

Hannah Arendt and Ecological Politics

Kerry H. Whiteside*

I argue that Arendt's understanding of "society" deepens Green critiques of productivism. By avoiding subjectivist or objectivist modes of thought, Arendt uncovers hidden links between life-sustaining labor and a world-destroying drive to consume. Checking environmentally destructive desires to produce and consume requires structuring communities around an optimal configuration of public deliberation, work and labor. I conclude that an Arendt-inspired ecological politics stresses the interdependence of human values and an all-encompassing natural order.

I. PRODUCTIVISM IN GREEN POLITICAL THOUGHT

It is odd that political ecologists almost universally ignore Hannah Arendt's thought,¹ for the arguments of her greatest work, *The Human Condition*,² converge with the sensibility of ecological ("Green") political movements in a remarkable variety of ways. Decades before the discovery of the greenhouse effect and ozone holes, Arendt warned of the power of contemporary science, which "imports cosmic processes into nature even at the obvious risk of destroying her and, with her, man's mastership over her" (p. 244). To ecologists, there is something familiar in her picture of a perpetually growing society that consumes voraciously because it is an extension of the life process. Green demands for a more authentic *Basisdemokratie* echo her desire to rehabilitate the value of political participation. But then, perhaps it is Arendt's praise of strictly political action that puts off ecological thinkers. She denigrates any politics that takes its concerns from the private household, and ecological politics (from *oikos*, household, and *logia*, discourse) seems to do precisely that. Nonetheless, her conception of the human condition could deepen critiques of overconsumption current in the literature of ecological political movements.

Those critiques usually target a phenomenon known variously as "productivism" or "industrialism." Like "capitalism" for Marx, "productivism" for Greens identifies the inner mechanisms of a system that, even as it yields much-vaunted benefits of material abundance, ultimately devours the sources

* Department of Government, Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, PA 17604. Whiteside's interests include French existentialism and contemporary political theory. He is currently studying the political thought of the French Greens. The author wishes to thank Sandra K. Hinchman for thoughtful criticism of an earlier draft of this paper.

¹ I know of a single exception: Joel Jay Kassiola, *The Death of Industrial Civilization* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), esp. p. 113.

² All references in the text are to Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Anchor Books, 1959).

of its own vitality. However, just as Marx's theory spawned subjective and objective interpretations of the crisis of capitalism (the former emphasizing that the workers' subjective awareness of their exploitation is a necessary condition of revolutionary action, the latter suggesting that objective, material conditions drive the exploited to revolt), so "productivism" threatens to dissolve into rival subjective and objective interpretations of the ecological crisis. Because Arendt strenuously avoids the subject-object dichotomy, her alternative understanding of productivism should be of particular interest to Green thinkers.

Perhaps the most distinctive critical theme of Green thought is its contention that a growth-oriented society is destined to run up against insurmountable natural limits.³ Only fundamental changes in our modes of production and consumption can avert environmental catastrophe. Greens highlight the irrationality of pursuing unlimited growth in a finite world, a world whose finitude is conditioned not only by absolute quantities of vital materials, but by the need to respect the limited capacity for self-renewal of many ecosystems. Greens insist that, no matter how much more "environmentally friendly" and efficient new technologies are made, it would simply overwhelm the planet if the growth required to bring the "developing countries" up to the living standards prevailing in the "developed countries" were attempted.⁴ Moreover, irrespective of the ability of further economic growth and technological innovation to respond to increasing human material needs, there are also spiritual needs for areas of pristine nature and respect for the diversity of species that are incompatible with unlimited development. Economic assumptions that regard nature only in utilitarian terms, as a resource to be exploited for mankind's material benefit, are inimical to respect for nature.⁵

In an attempt to explain the persistence of contemporary societies' commitment to growth, Greens point to "an adherence to the belief that human needs can only be met through the *permanent* expansion of the process of production and consumption."⁶ This ideology is named "productivism," and rejection of it distinguishes Green political thought from familiar ideologies of the Right and Left. Whatever their differences over the ethics of redistributing wealth, conservative and progressive parties of the West agree that we must spur investment, innovate technologically, and fine-tune the division of labor.

³ Andrew Dobson, *Green Political Thought* (London: Unwin, Hyman, 1990), pp. 15–19; Guillaume Saintény, *Les Verts* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), pp. 53–55.

⁴ René Dumont, *Les Raisons de la colère ou L'utopie des Verts* (Paris: Éditions Entente, 1986), p. 55.

⁵ Robyn Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory: Toward an Ecocentric Approach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 53–55.

⁶ Jonathan Porritt, quoted in Edward Goldsmith and Nicholas Hildyard, *Green Britain or Industrial Wasteland?* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1986), pp. 343–44. See also Jean-Jacques Gouget, "Environnement et productivisme: L'impossible alliance," *Reflets et perspectives de la vie économique* 24, no. 4 (1985): 239.

These economic strategies allow us to turn out more products—and increase consumption to absorb them. It is essential to cajole consumers into always consuming more so that the system's movement never ceases—so that investors (or the state, in more socialized economies) perceive new opportunities and invest more, create new jobs, push toward an ever-higher (material) standard of living. In the words of certain French Greens,

the analysis of productivism is the guiding thread which allows us to go beyond the classic explanations of the crisis. . . . Productivism is a totality of phenomena which form a whole and which have the appearance of being necessary to one another. . . . It is a mechanism that . . . makes each collectivity and each individual always seek out the maximum (maximum efficiency, maximum production) under the threat of not getting even the minimum. . . .⁷

