

Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek
Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics: Toward Democratic Plurality and Reproductive Justice
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Reviewed by Robyn Ferrell, 2019

Robyn Ferrell is Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Law, Arts & Humanities at the Australian National University. She has written several books of philosophy and creative writing; the latest, *Free Stuff: Freedom and Commodity in the Internet Age*, is forthcoming from Lexington Books.

Quote: "Scholarly and visionary, *Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics* constitutes a wholly inspiring intervention into the ongoing questions of biopolitics and feminist theory."

This excellent monograph presents a striking new reading of Hannah Arendt's concept of natality, arguing that through the concept, a prescient Arendt provides a convincing account of biopolitics ahead of successors Foucault, Nancy, and Agamben. Comparative discussions of these theorists, who are often more familiar citations in the discussion of biopolitics, bring clarity to the differences among them, and to previous readings of Arendt.

The analysis . . . reframes Arendt's accounts of the "rise of the social" and the "social" precursors of totalitarianism as significant for a diagnosis of similar trends in contemporary biopolitics and as pre-empting Foucault's definition of biopolitics, understood as state control of the power both to "make live" and to "let die" through regularization of the biological life of the population.

. . . as a warning against trends in contemporary politics, the analysis focuses on how biopolitics, by suppressing the event of natality, can, in the extreme, transform one pole of biopolitics, the state control of the power to "let die," into totalitarianism and a politics of "making die" or of (living) death, without recourse to the state exercise of sovereign power. (174)

Through the analysis of "natality," Arendt is interpreted as delivering concepts of power, freedom, and alliance that overcome two stumbling blocks in alternative modern political theories: on the one hand, the view of power that rules out change by political agency, often attributed to Foucault; on the other, the negative freedom of social-contract theorists that leaves only individual rights under the protection of governance.

In engaging the power to "make live and let die" with the question of the political actor in such a way as to reveal its ontology, this book offers conceptual resources to diverse debates in feminist theory and beyond. It also opens up some urgent questions: the rise of right-wing nationalist politics, the intensifying of alienation in contemporary urban life, and the reverses suffered by women in relation to their reproductive rights despite being citizens of apparently liberal democratic states.

The Concept of Natality

The virtues of Arendt's concept of natality are brought out by the authors' wide understanding of its development through Arendt's writing.

Arendt defines "natality" *not* as the birth of new "life," but variously as a "new beginning" and the human "capacity of beginning something anew" (HC: 9 [*The Human Condition*]). While she does not always use the term "natality," the concept of a beginner "beginning something anew" persists throughout her oeuvre. She considers "natality" to be both the central feature of human existence (as the basis for new notions of agency and "humanness") and the "central category of political . . . thought" (HC: 9). Defining human existence and politics in terms of the appearance of new beginnings emphasises novelty, unpredictability and frailty as central features of the human condition and human affairs. (2)

But it's fair to say that Arendt's explicit presentation of the concept in *The Human Condition* has not been enough to bring out the political potential of her thinking. *Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics* brings out the context that develops from reading across more vivacious texts like *Origins of Totalitarianism*, to better point up the originality in the concept.

Arendt frames her thinking on natality in and around a sustained meditation on how totalitarian politics came to be. It's good to remember that Arendt formulates her philosophy as herself a Jewish refugee with firsthand experience of Nazism. She regarded totalitarian government to be a new form of government that could only come to pass in a world of mass populations, that is, in the twentieth century in the wake of mature industrial-technological revolution.

Her anxiety about the bureaucratic caused her to describe it as a regressive agent that made the political sphere into the private through the administration of populations. This locates the unique positioning of "natality" on the border between public and private, and not as a biological but as a political event. Her conception has an attractive literalism:

it is not simply that "natality" is the result of an individual aptitude or specific human faculty (for example, of mind). A human being *is* a new beginning by virtue of their "appearance" in the socio-historical world and, whatever the person is doing, their actions begin something new in the sense that they have a unique and unpredictable effect on others and on the course of events. (5)

This is important to take up, especially in the era of mass populations when each is "only one of seven billion." The digital era overemphasizes the faculty of mind and abstracts human being from its immersion in material necessity and physical frailty, dwelling in the life span between a birth and a death.

In Arendt's writing, being with others becomes the phenomenological ground of individual being and is the conceptual strength of "natality." It prevents from the outset the conceiving of human life as either simply biological or simply as a metaphysics of the individual. Sociality is primary. We can see the pertinence of this conception now, in an era of false individualism that takes its expression only in terms of the consumer's free choice, and at the same time, of strident identity politics crying out for distinctions without real differences--in which plurality is reduced merely to so many brands.

The conception of natality being in company with others also matters when we regard its shadow, the isolation invoked in the breakdown of traditional community in contemporary life. The transition to the urban has disrupted customary identities and thrust new generations onto a path of globalized futures. But these vistas are not always realistic, and the lived reality of the rupture can leave people leading atomized lives that are lived primarily alone. The "global village" is an ideal far from the high-rise dormitories and urban environments of modern cities in which the populace is exposed to loneliness--explicitly identified by Arendt as a technique of totalitarian rule.

