process of life itself, while vitality and liveliness can be conserved only to the extent that men are willing to take the burden, the toil and trouble of life, upon themselves. (1958, 120-1)

Arendt’s recognition of the importance of the lower levels of the *vita activa* is also apparent in the distinction she makes between entertainment and culture, and her criticism of those “cultural snobs” who treat with contempt “useless” entertainment, while seeking to “put to use” – as a means of self-refinement or social ascension – cultural goods whose authentic meaning, Arendt argues, lies precisely in their transcendence of ephemeral interests, social functions and biological needs. Arendt points out that, unlike culture, entertainment does indeed have a “function”, which is the “restoration of the human labour force” and the “whiling away” of that “left-over time” which, unlike the “*scholē*” that Aristotle regarded as time free for contemplation, “still is biological in nature, left over after labour and sleep have received their due” (Arendt 1978, 93). “The truth is we all stand in need of entertainment and amusement in some form or other, because we are all subject to life’s great cycle, and it is sheer hypocrisy or social snobbery to deny that we can be amused and entertained by exactly the same things which amuse and entertain the masses of our fellow men.” (Arendt 1968, 206)

Not only did Arendt see biological needs as a vital, though ideally mediated, component of the human condition, she also warned of the hubris involved in treating nature as a pure object or product of humans' higher faculties. Defining "labour" as the reproduction of humans' physical existence, "work" as the creation of a durable world, and "action" as the initiation of something new and unexpected, Arendt argued that modern technoscience had enabled people to act "into nature" as well as into the web of human relationships that make up the political community. For Arendt, the invention of nuclear fission signalled a critical stage in the development of the modern world, since it indicated "that man is as capable of starting natural processes which would not have come about without human interference as he is of starting something new in the field of human affairs" (1968, 58).

When nuclear physicists and molecular biologists initiated natural processes that the earth had never previously known, science began to undermine the predictability of nature, robbing it of the stability that had, for millennia, inspired humans to rival and relate to it with their own immortalising monuments and deeds. "If, therefore, by starting natural processes, we have begun to act *into* nature, we have manifestly begun to carry our own unpredictability into that realm which we used to think of as ruled by inexorable laws." As a result, "we are confronted with elemental forces which we shall perhaps never be able to control reliably" (1968, 61-2). This uncertainty affects in turn the stability of our political principles and ideas: now that "the destruction of all organic life on earth with man-made instruments has become conceivable and technically possible", Arendt writes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "nature itself has assumed a sinister aspect" – becoming so alien to human activity that it is incapable of furnishing the political community with credible notions of "inalienable rights" and "natural law" (Arendt 1973, 298).

The “unnatural growth of the natural”, as Arendt referred to the disfigured, unchecked expansion of nature-like imperatives in *The Human Condition* (1958, 47), is epitomised by the replacement of the regular patterns of natural life and labour with pseudo-natural, anthropogenic processes which advance into the future in unforeseen and irreversible ways. In describing “the situation of radical world alienation” that results from this trend, Arendt now defines the “world” as more than just what humans have made. For what we are witnessing, she says, is a “*twofold loss of the world — the loss of nature and the loss of human artifice*” (1968, 89; emphasis added).

In the “Prologue” to *The Human Condition* Arendt introduced the term “earth alienation” to describe the second dimension of this “radical world alienation”. In a curious echo of the well-known passage in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, where Marx (1975, 328) refers to nature as “man’s inorganic body”, Arendt describes planet earth as “the very quintessence of the human condition”. Although human worldliness rescues us from a merely animal existence, she writes, “life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms”. The desire to manipulate the human genome is an expression, according to Arendt, of a hitherto unknown “wish to escape the human condition” in its most fundamental form, a “rebellion against the very factuality of the human condition” (1970, 13). Arendt also found this wish encapsulated by the media’s reaction to the launch into space of the world’s first satellite, including one newspaper which described it as the first “step toward escape from men’s imprisonment to the earth”. “Christians have spoken of the earth as a vale of tears and philosophers have looked upon their body as a prison of mind or soul”, Arendt responded, but “nobody in the history of mankind has ever conceived of the earth as a prison for men’s bodies or shown such eagerness to go

literally from here to the moon” (1958, 2). Arendt’s comments here recall the way Adorno and Horkheimer saw the dialectic of Enlightenment prefigured in Odysseus’s cunning strategy of outwitting the Sirens by disabling his natural reaction to their enchanting song. Arendt’s departing astronauts, tied not to a ship’s mast but to an orbiting spaceship, are able to resist the desire to be at home in the world, regarding it instead as an object among objects, as *a* world rather than *the* world. The “temptation is neutralised and becomes a mere object of contemplation”, Adorno and Horkheimer (1997, 35-6) write of Odysseus, the mutual degradation of subject and object being the fate of “the self-dominant intellect, which separates from sensuous experience in order to subjugate it”.