Philosophically, this concept lends itself to two interpretations, one “subjectivist,” the other more “objectivist.” On the one hand, productivism appears to be a set of moral beliefs appealed to by all who demand more material consumption and fail to understand the need to respect natural limits. Green politics thus has a subjectivist side that orients it toward working to change attitudes. If it is the *ethic* of “always more” that threatens us, then we must *learn* to live in balance with nature, not to dominate it. That is why the leaders of the French Greens call for a “revolution of *mentalités*,” a change in our thinking such that we become aware of our interdependence with nature, value it non-instrumentally, and voluntarily change our expectations always to increase our material welfare.⁸ The party's electoral literature claims:

Our objective is to *convince* the majority that a radical *cultural change* is necessary. We must modify our modes of consumption, distribution, production and exchange, to go in the direction of a society of responsible individuals with needs which have been *reasoned out* [*raisonnés*].⁹

Greens do not naïvely believe that simply having better arguments will suffice to turn the productivist tide. Their repertory of direct political action (demonstrations, theatrical protest, civil disobedience) seeks by every imaginable nonviolent means to call people's attention to ecologically unsound prac-

⁷ This statement comes from a motion proposed at the 1990 Assemblée Générale des Verts in Strasbourg, France. *Tribune des Verts*, no. 9 (1990): 5.

⁸ Antoine Waechter, *Dessine-moi une planète* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1990), p. 19; Christian Brodhag, *Objectif terre: Les Verts, de l'écologie à la politique* (Paris: Éditions de Félin, 1990), p. 84. Dobson also notes that “most members of the Green Party in Britain . . . are serious about political power, but see their role principally in educative terms” (*Green Political Thought*, p. 134).

⁹ “Les Verts et l'économie: Responsabilité, Autonomie, Solidarité,” 1992 electoral pamphlet, p. 1 (emphasis added).

tices.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the project of calling people's attention to the ecological crisis and giving them prudential reasons to restrain consumption does make a subjectivist presupposition. Changing the world is, above all, a matter of changing ideas.

The more objectivist bent of Green thought shows through in references to the "totality of phenomena" and "necessity." These expressions seem to indicate that human consciousness depends on a conditioning context of social practices. Certain institutions favor the perpetuation and development of a productivist social system. One segment of the French Greens argues that the productivist "mechanism has a material axis of development . . . the development of the division of labor. For two centuries, this has been the required point of passage for any search for maximal economic efficiency."¹¹ On this interpretation, lowering the costs of production has required simplifying tasks on production lines, introducing labor-saving machinery, seeking out new geographic locations where labor is cheap. Each enterprise becomes highly specialized and seeks to gain economies of scale by increasing production. Owners decide about the location of industries, their size, and their rate of production without regard for the ability of the local environment to support them. The need for efficient production trumps environmental concerns. Firms that fail to make the necessary accommodations (i.e., changes necessary to increase their productivity) are competed out of existence.

According to Alain Lipietz, the principal author of the French Greens' pamphlet on the economy, in the absence of welfare state protections, such a system is fraught with social instability. Reduced to repeating mindless tasks, facing a constant threat of unemployment or lowered wages, workers have every incentive to throw the system into crisis by refusing to work—as they often did before World War II. The system stabilized only after the war, with what Lipietz calls the "Fordist compromise." In return for accepting the division of labor and certain risks of economic change, workers won salary increases, a state dedicated to maintaining full employment, and a secure place in the welfare state. The compromise changed the workers into a "crowd of consumers."¹² Not only did they attenuate their challenges to the system, but by increasing demand for goods, they also played an essential role in keeping the economic machine running.

This account of productivism treats *mentalités* as a function of incentives sustained in a particular model of development. Although all of the social and environmental changes take place for the sake of increasing material abundance, it is not simply the "more is better" ethic that has to be undone in order

¹⁰ See Kerry H. Whiteside, "The Political Practice of the Verts," *Modern and Contemporary France* 48 (January 1992): 18–21.

¹¹ *Tribune des Verts*, no. 9 (1990): 5.

¹² Alain Lipietz, *Choisir l'audace* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1989), pp. 18–23.

to reverse them. In this scenario, each of us is caught up in a mechanism that *requires* us to contribute to its workings. A productivist society gives the individual a terrible choice: produce (regardless of the ecological and social consequences) or risk “not having access to the minimum of other products that one needs.”¹³ The productivist system makes individuals serve its requirements by means of an often unobvious structure of penalties and payoffs. This line of Green thought can make it seem that productivist choices do not come from autonomous subjects. We are objects responding to conditions set by a larger, ecologically irrational social system.

That subjectivist and the objectivist interpretations of productivism mingle so casually in Green literature is troubling on two counts. First, it is a sign that Green thought has not yet advanced to the point of developing a consistent philosophy of the relationship of mind and world. Do the subjectivists’ hopes for a *révolution des mentalités* really mean that ecological destruction is primarily a function of ecological ignorance? Yet, powerful incentives of survival or profit, not just ecological ignorance, seem implicated in much environmentally destructive behavior. On the other hand, what “necessitated” the workers’ acceptance of the Fordist compromise? Doesn’t their willingness to trade off personal security and environmental interests for material consumption indicate a predisposition towards consumption, which itself needs explanation?

Second, the unstable admixture of subjective and objective explanation portends political problems in bringing about the transformation to a sustainable society. We should recall that, in the history of revolutionary socialism, subjectivist and objectivist interpretations of Marx led to political splits, differences of party organization, and contradictory strategies. Subjectivists believed that the workers must first attain a revolutionary state of consciousness before the overthrow of capitalism could take place. When decades of organizing and agitating failed to produce the requisite radical *mentalité*, many either dropped out of politics or accommodated themselves to “bourgeois” institutions. The reforms they eventually brought about fell far short of the quest for social transformation that had originally inspired them. Objectivists, on the other hand, believed that certain objective social conditions would be necessary to spark revolution. Some, like the Bolsheviks, set about fostering such conditions through strikes and acceptance of military defeat. Confronted with groups that resisted the changes which they thought essential to human progress, objectivist Marxists sought to force the hand of history. They created hierarchical, authoritarian organizations to generate the power necessary to overcome the objective resistance of capital.

