**Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault on History, Tradition, and Modernity**

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**Abstract**

This article interrogates the different ways in which Arendt and Foucault seek to conceptualize tradition in their work. First, it analyses Arendt’s approach, arguing that she put forward three overlapping accounts of the Western tradition – one that criticized the alienating affects of post-seventeenth century science, one that criticized the Western philosophical tradition as a whole for favouring ‘making’ and ‘contemplation’ over ‘action’, and one that sought to explain the advent of totalitarianism through the stresses that imperialism and racism put upon Western political thought. These approaches are then contrasted with Foucault’s. It is argued that he differed significantly in not believing there was *one* Western tradition, laid less stress on totalitarianism, was more of a historicist, and distinguished less between the ‘political’ and the ‘social’. Nevertheless there were important overlaps between Arendt and Foucault’s approaches. Both were critical of the instrumentalizing and technocratic effects of modern science, both stressed the importance of unpredictable events in history, and both believed that examining the Western tradition critically offered important alternatives for modern politics – though neither thought that these would lead to any simple gaining of liberal ‘autonomy’.

**Keywords**

Arendt, Foucault, tradition, totalitarianism, genealogy

1. **Introduction**

The status of the theorists Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault has never been higher, to the extent that each now has their own journal devoted to their work.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is partly due to the sheer inherent intellectual quality of their outputs, but also because of their impressive intellectual range – both wrote prolifically, and have become increasingly influential across a wide array of disciplines. Thus Foucault has had a profound impact on the study of gender and sexuality in particular,[[2]](#footnote-2) but his thought has been an important influence right across the human sciences[[3]](#footnote-3) – while Arendt’s stature has steadily grown, as political commentators as well as scholars have increasingly sought to mine her major works like *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition* for insights about how to protect democracy and understand radical evil.[[4]](#footnote-4) Perhaps inevitably, in view of some of their overlapping concerns, political theorists have begun to compare some of their most important themes. These include Amy Allen, who has argued that despite their differing philosophical backgrounds, Arendt and Foucault’s arguments about power significantly overlap;[[5]](#footnote-5) James Tully, who has noted parallels between Arendt and Foucault’s rejection of ‘sovereignty’ as a pre-condition of freedom;[[6]](#footnote-6) and Kathrin Baum, who has contended that despite not explicitly mentioning the concept, Arendt’s arguments in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere anticipate Foucault’s conception of bio-politics.[[7]](#footnote-7)

However, there has been considerably less work done comparing their respective approaches to history and historical method – rather surprisingly, since although neither can be identified as a conventional ‘historian’, clearly the thought of both was absolutely saturated with a sense of history and historical examples. For Arendt, explaining the crisis of the modern age and the overwhelming effects of totalitarianism was central to her whole intellectual enterprise, whether this was in a more overtly historical register (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) or a more phenomenological/philosophical one (in the *The Human Condition*). And for Foucault, too, historical investigation and exemplification was of critical importance – whether he was seeking to identify the fundamental rules and practices that lay behind human actions in his more ‘archaeological’ works, such as *The Archaeology of Knowledge* or the contingent origins of longstanding institutions and modes of behaviour in his more ‘genealogical’ works, such as *Discipline and Punish*.[[8]](#footnote-8) Crucially too, although there were clear differences between the two authors, with Arendt being more interested in the importance of the nation-state, the effects of totalitarianism, and the nature of revolution,[[9]](#footnote-9) and Foucault more focused on the history of discipline and punishment, sexuality, and classifications of knowledge,[[10]](#footnote-10) there were also some highly important overlaps. These included a deep interest in the effects of modern science and technology, a suspicion of the civilizing powers of modern societies, and a distrust of grand metanarratives of progress. They also included a strong interest in the possibility of using practical and theoretical examples from ancient history to use as alternatives to modern norms,[[11]](#footnote-11) important engagements with the work of Heidegger and Marx,[[12]](#footnote-12) and a wary respect for Kant[[13]](#footnote-13) – though they rarely used his arguments in entirely conventional ways.

