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When the Canon Backfires: Deconstructing the Centrality of Hannah Arendt to Human Rights Critical Theory

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When the Canon Backfires:
Deconstructing the Centrality of Hannah Arendt to Human Rights
Critical Theory

Senior Project submitted to the Division of Social Studies of Bard
College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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In Loving Memory of My Grandmother, Cheryl.

To Annie Seaton for teaching me how to read things. To Peter Rosenblum for teaching me how to do things. To Tom Keenan and Yuka Suzuki for teaching me how to say things.

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Introduction:

In 2017, Hannah Arendt is among the few thinkers we can confidently situate within the Human Rights canon. In my final semester as a Human Rights major at Bard College, I struggle to recall a class in the discipline in which Arendt has not been mentioned. In the exceptional scenarios where her name was not included on the syllabus, at least one student always tends to introduce her ideas into class discussion, often insistently. I noticed a curious gap in this tendency: the readings assigned, including excerpts from *The Human Condition*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and *Between Past and Future*, rarely dealt explicitly with “human rights.” Rather, they dealt with totalitarianism, Arendt’s idiosyncratic notions of activity, freedom, nationalism, and — in the one passage that did explicitly deal with human rights — a strong critique of the idea of intrinsic rights. For three years, it seemed Arendt was a prolific human rights scholar whose fundamental contributions to the discipline my fellow Human Rights majors were simply better acquainted with. Surely, I believed, this theorist must have drastically expanded upon classical liberalism’s philosophical groundwork for Human Rights, but I had yet to encounter the specific contribution.

Entering my senior year, I enrolled in Thomas Keenan’s Human Rights Critical Theory class and gained more familiarity with the contemporary interlocutors in discussions about human rights. Arendt’s name did not go away. On the contrary, most of the contemporary texts we read throughout the semester invoked her ideas extensively. We also read the familiar chapter from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, “The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man,” in the seminar. Nevertheless, I was left with the nagging question: how did this political

theorist become such a prominent name in the discourse she seemed to disdain — and even moreso if the rest of her work does not contribute to a project of “human rights”? Clearly, Hannah Arendt’s eminence transcends the Annandale campus where she taught and posthumously rests. A Human Rights Senior Project seemed like the perfect opportunity to contemplate these questions.

Upon further research, I confirmed my suspicions that Arendt’s philosophy is central to discourse about “human rights.” Scholars regularly taught in my human rights classes, like Samuel Moyn, Jacques Rancière, Ayten Gündoğdu, Sarah E. Wagner, Giorgio Agamben, Étienne Balibar, Ariella Azoulay, Georges Didi-Huberman, Shoshana Felman, Annette Wieviorka, Thomas Keenan, and Peg Birmingham have all authored or contributed to works that feature Arendt’s name and ideas — from books that sacralize the theorist to articles that condemn her ideas. This is not to say that all of these authors embrace Arendt. On the contrary, scholars like Annette Wieviorka remain critical of Arendt’s infamous claims about the complicity of Shoah victims. Nevertheless, most of these authors do tend to reconcile Arendt’s ideas with the concepts of “human rights” and social justice, and all of them affirm Arendt’s place in the canon. One of Bard’s Human Rights professors, Roger Berkowitz, even leads the Hannah Arendt Center for the Humanities and Politics, and also conducts a virtual reading group that discusses Arendt’s books. The Arendt Center frequently publishes essays pertaining to social justice issues and the critical debate of contemporary policymaking, such as gun control, and thus exemplifies one of the ways Arendt’s theory has come to be deployed in the name of “human rights.”

It is imperative to note my use of the term “human rights” in this paper; I write with the twofold definition of human rights as those rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights as well as the subjects of books discussed in my Human Rights classes at Bard College. This project does not endeavor to resolve the contentious, perennial question of *what human rights are*. Rather, for the sake of this project I take “human rights” to mean a well-intentioned social justice project that manifests in various forms and is characterized by appeals to the rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is also important to consider that I am discussing this social justice project as it is institutionalized in American academia, rather than law, government, or non-governmental organizations.

This project is informed by two events. The first was the realization that Hannah Arendt has been rendered a kind of patron saint of the Human Rights discipline, and that the critical theoretical literature published over the past five to ten years and taught in my classes perpetuates this canonization. The second event was the discovery that Hannah Arendt held views contrary to what most students in the Human Rights department would consider consistent with the discipline’s intentions. In other words, regardless of how they would define “Human Rights,” students conceive of the discipline as a social justice-oriented project that is anti-racist. Curiously, Hannah Arendt wrote an article, *On Little Rock*, defending segregation in the American South in terms that are explicitly racist and with premises that contradict a conception of human rights that privileges justice and equality. Arendt also dismisses the role of law as an instrument for ensuring human rights — a critique whose place in discussions about human rights is merited, but an argument for which Arendt deploys unnecessarily reactionary rhetoric in order to make.

This project will consider the way that Hannah Arendt’s theoretical framework is being invoked and adopted by contemporary thinkers associated with “Human Rights,” by way of their

positions within Human Rights departments at American universities. It also considers the inclusion of these author's works in the syllabi of the Human Rights department at Bard College. The project will proceed by proposing the two schools of thought under which the interlocutors I encountered in my research fall: those who see Arendt primarily as a social justice icon whose work should be reconciled with contemporary human rights theory, and those who see Arendt's philosophy as a distinct social justice project that engenders the productive critique of human rights.¹ The first school sees Arendt's ideas and biography as essential in constructing arguments for human rights and justifying the mechanisms necessary to ensure rights, while the latter sees Arendt's philosophy as a distinct and superior map to social justice than human rights. While it can be argued that the writers I discuss often fall somewhere between these two poles, it is important to remember that I do not construct this model in order to affix each theorist to a position along the rhetorical spectrum. Rather, I propose this heuristic in order to illuminate the ethical lacunae along the spectrum that initially provoked this critique of Arendt's canonization in Human Rights.

My first chapter explicates the first of the aforementioned schools of thought and situate appropriate prominent theorists, such as Ayten Gündoğdu and Giorgio Agamben, within this group. Taking Gündoğdu's appropriation of Arendtian concepts as an exemplar, I will closely read *Rightlessness in the Age of Rights* as well as the original passages by Arendt that inform Gündoğdu's claim that Hannah Arendt's philosophy is imperative to how we imagine human

¹ A note on language: throughout this paper, I regularly use the phrase "justice project," which comes directly from Wendy Brown's article, *Human Rights and the Politics of Fatalism*. Brown deploys the term "international justice project" to describe the slot that activists attempt to fill with Human Rights, Marxism, or similar systems of theory and praxis that concern global justice. This is a specific strain of the "political projects" Brown writes about, and I found the language of "justice projects" valuable for explicating and critiquing the distinct schools of thought to which I devote my first two chapters.

rights. Throughout this reading, I analyze the premises Arendt employs for her arguments and read them alongside the most rudimentary rights claims, such as the prohibition of slavery in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I choose this example because, while “human rights” is a dauntingly equivocal term to use in this kind of paper, the prohibition of slavery is quite possibly the least contentious provision of the Human Rights project in its various manifestations. At the same time, Arendt’s discussion of slavery and her argument for opposing the institution provide a startlingly reactionary rationale. I will conclude this chapter by arguing that this rationale begs further interrogation about Arendt’s centrality within the Human Rights canon.

The second chapter turns to a second school of thought, made up of those who embrace Hannah Arendt as the proponent of a social justice project that is somehow more comprehensively just than human rights. This school of thinkers is much more critical of Human Rights, yet even more prone to uncritically romanticizing Hannah Arendt than the first school. Because the authors I discuss in this chapter tend to use “human rights” to refer to highly specific, idiosyncratic concepts, I confine most of this chapter to the close reading of one short work. For this close reading, I chose an essay by Roger Berkowitz that was published on the Arendt Center’s website, in which Berkowitz adopts Arendt’s rhetoric from *On Little Rock* to critique German activists who invoked “human rights” to critique the 2012 ban on circumcision in Germany. This choice was simple because the essay exemplifies the way the second school uses Arendt’s theory to propel an agenda invoking social justice, but simultaneously insists on critical distinction from “human rights” activists. Berkowitz was also an apt choice because his

subject is the same explicitly racist article by Arendt that alerted me to Arendt's ironic canonization.

Rather than continuing to deal with the appropriation of Hannah Arendt's political theory, my third chapter turns away from contemporary interlocutors and draws attention to the aspects of Arendt's oeuvre that beg further attention. That is, during my research, I was surprised at the dearth of critical responses to much of Arendt's writings that deal with race and class, especially considering her eminence in a social justice-oriented discipline. While I do touch on many of these moments throughout my first two chapters, the third chapter focuses exclusively on some contradictory passages from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that have been eschewed by the theorists who invoked the book in the first two chapters. As I close read the remaining passages from Arendt's works that might render her place in the human rights canon dubious, I consider ways in which the theorists' premises can work both for and against specific human rights claims and why they have found such widespread appeal.

What one omits can be just as significant as what one includes when appealing to the prominent intellectual tradition within which Arendt has been sacralized, but this paper is not simply advocating for a thick description over Arendt versus the thin description. Neither is my argument the simplistic claim that Hannah Arendt was racist and therefore her ideas should be dismissed in a justice project that purports to be anti-racist. Ultimately, this is a paper about how Arendt's confounding notion of justice is being reconciled with contemporary projects, whether they purport to be "human rights" or even distinct justice projects that claim supremacy to "human rights."

Martin Heidegger, a philosopher whose Nazism people still struggle to reconcile with his oeuvre, was Arendt's professor and lover. While there are glaring similarities between mentor and mentee, the explicit integration of Arendt's racism and classism into the same claims that are currently being celebrated and appropriated by Human Rights scholars distinguish her from Heidegger. With Heidegger, to claim that the philosopher's actual theories of authenticity and existentialism are racist — rather than just the author — is still frequently dismissed as contentious. A close reading of Arendt is not so different from a thick reading of Arendt; the ethical paradoxes in her work are conspicuous throughout, and need no biographical context. No matter how similar Arendt and Heidegger may be, to dismiss this project as a recapitulation of “how to read Heidegger?” is to recommit an essentialism that misses the point: that Arendt and her disciples inherit and tend to perpetuate reactionary assumptions about humanity and justice.

Arendt likely appeals to contemporary Human Rights scholars because of her critical ideas about history, anti-totalitarian agenda, position as an intellectual who experienced rightlessness firsthand, defense of the individualism, and her subtle but consistent dismissals of relativism. However, her canonization within Human Rights advances reactionary assumptions that contradict any justice project meant to address today's ethical questions. Regardless of intentionality, these assumptions provide premises that have historically been invoked to justify Nazism, the slave trade, and segregation. In other words: their place in the Human Rights canon begs for critical reading.

And what is the urgency of this thesis? At a time when Neo-Nazis are claiming the legitimacy of white supremacy through appeals to Friedrich Nietzsche and Theodor Adorno, perhaps we should not only be more critical of *whose* ideas we invoke; perhaps the longstanding

assumptions Human Rights critics inherit and perpetuate from a liberal tradition warrant just as much criticism as they offer.

Chapter 1: Arendt as Human Rights Muse: on the Conditionality of Humanity

This chapter deals with the first school of Arendtian critics that I propose: those who see Arendt as a Human Rights muse. That is, scholars in this school believe that while Arendt was critical of the notion of human rights after experiencing rightlessness, her work still somehow serves as a starting point to reify universal rights. Members of this school stress that even though Arendt's theory is critical of human rights, it does not dismiss rights as an impossibility. This optimism guides the rhetoric of theorists like political scientist Ayten Gündogdu and Giorgio Agamben, who identify works like *The Human Condition* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as part of a larger project to secure universal human rights. This chapter will proceed with a close reading of Gündogdu's approach, as she is one of the most rigorous and erudite scholars to appropriate Arendt's work in this way.

