

## **Biopolitics and the dissemination of violence: the Arendtian critique of the present**

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Since Auschwitz, nothing has ever happened that could  
be lived as a refutation of Auschwitz.  
To live with the sensation of helplessness: today,  
probably this is the moral state under which, by  
resisting, we could be faithful to our times.  
Imre Kertész

### **The contemporary experience of the political 'as' violence**

It would be hard to find another thesis in Political Theory that is more assertive and unquestionable than the traditional identification of violence and politics; this is true to such an extent that the possibility of a non-violent politics or of tracing a conceptual distinction between power and violence becomes a chimera. No one doubts that violence is crucially inherent to political processes, and if it is true that not all violent phenomena are political phenomena, we feel more than certain that there would be no politics without violence or beyond it. Have we not been sufficiently warned - by political thinkers as different as Marx, Weber or Schmitt - that violence pertains to the core of the political? But, on the other hand, does the mere repetition of so-called truisms help us in any way to elucidate the most important political phenomena of our present?

As we know, Hannah Arendt is among those very few thinkers in contemporary political theory who dared to refuse the strict identification of politics and violence, arguing that violence is not necessarily inherent to the political, or that violence and power are not the same. In works such as *The Human Condition* and *On Violence*, among others, Arendt tried to demonstrate that while power is spontaneously generated by collective and concerted actions of a plurality of citizens, violence is mute and intended to disperse, silence and isolate them, disrupting the civic bounds that tie them together in acts and speeches. While power is an end in itself, since it is the very amalgam that unifies political agents in the public space, violence is purely instrumental, since it is a means to achieve a definite end through coercion. In short, while power may generate the establishment of a transitory consensus, which does not eliminate the possibility of dissent and conflicts, pure violence is merely destructive, being incapable of creating anything new, and so on.

In the present text<sup>1</sup>, however, I do not intend to follow up and discuss the Arendtian analysis on the philosophical origins of the traditional equation of politics and violence,

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<sup>1</sup> This text has been firstly published in *Pasajes de Pensamiento Contemporáneo*, Spain, Valencia, n. 13, Winter of 2004. Translations are my own except where noticed

nor will I explore the extremely important consequences of her distinction between power and violence regarding the possibility of a radically democratic politics<sup>2</sup>. What concerns me here is to explore Arendt's diagnosis of the present, in which politics has been transformed into a wide variety of different violent phenomena. Only if we do not consent in repeating the old and traditional identification of politics and violence will we be able to reconsider and rethink the meaning of our present experience of the political 'as' violence. After all, Arendt's thesis that power and violence are not the same - since the fundamental political phenomenon is not domination, but the collective generation of novelty in deeds and speeches - does not contradict her view that, throughout Western history and up to the present - or perhaps even more so nowadays -, politics has been experienced as violence. In fact, preventive wars have been declared and promoted by countries that represent themselves as absolute good fighting absolute evil in order to save humanity and to prevent future possible evil deeds. To achieve these goals, such countries may disregard previous international juridical agreements thus imposing their political and economic hegemony in an increasingly more violent and insecure world. Suicidal fundamentalists, secret organizations or even the regular armed forces of a State continuously launch terrorist attacks aiming at no less than the complete annihilation of its opponents. It is also well known that the twentieth century actually began with the utilization of chemical and bacteriological mass destructive weapons whose manufacture rapidly became more and more lethal, culminating with nuclear weapons able to destroy all life on the planet. With considerable frequency States do impose preventive and repressive policies against immigrants and refugees, as well as against political movements that organize the unemployed, non-conformists of all sorts, displaced and homeless people, among many other 'undesirable' social groups. Last but not least, consider the so called 'human waste' that cannot be integrated in the capitalist system of globalized production and consumption, a whole mass of human beings that has to be seductively domesticated or put under strictly repressive vigilance so that new superfluous human beings can be constantly produced and reproduced. By considering these different contemporary experiences of politics 'as' violence, one should inquire: is there any link or bond between them? Has Arendt anything to say in order to render them more understandable?

I believe that she does have many important things to say about those phenomena and to start trying to answer the above mentioned questions I would like to propose a rather unusual hypothesis for Arendt's readers: the notion of biopolitics, which is not an Arendtian one, would be the missing link that fully articulates Arendt's reflections concerning the tragic contemporary shifts of the political, in *The Human Condition*, with her close analysis of totalitarian regimes, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In other words, the notion of biopolitics would permit us to highlight the Arendtian diagnosis of the present in terms of the dissemination of violence and of the growing meaninglessness of the political in our bureaucratized, mass- and market-oriented representative democracies, that is, our actually existent democracies. This hypothesis is unconventional not only because the notion of biopolitics is absent in Arendt's thought, but also because it

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<sup>2</sup> I have extensively dealt with these subject matters in my book *O pensamento à sombra da ruptura: política e filosofia em Hannah Arendt*. RJ: Paz e Terra, 2000.