Clearly it is not possible to delve into all such promising connections within the space of one article – indeed the richness of them is the very reason for the existence of this special issue. Instead, therefore, I will concentrate on how Arendt and Foucault conceptualized the nature of tradition and historical method, their understandings of modernity, and how they sought to use historical examples to present alternatives to modern understandings of politics and history. To do so I will firstly consider Arendt’s conception of history before contrasting it with Foucault’s. One of the challenges of dealing with such stimulating and complex thinkers is that they both evolved and developed intellectually, so I should make clear that I will be especially concerned to analyse Arendt’s arguments in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and *Between Past and Future*, and generally (though not exclusively) the more ‘genealogical’ writings in Foucault’s oeuvre – though I of course accept that any hard and fact periodization of either Arendt or Foucault’s work would necessarily be simplistic.

1. **Hannah Arendt on History and Tradition**
2. **Critique of Modernity**

Turning to Arendt first, then, how did she conceptualize the nature of history and the Western tradition? Even sticking to Arendt’s main texts, this question is a complex one to answer, since she gave more than one response, sometimes stressing the negative effects of modernity, sometimes querying the worth of the Western tradition in general, and sometimes emphasizing the importance of ‘subterranean currents’ which were at odds with the dominant norms within the Western tradition. We will examine each of these responses in turn.

First then, particularly in *The Human Condition*, but also elsewhere, Arendt stressed the negative effects of modernity, or at least its unprecedented nature. While she did not idealize the Greek polis, as some have claimed,[[14]](#footnote-14) and indeed distinguished between earlier and later phases of its development to some extent,[[15]](#footnote-15) there were three facets of ancient Greek life that Arendt valued highly. Firstly, she strongly approved of the division the ancient Greek polis had established between private and public spheres, where the former was regarded as distinctly inferior, the zone where practical necessities took place – while by contrast the latter was the place where the most praiseworthy of human conduct could occur.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Secondly, closely related to the first point, Arendt contended that the polis (or at least some versions of it) allowed human beings to conduct their three fundamental activities properly, and to do so in the correct sphere. These comprised ‘labouring’, the activity that most closely connected human beings to other animals – namely those that related to biological necessity, and which produced objects that were perishable, constantly consumed, and hence endlessly reproduced.[[17]](#footnote-17) This the ancient Greeks largely confined to the household. Then there was ‘work’ or ‘fabrication’ which was distinguished from ‘labour’ by its end: to produce durable, artificial objects, where although the end of the activity was known in advance, their production necessitated human ingenuity, a mastery of nature.[[18]](#footnote-18) Such production of objects could vary from being the mere making of a chair to an artwork to a whole set of artificial institutions, a durable ‘world’ where citizens could freely interact with one another – which had an ‘objective’ reality.[[19]](#footnote-19) In such a world, human beings were potentially able to ‘act’ – in other words to initiate new and surprising activities which genuinely expressed their individuality, their plurality, their differences from one another.[[20]](#footnote-20) ‘Actions’ could only be performed by interacting with others, often included speech, and, precisely because others were vital to their performance, were entirely unpredictable: no one individual could ever know how actions, once initiated, would turn out in advance – and indeed could not really have full prior knowledge of their own characters.[[21]](#footnote-21) (As such, the only way to determine the meaning of action was *ex post facto*, by subsequent storytelling.[[22]](#footnote-22)) Nevertheless despite all its challenges, ‘action’ was regarded by Arendt as the quintessential human activity – without its expression human beings were left passive, unfulfilled – and it could only genuinely take place in a properly constituted public sphere, where agents could ‘trust the appearances’ of the reality around them. To quote Arendt herself: ‘without a space of appearance and without trusting in action and speech as mode of being together, neither the reality of one’s self, of one’s own identity, nor the reality of the surrounding world can be established beyond doubt.’[[23]](#footnote-23)

Lastly, if Arendt thought it was vital for there to be a properly constituted ‘world’ and public sphere for individuals to perform their activities in the correct areas, she also stressed the importance of respecting the worth of different mental activities, and identifying what their true functions and possibilities were. In particular, she sought to distinguish between ‘contemplation’, the activity of appreciating the perfection of the cosmos, the ‘heavens’, from other mental activities, namely ‘cognition’, ‘logical reasoning’, and ‘thought’.[[24]](#footnote-24) ‘Cognition’, Arendt contended, was akin to ‘fabrication’ in that it was a mental ability that enabled the achievement of definite ends, whether these related to scientific or human activities. By contrast, ‘logical reasoning’, Arendt argued, was the deduction of correct conclusions from axiomatic premises – a vital skill, but one that Hobbes would later incorrectly label as the most fundamental mental ability.[[25]](#footnote-25) Much more important was ‘thought’, an ability that in *The Human Condition* Arendt claimed has no end or aim outside itself, and might not even produce results – and yet has ‘processes [that] permeate the whole of human existence so intimately that its beginning and end coincide with the beginning and end of human life itself’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Only by appreciating the respective worth of these abilities correctly, Arendt argued, could one genuinely apprehend the nature of the human condition.