In her book, *Rightlessness in the Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants*, Gündogdu offers a radical "re-reading" of Hannah Arendt's critical categories of labor, work, and action to make a convincing case for the "right to work" and the "right to labor" as the activities which generate Arendt's "right to have rights." According to Gündogdu, the role of Arendtian "action" is usually over privileged in readings of Arendt focused on the project of human rights, while "work" and "labor" are eschewed recognition of the fundamental roles they play in securing and guaranteeing rights. Gündogdu's analysis is based on case studies of migrant refugees — a sound methodological decision considering how the demographic exemplifies the "stateless" people Arendt claims to be "rightless" in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Specifically, in Arendt's chapter "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End

of the Rights of Man” she argues that refugees’ lack of membership in a national political community, and the subsequent absence of enforcement of their rights by a sovereign nation, show that humans are not entitled to rights by dint of their humanity alone. Rather, people derive rights from the political aspects of their identities, such as citizenship, that are added to their bare humanity.² Gündogdu is convinced that this critique of rights does not paralyze the project of human rights, but rather serves as an aporia that begs us to "rethink" rights in a way that interrogates our assumptions and values about rights. In order to advance the unfinished mission of human rights, Gündogdu reconciles Arendt’s critique with the possibility of “human rights” in the Arendtian terms of “work,” “labor,” and “action” from *The Human Condition*.³ The political scientist is not alone in using Arendtian language to discuss the justice project of human rights, as evidenced both by the pervasiveness of Arendt’s name in critical theoretical literature and the fact that Bard College’s Human Rights Department and the Human Rights Project operate out of a building named the Hannah Arendt Center; if we can say there is a Human Rights canon yet, then several of Arendt’s works are among its few obvious constituents. Yet, while Gündogdu convincingly shows us that Arendt’s abstinence from an explicit theory of human rights can be transcended in Arendt’s own terms in order to engender the very rights she was denied as a refugee, a close reading of *The Human Condition* reveals that the Arendtian framework stands at odds with — or is at least prone to being deployed against — the possibility of rights claims rooted in the universal dignity of being human. If Gündogdu begs us not to throw the baby out

² Arendt, *Origins*, 302

³ Gündogdu, *Rightlessness*, 20

with the bathwater, this critical reading of *The Human Condition* takes a closer look at the bathwater in search of pathogens.

The first suspicious moment in Gündogdu's reconciliation of *The Human Condition* with the possibility of universal rights occurs in her discussion of Arendt's analogy between labor and slavery, which I will show to be fatally intertwined with perhaps the most alluring contribution of Gündogdu's reading of Arendt: the concept of *persona-as-mask*. Per Gündogdu's reading, Arendt critiques human rights as a tragic misnomer for the civil rights guaranteed by citizenship. She claims that universal rights could exist for stateless people, but we must first accept the idea of personhood, or *persona*, as the rights-bearing element added to an antecedent human specimen; this specimen otherwise lacks innate rights. Gündogdu likens this constructed layer of identity to a "mask," a construct established by law. In this model, rights are deliberated and derived through the law rather than any sense of respect or dignity inherent in the human being; human beings are naturalized and always already exist, but *persona* is socially constructed and can only exist with respect to membership in a community which recognizes it. This image of the rights-bearer is a clever rhetorical maneuver to hurdle one of the many aporetic moments encountered in an Arendtian contemplation of rights, which Gündogdu joins Arendt in calling "perplexities" so as to avoid the connotation of immobility. Indeed, the mask analogy simultaneously serves as a heuristic for understanding Arendt's critique of the Rights of Man and reconciles Arendt's political theory with the possibility of a species-wide entitlement to rights that simply has yet to be reified. The conception of the rights-bearing *persona* as a precarious addition to one's inalienable humanness is productive insofar as it engenders a fantasy in which Arendtian *action* — the category of activity denoting speech and all the other actions that distinguish human

beings from others — can result in the realization of abstract rights without any qualification other than being human.⁴ The proposal is clever and optimistic, and it even defends the possibility of human rights on the same grounds that many use to dismiss the justice project. There is only one problem: the idea is not Arendt's, but rather a formulation of Gündoğdu's own that is merely inspired by an Arendtian conception of humanity and personhood that that can be just as reactionary to human rights as it can helpful.

Arendt's famous critique of human rights, from *The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man*, proceeds by distinguishing between *civil* rights and *human* rights. Per Arendt, civil rights are predicated on an individual's citizenship and the security that comes with a nation's legal protections. Human rights, on the other hand, do not exist; but if they did, then being human would secure rights for every individual. Arendt cites the rightlessness of refugees, who are *de facto* without citizenship, as evidence that human rights do not exist. Nevertheless, she does not condemn the idea as impossible, and thus arises the hope of Arendtian possibility of human rights that fuels theorists like Gündoğdu.

Gündoğdu proposes a heuristic “mask” which is predicated on the shared assumption of a *citizen* / *human* binary. This distinction recalls the *culture* / *nature* binary that Jacques Derrida deconstructs in *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, insofar as it assumes “citizenship” to be the enriched condition of human development and “humanity” to be an essential given. An analogous opposition informs Giorgio Agamben's binary of *bios* / *zoê*. In Agamben's case, *bios* is the concept denoting biographical and political life, whereas *zoê* denotes basic animation; humans are assumed to have *bios*, but animals have *zoê*. To summarize

⁴ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 176

Agamben's criticism of universal human rights in Gündoğdu's terms, when stateless people are deprived the "mask of personhood," they are deprived of *bios* while retaining *zoê*.⁵ In Arendt's language, the citizen is reduced to a mere human.

The widespread assumption of this binary undergirds a frustrating amount of aporetic discussions about human rights. Hannah Arendt's book, *The Human Condition*, takes its title from the traditional anthropological project of describing "human nature" and cultural universals. In writing a book of this title, Arendt takes for granted that the notion of humanity is, itself, a cultural universal. That is, not every individual that human rights interlocutors would deem "human" subscribes to a notion of humanity. Take, for example, the eastern Sudanese Uduk tribe, many of whose members identify as elk. Consider, also, the *runa puma* of Ecuador's Avila village. In Quechua, *runa* signifies person and *puma* signifies jaguar, but the *runa puma* occupy an unstable position; they are: "beings who can see themselves being seen by jaguars as fellow predators, and who also sometimes see other humans the way jaguars do, namely, as prey."⁶ While Arendt's totalizing project in *The Human Condition* may align with the universalizing mission of Human Rights, its point of departure is a flawed, Eurocentric assumption about the point of distinction between human and other. The line between *human / non-human* is in flux, and this line is a difference of place rather than a difference of truth. This is not at all a flaw exclusive to Arendt and her disciples, but these scholars nevertheless perpetuate an erroneous universalist assumption when they implement binaries like *citizen / human*, *bios / zoê*, and *mask-wearer / stateless* before treating these distinctions as aporetic.

⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*

⁶ Kohn, *How Forests Think*, 2

Benedict Anderson is the historian and political scientist who coined the term “imagined community.” While Anderson’s subject is nationalism and its underlying cultural mechanisms, the theorist’s language of “imagined communities” facilitates a critique of Arendt and her disciples’ *human / non-human* binary. To be more specific, Anderson proposes that nations are *imagined* communities because a given nation’s constituents can identify with one another without ever meeting, and because:

Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.⁷

While Anderson employs his concept to describe nations as bound by a shared, imagined history and defined by geographical borders, perhaps imagined communities transcend nations. It seems that humanity, itself, constitute might constitute an imagined community; the border between human and non-human needs to be imagined, and “human” rights as a concept is predicated on identification between members of this community. In fact, to advocate “human rights” as discussed by Arendt, Gündoğdu, and other human rights theorists involves partaking in a hegemonic liberal imagination. The *citizen / human* distinction for which Arendt is fetishized is predicated on the assumption that citizenship is imagined, but humanity is real. Recent anthropologists, like Eduardo Kohn, give us evidence that the category of humanity is just as imagined as citizenship.

Upon close reading, the dangers of a human rights framework rooted in Hannah Arendt’s ideas become evident. While “human rights” denotes an image of social justice whose scope is

⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6-7

oftentimes nebulous, freedom from slavery is one of its uncontentious tenets. It is in Arendt's position on slavery that we first encounter friction between the Arendtian image of justice and that of human rights, Gündogdu noting:

It is worth remembering here Arendt's criticism of the Greek institution of slavery not simply for its imposition of an unbearable injustice on the slaves but also for its relegation of the free male citizens to a life lived vicariously. Arendt characterizes the lives of these citizens in terms of a loss despite the fact that they were able to engage in politics in the leisurely time created by freedom from labor.⁸

While an opposition to slavery is in accord with human rights, Arendt's underlying rationale stands out and begs closer examination. The passage from *The Human Condition* that Gündogdu cites for her above claim calls into question the degree to which Arendt opposed slavery on the grounds of slaves' inherent entitlement to justice — similar to the rhetoric of "rights":

The price for the elimination of life's burden from the shoulders of all citizens was enormous and by no means consisted only in the violent injustice of forcing one part of humanity into the darkness of pain and necessity. Since this darkness is natural, inherent in the human condition — only the act of violence, when one group of men tries to rid itself of the shackles binding all of us to pain and necessity, is man-made — the price for absolute freedom from necessity is, in a sense, life itself, or rather the substitution of vicarious life for real life. Under the conditions of slavery, the great of the earth could even use their senses vicariously, could "see and hear through their slaves," as the Greek idiom used by Herodotus expressed it.⁹

Gündogdu is right to draw us to Arendt's reasons for being critical of slavery, since Arendt is alarmingly equivocal in her explanation of why slavery is unjust. She does describe the act of "forcing one part of humanity into the darkness of pain and necessity" as an "injustice," but it is "by no means" the only one, and even then her most stressed ethical criterion seems to be the comprehensiveness of slaveowner's life experience as opposed to the experience of the slaves. In fact, she even likens the general act of laboring to slavery and explicitly claims "enslavement

⁸ Gündogdu, *Rightlessness*, 143

⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 118-19

is inherent in the conditions of human life.”¹⁰ Gündogdu’s summation of the passage also seems to miss Arendt’s use of the word “even”; to live a life *only* vicariously is a form of deprivation, but to “even” be able to live and use one’s senses vicariously through slaves conveys a degree of domination that actually *expands* one’s repertoire of possible life experiences. Arendt’s claim that slaves experience “darkness as natural, inherent in the human condition” casts their injustice as regular and necessary while simultaneously redirecting focus to pity for “the great” slaveowners.

This is part of a larger tendency throughout *The Human Condition* to consider the experience of the hegemonic, slave-owning group as unjust and horrific as that of slaves, migrants, and the very poor; ennui is considered as heinous as slavery.

There is no lasting happiness outside the prescribed cycle of painful exhaustion and pleasurable regeneration, and whatever throws this cycle out of balance — poverty and misery where exhaustion is followed by wretchedness instead of regeneration, or great riches and an entirely effortless life where boredom takes the place of exhaustion and where the mills of necessity, of consumption and digestion, grind an impotent human body mercilessly and barrenly to death — ruins the elemental happiness that comes from being alive.¹¹

In this passage, Arendt expounds upon the way slaveowners are themselves deprived by the institution of slavery; they are not required to experience the bliss of exhaustion and (necessarily) restorative rest, and in turn are prone to experiencing a boredom that precludes “lasting happiness.” This is one of several discomfiting moments one encounters in a close reading of Arendt; the phrase “grind an impotent body mercilessly and barrenly to death” may not necessarily conjure images of slavery, but using this phrase to describe the ennui of the rich and

¹⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 83-84

¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 108

describe their experience as unjustly worse than the poor laborer's "elemental happiness" is nevertheless unsettling.