This experience suggests that incipient divisions between subjectivists and objectivists within a single political movement should be viewed with concern.

¹³ “Les Verts et l’économie,” p. 3.

It does not mean that Greens who use objectivist language are closet Bolsheviks, ready to seize power and build ecotopia by force. Nor should we infer that those who use subjectivist language are on the verge of selling-out a sustainable society for a slice of political power in a productivist one. No doubt the philosophical divergences would play themselves out differently this time around—in part because Green thinkers have learned from the fate of other radical movements in the twentieth century. Still, the history alluded to above is sufficiently cautionary to suggest that ecological political theorists should heed alternative philosophical viewpoints capable of expressing their central insights about productivism while avoiding the subject-object split. While Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* is such an alternative, Greens easily overlook it because the ecological crisis does not directly motivate her argument. If one starts from her philosophical anthropology, however, it becomes evident that her account of the dynamics of "society" parallels Green critiques of "productivism," and does so in a way that adds to our understanding of that phenomenon.

II. ARENDT'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE *VITA ACTIVA*

For Arendt, to speak of "the human condition" is to emphasize the partly given, partly mutable character of our existence (p. 11). Neither man nor the world fits into the categories of subject and object because "everything [man] come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence." We cannot be pictured as free, meaning-creating subjects because a world we experience as "given" inflects and lends structure to our thought. But conditioning does not make us into objects either, since "the world in which the *vita activa* spends itself consists of things produced by human activities" and these in turn "constantly condition their human makers." Moreover, the world itself is no mere object. There is, Arendt asserts, an epistemological dependence of the world on our presence: "Because human existence is conditioned existence," she says, "it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not conditioners of human existence." To have a world, in other words, is to be enveloped in a setting in which things have potential relationships to us (as a thing to stand on or as an obstacle, as something to use as a tool or as something to love.) Mind does not have to construct a world by stitching together units of sense impression ("a heap of unrelated articles"). Wholeness, continuity, and meaning are there in our world, and thus capable of giving form to (of conditioning) our existence. From the start, Arendt measures up to Robyn Eckersley's demand that ecological political theory picture us as "*relatively* autonomous beings," "constituted by . . . relations" with our environment.¹⁴

¹⁴Eckersley, *Environmentalism and Political Theory*, p. 53.

Such claims, however, are often unconvincing. Even saying “we” and “environment” seems to presuppose the existence of two distinct poles which have some “constitution” independently of their interaction. Sustaining a theory of relative autonomy demands a special philosophical move. Avoiding even implicit reference to subjects and objects requires seeking out a perspective that denies the necessity of those categories. This is what Arendt’s philosophical “understanding” does. She proposes to go back to the “preliminary, inarticulate” meaning that “precedes and succeeds knowledge.”¹⁵ Her argument is that subjectivistic and objectivistic theories are highly intellectualized systems of ideas that are parasitic on a more fundamental level of experience at which the subject-object distinction has not taken shape.¹⁶ They are one-sided developments of the experience of structures of meaning in what Arendt calls “common sense.” It is common sense, Arendt contends, that fits together our experiences to establish their significance. Thus, she intends to return to common-sense perceptions of the world, ones imbedded in ordinary language and preconceptual understandings of experience. She seeks to remain true to these fundamental meanings by making them “intelligible through rational speech.”¹⁷ Making experience intelligible means discerning its structure, discovering affinities in meaning, tracing patterns in conduct, finding functional relationships that tie together seemingly distinct attitudes and behaviors.

Arendt’s study of the *vita activa*, the active life, rests on these methodological assumptions. She investigates three essential patterns of human involvement in the world: labor, work, and action. These patterns are not merely objectively describable sequences of motions; nor are they merely subjectively prescribed orientations toward the world. They are ways of relating to the world and to other people. Each activity has a characteristic structure and purpose, an inarticulate meaning, that inflects the way we treat everything that surrounds us. Corresponding to each activity, therefore, is a characteristic mode of thought, a *mentalité*. The *mentalité* “fits” the activity, giving it its purpose and guiding its approach to the material world it encounters. In describing the *mentalité* of each activity, I focus on four areas of greatest relevance to ecological politics: ideals, end points, conceptions of nature, and perceptions of time.

Closest to our biological need to sustain life is the activity of laboring. As physical beings, we must replenish our bodily need for nourishment in order to survive and grow, and as mortal beings, we must replenish the species through

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics,” *Partisan Review* 20, no. 4 (July–August 1953): 380.

¹⁶ See Bhikhu Parekh, *Hannah Arendt and the Search for a New Political Philosophy* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981), pp. 66–68.

¹⁷ Leah Bradshaw, *Acting and Thinking: The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), p. 34.

procreation. Labor is the ever-repeated effort to secure food, shelter, security, longevity. Labor continually strives to reproduce the material conditions of human life. Our need for replenishment and repair integrates us into larger natural cycles of growth and deterioration. The preservation of human life itself requires that we synchronize ourselves with the seasons, combat the forms of decomposition that come with natural processes of erosion, death, and decay. Life requires that we continually incorporate substances external to us and wear out materials that protect us against the rigors of our environment (p. 84). Consumption thus correlates to the activity of labor (p. 76). A cycle of production and consumption—creating, using, and depleting—is the condition of life itself (p. 9).