What, then, went wrong in modernity, according to Arendt in *The Human Condition*? Essentially, she believed there were three related causes of decline. Firstly, Arendt identified ‘world alienation’, the process by which humankind lost a common world of institutions and shared experiences as critically important. Influenced by Marx, Arendt argued that this phenomenon began with the Reformation, when the expropriation of church lands had the unintended consequence of peasant lands also being seized, and to a more general process of expropriation. This led directly to the reduction of peasants to wage-labourers with no place in the common ‘world’ and, more fundamentally, to the transmutation of property, a stable, dependable form of ownership, upon which institutions could be based, into wealth – which by contrast was fluid, unstable, and could be recycled into the production process. The ultimate result was an accelerating torrent of production and consumption, which reduced the common ‘world’ of institutions into an inescapable process of labouring, and a set of individuals clumped together in a rootless, alienated, mass ‘society’.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Secondly, however, if this process of ‘world’ alienation was a significant one, even more vital for Arendt was what she labelled ‘earth alienation’. This was the phenomenon by which the scientific discoveries from the seventeenth century onwards gradually removed the limitations that the earth imposed upon human understanding and discovery, instituting instead an ‘Archimedean’ point outside the earth from which humans could actively intervene and change natural phenomena and natural processes, in a way that even Renaissance scientists, let alone ancient ones would have found unimaginable.[[28]](#footnote-28) Earth alienation really began with Galileo’s definitive discovery that the earth rotates around the sun, using his much improved telescope, but although the implications of his discovery took centuries to work through, the net result was an entirely different relationship with the natural world – since after this humankind began to be able to dominate nature and extract information from it in previously unimaginable ways.[[29]](#footnote-29) (These included phenomena such as nuclear fission, genetic experimentation, producing radioactive elements not found in nature, penetrating space to the extent of six billion light years, and last but not least launching man-made satellites into space, the event with which Arendt began *The Human Condition*.[[30]](#footnote-30)) But at least as significant as these concrete phenomena was the way in which Galileo’s discovery induced philosophers to doubt their senses in a way that they had never done before, directly leading to the Cartesian programme of rigorous doubt, to the idea that instead of trusting one’s senses, one had to trust one’s reason.[[31]](#footnote-31) This had fundamental consequences, Arendt argued. In particular, it implied that the old trust in sense perceptions of reality, guaranteed ultimately by ‘common sense’ could no longer be relied upon – ‘common sense’ became a faculty that individual agents carried within their heads.[[32]](#footnote-32) Instead, due to the subjugation of ‘real-world’ geometry to algebra, most fully displayed in Newton’s laws of motion, one might trust abstract mathematical reasoning, or, alternatively, humans could trust what they had made themselves – since they had much more certain knowledge of these objects as compared to the natural world.[[33]](#footnote-33) This elevated the worth of the fabricator, of ‘work’ on a temporary basis, but ultimately, because such standards of making were liable to degenerate into utilitarianism, into what gave the most pleasure, that was forgotten. And the result that the standard became instead what gave most sensual pleasure, what benefited the ‘life-process’ the most.[[34]](#footnote-34) In short, the worth of actions became equated with those of ‘labouring’.

Finally, as result of these concrete changes that occurred in practice, Arendt argued that the way in which humans conceived of their mental abilities radically changed in modernity. It was a key premise of her work that fundamental changes were always caused by concrete events rather than purely by innovations in thought, and in this case she argued that the discoveries that Galileo made with his telescope had far reaching consequences for how humans conceptualized the world. For because it became clearer and clearer from the seventeenth century onwards that the best way of gaining knowledge of the universe was by using man-made instruments, by doing, the high value that the ancients had placed on contemplating the universe was revealed to be suspect. (As Arendt put it herself: ‘after being and appearance had parted company and truth was no longer supposed to appear, to reveal and disclose itself to the mental eye of a beholder, there arose a veritable necessity to hunt for truth behind deceptive appearances’.[[35]](#footnote-35)) Contemplation was thus dispensed with, and doing (or fabrication) was elevated (at least in the early modern period) as the supreme method of obtaining the truth – with thinking as its handmaiden – before ultimately, later in modernity, as we have seen already, the advent of utilitarianism induced humankind to value pleasure, a part of the life-process of ‘labouring’ instead. Important for our purposes here is Arendt’s insistence that what made contemplation so useless was that humankind was no longer seeking to understand something perfect and unchanging – whether this be nature or the universe – as the ancients had done.[[36]](#footnote-36) Rather the new focus in modernity was a stress on how phenomena came into being, on a kind of history – so that before the dominance of history as a discipline in the humanities in the nineteenth century was established, a form of ‘history’ had already become dominant within sciences.[[37]](#footnote-37)