opens the path to some conclusions that she did not expressly or fully develop. However, as I will argue, if those conclusions stray from the exact meaning of Arendt's texts, they certainly do not contradict the spirit of Arendt's work on politics. This interpretive approach is inspired by Giorgio Agamben's work, *Homo sacer: sovereign power and bare life*, in which he argues that both Arendt and Foucault were the first contemporary thinkers to understand the radical changes suffered by the political in modern times.<sup>3</sup> According to Agamben, these changes culminate in the Nazi and Stalinist extermination camps with the transformation of citizens in the 'bare life' (*nuda vita*) of the *homo sacer*, the prototype of a man whose murder is no crime. According to Agamben's researches, the *homo sacer* was an old and rather obscure juridical figure of the Roman law that designated a man who had been excluded from both divine and human legislation. In other words, the paradox that the *homo sacer* - the sacrificial man - embodied in himself was that the only way in which he still belonged to the code of the Roman law was by means of his total exclusion from it. In other words, the *homo sacer* was deprived of any legal protection against anyone who attempted to murder him, providing that this murder was not supported by legal procedures or religious rites. This is not the place for extensive commentaries on Agamben's work, nor will I attempt to compare thinkers as different as Arendt and Foucault. Rather, I would like to stress the aspects in which Arendt's, Foucault's and Agamben's reflections converge, tracing a biopolitical diagnosis of the present.<sup>4</sup> In short, I believe that the introduction of the notion of biopolitics in Arendt's thinking, which is not at all arbitrary, as I will try to demonstrate, would permit us to better understand the correlation between the most important manifestations of contemporary political violence: the extraordinary violence of totalitarian disaster, and the ordinary violence of our mass- and market-democracies, corroded by the loss of any radical political alternative to capitalism. Although assuming the risks of reading Arendt beyond Arendt, I believe that I remain faithful to the core of her own thinking: at last, was it not she herself that emphasized interweaving political thought and the crucial political experiences of the present?

In order to justify introducing the notion of biopolitics where it does not originally appear, it is necessary to understand in what sense biopolitical violence has become the common denominator of contemporary politics, reducing the distance between modern mass representative democracies and totalitarian regimes. This idea has to be carefully developed since, as it is well known, Arendt considered totalitarianism to be a disruptive and unprecedented regime, one that broke with all past forms of political domination and violence, such as dictatorships, tyrannies and despotisms. In her detailed analysis of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt developed a careful evaluation of the structural characteristics they shared and distinguished them

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3 Agamben, G. *Homo sacer. El poder soberano y la nuda vida*. Valencia: Pre-textos, 1988

4 The concept of 'biopolitics' first appeared in a 1974 conference titled 'The birth of social medicine', later published in *Dits et écrits*. It was also discussed by Foucault in his *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 and later developed in the seminar course at the *College de France* of the winter semester of 1976-1977, posthumously published under the title of *Il faut defendre la société*. It was only from the early nineties onwards that Agamben, Hardt and Negri, Žižek and many others paid close attention to the concept of biopolitics and fully developed it in many different aspects, although maintaining its specific core, the politicization of life and the bringing of the phenomenon of life to the center of the public sphere with its rather catastrophic results.

from all other political regimes.<sup>5</sup> It is not my objective to counter her argument on the crucial structural differences that make all the difference between our actually existing democracies and totalitarian regimes, but to stress that biopolitical violence has become the common material underlying our contemporary political experiences. It is not a matter of merely blurring all differences and thus of simplistically identifying totalitarianism and representative democracies, although one should also be attentive to the political blackmail implied by the obstinate repetition of a simplistic opposition of totalitarianism and mass democracies. Slavoj Žižek has aptly described the ideological use of the concept of totalitarianism as a helpful admonition that actually uses the specter of a possible resurgence of totalitarian regimes to undermine any radical political alternative. This political blackmail works like this: it is better to accept the inequalities and absurdities of capitalism with its liberal economic and political foundations than to abolish it through totalitarian and genocidal regimes.<sup>6</sup> However, I believe that Žižek goes too far when he detects this ideological misuse of the notion of totalitarianism in Arendt's reflections since her own critical analysis of totalitarianism was never meant as a blind embrace of liberal democracies, an aspect that was perceived as an unacceptable betrayal by critics such as Sheldon Wolin, among others.<sup>7</sup> To talk about totalitarianism today does not necessarily imply that one is threatening the critics of liberal democracy with the risks of the reappearance of the Gulag or of Auschwitz, since the critical detection of some rather dangerous continuities regarding the historical background in which both totalitarianism and liberal democracies have appeared is a crucial aspect of Arendt's and Agamben's analyses, as I will try to show. In other words, the analysis of totalitarianism remains a fundamental way of realizing and understanding the totalitarian dangers that surround our actually existing democracies. What really matters now is to understand the rather perverse biopolitical mechanisms through which human beings have been both included and excluded from the political and economical spheres in mass- and market oriented democracies and in totalitarian regimes.

Moreover, to consider totalitarianism as a disruptive event in Western history does not mean to refuse understanding it as a historical phenomenon, that is, as the crystallization of different historical elements that have become constitutive of the political in late modern times and, therefore, also have something to do with liberal democracies. In other words, although totalitarian regimes should not be considered as the necessary pitfall of Modernity, they should never be viewed as a mere accident in Modernity's path. To recall Zygmunt Bauman's Arendtian inspired analysis, totalitarianism has to be understood in the historic context rendered possible by the conjunction of modern science and technology, bureaucratic administration and mass murder, all of which are

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5 I have dealt at length with Arendt's characterization of Totalitarianism as a disruptive form of domination in my article "Hannah Arendt e o evento totalitário como cristalização histórica" in *Origens do Totalitarismo, 50 anos depois*. RJ: Relume Dumar, 2001.