Arendt's notion of class — one that is prone to diminishing the injustices experienced by the poor — is also revealed in her critique of Marx, during which she writes of the value of increasing social wealth: "And what else, finally, is this ideal of modern society but the age-old dream of the poor and destitute, which can have a charm of its own so long as it is a dream, but turns into a fool's paradise as soon as it is realized."¹² For Arendt, the poor are charming fools and the slaves happy, but the rich and the slaveowners know the truth: slaves may be owned by someone else and deprived freedom of movement (to give Arendt the benefit of the doubt I will confine our discussion to the "best-treated" Ancient Greek slaves, who were not allowed to stray from their otherwise "easy" household life).¹³

This plays into the book's pervasive and pernicious undertone that "all human beings are slaves" — or at least very akin to them — insofar as each human being is subject to the necessity of biological metabolism; that "The labor of our body which is necessitated by its needs is slavish."¹⁴ Interestingly, Arendt writes that slaveowners are the sole exemption from this category in her description of slavery's purpose:

The burden of biological life, weighing down and consuming the specifically human life-span between birth and death, can be eliminated only by the use of servants, and the chief function of ancient slaves was rather to carry the burden of consumption in the household than to produce for society at large.¹⁵

¹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 133

¹³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 31

¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 83

¹⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 188-89

This passage stands out because it suggests that ancient slaves somehow alleviated their owners' biological burden, which is mysterious in light of Arendt's frequent references to the body's biological needs as the "metabolism" which explicitly includes the consumptive act of eating. Keep in mind that this metabolism is a form of sustenance, which falls under the Arendtian category of labor because it exists not for the sake of constructing a durable world (which she calls "work"), but rather solely to perpetuate the process of labor.¹⁶ Her twofold claim that biological life's burden "can be eliminated" and that slavery existed to "carry the burden of consumption" in ancient times assert the possibility of the body's needs being displaced onto another member of the human species both in antiquity and the present. The political theorists' discussion of automation and Marx's predictions, however, is in tension with the idea that slaveowners were successful in passing off to their slaves the labor they found so odious (yet also necessary for happiness):

The danger that the modern age's emancipation of labor will not only fail to usher in an age of freedom for all but will result, on the contrary, in forcing all mankind for the first time under the yoke of necessity, was already clearly perceived by Marx when he insisted that the aim of revolution could not possibly be the already-accomplished emancipation of the laboring classes, but must consist in the emancipation of man from labor. At first glance, this aim seems utopian, and the only strictly utopian element in Marx's teachings. Emancipation from labor, in Marx's own terms, is emancipation from necessity, and this would ultimately mean emancipation from consumption as well, that is, from the metabolism with nature which is the very condition of human life. Yet the developments of the last decade, and especially the possibilities opened up through the further development of automation, give us reason to wonder whether the utopia of yesterday will not turn into the reality of tomorrow, so that eventually only the effort of consumption will be left of "the toil and trouble" inherent in the biological cycle to whose motor human life is bound.¹⁷

According to this passage, the same biological labor for which the Ancient Greek institution of slavery existed to redistribute — thus enslaving some and while subjecting their owners to the

¹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 143

¹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 130-31

injustice of boredom — is and has been a “utopia,” but one which automation and technological advances may render a possibility in the future. This stands at odds with the Arendtian understanding of slavery’s function and conception of biology. Surely the slaveowner’s labor in this context, his biological needs and processes — and by this I mean the act of eating and cellular metabolism — could not literally be passed off to slaves without Marx’s utopian technology. Clearly, a deeper understanding of Arendtian biology remains to be unpacked here.

In fact, this is an example of one of the “perplexities” Gündogdu writes about encountering in Arendt’s oeuvre, albeit not the kind she chose to focus on. This meditation on Arendtian aporia is largely inspired by the sharp ways in which Gündogdu hurdles what others dismiss as logical paradoxes in a way that advances her personal agenda of human rights. Similarly to the way Gündogdu reconciled the perplexity of an Arendtian notion of Human Rights by developing the inspirational persona-as-artificial mask construct, I intend to show how such perplexities are equally prone to being resolved in a reactionary way due to an ideological incompatibility with the species-wide guarantee of rights entrenched within the Arendtian framework. The aim of this project is to admonish other Human Rights practitioners and theorists from uncritically borrowing Arendtian ideas without considering the possibility that debts to such an equivocal philosophy may be collected in the form of the reactionary appropriation and inversion of these ideals. This anxiety is inspired by what we have recently witnessed in white nationalist leader Richard Spencer, and the “identitarian alt-right;” the appropriation of the language of identity politics and intellectual appeals to authority in the name of hate and white supremacy lend urgency to this project of close reading.

In order to make sense of the perplexity of ancient slaveowners' "biological labor" *having been conducted by their slaves* while the "utopia" in which automation may first abstract human beings from such labor *simultaneously is only possible in the future*, a close reading of the Arendtian "biology" and the species-wide "humanity" is necessary. To begin with, in Arendt's distinction of labor, work and action, each category of activity possesses a corollary term denoting the specimen who performs the action; one who labors is an "*animal laborans*," one who works is a *homo faber* or "craftsman," and one who acts is called a "man of action." Note that the "craftsman" and the "man of action" feature the word "man" in the terms Arendt uses to denote them — a deliberate acknowledgment of their humanity — while the *animal laborans* is only described in Latin. This is our introduction to the loaded, mysterious discipline of Arendtian Biology, which borrows from Orthodox Biology the form of binomial nomenclature in order to tragically show that one can be a member of the human species without constituting "man." One who labors is not even a member of the genus *homo*, unlike the craftsman whose humanity is initially conveyed in English before his Latin affirmation in *homo faber*. Rather, the *animal laborans* is a species of an altogether different "nature" from other human specimens, if not in physical form, then in a quintessentially Arendtian form that is constantly shifting between the traditional biological (physical) realm of forms and the artificial — or socially constructed — realm of forms; Arendt tells us that what lies behind the mask is unstable.¹⁸ On the classification of the *animal laborans* as either "human" or "animal," Arendt writes:

The slave's degradation was a blow of fate and a fate worse than death, because it carried with it a metamorphosis of man in to something akin to a tame animal. A change in a slave's status, therefore, such as manumission by his master or a change in general

¹⁸ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 84

political circumstance that elevated certain occupations to public relevance, automatically entailed a change in the slave's "nature."

The institution of slavery in antiquity, though not in later times, was not a device for cheap labor or an instrument of exploitation for profit but rather the attempt to exclude labor from the conditions of man's life. What men share with all other forms of animal life was not considered to be human. (This, incidentally, was also the reason for the much misunderstood Greek theory of the non-human nature of the slave. Aristotle, who argued this theory so explicitly, and then, on his deathbed, freed his slaves, may not have been so inconsistent as modern times are inclined to think. He denied not the slave's capacity to be human, but only the use of the word "men" for members of the species man-kind as long as they are totally subject to necessity). And it is true that the use of the word "animal" in the concept of *animal laborans*, as distinguished from the very questionable use of the same word in the term *animal rationale*, is fully justified. The *animal laborans* is indeed only one, at best the highest, of the species which populate the earth.¹⁹

For the sake of clarification, I am going to introduce the term *Homo sapiens*. It is important to remember Arendt never explicitly uses this term in *The Human Condition* despite her obvious inspiration by its taxonomical form. By *Homo sapiens*, I mean all individual members of the species known as human: that bipedal primate that the non-Arendtian discipline of Biology tells us possesses 46 chromosomes, and the bearer of "Human Rights" in its universalist conception. The Arendtian argument is that the *Homo sapiens* is a stable, antecedent being who takes one of three "natures": the *animal laborans*, *homo faber*, or the man of action. These "natures" are not necessarily permanent, as the example above of a slave's manumission by his master demonstrates. Per Arendt's reading of Aristotle's theory on the humanity of slaves, we learn that the "non-human" slave still maintains the "capacity to be human." In this way, a slave who typifies the *animal laborans* is *Homo sapiens*, yet not *human* in the Arendtian sense, barring manumission or newfound public relevance. In short, *Homo sapiens* denotes the stable, essential and — most importantly — inalienable virtue of belonging to a species that universalists strive to connote with terms like human, stateless, and zoê. The fact that we cannot

¹⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 84

equate the biological species to the term “human” confirms that the corresponding ideas of citizen, persona, and bios constitute an imagined community distinct from biological fact. Gündogdu contradicts the inalienability of belonging to a biological species in her reading of Arendt when she conceives of Arendtian persona as a constructed mask:

Although Arendt does not mention the religious lineage of personhood, she targets the metaphysical idea that it gives rise to, as she argues that it is the artificial mask that makes a human being a person entitled to rights. In the absence of this mask, one appears to others as a “natural man” stripped of all political and legal rights and duties: “a human being or *homo* in the original meaning of the word, indicating someone outside the range of law and the body politic of the citizens, for instance a slave — but certainly a politically irrelevant being. Deprived of the artificial mask provided by legal personhood, the stateless fall “outside the pale of law” and appear to others in their naked humanness or as “unqualified, mere existence.”²⁰

Gündogdu’s image of the “natural man” behind the mask, the “*homo* in the original sense of the word,” is not consistent with our close reading of Arendtian humanity. To test this theory, substitute the Aristotelian slave — an instance of the *animal laborans* we are told lacks Arendtian humanity — for the “natural man stripped of all political and legal rights and duties” in the above passage. Now consider the question: is Gündogdu correct in describing this being as “in their bare humanness?” In a sense, yes: the slave is still a *Homo sapiens* in possession of an inalienable form, which is what Gündogdu means by “*homo* in the original sense.” However, as a close reading of Arendtian Biology has demonstrated, the *animal laborans* is denied Arendt’s idiosyncratic “humanity” that the *homo faber* or man of action possess by virtue of nomenclature, but to which the *animal laborans* is clearly excluded. This renders the slave a human in the clearly intelligible *Homo sapiens* sense, but simultaneously non-human in the Arendtian framework within which Gündogdu makes her argument; upon a close reading of *The Human Condition*, humanity is shown to be an equivocal category when Gündogdu and the

²⁰ Gündogdu, *Righlessness*, 101-102

many other theorists who attempt to reconcile Arendt with their various conceptions of “human rights” make the fatal flaw of assuming its stability. Opting to pick and choose what we think can advance Human Rights’ project of social justice while ignoring how the same rhetoric allowed Arendt’s personal life and opinions to curiously clash with the few uncontentious tenets of the project is a dangerous misstep in the construction of the discipline’s critical canon. A continued consideration of Gündogdu’s otherwise brilliant *Rightlessness* exemplifies these perils:

Arendt’s comparison of statelessness to slavery, which I discuss in the next chapter, suggests that rightlessness involves this most comprehensive form of depersonalization in a certain sense; both the slaves and the stateless, she argues, are denied even “the possibility of fighting for freedom.”²¹

As my close reading of Arendtian humanity has shown, the “persona” of the rights-bearing *Homo sapiens*’ is not the only element of its identity that can be denied. The “humanness” that lies behind the mask in Gündogdu’s critical theory is also precarious rhetoric, if we are to apply Hannah Arendt’s philosophy to the mission of inalienable rights. This “most comprehensive form of depersonalization” is still less severe than the “dehumanization” to which we now understand as a possible cause of the stateless’ preclusion from the “possibility of fighting for freedom;” we can no longer deduce that the “removal of the mask” engenders the violation of the stateless’ rights.

This reading obfuscates Gündogdu’s idea that human rights can be achieved through a social action that hasn’t been completed yet — the extension of a legally constructed *persona* to all individual *Homo sapiens* — because it shows that even if a stable “mask” is created, the stability of the “face” to which it would be applied in this analogy cannot be taken for granted; no matter how excellent the mask maker, human artifice cannot be tasked with designing a mask

²¹ Gündogdu, *Rightlessness*, 103

for Proteus. Arendt's own comparison of statelessness and slavery only bolsters this critique, as it suggests that the instability of Arendtian humanity we witnessed in my close reading of slavery in *The Human Condition* can be applied to the philosopher's own analogy. In fact, her analogy goes further in this respect:

Arendt's analogy suggests that the stateless share with the slaves a condition of rightlessness defined by the loss of a share in the coming world constituted in and through action and speech. The rise of lip-sewing and other forms of self-inflicted harm must be understood within the context of violent conditions that deny asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented immigrants "even the possibility of fighting for freedom," to use Arendt's terms, by placing them in detention centers and camps isolated from the political and human world.