1. **Critique of the Western Tradition**

Thus far, we have concentrated on Arendt’s critique of modernity, which she put forward with force in *The Human Condition*, but also elsewhere. As already indicated, however, this certainly does not exhaust Arendt’s approach to history and tradition, and the second major theme in her work is a strong distrust of the Western philosophical tradition as a whole, not just its degeneration in modernity. Essentially, Arendt had three queries about it. In the first place, she was suspicious about the degree to which the Western philosophical tradition had tended to prioritize contemplation over action. For despite the fact that she lamented its disappearance altogether in modernity, Arendt still viewed the supreme importance that the tradition had accorded to contemplation as problematic, since it tended to diminish the importance given to the active life, the *vita activa* – and furthermore to minimize the distinctions between ‘labour’, ‘work’, and ‘action’, that Arendt thought were so crucial. The reason for the tradition according contemplation such a high value was partly due to Christianity, which located the ultimate meaning of life in the next world, rather than this one. But more fundamentally, it was due to the firm conviction of many ancient Greek thinkers, including Plato and Aristotle, that nothing accomplished by the imperfect hands of human beings can match the beauty and truth of the heavens – which it is the job of philosophical contemplation to understand.[[38]](#footnote-38)

In the second place, Arendt was suspicious of the Western philosophical tradition not only because of its hostility to the *vita activa* in general, but to ‘action’ in particular. One of her key criticisms of Marx, for example, was that he failed to distinguish between the activities within the *vita activa*,[[39]](#footnote-39) arguing for a conception of emancipation based upon ‘labour’ rather than ‘work’, and blurring the distinction between ‘work’ and ‘action’ – so that he talked about ‘making’ history, when real revolutionary ‘action’ was much more unpredictable.[[40]](#footnote-40) And this problem was not unique to Marx, Arendt argued, but rather a deep-seated one within the Western tradition, which again went right back to Plato and Aristotle’s work. For notwithstanding the possibilities for ‘action’ in certain parts of ancient Greek history, such theorists were nevertheless deeply suspicious of its unpredictability, its irreversibility, and the degree to which it had a tenuous relationship to individual characters – since the plural and unpredictable nature of ‘action’ meant that its ultimate outcomes were unknown in advance even to the actors themselves. In response, Plato had established a tradition of trying to tame ‘action’ by subjugating it to a form of ‘fabrication’ – in other words to rules, to laws. To do this effectively, he sought to divide knowledge of *how* to rule from the act of *doing* it, drawing a distinction between those who ought to rule from those who ought to obey.[[41]](#footnote-41) And perhaps even more fundamentally, Plato had linked this to a self-controlled conception of the self – where (to quote *The Human Condition*) ‘just as the philosopher-king commands the city, the soul commands the body and reason commands the passions’.[[42]](#footnote-42) ‘Action’ is tamed by the strategy of dividing ruling and obeying, in other words, and the best fitted man to rule is someone who has established sovereignty over himself – hence rejecting the unpredictability of ‘action’.