6 See Žižek, S., *Quién dijo Totalitarismo? Cinco intervenciones sobre el (mal) uso de una noci*Ūn. Valencia, PrÈ-Textos, 2002, p. 13.

7 See Wolin, S.: "Hannah Arendt: democracy and the political", in *The Realm of Humanitas: responses to the writings of Hannah Arendt*. NY, Peter Lang, 1990. According to Žižek, if Arendt is nowadays praised in intellectual circles committed to the left this is only the "clearest sign of the theoretical defeat of the left; that the left has accepted the central coordinates of liberal democracy ('democracy' against 'totalitarianism') and is trying to redefine its (op)position *inside* of this space". Cf. Žižek, S., *op. cit.*, p. 13.

suddenly brought together by the desire of purifying and embellishing the so-called “garden of politics”.<sup>8</sup> One should not forget that if such a desire is less present in liberal democracies than in totalitarian regimes, both of them share a substantially common historical background. In fact, many of those modern historical elements that crystallized in totalitarian regimes still remain vastly present in our times, such as racism, xenophobia, political apathy and indifference, economic and territorial imperialism, the use of lies and violence in mass proportions as a means to dominate whole populations, the multiplication of homelessness, of refugees, of those with no country, as well as the growing superfluousness of a huge mass of human beings deprived of citizenship and economic dignity. Under these conditions we should be attentive not only to the possible appearance of new totalitarian regimes, but also to the quasi-totalitarian elements that stand right in the core of our representative mass democracies. At the end of her analysis of totalitarianism, Arendt herself warned us that as long as huge masses of superfluous human beings still abound in the present world it would always remain very tempting to any regime to resort to totalitarian measures in order to 'solve' contemporary political dilemmas:

The danger of the corpse factories and holes of oblivion is that today, with populations and homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think of our world in utilitarian terms. Political, social, and economic events everywhere are in a silent conspiracy with totalitarian instruments devised for making men superfluous. The Nazis and the Bolsheviks can be sure that their factories of annihilation which demonstrate the swiftest solution to the problem of overpopulation, of economically superfluous and socially rootless human masses, are much of an attraction as a warning. Totalitarian solutions may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worth of man.<sup>9</sup>

## **Towards the notion of biopolitics in Arendt's thought**

What does it mean to characterize the present equation of politics and violence in terms of the paradigm of biopolitics? And how can this non-Arendtian notion make any sense in Arendt's work? Let us begin with the first question. My contention is that the peculiar trait of the political since the turn of the nineteenth century up to the contemporary world is the paradox of the simultaneous elevation of life to the status of supreme good and the multiplication of instances in which life is degraded to the utmost. I think that the constitutive element of the political in the present is the reduction of citizenship to the lower level of 'bare life', as Agamben understands it, an operation that implies a certain politicization of life through which human life is simultaneously divided into the categories of life included and protected by the political and economical community and

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<sup>8</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt. *Modernidad y Holocausto*. Toledo: Sequitur, 1997, p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> See Arendt, H. *Totalitarianism. Part three of The Origins of Totalitarianism*. NY, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1968, p. 157.

life excluded and unprotected, left to degradation and annihilation.<sup>10</sup> The answer to the second question, that is, how the notion of biopolitics fit into Arendt's work, is contained in a nutshell in Arendt's thesis regarding the 'unnatural growth of the natural', a rather peculiar formula with which she intended to define the main historical transformations suffered by the political in the late modern age.<sup>11</sup> The Arendtian formula presented in *The Human Condition* comprises different historical phenomena originating from the outcome of the Industrial Revolution, such as the generalization of the capitalist form of production of wealth in abundance; the widening of the realm of human necessities, such as laboring and consuming, up to the point in which life itself, that is, the eternal life process of the human species, became the supreme good and the most important political subject-matter; the elevation of laboring activity to the level of the most important human activity; the reduction of men to the status of the animal laborans, the prototype of man conceived as a living being whose main necessities are tied down to the continuous cycle of laboring and consuming; the requirement of the continuous production and reproduction of goods in abundance, so that nature was reduced to no more than a stock of natural resources abused to the point of almost disappearing from the surface of the planet; finally, the transformation of politics into the administrative office responsible for the promotion of human happiness by securing the private vital interests of the animal laborans. In order to guarantee them it was necessary that the public sphere be transformed into a social one, i.e., into the market of private and economic exchanges devoted to the production and reproduction of abundant goods destined to almost immediate consumption. These goods have to be continuously produced and reproduced through ever-increasing laboring activity in order to be massively consumed, thus generating an unbreakable cycle. Arendt's thesis is that from the nineteenth century onwards the political and its constitutive elements have become increasingly over-determined by private social and economic interests - governed today by financial globalization and free-market ideological discourses - to the extent that it has been transformed into the activity of managing the production and reproduction of the animal laborans' life and happiness. To put it in Antonio Negri's and Michael Hardt's terms, the industrial and financial powers of the present produce not only commodities, but also subjectivities, needs, social relations, bodies and minds, since they actually produce the producers.<sup>12</sup>