Arendt's comparison of slavery and statelessness also underscores that the stateless find themselves in a worse condition in some respects:²²

[Even] slaves still belonged to some sort of human community; their labor was needed, used, and exploited, and this kept them within the pale of humanity. To be a slave was after all to have a distinctive character, a place in society — more than the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human.²³

The claim that "the stateless find themselves in a worse condition" in some respects is striking because it further engenders the reading that the stateless are rightless not because they lack the legal protections of "personhood," but that they lack recognition of their "humanity" in a way that threatens the universalist project of human rights rooted in the virtue of being human. Arendt's own description of slaves as "still within the pale of humanity," at first glance, calls into question my reading of the *animal laborans* as the dehumanized *Homo sapiens*. Yet, regardless of Arendt's own inconsistency in her views on the humanity of slaves between *The Human Condition* and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the word "even" once again plays a pivotal role in the meaning of Arendt's passage: the tone of this passage strongly implies that *even if slaves* were kept within the pale of humanity, *the stateless are not so lucky*. Here, it is important to note

²² Gündogdu, *Rightlessness*, 161-62

²³ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 297

that Arendt's "pale of humanity" does not, by default, include every member of *Homo sapiens*. Human rights are only significantly better than the qualified, national rights Arendt proposes in "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man" if they are indeed universalized among every specimen of *Homo sapiens*. In an ideological system like Arendt's, in which humanity is a qualification we cannot take for granted, the ostensible solution to the problem of justifying rights in lieu of an additional qualification is destabilized and rendered precarious; the "human" of "human rights" whose premise universalist rhetoric is founded in becomes yet another manifestation of the "qualification" it was employed to combat.

In short, Ayten Gündogdu's radical "re-reading of Arendt against Arendt" demonstrates a very clever and inspirational way of transcending the "perplexities" of human rights that readers traditionally dismiss as impasses. She shows us that the "paradoxes" of Arendt's philosophy do not necessarily preclude the possibility of a Human Rights compatible with Arendtianism. While Gündogdu takes on the painstaking task of reconciling the justice project of human rights and Hannah Arendt's theory with incredible lucidity and formidable intelligence, I am left with the question: why Arendt? Why has this theorist, whose thought is so staunchly in tension with even the most minimalist conception of human rights, become so canonized within Human Rights as a discipline? While Gündogdu shows us that aporia can be surpassed with the right amount of thought, my close reading of slavery and Arendt's idiosyncratic "biology" in *The Human Condition* shows that, while Arendtian perplexities are able to be resolved in a way that advances the project of human rights, they are at least as prone to being exploited in ways that justify violence. This is a warning against using Arendt's philosophy as an ersatz for a distinctly "Human Rights" school of critical thought. The theorist's oeuvre may reveal ways of thinking

that are enticing because they function similarly to human rights rhetoric — such as proposing a totalizing concept of the human — but there are risks inherent to canonizing a thinker whose theory and practice oppose the most rudimentary rights claims and social justice initiatives. Namely, Arendtianism is an ideological weapon Human Rights theorists may be tempted to use, but it is one against which they severely lack protection in the feasible case of its appropriation by reactionaries on the intellectual right-wing; this chapter illustrates the unstable way Arendtian theory deals with slavery, and the next will examine its approach to racial segregation and economic inequality. While Gündogdu has excelled in showing us that *aporia* does not mean we have to abandon an intellectual mission, I ultimately hope to have shown in this chapter how transcending an *impasse* carries the risk of fatal ethical disorientation.

Chapter 2: Arendtian Justice Versus Human Rights: *the Injustice in Justice*

“It has been said, I think again by Mr. Faulkner, that enforced integration is not better than enforced segregation, and this is perfectly true. The only reason that the Supreme Court was able to address itself to the matter of desegregation in the first place was that segregation has been a legal, and not just a social, issue in the South for many generations.”

“Like most people of European origin I have difficulty in understanding, let alone sharing, the common prejudices of Americans in this area. Since what I wrote may shock good people and be misused by bad ones, I should like to make it clear that as a Jew I take my sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed or underprivileged peoples for granted and should appreciate it if the reader did likewise.”²⁴

— Hannah Arendt

The second school of Human Rights academics to affirm Hannah Arendt’s centrality to Human Rights critical theory differs from the first school because its scholars write from a position that maintains critical distance from Human Rights. This is not to say that these scholars occupy positions outside the academic discipline or institutions of Human Rights; on the contrary, the exemplar of this school whom I will analyze in this chapter is a professor who teaches in Bard College’s Human Rights Department. What I mean by “critical distance” is that, when writing, these academics establish that they are not the “human rights advocates” they write about. On the other hand, their narrative style indicates that they nevertheless identify as proponents of a justice project. What distinguishes this school of thinkers from Human Rights critics more broadly is its members’ presumption that their own justice project is superior to their idiosyncratic conceptions of “Human Rights,” and that their personal justice projects almost completely informed by Hannah Arendt’s oeuvre.

²⁴ Arendt, *On Little Rock*, 46

The most staunch members of the second school that I encountered in my research include Peg Birmingham, author of the book *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights*, and Roger Berkowitz, author of numerous essays and an anthology of Arendt's work. Berkowitz is a professor of Political Studies, Philosophy, and Human Rights at Bard College. He is also the director of the Hannah Arendt Center, which houses the Human Rights Project at Bard College. The Hannah Arendt Center's website conducts a virtual reading group, led by Berkowitz, in which anyone can join to read and discuss Arendt's works with others. The site also hosts dozens of essays applying Arendt's theories to contemporary events and political problems — all of which are authored by Berkowitz. Exemplary of these essays is his 2012 "Circumcision and Segregation," published under the heading "Arendt and Justice," in which the academic applies Arendt's ideas about distinct public, social, and private realms and rights to the case study of Germany's ban on circumcision. In it, Berkowitz presents a compelling critique of human rights activism while reconciling an Arendtian project of justice with one form of antiracism (that against antisemitism), but its rhetoric is rooted in Arendt's *Reflections on Little Rock* — an explicitly racist defense of segregation in the American South. This chapter entails a close reading of Arendt's article with the twofold intention of evaluating Berkowitz's critique of human rights and finding the faults in a human rights "justice project" (to borrow a term from Wendy Brown) rooted in Arendtian notions of rights.

Berkowitz writes that the German case's "conflict between Human Rights and privacy" recalls Arendt's article, which has been "roundly criticized but less well understood." As a starting point, it is valuable to consider the ways Arendt herself employs the terms Berkowitz treats as a binary. An analysis of Arendt's discussion of "rights" in *On Little Rock* reveals some

details about the political theorist's notion of rights that are usually overshadowed by her critique of human rights in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Namely, Arendt enumerates several classes of rights which constitute a hierarchy, the apex of which are human rights:

For the crucial point to remember is that it is not the social custom of segregation that is unconstitutional, but its *legal enforcement*. To abolish this legislation is of great and obvious importance and in the case of that part of the Civil Rights bill regarding the right to vote, no Southern state in fact dared to offer strong opposition. Indeed, with respect to unconstitutional legislation, the Civil Rights bill did not go far enough, for it left untouched the most outrageous law of Southern states — the law which makes mixed marriage a criminal offense.

The right to marry whoever one wishes is an elementary human right compared to which the “right to attend an integrated school, the right to sit where one pleases on a bus, the right to go into any hotel or recreation area or place of amusement, regardless of one's skin or color or race” are minor indeed. Even political rights, like the right to vote, and nearly all other rights enumerated in the Constitution, are secondary to the inalienable human rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence; and to this category the right to home and marriage unquestionably belongs. It would have been much more important if this violation had been brought to the attention of the Supreme Court; yet had the Court ruled the anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional, it would hardly have felt compelled to encourage, let alone enforce, mixed marriages.²⁵

This passage is indispensable for imagining an Arendtian rights framework because it does three things: classifies different types of rights, prioritizes them, and then analogizes their implementation. First, Arendt explicitly describes “human rights,” which are further classified into the “inalienable human rights to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’” and the other human rights — like “the right to marry whoever one wishes” — that are “elementary,” yet still less urgent than human rights. The right to marry outside of one's race seems to be “alienable” in light of the existence of miscegenation laws, but then again, the ability of human rights to be alienated from stateless people is the premise of Arendt's famous critique in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; inalienability is a moral imperative rather than an empirical claim. Note that Arendt privileges these rights because they are cited in the the *Declaration of Independence* — a

²⁵ Arendt, *On Little Rock*, 45

document that pre-existed the Constitution. Furthermore, Arendt's placement of the "right to home and marriage" alongside these rights will prove crucial to Berkowitz's reading; remember that human rights are the "most outrageous" to legally interfere with.

Arendt's subsequent category is that of "political rights." Per the theorist, political rights include the right to vote and everything enumerated in the Constitution. Such privileging of the "rights" described in the Constitution is part of Arendt's larger tendency to sacralize this document in her rights-based justice project. If Arendt's arguments are to be taken as the building blocks of human rights claims as a species-wide justice project, it is important to consider that this strategy involves presupposing the superior justness of a document that required amendments in order for slavery to be banned and for women and people of color to be allowed to vote. For historical context, the prohibition of slavery and provision of universal suffrage are provided in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by Article 4 and Article 21, respectively; this document was published in 1948, eleven years before Arendt's musings on desegregation. Furthermore, the very fact that Arendt introduces this passage with the insistence that segregation is a "social concern" not to be conflated with the legal realm evidences that her evaluation of desegregation laws is not conducted in terms of justice, but rather the degree to which contemporary laws cohere with the status quo. In her chapter titled "Freedom" from *Between Past and Future*, as well as *The Human Condition*, Arendt expresses a nostalgia for Ancient Athenian "equality" — the qualified citizenship and political participation of free, landowning men predicated on the institution of slavery. In fact, Arendt even posits that the Constitution contains the only way to resolve "The color question," which "was created by the one great

crime in America's history and is soluble only within the political and historical framework of the Republic."²⁶

Armed with the knowledge that voting is a political right for Arendt, a close reading of "voting" reveals one way political rights relate to justice and equality:

Segregation is discrimination enforced by law, and desegregation can do no more than abolish the laws enforcing discrimination; it cannot abolish discrimination and force equality upon society, but it can, and indeed must, enforce equality within the body politic. For equality not only has its origin in the body politic; its validity is clearly restricted to the political realm. Only there are we all equals. Under modern conditions, this equality has its most important embodiment in the right to vote, according to which the judgement and opinion of the most exalted citizen are on a par with the judgement and opinion of the hardly literate.²⁷

This passage is crucial because it reveals some of Arendt's fundamental assumptions about American inequality. First, she argues that equality *must* be enforced by the government in the political realm (from which equality originates) but also *must not* be enforced in the social realm. Per Arendt, the political realm entails voting booths, buses, and hotels, but excludes schools; schools are relegated to yet a third space, the *private realm*, on the basis that "education is a question of how a parent raises his or her children."²⁸ Second, equality is taken to already exist within the South at the time of Arendt's writing, and to be embodied in the right to vote. Her assertion that voting situates the opinion of the "most exalted citizen" alongside that of the "hardly literate" raises questions as to Arendt's familiarity with extant voting practices in the American South during the time of her writing; in her history of the Citizenship School Program in the American South, Susan Kates notes that white election officials regularly administered literacy tests to African-Americans in an effort to preclude their voting between 1945 and 1965.²⁹ These programs were ubiquitous in the South Arendt wrote about, and could be found in Virginia, Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, and Georgia in the year she wrote *On Little Rock*. Literacy tests did not have a comparable effect on illiterate white voters, who could often register to vote

²⁶ Arendt, *On Little Rock*, 46-47

²⁷ Arendt, *On Little Rock*, 49-50

²⁸ Berkowitz, *Circumcision and Segregation*

²⁹ Kates, *Voting Rights*, 480

on the grounds that they owned land or were deemed “of good character.”³⁰ Arendt’s insistence that “the hardly literate” enjoyed a categorical access to voting rights thus ignores a prevalent racist practice by Southern Boards of Elections in order to advance her project of limited government in the name of the private.