Lastly, Arendt had ambivalent feelings about the way that ‘tradition’ had operated in practice over the centuries. It is true that she certainly lamented the breakdown of tradition due to the nightmare of totalitarianism, and indeed maintained that if traditional religious beliefs and practices had been maintained, totalitarianism would in fact never have occurred.[[43]](#footnote-43) Moreover, although she respected the intellectual ambition of the great nineteenth century theorists seeking to undermine the Western philosophical tradition, namely Marx, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, Arendt felt that all had ultimately failed and remained trapped within the boundaries that tradition had set. (Just to take one example, Arendt argued that Kierkegaard’s attempt to save traditional religious beliefs by making them subject to modern doubt and distrust was self-defeating – asserting the possibility of religious belief on the basis that reason and the senses were untrustworthy was more or less self-defeating.[[44]](#footnote-44)) But nevertheless, she regarded the ‘tradition’ that had endured for centuries as very much a particular and contingent development of certain concepts, which might have taken other paths, had its limitations, and in some ways was proving unequal to the task of providing stability in modernity even before the advent of totalitarianism.[[45]](#footnote-45) Tradition in this sense was, she argued, essentially a Roman invention, based upon the idea of according the founding of the city of Rome a religious significance – so that Roman gods themselves were located within the city itself, as opposed to remotely on Mount Olympus, as the Greek ones were.[[46]](#footnote-46) Closely linked to this was a particular concept of political authority, distinguished from the more ‘educative’ one of Plato and Aristotle – namely the idea that authority in politics, just as in medicine, or greater age and experience, derived from expertise.[[47]](#footnote-47) (Instead, authority on this definition precisely derived from - or perhaps, better, was indistinguishable from – the idea of tradition, of sacred founding.[[48]](#footnote-48)) This conception of tradition had proved extraordinarily resilient, enriched by the ideas of Plato and other ancient Greeks – whom the Romans integrated into their sacred tradition – and then by Christianity, when Constantine the Great established it as the official Roman religion.[[49]](#footnote-49) Indeed such was the strength of the Roman conception of tradition and authority, Arendt argued, that it actually affected Christianity itself, with a new emphasis on the historical truth of the life of Jesus, and less on the Christian faith in resurrection or Hebraic obedience to the commands of God.[[50]](#footnote-50) Respectful as she was of aspects of this durable conception of tradition, in other words, Arendt also stressed its contingency and particularity – and certainly saw it as no particular friend to the performance of genuine political ‘action’.

1. **Explanations for Totalitarianism**

Thus far, we have examined Arendt’s critiques of modernity, and of the whole Western tradition. But beyond this she also offered another historical account, which was related to these, and yet had a different emphasis, namely her explanation for the advent of totalitarianism. *The Origins of Totalitarianism* resembled her more philosophical work in that it insisted that it was unpredictable events rather than changes in philosophy that had the most decisive effects in history – and indeed that totalitarianism itself was the most decisive event of all, bringing the very Western tradition to an end.[[51]](#footnote-51) There was, in other words, no inevitability that the important changes made in conceiving the world from the seventeenth century onwards would necessarily lead to totalitarianism, and thus Arendt is certainly not to be identified with thinkers who regarded totalitarianism as the inevitable result of the Enlightenment – as some of the Frankfurt School did in particular.[[52]](#footnote-52) Rather, totalitarianism had to be explained by a combination of factors, none of which made it inevitable, and which were at least as much a product of what Arendt called the ‘subterranean currents’ of Western thought as they were by ‘legitimate’ political thinking.[[53]](#footnote-53) For if the increasing tendency of Western thinkers to conceptualize history as a ‘process’ in modernity, found above all in Hegel, but also Marx, encouraged an approach to human beings that treated them more as automata than agents capable of genuine ‘action’, this was not sufficient on its own to lead to the hell of totalitarianism.[[54]](#footnote-54) Rather, Arendt argued, this had to be explained by the crystallization of various concrete historical factors, of which three were key.

In the first place, Arendt argued that a fundamental reason for the rise of totalitarianism was the decline of the nation-state, particularly after the First World War.[[55]](#footnote-55) Arendt’s positive view of the nation-state in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* contrasted somewhat with her approach to *The Human Condition*, where the nation-state was already seen as inferior to what went before it, but certainly in both texts she regarded it as superior to what came afterwards – namely imperialism and totalitarianism. The strength of the nation-state and its institutions was its ability to resist the reduction of the populace into an undifferentiated, unhinged ‘mass’ – as evidenced by, for example, the Dreyfus affair, where French politicians were able to prevent their biggest outbreak of anti-Semitism from causing the breakdown of civilized norms.[[56]](#footnote-56) But the nation-state was always subject to internal tension, Arendt argued, particularly when it came to non-native inhabitants, since however benevolent a ‘nation’ was, it was always essentially an exclusionary entity, whereas the post-Enlightenment ‘state’ was, by definition, designed to guarantee universal rights. And the more such rights were insisted to be universal, the greater the tension. This became particularly acute with the stress on ‘self-determination’ after World War One, when this principle was given priority over whether a nation-state made genuine political sense.[[57]](#footnote-57) In the second place, the nation-state was put under even greater pressure in the later nineteenth century by imperialism. If originally explained, at least partially, by the profit motive, imperialism increasingly became equated with a limitless seeking for power for its own sake, breaking away from the territorial barriers set by the nation-state, and paving the way for a similar desire amongst totalitarians.[[58]](#footnote-58) Lastly, Arendt also pointed to the importance of racism in the formation of totalitarianism – not so much the theories of the nineteenth century racists like the Count de Gobineau, but rather the practice of racism as practised in the ‘scramble for Africa’ in the 1880s and 1890s.[[59]](#footnote-59) This provided an excuse for treating conquered people as ‘barbarians’ – although uncomfortably Arendt thought this was partially justifiable, since conquered people in Africa had not formed a full civilization of their own and were thus still ‘part of nature’.[[60]](#footnote-60)