Corresponding to labor are a conception of life as the highest good (p. 186) and an ideal of material abundance (p. 110). As laboring beings, the point of our toil is to sustain life; our fear is the pain of hunger, the grief of sickness or death. Labor's ideal—the original meaning that could be drawn out of inarticulate experience—would be the perfection of its primordial goal: facilitating life to the highest degree. Labor's ideal is to generate an abundance that preserves us from the dangers of deprivation. It is to feed into the recurrent need for consumption that we, as mortals, cannot escape (p. 86). Because consumption, replenishment, and exhaustion are ever recurrent experiences, laboring is associated with no firm conception of end points. When we cultivate and harvest, clean and soil, there is no fixity, no final resting point. Labor involves us in a process, a cycle of endlessly repeated steps (p. 84).

With its attention fixed on supplying our recurrent needs, labor has little conception of permanence. It is not its concern to create something durable that cuts across the cycles of production and consumption. Insofar as we are under the sway of the urgent promptings of the life process, our time horizon is greatly restricted. The laboring *mentalité* is "worldless," in the sense that it does not care to invest its energy in the construction of a lasting world of durable objects. Investment in a lasting world is tantamount to self-imposed deprivation, for durable objects are not available for consumption. What permanence the laboring *mentalité* recognizes is the permanence of processes, not of things. Much of labor's toil, in fact, is devoted to the "constant, unending fight against the processes of growth and decay through which nature forever invades the human artifice" (p. 87). From the perspective of labor, nature is "the great provider" (p. 116). However, it is also the source of unwanted change and decay. That it engages in a "constant fight" with nature suggests that labor secretly aspires to victory. If only nature could be made infinitely provident without requiring man's constant tendance, labor might finally be able to abandon its endlessly repeated struggle.

Arendt insists that labor be distinguished from a second fundamental activity with which it is often confused: work. Work is the human activity of construct-

ing about us a more or less permanent world of artifacts: tools, buildings, instruments, books, works of art (p. 80). Work is distinct from labor inasmuch as it aims not at consumption of vitally necessary goods but at construction of stable surroundings in which we can move, learn, relate, and seek distinction. The fabricated world shelters us from natural change. The tools of *Homo faber* and the durability of his products partially free us from sempiternal cycles of deterioration and restoration. Work products are to be used, not used up.

The *mentalité* of work prizes permanence, durability, and stability (p. 110). Insofar as we work, we take pride in the creation of goods which are, in a sense, greater than ourselves because they may outlast a human life. *Homo faber* is the builder of cities and monuments and memorials (p. 153). In the perspective of work, materials must be assembled into a non-natural whole, according to a plan that guides the construction process. However, this process, unlike the natural process that impels the cycle of labor, comes to an end with the assembling of a finished product. These products are better in proportion as they resist natural processes of decay and growth. Thus, work is worldly in a way that labor is not. Work understands worth not as a function of something's contribution to mere life, but as a function of its bringing us closer to a desired end point, the construction of some durable object. Characteristically, work involves thinking in terms of means and ends. *Homo faber* therefore tends to regard whatever falls within its field of perception as an instrument to be used in the fabrication of something else (p. 279). There are two ways, then, in which work is in competition with nature. First, in the perspective of work, nature in itself is valueless. It is valuable only as a resource in the fabrication of a humanized world. Work is a destroyer of nature; it is a violent act bent on "re-forming" the given forms of the natural world (p. 122). Second, work "takes matter out of nature's hands without giving it back to her in the swift metabolism of the living body" (p. 87).

The third category of the *vita activa* is action. Action comprises the words and deeds by which we initiate events in the realm of human plurality, as participants in a community. Tied neither to bodily necessity nor to the technical requirements of useful production, action is uniquely free. Our ability to act is identical with our ability to begin anew. With action we unleash chains of events that cut across the regularity of natural patterns. Action aims at self-disclosure. To act, says Arendt, is to seek remembrance in the eyes of one's peers (p. 10). The unique speeches and deeds that are seen from multiple perspectives establish the meaningful context for all human endeavor.

Corresponding to action is "the conviction that the greatest that man can achieve is his own appearance and actualization" (p. 186). In Ronald Beiner's words, "political action, alone among the worldly activities of man, offers a lasting source of meaning to human affairs, for the deeds and speeches of speaking and acting can be gathered into a story that, when retold, allows their

human intelligibility to become visible.”¹⁸ Where labor understands the good in terms of participating in a predictable process, and where work interprets the good instrumentally (seeing matter as “good for” some other end), action testifies to the human ability to posit intrinsic value. Action, and the storytelling that follows, creates meaning which gives a point to life and which establishes a final purpose for the world of *Homo faber* (p. 171). According to Arendt, political action removes itself from both the futility of natural cycles and the comprehensive instrumentalization of existence. True action is free of all necessity, including the necessities imposed by our biological needs or by our natural environment (p. 14). Action initiates an endless chain of events, which, remembered long after as a story, give man an earthly immortality. Nothing that Arendt says indicates that action is in itself hostile to nature.

III. SOCIETY, PRODUCTION, AND CONSUMPTION

Arendt’s account of the *vita activa* strikes some commentators as quaintly antiquarian. In fact, her criticisms not only anticipated Green accounts of productivism by some two decades, but also suggested startling connections between labor, work, and consumption that have yet to be systematically pursued by contemporary thinkers. Unlike most Greens, Arendt does not rest satisfied with the observation that economic growth is the unquestionable value of every nation in today’s world. She sees our emphasis on growth as the result of a characteristically modern reduction of all values to the value of life itself. This value grows out of the primordial experience of laboring.