In fact, Arendt grounds her argument for “privacy” in a misinformed concept of United States history elsewhere, writing of desegregation and colonialism:

The fact that this question has also become a major issue in world affairs is sheer coincidence as far as American history and politics are concerned; for the color problem in world politics grew out of the colonialism and imperialism of the European nations — that is, the one great crime in which America was never involved. The tragedy is that the unsolved color problem within the United States may cost her the advantages she otherwise would rightly enjoy as a world power.³¹

In Arendt’s account, the United States is the exceptional world power because it abstained from colonialism. However, if Arendt wrote this with cognizance of the Spanish-American War and the 1898 Treaty of Paris, she is absolving the country only through a definitional tactic. In fact, the work of another theorist of genocide and totalitarianism helps explain one reading of Arendt’s denial of American colonialism; Edina Bećirević, Security Studies professor and author of books on genocide and the mechanisms of its denial in Bosnia and Herzegovina, uses the term *definitionalism* to discuss the tendency of reactionary academics to redirect attention from the critical discussion of mass injustices to quarrels over terminology. Perhaps Arendt was unaware of the United State’s seizure of Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, and the Philippines. Or perhaps she partook in a variation of this definitionalism (admitting there was American *imperialism and expansionism*, but denying *colonialism*). Either way, this passage betrays Arendt’s complicity

³⁰ Levine, *Citizenship Schools*, 12

³¹ Arendt, *On Little Rock*, 46-47

with the American exceptionalism with which critics like Michael Ignatieff frequently charge human rights theorists and practitioners.³²

But this project does not aim to dismiss Arendt's theories for their historical inaccuracy; rather, it seeks to question the centrality of Arendtian ideas in contemporary discussions about human rights. Returning to the aforementioned quote on segregation and voting, Arendt offers us a definition and a normative claim at the heart of her justice project: "Segregation is discrimination enforced by law, and desegregation can do no more than abolish the laws enforcing discrimination."³³ Under this definition, segregation is a strictly legal phenomenon, rendered both abstract from "society" and inappropriate as a means to enforce equality; the law should not enforce inequality, but it is also not the role of the law to assuage social injustice. This idea is foundational to the Arendtian concepts of law and justice and — while it may be prudent to those consumed with preventing the rise of new totalitarian regimes — this is something Human Rights scholars must not forget. The law, after all, is the same institution theorists like Ayten Gündoğdu see as an opportunity for securing rights in accord with other Arendtian ideas like work, labor, and the critique of national rights. Yes, totalitarianism is an obvious threat to the comprehensive justice project "human rights" suggests, but the ethical lacunae in Arendt's anti-totalitarian project might be harder to reconcile with aspirations of social justice than the theory merits.

Arendt's ideas about government intervention in the name of social justice surface at another point in the *Little Rock* article, when she recounts the story of a sensational photograph:

³² Micheal Ignatieff, *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry*, 294

³³ Arendt, *On Little Rock*, 49

However, the most startling part of the whole business was the Federal decision to start integration in, of all places, the public schools. It certainly did not require too much imagination to see that this was to burden children, black and white, with the working out of a problem which adults for generations have confessed themselves unable to solve. I think no one will find it easy to forget the photograph reproduced in newspapers and magazines throughout the country, showing a Negro girl, accompanied by a white friend of her father, walking away from school, persecuted and followed into bodily proximity by a jeering and grimacing mob of youngsters. The girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero — that is, something neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be. It will be hard for the white youngsters, or at least those among them who outgrow their present brutality, to live down this photograph which exposes mercilessly their juvenile delinquency. The picture looked to me like a fantastic caricature of progressive education which, by abolishing the authority of adults, implicitly denies their responsibility for the world into which they have borne their children and refuses the duty of guiding them into it. Have we now come to the point where it is the children who are being asked to change or improve the world? And do we intend to have our political battles fought out in the school yards?³⁴

This passage betrays more about Arendt's rationale for opposing desegregation in schools, and also offers information about one of the philosopher's characteristic themes: natality. According to this passage, desegregation's presence in public schools was the "most startling" aspect of the process. According to Berkowitz' reading, this is because education is the pinnacle "right of privacy." Arendt also includes a critique of "progressive education" — at the heart of which is the mission to integrate public schools — on the basis that adults are absolved responsibility for complex social maladies and children should not be left to solve extant social problems. This complicates our reading of *The Human Condition* by obfuscating the notion of natality. Natality is usually understood as the aspect of the human condition that engenders individualism and thus endows human life with significance, and Arendt's fascination with the mystery of natality is juxtaposed with a preoccupation with mortality by her mentor and lover, Martin Heidegger. Margaret Canovan is the political theorist and Arendt scholar who wrote the introduction to *The Human Condition*, which Arendt published only one year prior to her *Little Rock* article. Per Canovan's reading, natality is the work's "most heartening message," and Arendt argues that

³⁴ Arendt, *On Little Rock*, 48

“faith and hope in human affairs come from the fact that new people are continually coming into the world, each of them unique, each capable of new initiatives that may interrupt or divert the chains of events set in motion by previous actions.”³⁵ In short, Arendt writes of the new and unique characters who enter the world as humanity’s source of hope for social problems in 1958, but one year later dismayed the idea that children in integrated schools could address what their parents failed to resolve. Reading these two claims against one another reveals the paradoxical nature of Arendtian natality: new minds are the source of human individualism, which is our only hope for solving social injustices, yet these same minds must be cultivated within the status quo before they can be justly burdened with solving social maladies. It is this tension between cultivation and conformism from which the concept of “private rights” seems to provide relief.

While this perplexity may initially seem like a diversion, I propose that Berkowitz’ case for private rights is a clever escape from this rhetorical bind, but one which validates readings that conflict with even the most minimalist understanding of rights. This tension is also a rhetorical landmine waiting for the theorists, like Gündoğdu, who explicitly try to reconcile these ideas with a “human rights” mission. While yielding to Arendtian fallacies may bestow an air of authority upon theorists with a social justice agenda, ultimately Arendt’s ideals cannot be divorced from the reactionary ideology that undergirds them.

In order to disentangle conformism from cultivation, we must take a step back and ask the questions whose answer our interlocutors seem to be taking for granted: is privacy important to justice, and why? Arendt rationalizes the significance of the hearth and home in her discussion of the ancient home:

³⁵ Arendt, *Human Condition*, xvii

The sacredness of this privacy was like the sacredness of the hidden, namely, of birth and death, the beginning and end of the mortals who, like all living creatures, grow out of and return to the darkness of an underworld. The non-privative trait of the household realm originally lay in its being the realm of birth and death which must be hidden from the public realm because it harbors the things hidden from human eyes and impenetrable to human knowledge. It is hidden because man does not know where he comes from when he is born and where he goes when he dies.³⁶

In short, privacy is significant because it historically hosted the key events of the human condition — birth and death. Notice the emphasis on the occult and the absence of rights, authority and agency in this rationale. Also important is the idea that this sacredness is the “non-privative” trait of the household, as distinguished from the aspects of home life that *deprive* one the human experience. Arendt claims that since the private man does not appear, it is though he does not exist, and is thus deprived the reality that comes from being witnessed by other humans.³⁷ Ancient slaves, after all, were not seen as complete humans for the very reason that they were confined to the private realm, the home.³⁸

This, I believe, is the moment after which privacy’s significance comes to be conflated with that of natality. Arendt asserts that “We no longer think primarily of deprivation when we use the word “privacy,” and this is partly due to the enormous enrichment of the private sphere through modern individualism.”³⁹ Thus, in the course of 40 pages, we have encountered the *circulus in probando* from which the contemporary claims both for and against “human rights” are formulated: modern individualism has rendered privacy important, and privacy is important

³⁶ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 62-63

³⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 58

³⁸ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 38

³⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 38

because it fosters individualism despite the conformist pressure of mass culture. Berkowitz' reading of *On Little Rock* is thus flawless when he recapitulates the merit of privacy:

“Private rights are deeply important. It is in the private realm where young people grow up and are led into the world by parents, teachers, and friends. If we value plurality, difference, and individuality, it is essential that we protect the private realm—that world in which individuals are formed in their singularity and uniqueness. As well meaning as human rights advocates may be, they are antagonistic to the private realm. They will forever seek to impose a world of humane conformity at the expense of the singularity suffering. This is the tension that Arendt provokes us to consider.”⁴⁰

So, private rights are “deeply important,” but a tautology is a tautology: the private realm must be protected to preserve plurality, difference, and individuality, but these values also must have pre-existed modern privacy since Arendt claims they are what lent privacy its significance. If we suspend our question as to whether the chicken or the egg came first, this quote features two interesting moments. First, it reveals that Berkowitz' conception of “human rights” is inherently regulatory and imposing, situating human rights in accord with Arendt's conception of civil and political rights and Gündoğdu's understanding of human rights as an exclusively legal construct. Second, we see Berkowitz affirm Arendt's relegation of education to the private sphere when he includes “teachers” in his list alongside parents and friends.

This is where the education Berkowitz writes about diverges from Arendt's subject. Berkowitz' statement that “It is in the private realm where young people grow up and are led into the world by parents, teachers, and friends” is positive, fixing education in the private realm at the time he writes. Arendt, on the other hand, writes of education normatively; after all, her entire argument and the anxieties about enforced integration informing this argument are predicated on the idea that education *should be* a private matter, but cannot be so long as the government is

⁴⁰ Berkowitz, *Circumcision and Segregation*

involved. The unfixed border between “rights of privacy” versus other kinds of rights matters *because it must be imagined* and, more importantly, imagined by a hegemonic subject; the difference between these categories is not a matter of universal truth, but rather a function of place. Berkowitz explicitly acknowledges one manifestation of this principle when he writes of the German court’s decision to ban circumcision in favor of “human rights” over “private rights”:

“The German court’s decision imagines the parental rights to practice religion as a right to privacy—to determine how to raise their child. Against this right it balances the child’s human right to bodily integrity. And the court decides the matter on the side of human rights over the right of privacy.”⁴¹

Thus, Berkowitz’ analogy between integration in Little Rock and Germany’s circumcision ban holds insofar as *private rights are subjugated* to other agendas — “social opportunity” in the first case, and human rights in the latter — in a way that he condemns as unjust.⁴² What his analogy equalizes, however, cannot be dismissed by any project sincerely invoking “justice”: the German government imposed itself in order to legitimate antisemitism and islamophobia while the American government did so — counter to Southern public opinion — in an attempt to uproot one manifestation of a pervasive racist ideology. One would be called absurd to equate the deregulation of marijuana with that of human trafficking, but the essentialist rhetoric in this analogy recalls the argument.

⁴¹ Berkowitz, *Circumcision and Segregation*

⁴² Arendt conceives of education neither as a human nor civil right, but rather as a red herring to NAACP members in the pursuit of racial justice, whom she patronizes when she writes: “I have my doubts about this, especially with respect to the educated strata in the Negro population, but it is of course perfectly true that Negro public opinion and the policies of the NAACP are almost exclusively concerned with discrimination in employment, housing, and education. This is understandable; oppressed minorities were never the best judges on the order of priorities in such matters and there are many instances when they preferred to fight for social opportunity rather than for basic human or political rights. But this does not make the marriage laws any more constitutional or any less shameful; the order of priorities in the question of rights is to be determined by the Constitution, and not by public opinion or by majorities.” (Arendt, *On Little Rock*, 46)

It is this exact tendency for equalization and Arendt's notion of "equality" that undermine Arendtian theory's ability to contribute much beyond a wariness of totalitarianism to human rights as a justice project. In Berkowitz' reading, Arendtian ethics run counter to Human Rights but are cast as more comprehensively just; in the case of Little Rock, Arendt explicitly condemns the NAACP and the idea of integrated education as a human, civil, or political right. In order to do so, she invokes the priority of political rights mentioned the Constitution, like the right to freedom of assembly, and asserts the "Constitution's silence on education."⁴³ Casting desegregation as an infringement of freedom of assembly presupposes that this right should only belong to Southern whites, but this worldview contributes to racial inequality and injustice in less obvious ways as well.

A close reading of Arendtian "equality" illuminates more circular logic at the kernel of Arendtianism that runs counter any antiracist or anti-classist justice project. Namely, Arendt insinuates that social equality will somehow engender hatred and injustice rather than assuage it.