The most evident consequence of this historical process is that we do not even know if there is still any space left for the establishment of new radical political alternatives, since all State policies, most specially in underdeveloped countries, are always predetermined by the rather unstable flows of international financial investments and stock-exchange

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<sup>10</sup> I would like to observe that I am not espousing here Agamben's main thesis concerning biopolitics as the ontological core of the political in the Western world. According to him, Western politics is based on the sovereign decision of the polis regarding those who can and those who cannot be part of the political community, a decision that thus produces 'bare life' or unqualified life (mere *zoe*) that can be discarded. This ontological thesis is problematic inasmuch as it prevents us from rethinking and redefining our contemporary political scenario beyond its biopolitical historical configuration. See the interesting rendering of Agamben's book by Andrew Norris in his article "The exemplary exception". *Philosophical and political decisions in Giorgio Agamben's Homo sacer*" *Radical Philosophy*, n. 119, may-june of 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Arendt, H.: *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p.47.

<sup>12</sup> Negri, Antonio; Hardt, Michael. *Imperio*. Barcelona, Paidós, 2002, p. 45.

fluctuations. The results of these historical changes promoted by the advance of capitalism imply many losses, according to Arendt: the loss of the political as the constituting space opened up and sustained by new political relations in the world, with the consequent surrendering of the spaces of freedom to that of necessity; the loss of free and spontaneous action to repetitive and predictable behavior;<sup>13</sup> the invasion and destruction of the public and shared common space by private lobbies and other hidden pressure groups which easily escape the mechanisms of public vigilance; the substitution of blind and mute violence for the possibility of persuasively exchanging opinions; the submission of the plurality of political ideas to the so-called unique thinking governed by the inexorable laws of the economic market; the weakening of the citizen's ability to consent and dissent and the increase of their tendency to blindly obey; in short, the obfuscation of people's ability to bring about political novelties through common creativity by the tedious reduction of the exercise of freedom to the solitary instant of depositing a vote; and the reduction of the political arena to the disputes among the highly enclosed and bureaucratized party machines, not to mention repressive State actions and the media campaigns of demoralization mobilized against all those political agents that do not accept the so called rules of the game - in the media's general discourse they will be called anarchistic rioters, anti-system terrorists and the like. The contemporary social production of wealth in abundance as connected to mass consumerism has transformed human beings into laboring animals and the political citizen into a consumer agent in the democratic-supermarket: s/he has a certain variety of opinions to choose among, provided that s/he does not question the limited political options offered by the whole system. And how could one question a political system in which all political parties declare that their aim is to protect citizens' life interests and life quality? As Agamben has stated, to question the intrinsic limitations of our political system has become more and more difficult since political debates today have taken on the task of caring, controlling and enjoying the benefits of bare life: traditional political distinctions (such as right and left, liberalism and totalitarianism, private and public) have lost their clarity and intelligibility, entering into a zone of indetermination, ever since bare life became their fundamental determination.<sup>14</sup> When 'capitalism has become one with reality', a historical situation that has been aptly characterized by Santiago Lopez Petit under the concept of 'postmodern fascism', there appears a time in which, according to Marina Garcés, "we are condemned to make choices in an elective space in which there are no options. Everything is possible, but we can do nothing"<sup>15</sup>. In other words, our actual political experience is the experience of the

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<sup>13</sup> See Arendt, H. *The Human Condition*, op. cit., p. 321: "Socialized mankind is that state of society where only one interest rules, and the subject of this interest is either classes or man-kind, but neither man nor men. The point is that now even the last trace of action in what men were doing, the motive implied in self-interest, disappeared. What was left was a 'natural force', the force of the life process itself, to which all men and all human activities were equally submitted and whose only aim, if it had an aim at all, was survival of the animal species man. None of the higher capacities of man was any longer necessary to connect individual life with the life of the species; individual life became part of the life process, and to labor, to assure the continuity of one's own life and the life of his family, was all that was needed."

<sup>14</sup> Agamben, G. *Homo sacer. El poder soberano y la nuda vida*. Op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>15</sup> See Petit, Santiago Lopez. *El Estado guerra*. Hondarribia, 2003; see also *El infinito y la nada. El querer vivir como desafío*. Barcelona, Ediciones Bellaterra, 2003. From Garcés, M. see "Posibilidad y Subversión". In *Archipiélago, Cuadernos de Crítica de la Cultura*, n. 53. Madrid, Editorial Archipiélago, nov. 2002, p. 15; and

vanishing of all creative political alternatives, since the practices and discourses of the so called anti-globalization movements - 'another globalization is possible', and the like - are to a large extent unable to create real alternatives to the economic roles that they are intent on confronting.