Arendt begins by tracing a remarkable change in the valuation of private and public life between the times of ancient Greece and the modern world. For the Greeks, the household was the domain of labor. Household functions included reproduction, the procurement of food and shelter, and sanitation. Life in the household could not be free, because it had to be organized so as to assure that the organic needs of its members were met. Because the household did not aim at any of the higher human abilities of free action, thought, or remembrance, it necessarily occupied a limited place in the hearts of the Greeks. Dignity was reserved for the public realm, in which citizens employed great words of persuasion and memorializing as part of their deliberation on affairs of the city (p. 25). So long as this understanding of the distinction between the public and private spheres remained intact, the recognized superiority of the public life checked the inherent fecundity of the life process. Life was subordinated to the good life that was possible only in the polis.

In the modern world, the erosion of this understanding of the public/private distinction allowed concerns formerly confined to the household to enter the political arena. Christianity’s disdain for public glory, early capitalism’s

¹⁸ Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 13.

creation of a deep pool of laborers without commitment to a particular place, and the nation states' attempt to create a substitute "family" for the dispossessed are only a few of factors mentioned in Arendt's complex historical account of the demise of the *vita activa*. For purposes of seeing the potential contribution of her ideas to Green thought, it is less this history than its contemporary result that must draw our attention.

The result is that our collective life is dominated by an amalgam of public and private matters in a communal form called "society." As "the public organization of the life process" (p. 42), society gives primacy to the ideals of labor. Moreover, society, Arendt argues, is the phenomenon responsible for the rapacity of contemporary communities.

In a relatively short time the new social realm transformed all modern communities into a society of laborers and jobholders. . . . The admission of labor to public stature . . . has . . . liberated this process from its circular, monotonous recurrence and transformed it into a swiftly progressing development whose results have in a few centuries totally changed the whole inhabited world. . . . It was as though the growth element inherent in all organic life had completely overcome and overgrown the processes of decay by which organic life is checked and balanced in nature's household. The social realm . . . has let loose an unnatural growth, so to speak, of the natural (pp. 42–43).

It is because Arendt sees contemporary communities organized as variations on "society" that her critique converges with Green politics. She argues, first, that placing preeminent value on life itself makes society devote its energy to assuring that all receive the material requisites of life: physical security and a parade of consumption goods. Labor's ideal of limitless consumption displaces all other public ideals in a community that operates as a society. Understanding environmentally destructive desires for unfettered consumption requires seeing them in relation to the modern world's reconfiguration of labor, work, and action.

Yet, before a way of life could be constructed around the twin activities of production and consumption, three obstacles had to be overcome. The first was that most communities had assumed that human need was finite. Thus, it made sense to confine need-satisfying activities to a distinctly limited sector of life. Society erases such limits on consumption by encouraging our "appetites [to] become more sophisticated" (p. 115). Life-valuing societies never lay back in happy satiation. They encourage new needs, tastes for luxury, and cravings for additional sources of pleasure.¹⁹ From the growth of appetite, Arendt draws the same conclusion as many ecological thinkers: that it "harbors the grave danger

¹⁹ For a recent account of the historical and theoretical changes that made it possible for society to encourage consumption by recasting it in terms of status and fantasy rather than mere need, see Nicholas Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

that eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption” (p. 115).

The second obstacle was the conviction of pre-modern communities that their surplus of available energy should be devoted not to the production of goods for immediate consumption, but to the construction and maintenance of relatively permanent structures (roads, great buildings, and furnishings). If material desire were to be given free rein, no respect for permanence would be allowed to hinder its advance. Objects that once were considered permanent would come to be seen as goods suitable for rapid consumption. This transformation is precisely what happens, according to Arendt, in a consumer society:

A booming prosperity . . . feeds not on the abundance of material goods . . . but on the *process* of production and consumption itself. Under modern conditions, *not destruction but conservation spells ruin* because the very durability of conserved objects is the greatest impediment to the turnover process. (pp. 229–30; emphasis added)

Thus, buildings are now designed to last for only thirty to fifty years, furniture for five or ten, hamburger containers for two minutes. This lack of durability, moreover, is seen not as a defect but as an essential part of the community’s well-being.

In order for society to organize itself around consumption, it is not sufficient to stimulate desire; it must also be able to respond to the consumer expectations thus generated. In the past, communities were inhibited from doing so by the third obstacle: human susceptibility to exhaustion and the need for regeneration. In the modern period, innovations in the division of labor surmount this obstacle (p. 44). Reducing productive activities to a sequence of tasks requiring minimal skill enables society to turn out enormous quantities of goods. There is no longer any need to interrupt the production process while waiting for trained workers to recuperate from their exhaustion. The division of labor breaks complex techniques down into simple tasks that an abundant supply of unskilled laborers can step in to complete. What Lipietz analyzes as a recent event—the “Fordist compromise” that ratified further separation of management and labor, and the application of Taylorist scientific management techniques to labor—Arendt regards as only an additional step in a long evolution of the phenomenon of “society.” Both thinkers understand, however, that the resulting increase in productivity completes the cycle of the system. Enhanced material productivity supplies more goods; more goods feed into increased material appetite; enlarged appetites stimulate further productivity.

Having overcome these obstacles, contemporary communities take the form of a “society of laborers” (p. 42). Now, Greens could, I think, rightly insist on one amendment to this assertion. Arendt believes that, in the nineteenth

century, work and its accompanying ethic of conspicuous production gave way to labor's norm of conspicuous consumption (pp. 142–43). She views this development with particular alarm, because her primary complaint against the modern world is its destruction of the public realm. Work at least favors an exchange market in which people can gather and appraise the quality of products. The triumph of society, in contrast, signifies that every public space is turned to the service of sustaining life. However, if we regard the destruction of the natural world, and not just the absence of political action, as one of the contemporary phenomena that we are most in need of understanding, then we must ask whether “the victory of the *animal laborans*” was quite so total, for labor, in spite of its penchant for consumption, is not intrinsically hostile to nature. Indeed, insofar as we labor, we learn to live with nature, coordinating our activities to its cycles: planting and harvesting, giving birth and fostering maturity, setting aside time for recuperation to follow exhaustion (p. 92).