A Taste for the World

It was Habermas (1980, 128-9) who applauded Arendt’s theory of action for providing “an instrument for saving the Marxist tradition from its own productivist aberrations”, yet this was the aberration of applying instrumental reason to fellow human beings, not to nature, where in Habermas’s view productivism rightly belongs (Habermas 1982, 243-5). The passages discussed above, however, indicate that Arendt may not have been so sanguine. They suggest, on the one hand, that worldliness for Arendt is not the crude antithesis of nature, and on the other, that the greatest threat to the world may actually come from the highest and least natural of human faculties.

“Worldliness” is a concept that has received insufficient attention in political and ecological interpretations of Arendt’s work. Appearing to stand in the intermediary space between the natural environment and the freedom of the political actor, it seems to ecologists to exaggerate the superiority of making over living, while

to political theorists it implies instrumental and materialist values that, if we are faithful to the hierarchy of the *vita activa*, should be subordinated to the unpredictable and essentially boundless spontaneity of political words and deeds. Although there are places in *The Human Condition* where Arendt logically associates the existence of the “world” with the fabricating activity of the worker, *worldliness* – our attachment to a stable and lasting world which we care for because it is common to all and yet independent of each – is actually, for Arendt, a virtue of the political community. That worldliness is not, for Arendt, the achievement of the maker, was already apparent in her doctoral study of Saint Augustine:

It is not “making” as such that ends the strangeness of the world and lets man belong to it, for making still leaves the essence of man outside his product. Rather, it is through love of the world that man explicitly makes himself at home in the world, and then desirously looks to it alone for his good and evil. Not until then do the world and man grow “worldly”. (Arendt 1996, 67)

As Arendt’s own political theory evolved, she came to see this “love of the world” as a mark of the mature political actor, an actor who understands that the world assumes a stable, sustainable, three-dimensional reality only when its different aspects are made visible through the exchange of perspectives, judgements and opinions. Hence “the more peoples there are in the world who stand in some particular relationship with one another, the more world there is to form between them, and the larger and richer that world will be” (Arendt 2005, 175-6).

If someone wants to see and experience the world as it “really” is, he can do so only by understanding it as something that is shared by many people, lies between them, separates them and links them, showing itself differently to each and comprehensible only to the extent that many people can talk *about* it, over against one another. Only in the freedom of our speaking with one another does the world, as that about which we speak, emerge in its objectivity and visibility from all sides. (Arendt 2005, 128)

What enables political actors to *take care* of the world, rather than treat it as a disposable means for achievement of convenient and circumstantial ends is, according to Arendt, the faculty of “taste”.

The activity of taste decides how this world, independent of its utility and our vital interests in it, is to look and sound, what men will see and what they will hear in it. Taste judges the world in its appearance and its worldliness; its interest in the world is purely “disinterested”, and that means that neither the life interests of the individual nor the moral interests of the self are involved here. For judgements of taste, the world is the primary thing, not man, neither man’s life nor his self. (Arendt 1968, 222)

Towards a Culture of Care

Taste, Arendt argues, is both a *political* faculty and a mark of “culture”, a term whose meaning is made clearer if we consider Nobert Elias’s discussion of the word in *The Civilizing Process*. Elias (2000) begins his book with Kant’s polemic, voiced in different ways by many of his German intellectual contemporaries, against the

ceremonial rules of *civilité* that originated with the ruling courtly upper class in prenational Europe. What became, after the Revolution, an element of the French national consciousness, were elaborate standards of comportment and self-control that, in partnership with commercial and technological growth, designated a society's steadily improving "civilisation". In Germany, where there was no unified and accessible "good society" that the bourgeois intelligentsia could ape, covet or assimilate to, *Zivilisation* meant something less desirable: superficiality, pragmatism, hypocrisy and contrivance. "We are *civilised* – perhaps too much for our own good – in all sorts of social grace and decorum", Kant wrote. But "love of honour and outward decorum constitutes mere civilisation", whereas "morality" is an ideal that "belongs to culture" (Kant 1963, 21).