These historic transformations have not only wrought more violence at the core of the political but have also redefined its character by giving rise to biopolitical violence. As we have stated, what characterizes biopolitics is the dynamic of both protecting and abandoning life through its inclusion and exclusion from the political and economic community. Thus, in Arendtian terms, the aspect that best describes biopolitical danger is the risk of converting the animal laborans into what Agamben has described as the homo sacer, the human being that can be put to death by anyone and whose death does not imply any crime whatsoever.<sup>16</sup> In other terms, when politics is conceived of as biopolitics, in the sense of increasing life and happiness of the national animal laborans, the Nation-state becomes more and more violent and murderous. If we link Arendt's thesis from *The Human Condition* to those defended in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* we understand that the Nazi and Stalinist extermination camps were the most refined laboratories designed for the annihilation of the 'bare life' of the animal laborans, although they were not the only instances devoted to human slaughter. Hannah Arendt does not center her analysis only on the process of the extermination itself; she also discusses the historical process under which large-scale exterminations were rendered possible: the emergence of the animal laborans out of uprootedness and superfluousness of modern masses. She gives us a hint of this understanding when she affirms, in "Ideology and Terror: a new form of government", a text written in 1953 and later added to the second edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in 1958, that isolation is that impasse into which men are driven when the political sphere of their lives is destroyed. Isolated man who lost his place in the political realm of action is deserted by the world of things as well, if he is no longer recognized as homo faber but treated as an animal laborans whose necessary 'metabolism with nature' is of concern of no one. Isolation then become loneliness. Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government, and for ideology or logicity, the preparation of its executioners and victims, is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all.<sup>17</sup>

The historical process of converting the homo faber, the prototype of the human being as the creator of durable objects and institutions, into the animal laborans and, later on, into the homo sacer, can be retraced in Arendtian terms to the nineteenth century wave of imperialist colonization. In this process, European countries imposed well-planned administrative genocide in African territories as a means of domination and exploitation. As argued in the second volume of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, European colonialist

also En las prisiones de lo posible. Barcelona, Ediciones Bellaterra, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> See Agamben, G. Homo sacer. El poder soberano y la nuda vida. op. cit., p. 112.

<sup>17</sup> See Arendt, H.: Totalitarianism, op. cit., p. 173.

countries combined racism and bureaucracy and thus promoted the "most terrible massacres in recent history, the Boers' extermination of the Hottentot tribes, the wild murdering by Carl Peters in German Southeast Africa, the decimation of the peaceful Congo population - from 20 to 40 million reduced to 8 million people; and finally, perhaps the worst of all, it resulted in the triumphant introduction of such means of pacification into ordinary, respectable foreign policies"<sup>18</sup>. This vital equation between protecting and destroying life was also at the core of the two World Wars, as well as in many other local warlike conflicts, in the course of which whole populations have become stateless or deprived of a free political space. It is more than symptomatic that, in spite of all their structural political differences, the United States of Roosevelt, the Soviet Russia of Stalin, the Nazi Germany of Hitler and the Fascist Italy of Mussolini were all conceived of as States devoted to the production and reproduction of the needs of the national animal laborans. According to Agamben, since our contemporary politics does not recognize no other value than life, Nazism and Fascism, that is, regimes which have taken bare life as its supreme political criterion, are bound to remain unfortunately timely.<sup>19</sup> Finally, it is quite obvious that this same vital logic of enforcing and annihilating life still continues to be effective both in post-industrial and in underdeveloped countries, since economic growth depends on the increase of unemployment and on many forms of political exclusion.

When politics is reduced to the tasks of enforcing, preserving and promoting life and happiness of the animal laborans it really does not matter if those objectives require increasingly violent acts, both in national and international milieus. Therefore, it should not be surprising if today the legality or illegality of the State's violent acts have become a secondary aspect in political discussions, since what really matters is to protect and stimulate the life of the National (or, depending on the case, Western) animal laborans. In order to maintain the sacrosanct ideals of increased mass production and increased mass consumerism developed countries can ignore the finite character of natural reserves that can jeopardize the future of humanity and thus refuse to sign International Protocols regarding the conservation of natural resources and diminishing the emission of dangerous polluting gases. They can also launch preventive humanitarian attacks, interventions or wars, disregard basic civil rights everywhere, create detention camps that escape all legislation, like Guantanamo<sup>20</sup>, enforce the Airport jails where suspects are kept incommunicable, or multiply refugee camps for those who no longer have a homeland or have been evacuated from zones of conflict. Some countries have even imprisoned whole populations in ghettos or built up concrete walls to physically isolate them from other communities and thus give rise to new forms of social, political and economical apartheid. In short, there are countries that can allow themselves to impose the highest level of violence possible against suspect individuals or political regimes - the so-called 'rogue-countries', les ...tats voyous<sup>21</sup> - which, in one way or another, supposedly interfere with the

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<sup>18</sup> See Arendt, H. *Imperialism. Part Two of the Origins of Totalitarianism*. NY, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1968, p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> See Agamben, G. *Homo sacer. El poder soberano y la nuda vida*. Op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> See Agamben, G. *Stato di Eccezione*. Turim, Bollati Boringhieri editori, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> See Derrida, J. *Voyous*. Paris, Galilée, 2003.