It is work, as Arendt recognizes, that harbors the desire to do violence to nature by mastering and reshaping it. The extent of the destruction that we wreak on the environment depends on the powerful tools—the work-objects of *Homo faber*—that we use to strip mine, deforest, generate power, and pave over. Moreover, the pervasive means-ends reasoning of economic efficiency is what drives production in the search for ever-more powerful means of extraction and fabrication. Thus, if the instrumentalization and destruction of nature are principal factors conditioning human existence in the twentieth century, the *mentalité* of work must share some blame with labor.

This revision should not be hard to accommodate within Arendt's theory. Although most of her critical remarks regarding the contemporary world target the *mentalité* of labor, her larger argument is that *animal laborans* and *Homo faber* are deficient in the same way. Although both lack a commitment to a public realm, both need one, for only through the multiplicity of perspectives of a plurality of human beings can they bestow meaning on their existence (p. 212). Labor is so closely engaged with meeting physical needs that it fails to develop a full awareness of a world that transcends immediate sensation. Work instrumentalizes the world, to the extent that no goal becomes final, and in doing so undermines the notion that there is any value that might make the whole chain of means and ends worthwhile. Public deliberation, Arendt suggests, is the only feature of the *vita activa* that validates individual experience with common sense.

Arendt's defense of action might amount to the realization that the values that make life worthwhile are constituted publicly. Only if we scrutinize standards from a great variety of perspectives do we gain confidence that they are not arbitrary assertions of particular wills. Shared experience and public deliberation are necessary to build the sense of certainty that gives meaning to our life-preserving and world-creating activities. Standards of equity and justice, beauty and nobility, and risk and responsibility depend on our collec-

tive judgment. This judgment emerges from “the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world, and the decision about what manner of action is to be taken in it, as well as to how it is to look henceforth, what kinds of things are to appear in it.”²⁰ Deliberative judgments are very different from decisions reached by toting up individual preferences. They entail an examination of problems from the other’s perspective, not merely the assertion of one’s own interest. They involve a recognition that the decisions of participants are helping to constitute the way of life of an entire community. Viewed in this way, it is pointless to repeat accusations that laws imposing standards of safety, equity, or beauty on civil society are unjustified intrusions on individual freedom. To the contrary, framing all choices as a matter of purely individual decision is what threatens to undermine every standard that could make anything in existence a thing to be valued. Green complaints that “free” markets create a world of clear-cut forests and strip malls are grounded in the same insight. Markets aggregate private choices, but ignore the community-shaping function of deliberative judgments.

IV. HUMAN FULFILLMENT AND THE GREEN COMMUNITY

According to some interpreters, Arendt’s critique of society comes from a distinctly elitist perspective. For Arendt, Martin Jay argues, “action is the highest of the three [activities,] for here men are engaged in the activity which is most ennobling: the public interaction through speech which is the essence of freedom.”²¹ Although this kind of action has always interested only a minority, what that elite does is the best that man *can* do. Moreover, it is because “society” is the communal form least disposed to action that Arendt treats it so harshly. If this interpretation is the only possible account of Arendt’s views, it is hard to imagine how she could contribute to Green thought. In this perspective, ecological politics seems doubly suspect. First, rather than heroic action, it concerns the lowly question of how to keep “nature’s household” clean. Second, in some cases ecological politics demands that we face up to massive restraints on human freedom imposed by our dependence on natural systems.

Arendt’s writings, however, support a more *umweltfreundliche* interpretation. Her critique of society presupposes that the components of the *vita activa* can fit together in an optimal configuration—one that bears a striking resemblance to some Green recommendations for an ecologically sound way of life. In a review of Green literature that speculates on the contours of a sustainable society, Andrew Dobson highlights such features as “a de-emphasis on mate-

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. 223.

²¹ Martin Jay, “Hannah Arendt: Opposing Views,” *Partisan Review* 45, no. 3 (February 1978): 352.

rial things” and “a code of behaviour that seeks permanence and stability”; a recognition of “work [as] a necessity of the human condition”; and “some form of participatory democracy” that “encourag[es] greater participation and accountability.”²² Similarly, the proper ordering of a human life, as Arendt sees it, values but limits production. It takes pride in durable works, but does not allow them to determine the ends of the community. It encourages political participation, but accepts its dependence on the processes and products of mankind’s more material activities.

For Arendt, although labor is the most humble and least free of activities, it also is an essential part of the human condition. “The perfect elimination of the pain and effort of labor,” she contends, “would not only rob biological life of its most natural pleasures but deprive the specifically human life of its very liveliness and vitality” (pp. 103-04). As a response to the necessities of our biological existence, labor offers us the opportunity to “swing contentedly in nature’s prescribed cycle, toiling and resting, laboring and consuming” (p. 92). Labor plays a vital role in the psychic equilibrium of each individual’s existence. It immerses us in the feeling of life itself and so connects us to the world. Still, Arendt does not callously ignore the misery, ignorance, and deformity that have usually accompanied a life spent in labor. Although she sees the easing of toil through the refinement of tools—and the consequent opportunity to reduce the the amount of time devoted to labor—as genuine progress, she does not aspire to abolish labor. She stops short of calling for its abolishment not because such an eventuality is technologically unattainable, but because “for mortals, the ‘easy life of the gods’ would be a lifeless life” (pp. 103–04).

Even though work needs labor to sustain life, labor without work would be imprisonment in the cycles of the life process. In order to have a sense of place and individuality, labor needs a durable world sustained by fabrication (p. 212). Work creates a world that relates and separates the members of a community. This fabricated world cuts across the natural cycles to give a feeling of permanence, location, and belonging. To treat fabricated objects as objects for consumption thus undermines crucial features of a truly human community. Work, too, is an essential part of a balanced human existence.