The theorist writes of American equality:

In its all-comprehensive, typically American form, equality possessed an enormous power to equalize what by nature and origin is different — and it is only due to this power that the country has been able to retain its fundamental identity against the waves of immigrants who have always flooded its shores. But the principle of equality, even in its American form, is not omnipotent; it cannot equalize natural, physical characteristics. This limit is reached only when inequalities of economic and educational condition have been ironed out, but at that juncture a danger points well known to students of history, invariably emerges: the more equal people have become in every respect, and the more equality permeates the whole texture of society, the more will differences be resented, the more conspicuous will those become who are visibly and by nature unlike the others.

It is therefore quite possible that the achievement of social, economic, and educational equality for the Negro may sharpen the color problem in this country instead

⁴³ "It is perfectly true, as Southerners have repeatedly pointed out, that the Constitution is silent on education and that legally as well as traditionally, public education lies in the domain of state legislation." (Arendt, *On Little Rock*, 54)

of assuaging it. This, of course, does not have to happen, but it would only be natural if it did, and it would be very surprising if it did not. We have not yet reached the danger point, but we shall reach it in the foreseeable future, and a number of developments have already taken place which clearly point toward it. Awareness of future trouble does not commit one to advocating a reversal of the trend which happily for more than fifteen years now has been greatly in favor of the Negroes. But it does commit one to advocating that government intervention be guided by caution and moderation rather than by impatience and ill-advised measures. Since the Supreme Court decision to enforce desegregation in public schools, the general situation in the South has deteriorated. And while recent events indicate that it will not be possible to avoid Federal enforcement of Negro civil rights in the South altogether, conditions demand that such intervention be restricted to the few instances in which the law of the land and the principle of the Republic are at stake. The question therefore is where this is the case in general, and whether it is the case in public education in particular.⁴⁴

Thus, an Arendtian justice project eschews the pursuit of economic and educational equality on the grounds that “the more equality permeates the whole texture of society... the more will differences be resented.” Per this logic, the pathogen of the Holocaust was Germany’s unprecedented social and educational equality. Also significant is the way Arendt naturalizes differences of race and class, adopting the classical assumptions of the Great Chain of Being used to justify human inequality in terms of race.⁴⁵ While the political theorist may not have acquired a solid grasp of American military and colonial history by 1959, she had at least assimilated to the American norm of biologizing race in a way that justifies colonialism.

Arendt’s formulation that the reduction of economic and educational equality amplifies the relative significance of “visible and natural” differences — meaning race — in human relations is not only dubious, but also commits the same flaw of thoughtless translation for which she scolds two millennia of thinkers in *The Human Condition*. Specifically, I am referring to her address of “The profound misunderstanding expressed in the Latin translation of ‘political’ as ‘social,’” disseminated by way of Thomas Aquinas.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Arendt, *On Little Rock*, 48

⁴⁵ American Anthropological Association

⁴⁶ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 27

Arendt writes of equality in Ancient Greece: “Equality, therefore, far from being connected with justice, as in modern times, was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the inequality present in rulership and to move into a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed.”⁴⁷ This line proposes a definition of “equality” that is predicated on inequality elsewhere, but its status as a fallacy transcends such obvious critique. This line also suggests that “the essence of freedom” runs counter to modern justice, and more importantly that equality and justice were not bound up in ancient times, that they are not inherently entangled. Furthermore, the English words “liberty” and “freedom” are conveyed in one shared word in both the Latin “*libertas*” and the Ancient Greek “ἐλευθερία.” Consider this as we recall Arendt’s sacralization of the Declaration of Independence, in which she celebrates the “right to liberty” as one of the highest, inalienable rights.

Etienne Balibar is a contemporary French philosopher who shares Arendt’s penchant for etymology and the classical virtues of justice and freedom. In his 2014 book, *Equaliberty*, he makes a proposition that helps us deconstruct Arendt’s discussion of equality and justice:

If one really wants to read it literally, the *Declaration* in fact says that equality is identical to freedom, and vice-versa. Each is the exact measure of the other. This is what I propose to call, with a deliberately baroque phrase, the proposition of equaliberty..⁴⁸

Balibar is specifically writing in response to a tendency for political theorists, such as Arendt, to cast equality and liberty as contradictory. This proposes the possible rationale behind Arendt’s fear that alleviating racial inequality would “sharpen the color problem” in the South. Balibar, on the other hand, through his reading of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, claims

⁴⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 32-33

⁴⁸ Balibar, *Equaliberty*, 46

that social inequalities and infringements on one's liberties always accompany one another; equality and liberty always accompany each other.⁴⁹

Following Balibar's critique, Arendt's dire warnings that improved social, economic, and educational equality for black Americans in the South are rendered contradictory. In fact, Arendt's alleged defense for maintaining racial segregation and socioeconomic inequality lacks further justification beyond her prioritization of "individualism" above all other virtues. Ultimately, it is this prioritization that academics like Berkowitz take as their premise when they invoke Arendt as the proponent of a social justice project that is more appropriate than human rights.

This observation turns my critique toward my own use of the terms "human rights" and "justice" throughout this paper: I use these terms with the assumption that a justice project ought to value "liberty" and "equality" at least as much as "individuality," and I find myself assuming that "human rights" endeavors to do this. This is perhaps ironic— after all, this is a critique of the way "Human Rights" is becoming — but I think there is something significant about the prevalence of this assumption throughout Western history. Take, for instance, linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's evidence for the immutability of language in his *Course on General Linguistics*: "The symbol of justice, a pair of scales, could not be replaced by just any other symbol, such as a chariot."⁵⁰ The association between scales and justice is deeply entrenched in the Western culture from which Human Rights originates. This association harkens back to Ancient Roman religion, suggesting the possibility that Western notions of justice have been entangled with equality

⁴⁹ Balibar, *Equaliberty*, 49

⁵⁰ Ferdinand de Saussure, *General Linguistics*, 68

throughout the entire intellectual development of Human Rights; Balibar correctly detects this entanglement, whereas Arendt interprets the interaction between equality and justice as dialectical. Arendtian disciples who subscribe to this worldview — like Berkowitz — have the groundwork for a trenchant defense of privacy and individualism, but this rhetoric simultaneously arms readers with a validated dismissal of employment, housing, educational, and economic rights.⁵¹ While well-intentioned liberal scholars may find Arendtian theory useful for their own ethical projects, this rhetoric is even more apt for another task: defending the very injustices Human Rights scholars purportedly oppose.

In short, Roger Berkowitz is an exemplar of one way contemporary intellectuals tend to appropriate Arendtian ideas to critique and advance conceptions of justice. Whereas the first school of thought I described discusses Arendt as a *critical proponent* of Human Rights, this school tends to discuss Arendt as the *vanguard of a novel theory of justice* that is superior to Human Rights. While the members of this school of thought often find ingenious ways to reconcile Arendtian theory with social justice projects, such an act reaffirms Arendt's intellectual authority and, in doing so, lends authority to the explicitly racist and classist premises undergirding Arendt's own arguments. The critiques of Human Rights and social justice advanced by this school are valuable, but the rhetoric they deploy is contradictory and counterproductive to any project invoking justice and rights.

⁵¹ Arendt, *On Little Rock*, 46

Chapter 3: The Totalitarianism of Origins

Whereas the previous chapters delineated and critiqued the two schools of thought that I propose contemporary Arendtian theorists constitute, this chapter will take a deconstructive turn to focus on Hannah Arendt's discussion of racism in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Specifically, I will closely read the theorist's genealogy of racism before analyzing the rhetoric underlying her discussion of colonialism in South Africa. This chapter relates to my overarching critique of Hannah Arendt's canonization within the Human Rights discipline by examining claims that are likely to be cited in a defense of Arendt as an anti-racist vanguard, yet whose rhetoric collapses upon close reading. While in my research I did not encounter these passages to be appropriated in such a way, this approach exemplifies the trend of representing Arendt as a radical social justice icon that lies at the heart of this critique. The passages I examine in this section are indispensable to my thesis because they simultaneously provide a liberal critique of racism while advancing reactionary premises that undermine Arendt's reliability as an ethical authority, which contributes to my overarching argument. If the two preceding chapters consider a trend that has occurred over the past ten years, this chapter is a case study in the contradictions of that trend's source text.

How Classical Liberal Racism Constructs Anti-Racism

Imperialism is the name of Arendt's second section of the tripartite *Origins of Totalitarianism*. The section's final chapter, "The Decline of the Nation-State and the Rights of Man," is the critique I have found most frequently referenced in Human Rights classes and

readings, but the other four chapters comprising *Imperialism* constitute a lengthy discussion of race, racism, and class. Arendt's first task in this section entails proposing a definition and genealogy for racism, which she argues arose at the end of the nineteenth century. Specifically, she argues that an intellectual trend called "race-thinking" had existed since the inception of nations, but that racism was distinct and novel because it qualified as an *ideology*. For Arendt, "an ideology differs from a simple opinion in that it claims to possess either the key to history, or the solution for all the 'riddles of the universe,' or the intimate knowledge of the hidden universal laws which are supposed to rule nature and man." The theorist continues to claim that there were two dominant ideologies at the time of her writing: "that which interprets history as the economic struggle of classes, and the other that interprets history as a natural fight of races."⁵²

Arendt devotes several pages to the distinction between race-thinking and racism, insisting that earlier forms of hatred and exploitation between people may resemble racism to the modern thinker, but that the term "racism" is anachronistic when discussing human relations before the father of racism proliferated the race concept in 1859: Count Arthur de Gobineau.⁵³ While Arendt writes that Gobineau was unable to foresee the disastrous effects of the race concept and that there were other "believers in race" who preceded him, Gobineau's popularity at the turn of the twentieth century directly engendered racism.

If *The Human Condition* is an anthropological project, then *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is a venture into revisionist history. When reading *Imperialism*, one is frequently left with the question of how Arendt's critiques of intellectual history can serve to explicate totalitarianism

⁵² Arendt, *Origins*, 159

⁵³ Arendt, *Origins*, 170

rather than justify it. This is especially true of Arendt's discussion of the seventeenth century historian and translator of Spinoza, Henri de Boulainvilliers:

Boulainvilliers was deeply influenced by the seventeenth-century might-right doctrines and he certainly was one of the most consistent contemporary disciples of Spinoza, whose *Ethics* he translated and whose *Traité théologico politique* he analyzed. In his reception and application of Spinoza's political ideas, might was changed into conquest and conquest acted as a kind of unique judgement on the natural qualities and human privileges of men and nations. In this we may detect the first traces of later naturalistic transformations the might-right doctrine was to go through. This view is really corroborated by the fact that Boulainvilliers was one of the outstation freethinkers of his time, and that his attacks on the Christian Church were hardly motivated by anticlericalism alone.

Boulainvillier's theory, however, still deals with peoples and not with races; it bases the right of the superior people on a historical deed, conquest, and not on physical fact — although the historical deed already has a certain influence on the natural qualities of the conquered people. It invents two different peoples within France in order to counteract the new national idea, represented as it was to a certain extent by the absolute monarchy in alliance with the *Tiers Etat*. Boulainvilliers is antinational at a time when the idea of nationhood was felt to be new and revolutionary, but had not yet shown, as it did in the French Revolution, how closely it was connected with a democratic form of government, Boulainvilliers prepared his country for civil war without knowing what civil war meant.⁵⁴

In this passage, Arendt exemplifies her tendency of distinguishing earlier forms of “race-thinking” from modern racism. This time, she attempts a technical defense: to discriminate against different *peoples* is different from discrimination against *races*. Arendt goes on to say that “two different peoples” were constructed from one French population without invoking *racism*, solely on the grounds that the word “race” was circumvented in the process. Furthermore, the Arendtian concept of race is revealed here to be “physical fact.” Without addressing the suggestion that race is irrelevant to histories of a given people's “conquest” over another — thereby justifying violence in colonized places — Arendt's diction in discussing Boulainvilliers as an admirable social critic is suspect. After all, Roger Berkowitz is correct in detecting Arendt's priority of “freethinking” and “individualism” above other values in his reading of *On Little Rock*. The rhetorical impetus behind Arendt's insistence on a highly

⁵⁴ Arendt, *Origins*, 163

exclusive definition of “racism” may very well be the protection it garners her own theory from criticism.

