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Towards a New Biopolitics

From Arendt to Agamben and Back Again

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With Covid-19 sweeping the planet, our way of life has been turned upside down. In an effort to mitigate the spread of the virus, democracies around the globe have taken unprecedented measures, imposing mandatory quarantines, declaring curfews, enforcing social distancing, closing schools and universities, and shutting down public life. Unsurprisingly, there is no paucity of reactions to this new normal from philosophers and political theorists. What is surprising, though, is that many of them tend to concur in their interpretation of the pandemic and its ramifications, no matter their political persuasion. Take Slavoj Žižek and Peter Sloterdijk, for example. Žižek, a self-declared communist, lambasts the 'will not-to-know' (Žižek 2020b, 142) of those talking down the danger of Covid-19 or flatly denying the virus's existence (see Žižek 2020b, 142–146). What is needed, he suggests, is some kind of 'disaster communism' (Žižek 2020a, 103).[1] The coronavirus crisis calls for international solidarity, all-out global cooperation, the reining-in of capitalism, and the letting-go of the nation-state as a model for social organization (see Žižek 2020a, 39, 45). Sloterdijk, a conservative, arrives at a strikingly similar view. Although in an interview conducted at the beginning of the pandemic he blusters about the 'medical-collectivist dictatorship' (Sloterdijk 2021, 13; our translation) Covid-19 has purportedly given rise to,[2] he soon becomes aware of the seriousness of the situation. Just a few months later, he expresses his disbelief at those protesting against the measures taken to contain the spread of the virus (see Sloterdijk 2021, 62). And he makes a case for what he terms 'co-immunism': 'The operational imperative of the future calls for a new consciousness, new habits of the heart, of cooperation and solidarity with others and nature in order to survive and thrive.' (Sloterdijk 2020) For immunity 'means a state of protection that can only be reached collectively' (Sloterdijk 2020).[3]

Remarkable parallels such as these notwithstanding, it would be stretching a point to claim that there is unanimity among thinkers as to what to make of the coronavirus crisis. There are dissenters, too. The most prominent among their ranks is the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. His take on the pandemic is markedly different.

1 This phrase is a variation on and the very opposite of Naomi Klein's concept of 'disaster capitalism', which is a shorthand for 'orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities' (Klein 2007, 6).

2 'The "coronavirus crisis" thus shows all the symptoms of a takeover by the "security state", hidden under the guise of a benevolent "medicocracy".' (Sloterdijk 2021, 11; our translation)

3 Sloterdijk first outlines the idea of co-immunism in *You Must Change Your Life: On Anthropotechnics* (see Sloterdijk 2013, 450–452). The similarity between Sloterdijk's position and his own is not lost on Žižek: 'It doesn't matter what we call the new order we so desperately need—Communism or, to borrow from Peter Sloterdijk, "Co-immunism" (collectively organized immunity against viral attacks)—the point is the same.' (Žižek 2020b, 82)

Governments all over Europe, he argues, use Covid-19 as a pretext to bring about a 'Great Transformation' (Agamben 2021, 9) of the entire political landscape. The steps they have taken are meant not so much to quell the spread of the virus as to usher in the end of Western democracy (see Agamben 2021, 60). Once under the sway of the paradigm of governance Agamben calls 'biosecurity' (Agamben 2021, 60), the majority of citizens have shown themselves willing to renounce their life as political, social, and cultural beings and to accept their being reduced to their sheer biological existence (see Agamben 2021, 63–64, 67). In this way, democracy morphs into 'technological-sanitationist despotism' (Agamben 2021, 10)—a form of despotism that, 'with the pervasiveness of its controls and with its suspension of all political activity, will be worse than the totalitarianisms we have known thus far' (Agamben 2021, 42).

This interpretation of the pandemic and its political aftermath builds on the notion of biopolitics that Agamben advances in his multi-volume *Homo Sacer* series. And this notion, in turn, owes a great deal to the thought of Hannah Arendt. Indeed, it is fundamentally Arendtian in character. This leaves one pondering whether Agamben's is the only way to avail oneself of Arendt's ideas in order to tackle the coronavirus crisis. Our response to this question is a resounding no. In the following, we show that Arendt's thought can be put to quite different use. Rejecting Agamben's vision of doom, we hold that the Covid-19 pandemic calls for an Arendtian conception of biopolitics that centres not on fatalism but on agency. Our argument to this effect falls into four parts. First, we defend the proposition that what Agamben calls biopolitics is but a generalization of Arendt's account of totalitarian domination. Second, we offer a critique of Agamben's take on the coronavirus crisis, which bears alarming similarities to right-wing conspiracy theories. Third, we bring into relief Arendt's keen awareness of the profound impact our active life has on the natural world. We combine this awareness with her definition of human beings as conditioned beings to suggest that she is mindful of the fact that our interacting with nature rebounds on us. This leads us to contend that Arendt, in a way, points us towards the unpleasant truth of Covid-19—namely, that it is the result of our foul treatment of the natural world. Fourth, we argue that since the way we affect nature is mediated by how we conduct our active life, the proper response to the coronavirus crisis is for us to change the latter, thus rendering it a matter of political concern. This politicization of our active life amounts to an Arendtian conception of biopolitics that is fundamentally different from Agamben's. Where his take on biopolitics revolves around political impotence, ours concentrates on agency—on our ability, that is, to join together and make a new beginning.

1.