security, maintenance and growth of their own national life cycle. If, according to Arendt, the common world is the institutional in-between space that should survive the natural cycle of life and death of human generations, what happens in modern mass societies based on continuous laboring and consuming activities is the progressive abolition of the institutional artificial barriers that separate and protect the human world from the forces of nature.<sup>22</sup> This is what explains the contemporary sensation of vertigo, instability and unhappiness, as well as the impossibility of combining stability and novelty in order to think and act in a politically creative way.<sup>23</sup> However, what should not be missed in the Arendtian argument is that in the context of a “waste economy, in which things must be almost as quickly devoured and discarded as they have appeared in the world, if the process itself is not to come to a sudden catastrophic end”<sup>24</sup>, it becomes not only possible, but also necessary, that people be taken as raw material ready to be consumed, discarded or annihilated. Therefore, when Arendt announces the “grave danger that eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption”<sup>25</sup>, we should also remember that human annihilation, elevated to the status of a supreme and managed end in totalitarian regimes, still continues to occur, although in different degrees and by different methods, in the contemporary dark holes of the oblivion such as miserably poor Third World neighborhoods and Penitentiaries, underpaid and infra-human labor camps, not to mention slave labor camps, always in the name of protecting the vital interests of the animal laborans.

To talk about the process of human consumption is not to employ a metaphoric language but to properly describe the matter in question. Heidegger had already realized it when in the notes written during the late thirties and later published under the title of *Overcoming Metaphysics*. In these notes he stated that the differences between war and peace had already been blurred in a society in which “metaphysical man, the animal rationale, gets fixed as the laboring animal”, so that “labor is now reaching the metaphysical rank of the unconditional objectification of everything present”.<sup>26</sup> Heidegger had also already understood that once the world becomes fully determined by the cyclical ‘circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption’ it is at the brink of becoming an ‘unworld’ (Unwelt), since “man, who no longer conceals his character of being the most important raw material, is also drawn into the process. Man is ‘the most important raw material’ because he remains the subject of all consumption”<sup>27</sup>. After the Second World War and the dissemination of detailed information concerning the death factories Heidegger pushed his criticisms even further, since he then acknowledged that even the understanding of man in terms of both subject and object of the consumption process was inadequate to describe the whole process of planned mass annihilation. He then came to

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22 Arendt, H.: *The Human Condition*. Op. cit., p. 126.

23 Arendt, H.: *The Human Condition*. Op. cit., p. 134: “the universal demand for happiness and the widespread unhappiness in our society (and these are but two sides of the same coin) are among the most persuasive signs that we have begun to live in a labor society which lacks enough laboring to keep it content”.

24 Arendt, H.: *The Human Condition*. Op. cit., p. 134.

25 Arendt, H.: *The Human Condition*. Op. cit., p. 133.

26 See Heidegger, M. “Overcoming Metaphysics”, in Wolin, R. (ed.) *The Heidegger Controversy*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1993, p. 68, translated by Joan Stambaugh. In another passage, at p. 85, he affirms that “War has become a distortion of the consumption of beings which is continued in peace”.

27 See Heidegger, M. “Overcoming Metaphysics”. Op. cit., pp. 87 and 84.

understand this process of human mass dehumanization in terms of the conversion of man into nothing more than an 'item of the reserve fund for the fabrication of corpses' (Bestandsstücke eines Bestandes der Fabrikation von Leichen), always ready to be manipulated, managed and destined to technological production and destruction. What happened in the 'extermination camps' (Vernichtungsläger) was not that millions of people met death as their own most fundamental possibility; much to the contrary, their essential possibility of dying was definitely stolen from them and they merely 'passed away' in the process of being 'unconspicuously liquidated' (unauffällig liquidiert).<sup>28</sup> Men as an animal laborans (Arendt), as homo sacer (Agamben), as an item of the reserve fund (Heidegger) are descriptions of the very same process of dehumanization by means of which humankind and human life are reduced to the lowest status of living and unqualified raw material. As argued by Agamben, when it becomes impossible to differentiate between bios and zoe, that is, when bare and unqualified life is transformed into a qualified "form of life"<sup>29</sup>, we can then recognize the emergence of a biopolitical epoch in which States promote the animalization of man by policies that aim at both protecting and destroying human life. Such considerations favor Agamben's thesis concerning the widespread presence of the homo sacer in the contemporary world: "if it is true that un-sacrificial life is the figure that our time proposes to us, although life has become eliminable in an unprecedented measure, then the bare life of the homo sacer concerns us in a particular way. If today there is not a single predetermined figure of the sacrificial man, perhaps that is because all of us have virtually become homines sacri".<sup>30</sup>

By discussing the changes in the way power was conceived of and exercised at the turn of the nineteenth-century, Foucault had firstly realized that when life turned out to be a constitutive political element, one that had to be carefully managed, calculated, ruled and normalized by means of different "caring" policies, giving rise to biopolitical measures, these policies soon became murderous ones. When the Sovereign's actions became destined to promote and stimulate the growth of life beyond the task of merely imposing violent death, wars turned into more and more bloodshed and extermination became a regular procedure both within and outside of the Nation. After the constitution of the modern biopolitical paradigm, says Foucault, political conflicts aim at preserving and intensifying the life of the winners, so that enemies cease to be political opponents and come to be seen as biological entities: it is not enough to defeat them, they must be exterminated since they constitute risks to the health of the race, people or community. Foucault thus characterizes the historical consequences that the emergence and consolidation of the modern biopolitical paradigm implied at the turn to the nineteenth-century: death that was based on the right of the sovereign is now manifested as simply the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain or develop its life. Yet wars

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<sup>28</sup>See Heidegger, M. Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge, Gesamtausgabe 79, Frankfurt a.M., Vittorio Klostermann, 1994, p. 56. I examine some similarities between Arendt's and Heidegger's analysis of the extermination process led at the death factories in my text "Heidegger, a essência da técnica e as fábricas da morte: notas sobre uma questão controversal in Fenomenologia Hoje. Porto-Alegre, Ed. PUCRGS, 2000.