Arendt clearly writes from the position of someone who condemns racism, as evidenced by her description of racists as people who discriminate in a way that is violative of “mankind’s equality.”⁵⁵ Simultaneously, throughout her prolonged discussion of race and racism as exceptional phenomena, Arendt ironically develops and embraces the same liberal trope that is frequently cited by contemporary white supremacists in the United States. Namely, this idea of “races” as distinguished from “peoples” or particular “nationals” has been appropriated by members of the alt-right — for example White House Strategist Stephen Bannon and think tank leader Richard Spencer — to reconcile white supremacy with liberal thought that is assumed . This happens when white supremacy is rebranded as “white nationalism,” a distinction about which University of London professor Eric Kaufmann writes:

“White supremacy is based on a racist belief that white people are innately superior to people of other races; white nationalism is about maintaining political and economic dominance, not just a numerical majority or cultural hegemony.”⁵⁶

In distinguishing racism from “race-thinking” in terms of nations or ethnically distinct “peoples” within a country, Arendt — albeit inadvertently — architects today’s vogue defense for contemporary American white supremacy: if white supremacy is racist, it is the object of Arendt’s criticism, but “white nationalism” is explicitly distinguished and situated outside the scope of this criticism. This is perhaps the most contradictory implication of an anti-totalitarian

⁵⁵ Arendt, *Origins*, 161

⁵⁶ “*White Nationalism, ’ Explained*”, New York Times, November 21, 2016

book that has become canonized within the larger Human Rights discipline, considering such an argument's potential utility to totalitarian actors.

Ultimately, Arendt's pattern of criticizing racism while simultaneously advancing reactionary premises distills to the assumption that the Western liberal tradition is incompatible with genocide, slavery, colonization, and similar violence between groups of humans. This is revealed when Arendt describes racism as arising only when imperialism necessitated it in the early twentieth century, as a result of racism's "utter incompatibility with all Western political and moral standards of the past, even before it was allowed to destroy the comity of European nations."⁵⁷ Arendt's claim here is that prior to twentieth century imperialism, what she calls "race-thinking" was too innocuous to warrant the label "racism" — even if race-thinking facilitated the later development of racism. In a rather shocking aside on this idea, Arendt writes:

Among the men who influenced the colonial movement from the middle of the nineteenth century until the outbreak of actual imperialism at its end, not one has escaped the influence of Carlyle, but not one can be accused of preaching outspoken racism. Carlyle himself, in his essay on the 'Nigger Question,' is concerned with means to help the West Indies produce 'heroes.'⁵⁸

I include this passage not to make the simplistic claim that Hannah Arendt is racist, but rather to draw attention to the contradictory nature of the theorist's rhetoric and the strangeness of trying to appropriate such rhetoric in the pursuit of an anti-racist conception of justice. Arendt, as well as those who invoke her as the patron saint of human rights, can only do so after assuming that classical liberal ideals are, in fact, incompatible with the horrors of slavery.

In "Race and Bureaucracy," Arendt's own position as the narrator is destabilized; in an attempt to bridge the gap between her dual position as disciple of canonical German philosophy

⁵⁷ Arendt, *Origins*, 184

⁵⁸ Arendt, *Origins*, 181

and critic of racial violence, Arendt makes a number of contradictory claims in rapid succession. For example, Arendt condemns the Boer enslavement of the Bantu as “parasitic” in the same paragraph that she dehumanizes the native people as “the only raw material which Africa provided in abundance;”⁵⁹ on the same page, she calls the colonization of Africa “a senseless massacre” just after the lamentation that “slavery, though it domesticated a certain part of the savage population, never got ahold of all of them.”⁶⁰ The theorist claims that “Boer racism, unlike other brands, has a touch of authenticity, and so to speak, of innocence”⁶¹ while simultaneously upholding that the Boers “decided to use these savages as though they were just another form of animal life.”⁶² In the first case, Arendt seems to be appealing to the pervasive Enlightenment trope of the noble savage. In the latter, Arendt uses the language of treating people as an exploitative means without treating them as an ends — language introduced to Arendt’s own German philosophic tradition by Immanuel Kant over a century earlier.⁶³ Over the course of a few pages, Arendt continues to make several assertions that conflict with one another and her anti-totalitarian intention more broadly.

Critics have frequently discussed Arendt’s complex relationship to Jewry and her own position as a Jewish woman, and among them is historian David Nirenberg. In his critical history, *Anti-Judaism*, Nirenberg analyzes the historical use of anti-Jewish tropes throughout the Western philosophical canon, ultimately making the argument that “Anti-Judaism is and has long been

⁵⁹ Arendt, *Origins*, 193

⁶⁰ Arendt, *Origins*, 193

⁶¹ Arendt, *Origins*, 196

⁶² Arendt, *Origins*, 194

⁶³ Johnson, *Persons and Things*, 95

one of the most powerful theoretical systems for ‘making sense of the world.’”⁶⁴ Arendt suggests that Jews were complicit in Nazism insofar as Jewish immigrants were the financiers of the South African gold and diamond mining industries, which the theorist claims Nazi elites like Carl Peters treated as a case study in race-making.⁶⁵ Nirenberg proposes an explanation for Arendt’s tendency to make confounding claims like this, writing that the connection between Jews and finance was among “the a priori ideological commitments that structured her selection and interpretation of ‘facts’ about the Jews.”⁶⁶ Perhaps the same argument can be extended to Arendt’s selection and interpretation of facts about the Bantu (or members of what Arendt calls “the Dark Continent” more generally);⁶⁷ if Arendt’s anti-totalitarian theory is predicated on assumptions like the idea that native Bantu were “backward people” without a culture or history, and that this “backwardness” was determined by Africa’s geography, perhaps her work’s ability to construct a critical response to European racism against South African natives is paradoxical.

Regressive Progress and the Blackness in Whiteness

Arendt’s critique of ideology and the prevalence of racism and class-consciousness as modernity’s two dominant ideologies might partially explain her appeal to contemporary critical theorists: Arendt seems to offer a prototypical version of postmodern anthropologists’ proposition and critique of the masternarrative. The masternarrative critique suggests that there are hegemonic, totalizing narratives — such as histories — that are produced by and which serve

⁶⁵ Arendt, *Origins*, 207

⁶⁶ Walzer, *Imaginary Jews*

⁶⁷ Arendt, *Origins*, 186

to perpetuate power structures. Specifically, Arendt critiques the authority of preconfigured ways to narrate history that are demanded by given ideologies, writing:

Few ideologies have won enough prominence to survive the hard competitive struggle of persuasion, and only two have come out on top and essentially defeated all others: the ideology which interprets history as the economic struggle of classes, and the other that interprets history as a natural fight of races. The appeal of both to large masses was so strong that they were able to enlist state support and establish themselves as official national doctrines. But far beyond the boundaries within which race-thinking and class-thinking have developed into obligatory patterns of thought, free public opinion has adopted them to such an extent that not only intellectuals but great masses of people will no longer accept a presentation of past or present facts that is not in agreement with either of these views.⁶⁸

Arendt's discussion here reflects a critical awareness of the way unequal human relationships inform the ways history is narrated. Unfortunately, the political theorist betrays the limits of her historical criticism when narrating the settlement of the Boers in South Africa and the ensuing slavery of the native Bantu people. Paradoxically — or, perhaps as collateral damage withstood in order to garner appeal to a broader audience — Arendt subscribes to one of her favorite narratives to critique: that of capitalism. Even though Arendt critiques “the struggle of the classes” as one of the two hegemonic ideologies that wrongly claim to possess the “key to history,” she unabashedly defaults to a reductive capitalist narrative to tell the history of South African colonialism.⁶⁹ By this I mean the exclusive but dominant definition of history as a people's “progress” beginning with a nomadic “tribe,” leading later to agricultural settlements, then to specialized forms of labor, and ultimately culminating in industrialization.⁷⁰ This temporally fixed template is widely used to discuss human development, but in Arendt's case serves to contradict her proposed position as anti-racist.

⁶⁸ Arendt, *Origins*, 159

⁶⁹ Arendt, *Origins*, 182

⁷⁰ For a more detailed description of the capitalist masternarrative, see *Capitalism: Where Do We Come From?* by Joseph Heilbroner

Take, for example, the theorist's discussion of the "white race" in South Africa. In Arendt's use, this category does not include British and other European immigrants, but it does include the Boer people — the descendants of earlier Dutch settlers who enslaved many Bantu people. For Arendt, the Boers constitute the "white race" as a direct result of their moral historical backwardness and subsequent moral naïveté. The Boers are the people who commit "the unfathomable massacre of native peoples," the people who burn their farms and relocate inland on "the Dark Continent" whenever later British colonists try to tax their property.⁷¹ This very tendency for relocation is used to argue that the Boers are reminiscent of South Africa's nomadic and "prehistoric" Bantu natives. In turn, this nomadism is cited as evidence that the Boers — along with the Bantu — are further back in time than their European counterparts, since their way of life recalls an earlier point on the timeline of the Eurocentric and capitalist masternarrative Arendt to which subscribes. The Boers, cast as temporally behind, are subsequently labeled naïve and "innocent" on the grounds that they possess no histories of their own from which to learn morality. This is the logic underlying Arendt's claim that "Boer racism, unlike other brands, has a touch of authenticity, and so to speak, of innocence."⁷² This assumption of historical retardation also undergirds the generalization that "the senseless massacre of native tribes on the Dark Continent was quite in keeping with the traditions of these tribes themselves. Extermination of hostile tribes had been the rule in all African native wars."⁷³ This idea has been invoked to justify genocide and the slave trade throughout history.

⁷¹ Arendt, *Origins*, 191

⁷² Arendt, *Origins*, 196

⁷³ Arendt, *Origins*, 193

In a text that repeatedly refers to the Bantu as “savages” and Africa as “the Dark Continent,” the trope of the noble savage was bound to make an appearance. What was less foreseeable was the way Arendt painted the noble savage with white skin. Arendt’s “white race” is predicated on temporal assumptions just as much as it is phenotype, which is why the “backward” Boers constitute the white “race” but British colonists are just people without a “race.” To be more specific, Arendt claims that the Dutch settlers who came to be known as the Boers arrived as European *people*, but “degenerated” — in a sense, travelled back in history— over the generations into a *race*:

When the Boers, in their fright and misery, decided to use these savages as though they were just another form of animal life, they embarked upon a process which could only end with their own degeneration into a white race living beside and altogether with black races from whom in the end they would differ only in the color of their skin.⁷⁴

This passage is significant in a discussion of Arendtian race for two reasons. First, Arendt describes the transformation of European settlers into a race as a “degradation,” implying a descent within a pre-existing hierarchy of “humanity;” this is the descent from *person* to *white person*. Second, the theorist makes a claim that seems to contradict the “innocence” of the initial Boer enslavement of the Bantu: if the Boers “degenerated” into a race, it suggests that they began in South Africa as full-fledged European people *before* transitioning into the “white race” of noble savages; upon arriving, the Boers had “a history of their own,” so it follows that the very Boers who enslaved the Bantu indeed had the moral self-consciousness that the noble savage lacks. The innocence to which Arendt ascribes the Boers is therefore a contradiction.