On 21 February 1970, Agamben, then in his late twenties, sends a letter to Arendt, enclosing a copy of his essay 'On the Limits of Violence'.[4] In this letter, Agamben tells Arendt that 'discovering your books … has represented a decisive experience' (Agamben 2009, 111) and avers that he 'feel[s] all the urgency of working in the direction you

4 Arendt mentions Agamben's essay in *Macht und Gewalt*, the German edition of *On Violence* (see Arendt 2015, 35n44a).

pointed out' (Agamben 2009, 111). His conception of biopolitics, first proposed more than twenty years later in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, is proof that Agamben should remain true to his word. For although he—notorious for his eclecticism—draws on a vast array of thinkers from different epochs and disciplines, Arendt's influence clearly shines through. Even more than that, we maintain that Agamben's notion of biopolitics is, at bottom, an extension of some of Arendt's most prominent ideas.[5]

In what follows, we do not give a comprehensive analysis of Agamben's understanding of biopolitics, leaving out many of the concepts he has helped gain currency in philosophical and political debates. Nor do we say much about the impact other thinkers have had on Agamben, passing over such prominent figures as Aristotle, Walter Benjamin, and Carl Schmitt. We confine ourselves to defending the proposition that the pillars of Agamben's conception of biopolitics are but generalizations of what Arendt takes to be the essential elements of totalitarian domination.

Regardless of our strong focus on Arendt, there is one other thinker we cannot ignore: Michel Foucault. For the position Agamben comes up with is, in a sense, an amalgamation of Foucault's thoughts on biopolitics and Arendt's reflections on totalitarianism. Indeed, Agamben bemoans Foucault's failure to infuse his analysis of biopolitics with Arendt's insights into totalitarian power (see Agamben 1998, 4), while lamenting the 'absence of any biopolitical perspective' (Agamben 1998, 120) in Arendt. The onus, he seems to imply, is on him to bring the two thinkers together.[6]

Agamben starts off with Foucault's definition of biopolitics as 'the growing inclusion of man's natural life in the mechanisms and calculations of power' (Agamben 1998, 119; see Foucault 1978, 143), and then goes on to modify it significantly. Two changes are worth mentioning here.[7] The first is that while Foucault thinks of biopolitics as a modern phenomenon that comes up in the eighteenth century (see Foucault 2003, 242),[8] Agamben, equating sovereignty with '*the production of a biopolitical body*' (Agamben 1998, 6), construes the whole of the Western political tradition as a biopolitical endeavour. As a consequence, modern politics signifies not a break with but an intensification of what has been the political *modus operandi* of the West all along (see Agamben 1998, 9). The second change is that Agamben conceives of power's turn towards biological life not in terms of a simple inclusion but as an 'inclusive exclusion (an *exceptio*)' (Agamben 1998, 7). The political device making possible this inclusive exclusion is the state of exception, the declaration of which is the defining prerogative of the sovereign (see Agamben 1998, 15).[9] The suspension of the juridical order is

5 Because of the prominent position we accord to Arendt, we are somewhat at odds with the mainstream of Agamben scholarship. Adam Kotsko and Carlo Salzani, the editors of *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage*, for example, do not list Arendt among Agamben's '[p]rimary [i]nterlocutors' but consider her a mere '[p]oint[] of [r]eference' (Kotsko/Salzani 2017, v).

6 Agamben's is a somewhat simplified portrayal of Arendt's and Foucault's work. For some important qualifications, see Braun 2007, 6.

7 For a detailed analysis of the parallels and differences between Foucault's and Agamben's notion of biopolitics, see Lemke 2011, 33–64.

8 'For millennia', writes Foucault, 'man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.' (Foucault 1978, 143)

9 As Schmitt, to whom Agamben owes this definition of sovereignty, puts it right at the beginning of his *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, 'Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.' (Schmitt 2005, 5)

tantamount to a pushing-outside—an exclusion, that is—of those who, under normal conditions, fall within its purview. This does not mean, however, that they are all of a sudden beyond the grasp of sovereign power, cut off and left to their own devices. Deprived of the rights and duties that come with being citizens, the excluded now find themselves before the sovereign as natural beings, without any legal protection whatsoever. To this extent, their exclusion is inclusive. And owing to this 'limit form of relation' (Agamben 1998, 29), the life of those affected by the sovereign exception is not natural life lived in oblivious independence but natural life at the mercy of the sovereign. That is to say, it is natural life insofar as it is politicized—or, to use Agamben's term, 'bare life' (Agamben 1998, 6).[10]

Enter Arendt. Those familiar with her work cannot, upon closer inspection, fail to notice that Agamben's notion of biopolitics is in perfect agreement with her analysis of totalitarian domination. Recall the fate of the Jews under National Socialism, the centre on which Arendts reflections in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* converge. Once Adolf Hitler became Chancellor, the Nazis were intent on making use of Article 48 of the Weimar Constitution, which would enable them 'to intervene in the political process via emergency decree' (Pauer-Studer 2020, 25–26). By inciting public unrest and promoting political instability, culminating in the Reichstag Fire on 27 February 1933, the Nazis were soon able to fulfil their wish (see Pauer-Studer 2020, 45–46). On 28 February 1933, the government issued the *Verordnung des Reichspräsidenten zum Schutz von Volk und Staat* (Decree of the Reich President for the Protection of the People and the State), the so-called *Reichstagsbrandverordnung* (Reichstag Fire Decree); on 24 March 1933, it passed the *Gesetz zur Behebung der Not von Volk und Reich* (Law to Remedy the Distress of the People and the Reich), the so-called *Ermächtigungsgesetz* (Enabling Act). The former 'suspended such basic liberties of the Weimar Constitution as freedom of expression and the right to assembly', 'allowed the state to intervene extensively into the private sphere, and empowered Hitler and his subordinate executive authorities to take all necessary measures for restoring public order and security' (Pauer-Studer 2020, 46). The latter 'authorized the government to enact laws and amend the constitution without parliamentary oversight' (Pauer-Studer 2020, 47).