Although Arendt harboured a lasting suspicion of the German tradition of *Bildung*, one legacy of which, she believed, was a politically naïve, inward-looking mentality incapable of inspiring worldly resistance to Nazism, in other respects her writings on society and culture illustrate the Kantian critique of civilisation. In *The Human Condition* she distinguished between, on the one hand, the anonymous sphere of the "social", with its law-like imperatives of reproduction and growth, the unceasing movement of its automated labour processes and the "waste economy" of disposable products, and the normalising demand for conformist, "tranquilised" behaviour, and on the other, "the most intensely worldly of all tangible things" – the work of art – which deserved to be called an object of "culture" only by virtue of its claim to immortality, its exceptional capacity not to serve a contingent purpose or meet a social or personal need, but "to grasp and move the reader or the spectator over the centuries" (1958, 38-49, 121-35, 167-8; 1968, 202-3, 209). In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, similarly, she contrasted the role of positive laws in constitutional

government, which is to provide boundaries for political actors which “guarantee the pre-existence of a common world, the reality of some continuity which transcends the individual life span of each generation”, with the “law of movement” that characterised the maelstrom of totalitarian rule, the function of which was not to produce a stable world for human action, but rather “to ‘stabilise’ men in order to liberate the forces of nature or history” (1973, 465).

This distinction between functional processes and worldly treasures is mirrored in Elias’s description of the “antithesis” between civilisation and culture. As the industrial revolution “taught people, briefly and for the first time, to think of themselves and their social existence as a process”, the concept of civilisation grew in relevance, referring to “something which is constantly in motion, constantly moving ‘forward’. The German concept of Kultur”, by contrast, “refers to human products which are there like “flowers in the field”, to works of art, books, religious or philosophical systems” (Elias 2000, 39, 6-7).

In her essay, “The Crisis in Culture”, Arendt wrote of the genteel snobbery of the “educated philistine” who used and monopolised culture for the purposes of status competition and display, and whose social rank was so fixated on the currency of etiquette that during the Irish Famine, so the anecdote goes, it was unwilling to “debase itself or risk being associated with so unpleasant a reality” by uttering the word “potato”, preferring to speak euphemistically of “that root” (1968, 202). Arendt also shared the classical German association of culture with depth of feeling and “personality” – something which even Weber (1970, 135-7) recommended in his account of the scientific vocation – contrasting this with the bureaucratic attitude of war criminals like Eichmann who “refuse to be persons” in order to escape responsibility for their deeds, and who acted as if morality were merely a set of civil

customs and rules “which could be exchanged for another set with no more trouble than it would take to change the table manners of a whole people” (Arendt 2003, 111, 43). It was, Arendt argued, not the committed ideologist but the ordinary bourgeois family man who became “the great criminal of the century”. Holding his own publicly paraded virtues in private contempt, it was the bourgeois philistine, not the irrational and passionate mob, whom “Himmler organised for the greatest mass crimes ever committed in history” (Arendt 1994, 128-9; 1973, 334, 338).

Civilisation, then, is both instrumental and process-like, in the sense that it implies the constant development of humanity’s domination of nature – external nature by industrial technology, and internal nature by normative rules. As the French sociologist Emile Durkheim wrote in his quasi-Freudian account of the “painful dualism of human nature”: “since the role of the social being in our single selves will grow ever more important as history moves ahead, it is wholly improbable that that there will ever be an era in which man is required to resist himself to a less degree”. On the contrary, “all evidence compels us to expect our effort in the struggle between the two beings within us to increase with the growth of civilisation” (Durkheim 1973, 163).

Culture, by contrast, implies a loving care, a tending and treasuring of the worldly things that make human existence worthwhile. Perhaps most importantly, Arendt recognised that this includes the natural world on which human life depends. This is apparent in a letter to Mary McCarthy written in 1971, where Arendt questioned the rigid dualism of nature and artefact: “I want to quarrel with your opposition of culture and nature. Culture is always cultivated nature – nature being tended and being taken care of by one of nature’s products called man.” (Brightman 1995, 293) In “The Crisis in Culture” Arendt had already pointed to the Roman

origins of that “mode of intercourse of man with the things of the world” which we call “culture”:

The word “culture” derives from *colere* – to cultivate, to dwell, to take care, to tend and preserve – and it relates primarily to the intercourse of man with nature in the sense of cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation. As such, it indicates an attitude of loving care and stands in sharp contrast to all efforts to subject nature to the domination of man. (1968, 212)

Arendt notes how the ancient Greeks were suspicious of the instrumental mindset of artists and artisans, believing that the activity of fabrication gave rise to a philistine attitude that was in conflict with a cultured appreciation of artefacts themselves. *Homo faber* was a utilitarian at heart, and his instrumental outlook not only threatened the political principles of freedom and plurality, but also endangered the cultural realm with “standards and rules which must necessarily prevail in erecting and building and decorating the world of things in which we move, [but which] lose their validity and become positively dangerous when they are applied to the finished world itself” (1968, 216).