<sup>29</sup>Agamben, G.: Homo sacer. El poder soberano y la nuda vida. Op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>30</sup>Agamben, G. Homo sacer. El poder soberano y la nuda vida. Op. cit., p. 147. In another passage, the author affirms that bare life is not anymore confined in any particular place in contemporary societies, but "inhabits in the biological body of all living being". See Agamben, G.: Homo sacer. El poder soberano y la nuda vida. Op. cit., p. 177.

were never as bloody as they have been since the nineteenth-century, and all things being equal, never before did regimes visit such holocausts on their own populations. But this formidable power of death Ö now presents itself as the counterpart of a power that exerts a positive influence on life that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations. Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital. It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed. And through a turn that closes the circle, as the technology of wars have caused them to tend increasingly toward all-out destruction, the decision that initiates them and the one that terminates them are in fact increasingly informed by the naked question of survival. The atomic situation is now at the end of point of this process: the power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individual's continued existence. The principle underlying the tactics of battle - that one has to be capable of killing in order to go on living - has become the principle that defines the strategy of states. But the existence in case is no longer the juridical existence of sovereignty; at stake is the biological existence of a population. If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers, this is not because of a recent return of the ancient right to kill; it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population..<sup>31</sup>

Thus, under the biopolitical paradigm “the other's death is not only merely my life, in the sense of my personal security; the other's death, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or of the degenerated or abnormal), is what will render life in general saner; saner and more pure”<sup>32</sup> In *On Violence*, Arendt argued a similar thesis concerning the violent character of racist or naturalist conceptions of politics. According to Arendt, “nothing could be theoretically more dangerous than the tradition of organic thought in political matters”, in which power and violence are interpreted in terms of biological metaphors that can only induce and produce more violence, especially where racial matters are involved. Racism as an ideological system of thought is inherently violent and murderous because it attacks natural organic data that, as such, cannot be changed by any power or persuasion, so that all that can be done when conflicts become radicalized is to “exterminate” the other.<sup>33</sup> Biopolitical violence, the specific character of different violent phenomena underlying both totalitarianism and the quasi-totalitarian elements of modern mass democracies, is the tragic inheritance sustained by all kinds of naturalized conceptions of the political. According to her views, all forms of naturalizing the political

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<sup>31</sup> See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, volume one (translated by Robert Hurley). NY, Vintage Books, Random House, 1990, pp. 136-137.

<sup>32</sup> [1] Foucault, M. *Em defesa da sociedade*, op. cit., p. 305.

<sup>33</sup> See Arendt, H. *On Violence*. NY, A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1970, pp. 75-76. Besides, Arendt also notes that “so long as we talk in non-political, biological terms, the glorifiers of violence can appeal to the undeniable fact that in the household of nature destruction and creation are but two sides of the natural process, so that collective violent action, quite apart from its inherent attraction, may appear as natural a prerequisite for the collective life of mankind as the struggle for survival and violent death for continuing life in the animal kingdom.”

harm the egalitarian political artificiality without which no defense and 'validation of human freedom and dignity' are possible. It was the analysis of the terrible experience of both political and economic refugees, of those interned in different kinds of concentration camps, of those left with no home and all those who have lost their own place in the world, that showed her that nature - and, of course, human nature - cannot ground and secure any right or any democratic politics. She herself suffered the consequences of being left with no homeland between 1933 and 1951. This denial of any rights whatsoever showed her the paradox that the naturalistic understanding and foundation of the Rights of Man implied, since once those rights ceased to be recognized and enforced by a political community, their "unalienable" character simply vanished, living unprotected exactly those very human beings that mostly needed them: "The Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of a sovereign state".<sup>34</sup>