In other words, the Nazis made the state of exception the basis of their rule.[11] For the Jews (and others thought undesirable), this meant that Hitler and his henchmen could do with them as they pleased. And what they ultimately did first was 'to kill the juridical person in man' (Arendt 2017, 586)—a process that, Arendt tells us, comprised two things. One was to push the Jews outside the realm of the law (see Arendt 2017, 586), forcing on them 'a condition of complete rightlessness' (Arendt 2017, 387).[12] Robbed of all

10 'Yet this life is not simply natural reproductive life, the *zoē* of the Greeks, nor *bios*, a qualified form of life. It is, rather, … bare life …, a zone of indistinction and continuous transition between man and beast, nature and culture.' (Agamben 1998, 109)

11 Because the Nazis never rescinded the measures they took in 1933, Agamben is right in saying that 'from a juridical standpoint the entire Third Reich can be considered a state of exception that lasted twelve years' (Agamben 2005, 2).

12 The problem of rightlessness did not only affect the Jews but was a scourge afflicting people all over Europe. It started off in the immediate aftermath of the First World War when the number of stateless refugees exploded. As Arendt puts it in an article for *Aufbau* published on 28 November 1941: 'When at the end of the last war the statesmen of Europe believed that their treaties dealing with minorities had solved the question of nationality for good and all, the first wave of refugees was already streaming across Europe, and since then

membership in a political community, they found themselves 'thrown back … on their natural givenness' (Arendt 2017, 395). Before this 'abstract nakedness of being human' (Arendt 2017, 389), all declarations of human rights proved toothless (see Arendt 2017, 383), so that the Jews were left defenceless against the Nazis' genocidal assault. To put it differently, it was by reducing them to their sheer biological existence that the Nazis *qua* sovereign could turn on them with no holds barred. The second thing contributing to the killing of the juridical person was that the Nazis situated the camps to which they deported the Jews 'outside the normal penal system' (Arendt 2017, 586). In this sense, they were—to borrow a phrase of Agamben's—'permanent spatial arrangement[s]' (Agamben 1998, 169) of the state of exception. This is explains why it was precisely in the camps that the worst excesses of the Nazis took place—that human beings were 'transformed into specimens of the human animal' (Arendt 2017, 596) and the 'insane mass manufacture of corpses' (Arendt 2017, 585) was carried out.

It should not come as a surprise that the suffering of the Jews under the Nazis is one of the prime examples—nay, *the* prime example—Agamben uses to elucidate the functioning of biopolitics. ('[T]he Jews', he tells us, 'are the representatives par excellence and almost the living symbol of … bare life' (Agamben 1998, 179); the camp is nothing less than 'the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West' (Agamben 1998, 181).) For, as the above makes clear, what Agamben essentially does is to take Arendt's reflections on totalitarian domination, clothe them in a new terminology, and blow them out of proportion so that they become the pillars of a conception of biopolitics that supposedly governs the entire Western political tradition.[13] The only difference between times past and today is that now '[b]are life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category'—say, to the camp and the Jews—but 'dwells in the biological body of every living being' (Agamben 1998, 140).[14]

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it has dragged into its vortex the populations of all European nations. Stateless refugees of Russian origin were followed by stateless refugees from Hungary; then came those from Italy; after a short pause it was Germany's and Austria's turn; and today—except for Britain—there is no European nation that has not robbed a larger or smaller number of its citizens of their citizenship, driving them into exile, leaving them to the goodwill or bad will of other countries, without consular or legal protection of any kind.' (Arendt 2007, 139)

13 As for the claim that Agamben's position is a fusion of Foucault's reflections on biopolitics and Arendt's thoughts on totalitarian domination, our contention is that Agamben owes a lot more to Arendt than to Foucault.

14 To be fair, Arendt, too, discerns an expansionist drive in totalitarianism. 'It is', she says, 'in the very nature of totalitarian regimes to demand unlimited power. … In the realm of foreign affairs new neutral territories must constantly be subjugated, while at home ever-new human groups must be mastered in expanding concentration camps, or, when circumstances require liquidated to make room for others.' (Arendt 2017, 598) As proof of this claim she cites a document prepared by the Allied prosecutors for presentation at the Nuremberg trials indicating that 'this extermination program of Hitler's did not stop short of planning the liquidation of large sections of the German people' (Arendt 1994, 235). The document details a discussion in Hitler's headquarters on a possible new health bill: 'After the national X-ray examination, the Fuehrer is to be given a list of sick persons, particularly those with lung and heart diseases. / On the basis of the new Reich Health Law, which is still being kept secret to begin with, these families will no longer be able to remain among the public, and can no longer be allowed to produce children. What will happen to these families will be the subject of further orders by the Fuehrer. The Gauleiters are to make suggestions.' (Office of United States Chief of Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality 1946, 175–178; see Arendt 1994, 244n8) What is more, Arendt ventures the thought that '[t]otalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man' (Arendt 2017, 603). Still, what she says is peculiar to totalitarianism as a historical phenomenon. She does not, as Agamben does, conceive of the whole

This brings us back to Agamben's interpretation of the pandemic. With the measures governments have taken to stem the spread of Covid-19, biopolitics has, in his view, come into its own. What the temporary suspension of constitutionally guaranteed rights, the imposition of quarantines, the declaration of curfews, the closure of schools and universities, and the shutdown of public life signify is that 'the state of exception which our governments have for quite some time accustomed us to has finally become the norm' (Agamben 2021, 18). All over Europe, people 'have been reduced to a purely biological condition that has lost not only its political dimension, but also that of what is simply human' (Agamben 2021, 28), the final straw being that many have succumbed to this intensification of biopolitics without protest. They prove 'that our society believes in nothing more than bare life' (Agamben 2021, 17) and that '[m]odern politics is, from top to bottom, biopolitics' (Agamben 2021, 29).

2.