Nevertheless, if labor or work were to dominate action, a fully human existence would again be in jeopardy, for the ethic of life governs labor and the ethic of instrumentality governs work. Fabricators always see objects in the world as “good for” something else, as things to be made useful by building them into a larger whole—which in turn derives its value from its usefulness in the fabrication of something else. The *mentalité* of *Homo faber* threatens a “devaluation of all values,” an instrumentalization of the world that leads to a never-ending deferral of the attribution of value and meaning (p. 212). As a

²² Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, pp. 85, 109, 125.

result, Arendt argues, action and speech are necessary complements to labor and work. The common sense that emerges out of communal deliberation and out of the history of great deeds establishes the conditions in which labor and work become part of a larger enterprise. Action provides a sense of intrinsic value insofar as it allows one to participate in the production of meaningful stories and remembrance.

Those who read Arendt as an elitist believe that her emphasis on the meaning-giving significance of action, purely and simply, places it at the top of a hierarchy of human activities. In accordance with this interpretation, action in Arendt's philosophy is analogous to contemplation in Aristotle's, in which the best human life is the one devoted most exclusively to our highest capacity. Such a philosophy would eventually banish work and labor from the best human life. In contrast, my reading brings out Arendt's belief that her three categories are interdependent and that *the suppression of any category diminishes a fully human existence*. Arendt demands a respect for the distinctive role and limits of each activity. She denies that "the same central preoccupation must prevail in all activities of men." Her "use of the term *vita activa* presupposes that the concern underlying all its activities is not the same" (pp. 17–18). An active life combines labor, work, and action in a unique configuration. Labor both produces and respects a worked-upon world of more permanent creations; this world, in turn, derives its significance from public deliberation and memorialization. Deliberation needs labor's energies in order to maintain its sense of life; it needs work's accomplishments in order to appear. Maintaining the proper ordering of human existence is a matter of correctly integrating the three activities. Life becomes distorted if it is given over exclusively to laboring and consumption or to work and instrumentalization, or to deliberation and public display. Thus, adhering to this irreducible pluralism of activities leads us away from a life dominated by labor and consumption that—as many ecological political thinkers have concluded—is incompatible with the welfare of all living things.

There is, nevertheless, still an important difference between Arendt and the Greens. While Greens often derive their vision of a good life from some combination of ecological necessity and ethical duty, Arendt approaches such issues from the perspective of a unique structure of activities required for human fulfillment. Typically (but not universally) Greens argue that we *must* reduce consumption *because* of the planet's limited carrying capacity or that we have a *duty* to share labor so that all may enjoy the dignity of earning their own livelihood. The first argument is objectivist: it threatens us with material circumstances that will force us to change our way of life. The second argument is subjectivist, appealing to a sense of fairness. Not coincidentally, the objectivist argument calls forth authoritarian political solutions, such as William Ophuls' conclusion that our choice is between "Leviathan or oblivion." Subjectivist ethical appeals, on the other hand, have yet to prove their efficacy

on anything like the scale necessary to dismantle the productivist system. Small wonder that eco-socialists often dismiss as so much wishful thinking hopes that the currently privileged will voluntarily sacrifice their standard of living. Subjectivist and objectivist approaches are alike, however, at least in one respect: both assume that an effective response to the ecological crisis depends on the repression of people's ecologically unsustainable preferences, whether voluntarily by moral reason or coercively by the state's authority.

Arendt's intriguing alternative to the objectivist and subjectivist paths is based neither on threats nor on calls to sacrifice. If there is any truth to her understanding of the *vita activa*, then there is reason to hope that a particular form of a non-productivist life may be uniquely desirable—and stable. Its components reinforce one another. Political participation, for example, is not just a means to advance a Green agenda. Nor is it simply a potentially fulfilling activity that would remain available in a world less given to material consumption. A community that takes pride in collective deliberation fosters a way of life that limits the appeal of labor and work. It does so even apart from the content of its debates, because action itself favors the assertion of intrinsic values. Intrinsic values, in turn, guard against vitalism and comprehensive instrumentalization. Working to furnish the world does more than immediately counter a waste economy. It imparts a sense of permanence conducive to caring for the world. Sharing labor is not just a subjective matter of social equity or an objective necessity limiting production. A world in which labor is seen as only one part of a meaningful life will find consumption less tempting. In other words, there is a potentially stable configuration of the activities of the *vita activa* that can foster a corresponding non-productivist *mentalité*. To the extent that this is true, repression can recede as a theme in Green thought.

V. CONCLUSION: NATURE AND VALUE IN THE *VITA ACTIVA*

Although surprising, the resemblances between Arendt's theory and Green thought are not simply fortuitous. There is a deeper agreement that underlies both positions. Both understand the importance of a conception of an order beyond humans in the ordering of a truly human life.

In his eloquent and disturbing essay on *The End of Nature*, Bill McKibben argues that the magnitude of the human-made changes in the environment must, quite aside from all effects on our physical well-being, bring about a disquieting alteration in our ability to value our own achievements. Before the twentieth century, humankind transformed the environment, to be sure, with agriculture and urbanization. Nevertheless, even the largest effects were limited in scope. There were still vast areas of the Earth of which it could be said that "the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man."²³ With

²³ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1989), p. 55.

the greenhouse effect, pollution of the oceans, holes in the ozone layer, and other global changes induced by human activity, however, it becomes increasingly difficult to believe that *any* pristine place still exists. For example, if humans have caused the greenhouse effect, and if it alters climatic patterns worldwide, then we will no longer be able to look at a forest *anywhere* and say that it exists as it would have existed in the absence of humankind. The deepest effect of the end of nature, McKibben argues, is spiritual: the day is coming when “we can no longer imagine that we are part of something larger than ourselves.”²⁴ The primal importance of recognizing something that exists apart from humankind, something that is immortal, something that has its own harmony and permanence—that is what we lose as all our experience brings us into contact with only our own doings.