The core of her argument is that the loss of the Rights of Man did not per se deprive a human being of his/her life, liberty, property, equality before the law, freedom of expression or the pursuit of happiness; the real 'calamity' was that people in these circumstances "no longer belong to any community whatsoever. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them"<sup>35</sup>. In other words, nationalistic and racialized biopolitics has produced a huge mass of people that have no access to what Arendt has called as the "right to have rights" insofar as they have been stripped of their "right to belong to some kind of organized community": "Man, it turns out, can lose all so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him from humanity"<sup>36</sup>. The "abstract nakedness" of merely being a human being is not a trustful substitute for the artificial character of all the pacts freely consented to by active citizens. By analyzing the dynamic of the extermination camps, Arendt understood that "humanity" goes far beyond the notion of the human being a mere natural living being with its minimum natural denominator: "human beings can be transformed into specimens of the human animal, and that man's 'nature' is only 'human' insofar as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man"<sup>37</sup>. In other words, humanity, when it is politically understood, does not reside in the natural fact of being alive, since human beings depend on artificial legal and political institutions to protect them. The Arendtian rejection of understanding the human being as a living being in the singular, as well as her postulation of human plurality as the condition of all innovative politics depend on her thesis that politics has to do with the formation of a common world in the course of people's acting and exchanging opinions. Politics depends on the human capacities to agree and disagree, so that everything that is mysteriously given to us by nature becomes politically irrelevant. For Arendt, equality is not a natural gift, but a political construction oriented by the "principle of justice". In other words, political equality is the result of agreements through which people decide to grant themselves equal rights, since the political sphere is based on the assumption that equality can be forged by those who act

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34 See Arendt, H. *Imperialism. Part Two of the Origins of Totalitarianism*, op. cit., p. 173.

35 See Arendt, H. *Imperialism. Part Two of the Origins of Totalitarianism*, op. cit., p. 175-176.

36 See Arendt, H. *Imperialism. Part Two of the Origins of Totalitarianism*, op. cit., p. 177.

37 See Arendt, H.: *Totalitarianism. Part Three of the Origins of Totalitarianism*, op. cit., p.153.

and exchange opinions among themselves and thus change the world in which they live in.<sup>38</sup> According to Arendt, there can be no democratic politics worthy of the name unless everyone, regardless of their nationality, is included in the political and economic community of a definite State intending to recognize and protect them as their citizens; otherwise, no human being can discover his/her own place in the world. Agamben's thesis goes even further than Arendt's in detecting the perplexities inherent to the traditional foundation of the Rights of Man. By following up and radicalizing Arendt's reflections, he discovers in the text of the Declaration of the Rights of Man a fundamental piece of modern biopolitics since these rights constitute the very inscription of naked life into the political-juridical order. According to Agamben, in the Declarations of the Rights of Man of 1789 natural bare life is both the foundational source and the carrier of the rights of man, since the man's bare life - or, more precisely, the very fact of being born in a certain territory - is the element that effects the transition from the Ancient regime's principle of divine sovereignty to modern sovereignty concentrated in the Nation-State:

It is not possible to understand the development as well as the national and biopolitical 'vocation' of the National-State in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, if one forgets that in its own basis we find out not man as the free and conscious subject but, mostly, man's bare life, the mere fact of being born, which, in the transition from the ancient subject to the citizen, was invested as such as the principle of sovereignty.<sup>39</sup>

To conclude this text, I would like to emphasize that Arendt's main reflections concerning totalitarianism still remain relevant nowadays, especially when directed towards the feebleness of actually existing democracies. The core of Arendt's diagnosis of the present is that whenever politics has mostly to do with the maintenance and increase of the vital metabolism of affluent Nation-states, it will be indispensable to reduce the animal laborans to the even more degrading status of the homo sacer, of bare and unprotected life that can be delivered to oblivion and to death. Our actual understanding of politics as the administrative promotion of abundance and the happiness of the human being as an animal laborans has as its correlates economic and political exclusion, prejudices, violence and genocides against the naked life of the homo sacer. I also believe that Arendt can shed light on our current dilemmas, providing us theoretical elements for a critical diagnosis of the present as well as for the opening of new possibilities for collective action in the world. Arendt was a master of chiaroscuro political thinking in the sense that she was never blind to the contrasts between the open possibilities of radically renovating the political and the strict chains of a logic that binds violence and political exclusion under a biopolitical paradigm. If we still want to remain with Arendt, then we have to attentively think and consciously seek to participate in new spaces and new forms of life devoted to political association, action and discussion, wherever and whenever they seem to subvert the tediously multiplication of the same in its many different everyday manifestations. Arendt did not want to propose any political utopia but nor was she convinced that our political dilemmas had no other possible outcome, as if history had come to a tragic end. Neither a pessimist nor an optimist, she only wanted to understand the world in which she lived in and to stimulate us to continue thinking and acting in the

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<sup>38</sup>See Arendt, H. *Imperialism*. Part Two of the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, op. cit., p. 181.

<sup>39</sup>Agamben, G. *Homo sacer*. *El poder soberano y la nuda vida*, op. cit., p. 163.

present. At least, if a radically new political alternative can still come to be in our world, the responsibility for it will always be ours. Therefore, if we wish to remain faithful to the spirit of Arendt's political thinking, then we should think and act politically without constraining our thinking and acting to any previously defined understanding of what politics 'is' or 'should' be. In other words, the political challenge of the present is to multiply the forms, possibilities and spaces in which we can perform our political actions. These can be strategic actions destined to enforce political agendas favored by political parties concerned with social justice. They can also be discrete, subversive actions favored by small groups at the margins of the bureaucratized party machines that promote political intervention free of teleological or strategic intents, since their goal is to sustain an intense and radical politicization of existence. Finally, there are also actions in which ethical openness towards otherness becomes fully political: small and rather inconspicuous actions of acknowledging, welcoming, and extending hospitality and solidarity towards others.

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