The consequences of Agamben's decision to turn Arendt's reflections on totalitarian domination into the blueprint for the political tradition of the West are profound. His interpretation of the coronavirus crisis is a particularly striking case in point. Agamben is unwilling to see the handling of the pandemic as anything other than corroboration of his theory of biopolitics. Rather than taking Covid-19 for what it is—an infectious disease that has plunged the world into a severe crisis and poses a set of daunting challenges—he makes it part of a 'grand narrative' (Marchart 2010, 223; our translation) that is expressive of a 'pessimistic philosophy of history' (Marchart 2010, 224; our translation). Agamben's vision of doom precludes all other approaches to the coronavirus crisis.[15] Indeed, so adamant is he about Covid-19 serving as an excuse to justify the production of bare life that he insouciantly edges ever closer to conspiracy theorists,[16] suddenly finding himself in the unsavoury company of far-right demagogues.[17] In fact, Agamben does not even shy away from casting doubt on the factuality of the pandemic itself. 'We could argue', he muses, 'that, once terrorism ceased to exist as a cause for measures of exception, the *invention* of an epidemic offers the ideal pretext for widening them beyond

of Western politics as an enterprise revolving solely around the inclusive exclusion of natural life—a claim that leads Agamben to suggest 'an inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism' (Agamben 1998, 10).

15 With Arendt, one could say that Agamben refuses to make use of the power of judgement, which, as she never tires of telling us, is 'the faculty of seeing things not only from one's own perspective but from that of all others who are present' (Arendt 2018a, 181).

16 Because of this stubbornness of his, Agamben's position, in a sense, verges on ideology, at least if we understand this term as Arendt does: 'Ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea. Its subject matter is history, to which the "idea" is applied … . The ideology treats the course of events as though it followed the same "law" as the logical exposition of its "idea." Ideologies pretend to know the mysteries of the whole historical process—the secrets of the past, the intricacies of the present, the uncertainties of the future—because of the logic inherent in their respective ideas.' (Arendt 2017, 616)

17 Agamben blithely shrugs off this contiguity to the delusions of the right by stating that "[i]f a fascist says that "2+2=4", this is not an objection against mathematics' (Agamben 2021, 70).

all known limits.' (Agamben 2021, 13; our emphasis)[18] The driving force behind this scheme, he seems to suggest, is the World Health Organization.

> As for the pandemic, serious research has show that it did not arrive unexpectedly. … [T]he World Health Organisation suggested a scenario similar to the present one as early as 2005 (during the bird flu), and it furthermore proposed it to governments as a way of ensuring citizens' unconditional support! Bill Gates, who is the WHO's main financer, has made his thoughts on the risks of a pandemic known on many occasions: he warned that a pandemic threatened to cause millions of deaths and that it was therefore necessary to guard against it. As a result, and in the context of research funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security organised in 2019 a simulation exercise for the coronavirus pandemic called "Event 201". This exercise gathered experts and epidemiologists to prepare a coordinated response in the event of a new virus appearing. (Agamben 2021, 77–78)

What in the lingo of risk and crisis management is called preparedness, in Agamben sounds like a sinister plot to manufacture a pandemic. And although he keeps mum about what might be the motives of the World Health Organization, the idea he wants to impart is obviously this. The World Health Organization seeks, in collusion with governments all over the world, to transform entire populations into bare life. In other words, to make the coronavirus crisis fit his view of the Western tradition as the unfolding of biopolitics, Agamben is prepared to do what Arendt says is characteristic of modern political lies—namely, 'a complete rearrangement of the whole factual texture' (Arendt 2000, 566). In the final analysis, Agamben's position amounts to 'the making of another reality' (Arendt 2000, 566), a move that is made easier by the fact that the one purveying this alternative reality falls for his own delusions.[19] Indeed, what Žižek says is typical of all 'forms of refusal to *think* Covid-19' is also true of Agamben's stance—it presents itself as 'a special insider-knowledge', 'an excess-knowledge accessible only to the initiated' (Žižek 2020b, 142).

Commenting on the headwind his take on the pandemic has faced—and anticipating the criticism yet to come—Agamben touches briefly on two terms that are part of the discussions surrounding Covid-19. One is 'conspiracy theorist'; the other 'denier'. Their sole aim, he argues, is to malign those 'thinking in defiance of the fear that paralysed all thought' (Agamben 2021, 75). Unsurprisingly, Agamben is quick to dismiss both of them. As regards the former term, his position boils down to the fatuous claim that because he is right, there is no point in calling him a conspiracy theorist (see Agamben 2021, 75–78). As for the latter term, his position is even more grotesque.

18 Note, incidentally, that Agamben time and again calls an epidemic what is actually a pandemic. Mark Honigsbaum defines the difference thus: 'An epidemic is the rapid spread of [an] infectious disease to a large number of people in a given population within a short period of time. By contrast, a pandemic is an epidemic that has spread across a large region, for instance, multiple countries and continents.' (Honigsbaum 2020, xi)

19 According to Arendt, 'self-deception is likely to create a semblance of truthfulness, and in a debate about facts the only persuasive factor that sometimes has a chance to prevail against pressure, fear, and profit is personal appearance' (Arendt 2000, 566).

'Those', he contends, 'who use it incautiously equate the current epidemic with the Holocaust, demonstrating (consciously or not) the anti-Semitism that runs rampant in both Left and Right discourse.' (Agamben 2021, 75) For one thing, this argument is grotesque because, to the best of our knowledge, the term 'denier' is not exclusive to the discourse on the Holocaust. For another, it is grotesque because it is precisely Agamben himself who—since his theory of biopolitics is a generalization of Arendt's analysis of totalitarian domination—never fails to pepper his essays and interviews on the pandemic with references to Nazi Germany. Here are some examples. The exceptional measures taken by governments to tackle the coronavirus crisis, he suggests, are reminiscent of 'what happened in Germany in 1933, when the new Chancellor Adolf Hitler … declared a state of exception that lasted twelve years and effectively invalidated the constitutional propositions that were ostensibly still in force' (Agamben 2021, 8). In Italy, Agamben goes on, 'it seems that the words pronounced by the Prime Minister and by the head of the Civil Protection Department have the immediate validity of law (as was once said of the words of the Führer)' (Agamben 2021, 36–37). And finally, the '[c]ontrol exercised through security cameras and, as is now being proposed, through cellphones exceeds by far any form of control exercised under totalitarian regimes such as Fascism or Nazism' (Agamben 2021, 42–43).[20]

In accordance with these supposed parallels, and in the light of his own contrarian position, Agamben unabashedly strikes a heroic pose, proclaiming that 'those who speak the truth will never stop doing so, because nobody can bear witness for the witness' (Agamben 2021, 54). Since this last line is from a poem by Paul Celan revolving around the challenges peculiar to Holocaust testimony,[21] one cannot but arrive at the conclusion that Agamben likens his own situation to the lot of those suffering under the Nazis.