The price of the end of nature is not only the loss of awe before what is natural, but also the devaluation of our own non-natural accomplishments. We have our “victory” of human power over nature, but it is not the kingly achievement we dreamed of:

. . . it is a brutish, cloddish power. . . We sit astride the world like some military dictator . . . able to wreak violence with great efficiency . . . but not to exercise power to any real end.²⁵

Of course, we may devise technological remedies for some of these problems. Nevertheless, that strategy too ignores spiritual costs. Where “nature” is understood to be only molecules and forces and lines of genetic code—all malleable under the impact of human will—we end by losing our *respect* for the way things are independent of humankind. In the view of modern science, organisms are seen as “a set of instructions on the computer program that is DNA,” remarks McKibben. Yet, “it is impossible to have respect for such a set of instructions: they can always be rewritten”—and, it will inevitably be argued, *should* be rewritten for “the pleasure of man.”²⁶ Finally, the end of nature erodes our confidence that the bounty of nature is assured, that its cycles have not been disrupted. We are left to our own devices to cope with the results of our activities, but with no certainty that a larger order assures our existence. McKibben concludes that “The certainty of nature . . . is what frees us to be fully human, to be more than simply gatherers of food.”²⁷

According to Arendt, philosophy started in the apprehension of such an order, and keeping alive our primal sense of amazement before nature is the condition of retaining the optimal, non-productivist configuration of the *vita activa*. She recalls Plato’s comment “that *thaumazein*, the shocked wonder at

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

the miracle of Being, is the beginning of all philosophy” (p. 275). Philosophy is originally the rapture that humans feel before “the miracle of Being as a whole”: a Being that has an order and endurance and beauty that humans can only admire, never adequately recreate. Like the nature whose end McKibben laments, the philosopher’s Being invites contemplation of its beauty (p. 14).

Arendt draws much the same conclusion as McKibben when it comes to foreseeing the effects of turning our wondering gaze away from this order. It is only when modern science finally overturned the contemplative ideal (its discoveries by means of instruments belying any claims to truth based on contemplation) that the balance of the *vita activa* is lost. Arendt’s account of that consequence is worth quoting at length:

The coincidence of the reversal of doing and contemplating with the earlier reversal of life and world became the point of departure for the whole modern development. Only when the *vita activa* had lost its point of reference in the *vita contemplativa* could it become active life in the full sense of the word; and only because this active life remained bound to life as its only point of reference could life as such, the laboring metabolism of man with nature, become active and unfold its entire fertility. (p. 292)

Her argument is that maintaining the balance of the active life depends on the existence of a “point of reference” outside of action. The distinct values of human activity threaten to collapse in on themselves if we lose the elevating reference to an order more wondrous than man’s. Plato made philosophy into that point of reference. But before him, *thaumazein* was superior because it was *pure* wonder at the miracle of Being, unmediated by categories drawn from the active life. The purity of this primordial marvelling assures us that there is *something* besides human life that incontrovertibly presents itself for our apprehension and admiration. In the absence of that wonder, we are driven to consider human life itself as the highest good. In doing so, we vindicate the *mentalité* of labor. As a consequence, the other human capacities of work and action falter. Like McKibben, Arendt could have written that “the certainty of nature . . . is what frees us to be fully human.”

This discussion suggests a vital insight for Green political thought. Andrew Dobson writes:

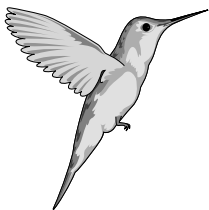
If there is one word that underpins the whole range of Green objections to current forms of human behavior in the world, it is probably “anthropocentrism.” Concern for ourselves at the expense of concern for the nonhuman world is held to be the basic cause of environmental degradation.²⁸

It has become a common feature of debate in ecological politics for one theorist

²⁸ Dobson, *Green Political Thought*, p. 63.

to charge another with anthropocentrism as soon as any concession is made to specifically human values and desires for a humanely built world. Certainly any ecological politics that took inspiration from Arendt would soon run up against this criticism. Nevertheless, Arendt's understanding of the active life suggests that our most distinctively human values—our desire for a stable material world based on a respect for beauty, our desire for participation in a community of peers based on a respect for justice—demand the presence of nature in order for them to hold their place in a fully human life.

This insight is not the common (and accurate) observation that human beings are part of complex ecosystems and that they ignore their dependence on them at their peril. Nor is it simply an assertion that we must add the appreciation of nature to some lengthy list of human psychological needs. Rather, it is the contention that humankind's "center" is off-center, eccentric, world-seeking. Arendt and McKibben show that a complete account of what it means to be human throws us back toward nature. The temptation to treat the natural world merely as an instrument for human purposes ends up ruining not only the natural world, but also *human* purposes themselves. Or rather, nature and human purposes are not distinct principles, the one in competition with the other. They are, from the start, existentially interdependent. Arendt's study of productivism just might contribute something important to the discussion of these issues: not an ecological politics based on a biocentric egalitarianism that drives us to value equally human beings and fruit flies, but rather one based on a deeper understanding of how humanity needs a nature-respecting sense of "the miracle of Being" in order to attain the worthiest forms of existence.



The Liberation of Life

From the Cell to the Community

Charles Birch and John B. Cobb, Jr.

ISBN 0-9626807-0-2

U.S. \$14.95 plus shipping and handling: \$1.50, book rate (U.S.); \$2.50, surface mail (all other countries).

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