Politics of Reproduction

Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics takes up Arendt's unique "mixed methodology," testing and advancing the argument through enlightening, real-world examples. It specifically uses reproductive politics as these examples, with a twofold significance to the field of debate. First, these reflect the feminist concerns out of which the rereading of Arendt has grown. Second, and symbolically, it is in examples of surgical and medical abortion that the concept of natality is seen in three dimensions, as the condition of a political world and as the natural bridge to it from the erstwhile "private sphere" of the feminine. "Because a new beginning by definition has an unpredictable impact on the world, governments are inclined to control human birth as part of wider regulation of so-called 'biological' life" (3).

The world's population is greater than at any other time in species history. But this crisis remains largely in the realm of social medicine and out of the purview of political philosophy. To meet the world of mass population with an alternative to the bureaucracy of health economists, who make policy on birth control within the passive context of the administration of public health and medicine, requires finding a political articulation of that world. And it needs to find it in the face of a contrary motion toward the digital abstraction of the populace in social media and artificial intelligence.

Of particular concern to contemporary feminist politics must be the argument that Arendt saw "*the perversion of a politics of equality* into a social process of normalisation" as on a conceptual continuum with the lethal governance of totalitarian forms (114). This presses on the very real dismay we might feel at the way in which political collective action of the mid to late twentieth century has dissipated into "distinctions without difference" that drive social identities across the political spectrum. It sketches why the granting of political recognition is not enough to protect specific groups from discrimination.

It is part of an intricate mapping in the book of how Arendt analyzes the precursors to totalitarian government, in the imperialism of the nineteenth century and the rise of the "social" sphere of life and death as the purview of governance, as a *thanato-biopolitics* that lives on in liberal democracies. This one thread of argument alone makes this book essential reading for feminist political philosophers.

Arendt's analysis also shows that the biopolitical "experiment" of total domination destroys both the conceptual significance of, and the political institutions based on, the distinctions between private and public, nature and history . . . totalitarianism destroys both the stabilizing and the novel aspects of people acting in political community; it destroys any expression of uniqueness and the means of disclosing natality to and by others; human existence is reduced to a (determined) product of the movement of nature or history . . . (175)

Drawing on readings from Cavarero and Kristeva, among others, chapter 5 offers an account of the place of narrative in the application of natality, as the imaginative bridge across the gap between past and future. "Arendt's notion of narrative provides a crucial alternative to information technologies, dominant in the age of biopolitics and neo-liberalism: statistical analysis, big data and the predictive modelling of the future" (292).

Democracy

[T]he event of "natality" can be understood as the unique philosophical concept that Arendt adds to political theory to explain the play of the conditioned and unconditioned that underlies human existence and hence to explain the "principle" underlying democracy . . . In a democracy understood as "activities that are "disclosed" by others as such and as originating with a "beginner" . . . we alter those conditions and thereby keep the "common" world that we share open to "potentiality" rather than governed by necessity. (6)

This articulation of democracy seems ever more germane in a context dominated by, on the one hand, impotent partisan political parties, and on the other, rising populist groups. Neither of these candidates for power is representative of the plurality Arendt enunciates in the ethic of the *natal*. "All spheres of human activity, including labour and work but especially the political realm of speech and action, are 'rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for . . . the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers'" (6).

Building on this formula of a principle of democracy, chapter 4 provides an analysis of how contemporary biopolitics threatens democracy, not only through draconian political discourse aimed at the personal and the nation--sexuality, maternity, immigration, and refugees--but also through the deregulation of labor in the gig economy.

Chapter 4 explores the role of conscience in Arendt, "working against a morally bankrupt politics." If we genuinely thought ahead to the world of strangers to come, and with what we should welcome them, the shortsightedness of climate policy no less than unfettered capital would be clear. There would be a view from which this myopia borders on corrupt.

The perspective from which we imagine reproduction as a philosophical event is strikingly novel. It is perhaps a view that can come to light only in the creation of a different kind of philosopher--one with a proximity to the bodily realm of sexuality and gender, and to the possibility of giving birth and child-rearing. This space has previously been conceived of as *not* philosophical, as *not* a place for the deliberation of public affairs. And yet, by stealth, the space is colonized as biopower if not given voice as political speech. It seems clear that this "world of strangers," who will be our descendants and for whom we will be ancestors, deserve better than this.

It follows from these ardent reflections on Arendt's view of the human condition that democracy needs to be reconceived. This book makes a start on that. It also performs a remarkable demonstration of natality in the act of presenting new thinking in and on the space of the political.

Both authors have a recognized track record in feminist theory. Ewa Ziarek's book *An Ethics of Dissensus* will be known to many readers of *Hypatia*, who may also be aware of her recent contribution to feminist aesthetics. Rosalyn Diprose has an enduring presence in the

scholarship of feminist phenomenology through her well-known books *Corporeal Generosity* and *The Bodies of Women*, and by her two decades of scholarship at the intersection of existential phenomenology and biopolitics (including on Arendt). This latest thinking builds on the previous work in a vibrant way. Scholarly and visionary, *Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics* constitutes a wholly inspiring intervention into the ongoing questions of biopolitics and feminist theory. It also revives Arendt in rereadings that are timely for political philosophy generally.