There is, admittedly, a temptation to brush aside Agamben's account of the coronavirus crisis as an exercise in hyperbole that at times, well, borders on utter nonsense. One should resist this temptation, though. A charitable reader will come away from studying Agamben with a heightened awareness of the fact that emergency measures such as the ones taken in response to Covid-19 are susceptible to abuse. It is on all members of the body politic to remain vigilant and be on guard against this danger. A less charitable reader, on the other hand, will take Agamben seriously precisely because he twists reality to make it chime with his conception of biopolitics. For, as we know from Arendt's reflections on lying, in doing so, in portraying reality differently from what it is, he becomes a political actor (see Arendt 2000, 563)—someone, that is, to be reckoned with.

20 For once changing the record, Agamben likens '[t]he instructors who agree—as they have done *en masse*—to subject themselves to the new online dictatorship and to hold all their classes remotely' not to the German academics who fell in line when the Nazis came to power but to 'those university professors who, in 1931, pledged allegiance to the Fascist regime' (Agamben 2021, 74).

21 The poem is called 'Aschenglorie'; in German, the line reads: 'Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugen.' (Celan 2005, 198) For an analysis of Celan's poem, see Derrida 2005.

3.

Agamben's idiosyncratic use of Arendt's ideas is not the only way to employ her thinking in order to make sense of the coronavirus crisis. Sections 3 and 4 of this paper outline an Arendtian conception of biopolitics that is the very opposite of Agamben's approach. Whereas the latter centres on the production of bare life—of politically impotent natural beings at the mercy of the sovereign—the former revolves around agency. We are aware, of course, that such a notion of biopolitics is at variance with what is commonly associated with the term. Still, since a closer look reveals that there is, ultimately, no generally agreed-upon definition of biopolitics,[22] we feel at liberty to advance yet another interpretation. We are also aware that we are not the first to treat Arendt as a theorist of biopolitics.[23] We are confident, however, that the conception we come up with differs considerably from what others have proposed. For what we have in mind—and regard as an adequate response to Covid-19—is nothing less than the politicization of our entire active life, guided by the principle of 'symbiosis between humankind and the earth' (Dubos 1976, 459). Note, though, that we do not provide a fully fledged account of what we call an Arendtian conception of biopolitics; we merely trace its contours. That is to say, the preposition *towards* in the title of this paper is used advisedly. We shall be content if we manage to convey the main features of our Arendt-inspired notion of biopolitics.

Let us begin by observing that Arendt's examination of the *vita activa*—that is, of our life as active beings—evinces a profound understanding of our embeddedness in and interaction with the natural world. This is most obvious in her description of the first of the three fundamental activities she considers, labour. Following Karl Marx, Arendt takes labour to be the 'activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body' (Arendt 1998, 7). That is, it signifies the 'human body's metabolism with nature' (Arendt 1998, 209).[24] As corporeal beings, we must consume what nature offers in order to stay alive; and the activity providing the goods for consumption is labour, which, in turn, derives its power from our consuming (see Arendt 1998, 98–100).[25] It is the sheer 'necessity of subsisting' (Locke 2016, 25) that fuels this 'ever-recurrent cycle of biological life' (Arendt 1998, 131)—a cycle that, crucially, has a destructive dimension to it, as both labouring and consuming are 'devouring processes that seize and destroy matter' (Arendt 1998, 100).

The next activity in line is work. Giving expression to the 'unnaturalness of human existence' (Arendt 1998, 7), it, too, leaves its mark on nature. Through work, human beings 'fabricate[] the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total

22 This is one of the takeaways from Thomas Lemke's excellent book *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (see Lemke 2011).

23 Kathrin Braun labels Arendt a 'theorist of biopolitics *avant la lèttre* [*sic*]' (Braun 2007, 7), offering a perceptive comparison with Foucault's account of biopolitics (see Braun 2007). André Duarte argues that the idea of biopolitics functions as the 'missing link that can help us connect Arendt's reflections concerning the tragic fate of the political in the modern age in *The Human Condition*, with her analysis of totalitarian regimes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*' (Duarte 2007, 192). Miguel Vatter, finally, considers Arendt's concept of natality the bond that ties politics to biological life (see Vatter 2006, 138, 150), thus arriving at what he calls 'a positive biopolitics' (Vatter 2006, 145).

24 'Labour', Marx tells us in the first volume of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 'is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature.' (Marx 1982, 283)

25 Indeed, 'laboring and consuming follow each other so closely that they almost constitute one and the same movement, which is hardly ended when it must be started all over again' (Arendt 1998, 100).

constitutes the human artifice' (Arendt 1998, 136), which is 'distinctly different from all natural surroundings' (Arendt 1998, 7). The fabrication of this world of things requires material. This material, however, 'is not simply given and there' (Arendt 1998, 139). Quite the contrary, it must be violently extracted from the natural world, by 'either killing a life process, as in the case of the tree which must be destroyed in order to provide wood, or interrupting one of nature's slower processes, as in the case of iron, stone, or marble torn out of the womb of the earth' (Arendt 1998, 139). In short, as makers of an artificial world, human beings are necessarily 'destroyer[s] of nature' (Arendt 1998, 139).