⁷⁴ Arendt, *Origins*, 194

Paradoxes like this arise throughout Arendt's oeuvre when she uncritically accepts classical liberal philosophy as radically critical of racism. Arendt is an author who flickers between the opposing positions of the anti-racist critic and someone who idealizes the same German philosophers who have historically been invoked to legitimize racism and antisemitism. For example, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel argues in his 1837 *Natural Context or the Geographical Basis for World History* that a region's geography is deterministic of its inhabitants' ability to possess moral self-consciousness and, in turn, history. This explains Hegel's premise: "In this main portion of Africa, history is out of the question."⁷⁵ Arendt uncritically accepts this premise in her depiction of the Boers as "without history" when she claims that the Boers' time in Africa and their treks further inland rendered them more like the "savage" natives, thus supplanting their "history" with the designation of a "race."⁷⁶ In addition to Hegel, Arendt's philosophy is heavily informed by that of her mentor, Martin Heidegger, who was a Nazi and author of a series of explicitly anti-semitic notebooks. However, Heidegger's influence is much more apparent in *The Human Condition* than *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The point holds: Arendt's theory is informed by the same texts that are frequently cited to legitimize the same unjust relationships at the heart of her critique. Considering Arendt's canonization within liberal discourse, it seems that the contemporary critics of injustice who uncritically appropriate Arendt's assumptions are simply passing forward the same problematic torch that was lit by earlier Enlightenment thinkers.

⁷⁵ Hegel, *Geographical Basis of World History*, 176

⁷⁶ Arendt, *Origins*, 193

This is not to say that a text's philosophical background is deterministic of its effectiveness. Jacques Derrida did, after all, develop deconstruction from one of Heidegger's concepts. Rather, I am arguing that the acceptance of premises that contradict a text's intended purpose can undermine the rhetoric of that text, and that this happens throughout the purportedly anti-racist sections of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Once more, the point is not that Hannah Arendt was racist, nor that her racism condemns the rest of her ideas, but rather that her texts are not stable enough to form a foundation for the anti-racist project that Human Rights theorists purport to construct.

In short, Hannah Arendt devotes one third of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to an anti-racist project, but the author's supposed intentions are hampered by a series of contradictions in the assumptions that underlying her rhetoric. Namely, the theorist insists on a distinction between "racism" and "race-thinking" that recalls a defense of contemporary white supremacists; in Arendtian terms, the "white nationalists" who have recently gained prominence in the United States are not racists, but rather "race-thinkers," since they add an element of nationalism to a politics based on racial hierarchy.

Arendt also assumes from a Hegelian tradition that "history" is a specific narrative of development from nomadism to industrialization, and that to be without a history is to be without the self-consciousness prerequisite for moral responsibility. This is the idea undergirding her claim of later British colonists that:

Here they were cured of the illusion that the historical process is necessarily "progressive," for if it was the course of older colonization to trek to something, the "Dutchman trekked away from everything," and if "economic history once taught that man had developed by gradual steps from a life of hunting to pastoral pursuits and finally to a settled and agricultural life," the story of the Boers clearly demonstrated that one could also come "from a land that had taken the lead in a thrifty and intensive cultivation... [and] gradually become

a herdsman and a hunter.” These leaders understood very well that precisely because the Boers had sunk back to the level of savage tribes they remained their undisputed masters.⁷⁷

This passage contradicts two of Arendt’s other claims. First, it invalidates Arendt’s assertion that the Boers were somehow “innocent” in their enslavement of the Bantu people by way of their historical “backwardness”; if the initial Dutch settlers arrived from a land that “had taken the lead in a thrifty and intensive cultivation,” then these men were not the noble savage whom Arendt portrays the Boers as elsewhere. Second, Arendt’s discussion of this historical narrative as a counterexample to “progress” betrays her subscription to the hegemonic narrative of history that anthropologists call the masternarrative. This is ironic, considering that the theorist introduces *Imperialism* with a lamentation of the way dominant ideologies prescribe history to be told. It is also perplexing that the same masternarrative of economic development that Arendt subscribes to is that of capitalism, which is possibly the philosopher’s most consistent object of critique throughout her oeuvre.

Ultimately, this chapter reveals that Arendt’s “anti-racist” work is too contradictory and unstable to rely on as an ersatz for critical race theory in the Human Rights canon, so long as Human Rights is taken to be an anti-racist project for justice. Whether this instability be —as historian David Nuremberg argues — the result of an epistemological problem entrenched in Western thought, or instead the result of Arendt’s own biographical biases, ultimately does not matter. What matters is that contemporary Human Rights scholars who share Arendt’s a priori ideological commitments regarding history and human hierarchies are bound to err in the same way as the philosopher; Hegel is to Arendt what Arendt is to Roger Berkowitz, Peg Birgminham,

⁷⁷ Arendt, *Origins*, 207

Ayten Gündoğdu, and the growing cult of critics who believe that Arendt's oeuvre contains the answers to the ethical questions raised by Human Rights.

Conclusion:

I have critiqued Hannah Arendt's disciples who assume her ideas about humanity, persona, and work are the perfect premises for the advocacy and realization of a universalist human rights project. In chapter one, I took Ayten Gündoğdu as an exemplar of the contemporary scholars who perceive Arendt's political theory as a stable starting point for creating critical theory and undertaking political action. I showed that Arendt's categories of the "human" and who has "personhood" are unstable, and that their implementation in a "universalist" project invoking "humanity" is paradoxical. While Gündoğdu's book, *Rightlessness in the Age of Rights*, exhibits exceptional critical thought, erudition and the best intention, it is ultimately a dangerous contribution to the social justice project it invokes.

I have critiqued those who cast Arendt's theory as its own ethical project and use its assumed superiority to criticize human rights activists. Taking Roger Berkowitz as an exemplar of this school of thought, I showed that Arendt's premises provide a defense certain of human rights to the detriment of others. Namely, Berkowitz invoked Arendt's article *On Little Rock* to defend privacy and "individualism" at the cost of racial and economic equality. Extending my object of critique beyond this article's explicit racism and defense of racial segregation in the American South, I analyzed Arendt's claims that Nazism arose in Germany as the result of unprecedented socioeconomic inequality. I invoked Etienne Balibar's notion of *equaliberty* to reveal the contradictory nature of Arendt's rhetoric by way of Berkowitz; to claim that equality causes injustice is akin to saying that *justice causes injustice*. My extension of Balibar's argument involves the assumption that "equality" is entangled with historical conceptions of

“justice,” for which I cite as evidence Saussure’s “immutability” of the scales as an ancient Western symbol of justice. This chapter, like the first, reveals the necessity for close reading in any justice project that aims to claim authority through appeals to a canonical. When scholars like Roger Berkowitz construct a defense of individualism and privacy by assuming pre-existing binaries like *justice-equality* and *privacy-desegregation*, it seems that reading Arendt more closely would help them better realize their intentions.

While chapter three emphasized race and the contradictory assumptions Arendt accepts in order to narrate her critical history of South Africa, a close reading of classist ideas would complement this chapter. In tandem with racist ideology, the “struggle of classes” is the other dominant narration of history according to the philosopher. Assumptions about class are clearly fundamental to Arendt’s theory as she develops her ideas in *The Human Condition*, as evidenced by the book’s project of distinguishing and hierarchizing *work*, *labor*, and *action*. The entanglement of class and morality is also prevalent in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, when Arendt claims of the Boer people that “Their poverty is almost exclusively the consequence of their contempt for work and their adjustment to the way of life of black tribes.”⁷⁸ While I did show Arendt’s assumptions about nature, history and morality to be unstable when we close read racism and humanity in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a close reading of class in her oeuvre would advance this critical project.

As I conclude this paper, the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and the Humanities at Bard College is preparing to host a panel featuring Lucian Wintrich. Wintrich is a White House Press Corps member and writer for the alt-right publication, *Gateway Pundit*. He is infamous for his

⁷⁸ Arendt, *Origins*, 194

provocative interviews — which often include the hateful derision of trans people and people “below a certain income bracket” — and his 2016 photography exhibit, “Twinks for Trump.” Wintrich was invited, by Arendt Center founder Roger Berkowitz, as a interlocutor on a panel discussing “Free Speech and Academic Freedom.” The equivalence of hate speech to freedom recalls the Arendtian formulation that racial segregation is fundamental to deterring the next totalitarian regime. This controversial event helps, however ephemerally, to further professionalize hatred, and arises out of one of the several binaries uncritically inherited by Arendt and her disciples. The fact that Wintrich was educated within this exact liberal tradition at Bard College speaks to the necessity for the deconstruction of these assumptions.

There is an intellectual continuity at the heart of this critique: canonical philosophers like Hegel are to Arendt what Arendt is to her contemporary disciples in Human Rights. This tradition includes ideological assumptions about personhood, race, and class that preclude its ability to effectively generate the ethical and anti-racist theory that the Human Rights discipline ought to cherish. This is not to say that the reactionary ideas within the Western canon preclude its works from inspiring effective ethical thought. Rather, such works as Arendt's -- especially considering their centrality to the Human Rights discipline -- mandate close reading and contemplation if they are to be given authority on the topics of justice and human relations. The paradoxes underlying Arendt's critical thought are not just logical fallacies; they are constitutive of a deeply entrenched ethical problem that is bound to recur without deconstruction.

I still haven't explicitly proposed a resolution to the problem of inheriting reactionary assumptions about people and ethics. Of course, I too am writing from the position of a student whose education is part of the liberal tradition at the heart of this critique. Throughout this

project, I encountered many assumptions of my own that made writing difficult; I, too, am Jacques Derrida's bricoleur. My critique of personhood and humanity as these ideas are discussed by Arendt and Gündoğdu was particularly difficult to write; in earlier drafts I found myself defaulting to the taxonomical language of biology privileged by the same liberal tradition at the heart of my critique. This made finding effective language to discuss the politics of "human rights" incredibly difficult, but it also led me to re-evaluate my own epistemological assumptions. It was not until revisiting Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* late in the semester and contemplating Roger Berkowitz' use of the word "imagination" that I realized humanity is itself an imagined community. Furthermore, when discussing Human Rights, this category is usually imagined as part of a hegemonic liberal ideology — just like the distinction between public and private in Berkowitz' essay. That this revelation took so much time, despite my persistent intuition of the idea, serves to show my status as both subject and object of this critique. The same education that gave me the language to write this paper also more deeply ingrained my acceptance of the epistemological hegemony of science, which led me to my initial aporetic response to Gündoğdu in biological terms.

This is not a paradox. Rather, there is a way to read canonical texts like Arendt's that contributes to the improvement of Human Rights as a project for social justice. Derrida's proposal of deconstruction was, after all, informed by his reading of Arendt's mentor, Heidegger. I am not criticizing *that* Hannah Arendt has been canonized, but rather *the hagiographic way* that her texts tend to be read by the scholars who affirm her centrality within the Human Rights discipline. As I showed in my third chapter, Arendt's works brim with assumptions about humanity, race, nature and history that resemble the arguments of contemporary white

supremacists much more frequently than those of radical critical theorists. The fact that Arendt's critical work advances reactionary premises is not necessarily deterministic of its ability to contribute to a justice project, but it does limit its efficacy unless we read the texts closely.

In conclusion, my critique of Hannah Arendt's canonization within Human Rights critical theory — and the academic discipline more broadly — arises from the way inherited ideological assumptions can haunt “human rights” in its manifold expressions as a justice project. Namely, Arendt and many of her disciples perpetuate longstanding assumptions about humanity and justice that undermine the ability of their ideas to condemn and deter injustice, especially racial injustice. In 2017, when members of an “alt-right” movement are in positions of political authority, and racist violence is rampant in the United States, the facility with which Arendtian assumptions dovetail with reactionary politics is especially startling. Through this project I have found myself according with thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Barbara Johnson and Judith Butler, who see close, deconstructionist reading as an ethical imperative. How we read Arendt and other members of the canon is a political act; this is illustrated by the distinctions between my readings of Arendt and those of scholars like Roger Berkowitz and Ayten Gündoğdu.

For now, Arendt's late life comment on how a text should be evaluated deals with part of the problem:

Each time you write something and you send it out into the world and it becomes public, obviously everybody is free to do with it what he pleases, and this is as it should be. I do not have any quarrel with this. You should not try to hold your hand now on whatever may happen to what you have been thinking for yourself.⁷⁹

This paper is ultimately about the understated possibilities of this freedom. Close reading itself has become a kind of justice project. While one ought to be free to do with a text what they

⁷⁹ Arendt, Hannah, *Remarks to the American Society of Christian Ethics*

please, one also ought to think about the ethical implications of reading. If Hannah Arendt is to be sacralized as today's preeminent social justice muse, this paper demands for Arendt the kind of reader Derrida was to Heidegger.

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