Arendt claims that the conflict between artisanship and culture – or, in Kant’s formulation, between the “genius” of the creator and the “taste” of the critic (Kant 2005, §50) – was settled in the early Roman era in favour of the latter. Although genuine artistic production was suppressed during this period – “It is hardly the mentality of gardeners which produces art” (Arendt 1968, 212) – the Romans’ high regard for agriculture, and their reverence for tradition, enabled them to look upon the

cultural objects inherited from classical civilisation as things to be tended, talked about, cherished and emulated, and in this process they acquired the aesthetic discrimination and love of beauty that the Greeks knew could never be gratified by the products of farming. The *cultura animi*, the cultivated mind “which knows how to take care and preserve and admire the things of the world” (1968, 225), thus had its roots in the “worldly” Roman attitude toward nature. But the positive influence also passes in the other direction, for our modern ecological awareness, our perception of nature not as a chaotic, devouring process which humans must subdue with superior cunning and violence, but as a durable and objective structure whose qualities must be respected, harnessed and tended, *is also an achievement of human worldliness*.

Only we who have erected the objectivity of a world of our own from what nature gives us, who have built it into the environment of nature so that we are protected from her, can look upon nature as something “objective”. Without a world between men and nature, there is eternal movement, but no objectivity. (Arendt 1958, 137)

Drawing on this insight from Arendt, Whiteside argues against those ecologists who call for an ethical relationship to nature that is simply an extension of our respect for other human beings. Our modern respect for nature “arose not from seeing in nature the same moral qualities that we look for in human beings, but rather from seeing in it qualities like those that define our *world*.” Hence “natural things have ‘intrinsic validity’ because world-like qualities (e.g., stability, beauty) inhere in them. Concern to maintain a much-valued world directs us toward tending, preserving, and caring for things having those qualities.” (Whiteside 1998, 34-5)

Hence also Szerszynski's observation that "the most fundamental problem of consumer capitalism is not simply that it threatens the 'earth' through resource use, pollution and habitat loss, but that it threatens the 'world', without which there can be no meaning or value" (Szerszynski 2003, 212). That is to say, if we cannot cherish and care for worldly things – if the only permanent artefacts that testify to our existence are the seemingly imperishable refuse tips that convey our distaste for almost everything we have made – then human life is nothing more than "eternal movement" and respect for the integrity of nature is inconceivable.

Conclusion

While a standard reading of Arendt's philosophical anthropology, combined with a knowledge of her critique of Marx, yields a perspective that suggests little in common with the concerns of political ecology, a more searching analysis of both Marx and Arendt's thinking points in a different direction. For both theorists, not being alienated from the world is inseparable from being at home on this earth, and both presuppose an attitude of care which, for Arendt if not for Marx, derives from the "cultured" and "cultivating" outlook of political actors. Readers of Arendt who have been drawn to her radical theory of freedom – and particularly those, like Gambetti (2005), who are inclined to define action in the agonal terms of novel events and deeds rather than the sharing of different standpoints and opinions – may have missed this "conservationist" theme in Arendt's thinking, but it is one that seems particularly prominent in her later writings and lectures. As Beiner (1992) notes, Arendt was increasingly inclined to see the judging spectator, not the initiator of new beginnings, as the person who really holds the key to human affairs, for it is the spectator's judicious remembrance that rescues mortal nature from the oblivion of time.

That said, there is much in Arendt to indicate that judgement belongs to the repertoire of the political actor, and that it is the latter's moderating faculty of taste which prevents the attitudes of the consumer, the maker and the doer from overrunning themselves and degenerating into violence, hubris, or an insatiable and vainglorious appetite for new and more beautiful things. Given the enthusiasm among many cultural theorists today for the way modern capitalism has made aesthetics the cornerstone of successful commerce, Arendt's observation that an immoderate love of beauty can be as dehumanising as a world devoid of finery and charm, seems doubly pertinent here. "Taste debarbarises the world of the beautiful by not being overwhelmed by it", Arendt (1968, 224) writes; "it takes care of the beautiful in its own 'personal' way and thus produces a 'culture'". Culture, in other words, is not simply artefacts, however beautiful they may be. It is, rather, the sense of proportion that, accommodating the different standpoints of other actors as well as the different activities of the human condition, knows the importance of limits, agreements and promises, and stamps the external world with faithfulness and love. An ecologically sustainable society cannot be one devoted to constantly rising consumption levels, but it may be one in which the surplus of time that Marx rightly predicted is given over to perhaps the most worldly but also the most ecologically necessary of activities: political discourse between citizens – both real and imagined, wealthy and poor, in the past and in the future – about the nature of the common world and why we care.

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