Even action, which 'corresponds to the human condition of plurality' (Arendt 1998, 7) and *qua* 'political activity par excellence' (Arendt 1998, 9) concerns matters 'between men' (Arendt 1998, 7),[26] can have an impact on nature—and a massive one at that. Thanks to scientific progress and dramatic advances in technology, human beings have acquired the ability to 'act *into* nature' (Arendt 1961, 61), initiating natural processes that otherwise would not have occurred (see Arendt 1961, 60–62).[27] In doing so, they introduce the ailments that afflict acting—its irreversibility and its unpredictability—into the realm of the natural world (see Arendt 1998, 238). And this is where the danger lies. For in the natural world, the remedies for these ailments—the power to forgive and the ability to make and keep promises—come to naught. They 'function only under the condition of plurality' (Arendt 1998, 238); nature does not forgive, and there is no point in promising anything to the natural world.[28]

Whatever we do, it can have—and usually indeed does have—an effect on nature. Our entire active life betrays our interrelatedness with the natural world. To grasp the import of this basic fact, recall Arendt's definition of human beings as 'conditioned beings' who willy-nilly convert 'everything they come in contact with … into a condition of their existence' (Arendt 1998, 9).[29] From this it follows that our affecting nature through our active life rebounds on, making it the ever-evolving condition of our earthly existence. It matters a great deal, then, how we conduct our interactions with the natural world.

What does all this have to do with our objective of redefining biopolitics in such a way that it addresses the current pandemic? Quite a lot, actually. Arendt's insight into our embeddedness in the natural world is the pivot on which both a proper understanding of Covid-19 and our reconception of biopolitics revolve. Or, to use a different metaphor, it is the cement that holds these two together. The remainder of this section lays out what Arendt's reflections on the interrelation between human beings and nature tell us about the coronavirus crisis. The next section sketches out the Arendt-inspired notion of biopolitics that, in our view, is consequent thereon.

So, why do we deem Arendt's musings on the embeddedness of us human beings in the natural world so important when it comes to pondering Covid-19? The reason is this. Arendt's acute awareness of the fact that our interactions with nature unfailingly boomerang on us points us towards the bitter truth of the current pandemic: Covid-19 did

26 'Politics', Arendt explains in 'Introduction *into* Politics', 'deals with the coexistence and association of *different* men.' (Arendt 2005, 93)

27 Arendt cites the splitting of the atom as an example of a man-made natural process (see Arendt 1961, 60).

28 It is with good reason, then, that Arendt calls acting the 'most dangerous of all human abilities and possibilities' (Arendt 1961, 63).

29 Needless to say, this is a formal definition. Arendt doubts that 'man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things' (Arendt 1998, 10).

not come out of nowhere; it is of our own making. This is the lesson that must sink in if we are to prevent similar events in the future—or at least minimize the chance of their occurrence.

To get a better idea of this claim, consider what the American historian of medicine Charles E. Rosenberg tells us about the explanatory frameworks within which disease events are typically analysed. Historically, there are two models vying for the explanation of epidemic or pandemic diseases, the configuration view and the contamination view. The first regards the spread of an infectious disease as 'the consequence of a unique configuration of circumstances, a disturbance in a "normal"—health-maintaining and health-constituting—arrangement of climate, environment, and communal life' (Rosenberg 1992, 295). The second concentrates on 'the idea of person-to-person contagion, of the transmission of some morbid material from one individual to another' (Rosenberg 1992, 295). The difference is clear: 'The configurational style of explanation is interactive, contextual, and often environmental; the emphasis on contamination reductionist and monocausal.' (Rosenberg, 1992, 295) Despite this contrast, these views are not mutually exclusive and usually coexist; the question is which one of them takes precedence over the other (see Rosenberg 1992, 295). Whatever the answer to this question, there is one more aspect that must be factored in—namely, predisposition, the fact that some individuals are more severely affected by infectious diseases than others (see Rosenberg 1992, 296).

Upon closer examination, one comes to realize that each part of this trio targets a different aspect of the disease event. The configuration view analyses the conditions responsible for the emergence of the disease. The contamination view zooms in on the agent causing it.[30] Predisposition looks at those potentially contracting the disease.

The global response to Covid-19 is reflective of only two of these three elements, contamination and predisposition. Concerning the former, great efforts have been made to analyse the pathogen SARS-CoV-2 and develop effective vaccines, the roll-out of which is still an ongoing process. As for the latter, the measures to combat the transmission of Covid-19 have been taken to a considerable extent with a view to protecting the vulnerable (older people and those with certain medical conditions). The configuration view, on the other hand, has been widely ignored—and, in consequence, has produced next to nothing in terms of actual policies. This is particularly regrettable. For such policies strike at the root of pandemic diseases.

What, then, can be said about Covid-19 in terms of the configuration view? Like other zoonotic diseases—diseases that spill over from animals, that is—Covid-19 is what Samuel Myers and Howard Frumkin call a 'planetary health problem' (Myers/Frumkin 2020, 489). Thought to have started in the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China, a so-called wet market that sells the meat of a variety of wild animals (see Honigsbaum 2020, 262), its origin and rapid spread across the globe are the result of and a testament to our foul treatment of the natural world. In an opinion piece for *The New York Times*, David Quammen puts it thus.

30 In this sense, the contamination view amounts to a '"germ-eye" view' (Honigsbaum 2020, 282).

> We invade tropical forests and other wild landscapes, which harbor so many species and plants—and within those creatures, so many unknown viruses. We cut the trees; we kill the animals or cage them and send them to markets. We disrupt ecosystems, and we shake viruses loose from their natural hosts. When that happens, they need a new host. Often we are it. (Quammen 2020)

Hence the title Quammen chooses for his article, 'We Made the Coronavirus Epidemic'. Importantly, what is true of Covid-19 holds equally for the other epidemic and pandemic diseases (SARS, swine flu, Ebola, Zika) we have experienced over the course of the first two decades of the twenty-first century.[31] Indeed, as the medical historian Mark Honigsbaum points out, 'most cases of disease emergence can be traced to the disturbance of ecological equilibriums or alterations to the environments in which pathogens habitually reside' (Honigsbaum 2020, xviii). This fateful interference of ours takes many forms, and it usually happens for the sake of the ruthless exploitation of the world's resources—that is, to borrow a caustic formulation of Naomi Klein's, 'in the name of feeding the god of economic growth' (Klein 2015, 82), which is part and parcel of the capitalist creed. The intrusion into hitherto untouched areas to do agriculture, to acquire bushmeat, to get at their mineral resources, or to clear them for timber has caused many a virus to jump from its animal host to humans (see Myers/Frumkin 2020, 489; Vidal 2020).[32] Climate change, which is brought about in large part by our incessant burning of fossil fuels, globalization, and the growing demand for animal protein also do their bit (see Honigsbaum 2020, 268). Once a spillover event has occurred, urbanization and global trade and travel see to it that the virus quickly conquers the planet: 'By concentrating large numbers of people in cramped and often unsanitary spaces, the mega-cities of Asia, Africa, and South America … provide ideal conditions for the amplification and spread of novel pathogens.' (Honigsbaum 2020, 279–280) And thanks to international jet travel, 'an emerging virus can land in any country or continent on the globe within seventy-two hours' (Honigsbaum 2020, 280). Wuhan, as a 'key domestic and international hub with over one hundred direct flights to more than seventy countries worldwide' (Honigsbaum 2020, 280), is a perfect case in point.

31 For an account of the pandemic diseases that have afflicted humanity over the last one hundred-odd years, see Honigsbaum's insightful study *The Pandemic Century: A History of Global Contagion from the Spanish Flu to Covid-19* (see Honigsbaum 2020).

32 As Honigsbaum argues apropos the SARS outbreak in 2002, which can be traced back to civet cats sold at wet markets in Guangdong, China (see Honigsbaum 2020, 167–196), the very practice of selling wild animals, one of the main causes of spillover events, illustrates the key role capitalism, with its emphasis on competition, plays in triggering pandemic diseases. '[F]or more than three centuries Guangdong, the epicentre of the 2002 SARS outbreak, practised a subsidence [*sic*] farming model, whereby rice-farmers would raise pigs, chickens, and ducks on plots of land adjacent to rice paddies. These backyard farms were ecologically sustainable and provided all the food requirements for farmers and their families. They also produced surpluses that could be sold at market for cash, supplementing farmers' meagre incomes. But with the advent of the Livestock Revolution in the 1980s and the arrival of so-called industrial food production conglomerates this began to change. Heavily capitalized broiler companies began to undercut traditional subsistence farmers, forcing smallholders to look for new sources of protein and income. Many of them turned to farming "wild" animals, such as civet cats and pangolins. As the market for these traditional Chinese delicacies grew and they were rebranded as luxury products, wild animals started to command premium prices at "wet" markets. … [O]ne of the advantages of this style of farming is that smallholders are able to transport animals to market without the involvement of large-scale food processing firms and supermarkets.' (Honigsbaum 2020, 281)

The upshot is this. The Covid-19 pandemic is on us. It is we who are responsible for the 'unique configuration of circumstances' (Rosenberg 1992, 295) that has set it off. Our guess is that Arendt would agree with this analysis. Of course, there is no straight line running from her reflections on our embeddedness in nature to what Rosenberg dubs the configuration view. And one would be hard-pressed to mention her name among historians of medicine. Still, her keen awareness of our often destructive interactions with the natural world and of our existence as conditioned beings makes her something of a forebear of those subscribing to the configuration view—a distant one, perhaps, but a forebear nonetheless. Arendt helps us become cognizant of the fact that the way we shape our relationship with nature through our active life makes all the difference. This is what renders her thinking so pertinent to the analysis of the pandemic.

4.

If one of the lessons to be drawn from Covid-19 is that there is an intimate connection between the way we interact with the natural world and the emergence of pandemic diseases, another is surely this. We had better change our interactions with nature, 'substituting stewardship for domination, reverence for arrogance, coexistence for conquest' (Myers/Frumkin 2020, 492). Otherwise we are in for more trouble.[33] As things stand, it is only a matter of time before the next pandemic hits us.[34]

This is where our Arendt-inspired take on biopolitics, which stands in strong opposition to Agamben's interpretation of the term, enters the picture. Let us rephrase the last paragraph in Arendtian terms. If what is needed is a 'Great Transition to a new relationship with the natural world' (Myers/Frumkin 2020, 494), we must transform how we labour and consume, alter how we work and acquire material, and limit our acting into nature. For the impact we have on the natural world is mediated by the way we conduct our active life. In order to change the former, we have to change the latter. That is to say, we must render it a matter of political concern. This politicization is what we call biopolitics.[35]

Is such an understanding of biopolitics, albeit informed by Arendt's thought, even compatible with it? What about her insistence that labour and work are essentially 'unpolitical' (Arendt 1998, 208)—and, for that matter, the concomitant claim that politics is to do with the 'realm of human affairs' (Arendt 1998, 181), with things that are *between human beings*? Our response to these qualms is that we would be doing ourselves a disservice if we were to define in advance what belongs to the domain of the political and what does not. Following Rahel Jaeggi, we contend that anything that 'can be deciphered as "*man-made*" and thematized as such' (Jaeggi 2007, 246; our translation) may become

33 Quammen is perfectly clear about this. 'So when you're done worrying about this outbreak, worry about the next one. Or do something about the current circumstances.' (Quammen 2020)

34 As Honigsbaum concludes, 'reviewing the last hundred years of epidemic outbreaks, the only thing that *is* certain is that there will be new plagues and new pandemics. It is not a question of if, but when.' (Honigsbaum 2020, 283)

35 *Pace* one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper, we do not seek to define the concept of nature in Arendt. Instead, and more modestly, we ponder the possibility of changing the effect we have on the natural world via the politicization of our active life.

a matter of political concern.[36] As regards our active life and the effect it has on nature, this is certainly the case.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to present anything more than a rough outline of our conception of biopolitics. We limit ourselves to discussing what we deem its two main aspects.

The first is that our understanding of biopolitics puts Arendt's definition of acting as the ability to 'begin[] something new on our own initiative' (Arendt 1998, 177) centre stage. In other words, its primary focus is on agency, on 'man's gift of performing "miracles", that is, bringing about the infinitely improbable and establishing it as a worldly reality' (Arendt 2018b, 144). There is, to be sure, nothing much we can do about the basic fact of our embeddedness in the natural world. Indeed, Arendt's point is precisely that as active beings we cannot not interact with nature, and we would be deluding ourselves if we indulged in some fancy of a natural world unscarred by human interference. What we *can* do, however, is to alter dramatically *how* we interact with nature. However set in our ways or stuck in our routines we are, nothing hinders us from starting over. This, after all, is what makes us—to use a wonderful phrase of Arendt's —'miracle worker[s]' (Arendt 2018b, 241). We are free to set a new course. And if we are to fend off the gloomy prospect of a future where pandemic outbreaks are the norm, this is exactly what we must do.

Importantly, this politicization of our active life is the adequate response not just to Covid-19 but to most of the crises we are facing today. Think of the climate crisis, for example. What is required of us in order to drastically reduce the burning of fossil fuels is that we change the way we labour and consume, transform how we work and acquire material, and restrict our acting into nature. And, as Klein points out, for this to happen, we must break with the reigning ideology of deregulated capitalism (see Klein 2015, 18, 23, 63).[37] In other words, our conception of biopolitics unites different social concerns under a common banner. What those troubled by the prospect of yet another pandemic, the members of the climate movement, and people challenging the rule of capitalism share is the belief that we must transform our entire active life.[38] Though this belief has a somewhat radical ring to it, it stands a chance of producing actual political change. For it is part of the human make-up to be endowed with the ability to make a fresh start and, in this sense, to perform miracles. This idea is at the core of our Arendtian conception of biopolitics. Hence the stark contrast to Agamben's approach. Where we focus on agency, Agamben highlights impotence, advancing a 'narrative of fated necessity' (Gündoğdu

36 According to Jaeggi, Arendt's view of politics is therefore best conceived of as 'a *theory of politicization*' (Jaeggi, 242; our translation).

37 Not mincing words, Klein argues that 'our economic system and our planetary system are now at war. Or, more accurately, our economy is at war with many forms of life on earth, including human life. What the climate needs to avoid collapse is a contraction in humanity's use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it's not the laws of nature.' (Klein 2015, 21)

38 As Greta Thunberg, the founder of the *Fridays for Future* campaign, puts it, 'we can't save the world by playing by the rules. / Because the rules have to be changed. / Everything needs to change. And it has to start today.' (Thunberg 2019, 11)

2012, 15) that casts most of humanity as helpless pawns at the mercy of the sovereign, pummelled from one state of exception to the next.[39]

The second point that merits attention is that our notion of biopolitics is reflective of Arendt's claim that 'one can only *act* with the help of others' (Arendt 2018b, 242).[40] Action is a collective effort. Although we can make a move as individuals, nothing will come of it if others refuse to come to our aid. This is what Arendt calls 'the original interdependence of action' (Arendt 1998, 189). In 'Freedom and Politics, a Lecture', she puts it thus.

> In action, beginning and performance merge into each other, and, when applied to politics, this means that the person who takes the initiative and thus starts to lead must always move among those who join in to help him as his peers, and neither as a leader among his servants nor as a master among his apprentices or disciples. This is what Herodotus meant when he said that to be free was neither to rule nor to be ruled, and that therefore men could only be free in ἰσονομια, as democracy was originally called, in being among one's equals. (Arendt 2018b, 243)

From this it follows that in Arendt action is inherently democratic. It is to do with the collective endeavour of equals, not with the dictates of some elite. This understanding of action chimes perfectly with the fact that the transformation of our relationship with the natural world is typically the concern not of governments but of civil society. Think, again, of the climate crisis. The most we can expect from our official political leaders, it seems, is a perfunctory commitment to take some minor steps towards more sustainable economic development. It is non-governmental actors—particularly young people determined to take a stand not only for their own future but for that of generations to come—who are championing the cause of a symbiosis between humankind and nature and are fighting for the radical change this requires. The biopolitics we have in mind, then, is a biopolitics from below. Again, the contrast to Agamben's interpretation of biopolitics is striking. While we take action to be a collective democratic effort, Agamben conceives of it in terms of the prerogative of the sovereign to produce bare life.

Let us close with a brief summary. Agamben's and our conception of biopolitics, though both inspired by Arendt, could not be more different. In Agamben, biopolitics is about the production of bare life at the hands of the sovereign. What he presents us with, in other words, is a biopolitics from above that renders those it affects powerless. In this sense, his take on biopolitics is truly a generalization of Arendt's analysis of totalitarian domination. For, as she tells us in 'Freedom and Politics, a Lecture', what totalitarianism amounts to is, properly understood, not a 'total politicization of life' but the 'abandonment of politics' (Arendt 2018b, 223), as it seeks to 'kill off all forms of spontaneity' (Arendt 2018b, 241). And because for Agamben biopolitics is totalitarianism writ large, he ends up with a theory of depoliticization.

39 Our wager is that Arendt's claim that 'historical processes are created and constantly interrupted by human initiative' (Arendt 2018b, 240) feels entirely alien to Agamben.

40 The idea that acting is possible only in concert with others is from Edmund Burke (see Burke 1909, 375).

What we propose, on the other hand, is a biopolitics from below that highlights agency, rendering our entire active life a matter of political concern. As we see it, biopolitics is a collective democratic affair and aims at what one might term, somewhat cumbersomely, the hyperpoliticization of life.*

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