None of these factors made totalitarianism inevitable, but certainly made it more likely, and for Arendt, once enacted, did decisive damage to the Western tradition. The advent of regimes, notably in Nazi Germany, that had the process of destruction at their very heart could not be understood by any of the traditional categories of Western political thought.[[61]](#footnote-61) Given Arendt’s ambivalence about the Western tradition, this did provide new opportunities as well as challenges – so that, for example, it provided new opportunities for ‘action’ in a world where the tradition of constantly trying to subordinate it to ‘making’ had been shattered.[[62]](#footnote-62) But it also, Arendt argued, left humans with major problems in trying to judge conduct morally, ‘without a metaphysical banister’ as she lyrically put it. Dwelling on these problems at length in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* and *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt stressed both the necessity of introspective ‘thinking’, the ‘dialogue of me and myself’ – something that notably Adolf Eichmann had been incapable of – and the relative modesty of its results (since it paralysed as much as empowered).[[63]](#footnote-63) Likewise she stressed the vital nature of reflective ‘judgment’, in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, but also its difficulty, without obvious moral standards upon which to base it.[[64]](#footnote-64) The obvious implication for historians, Arendt thought, was that narration on the basis of the solidity of the Western tradition was no longer possible. Rather, she argued, they must use their judgement to tell stories, to use more individual judgement to produce narratives to make sense of an unprecedented situation.[[65]](#footnote-65)

1. **Michel Foucault on History and Tradition**

Turning to Foucault, determining exactly how he conceptualized tradition, let alone history in general, is a highly complex task. Scholars have disagreed quite markedly over the degree to which Foucault’s historical method altered from its more ‘archaeological’ period (of *The History of Madness*, *The Brith of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things*, and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) to a more ‘genealogical’ period (of *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*) to a final ‘ethical’ period (of *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*),[[66]](#footnote-66) and even whether it makes sense to ‘periodize’ Foucault’s work at all. For some prominent Foucault scholars, such as Gary Gutting, Foucault’s work is best seen as set of discrete, differing, brilliant experiments, whereby the historian/theorist tailors his arguments to whichever intellectual problem confronts them – and where Foucault’s subsequent descriptions of his method(s) are *ex post facto* justifications, rather than useful classifications.[[67]](#footnote-67) Nevertheless, if we compare Foucault’s position concerning history and tradition to Arendt’s, there are four obvious differences that should be highlighted before we undertake the more intricate task of examining their similarities, their touching-points.

1. **Differences with Arendt over Tradition**

First, Foucault was less intent than Arendt on suggesting there was *one* Western tradition, rather than several overlapping ones. That contrast could be overstated: as we have already seen, Arendt in fact provided more than one conceptualization of the Western philosophical tradition, and (not unlike Foucault) continually rethought her position, so that her theorizing about it sometimes resembled the ‘Penelope’s Web’ that she used as the arresting image for ‘thinking’ in general.[[68]](#footnote-68) Moreover, Foucault clearly did seek to mark out and periodize history in various ways in his work, for example often talking of the Renaissance, the ‘Classical Age’ (of roughly 1650 to 1800), and modernity[[69]](#footnote-69) – and becoming increasingly interested in ancient Greece towards the end of his life.[[70]](#footnote-70) But the idea of a ‘Roman’ tradition, with a vice-like grip which continued for centuries, and which even Marx and Nietzsche found it all but impossible to escape from, was one that Foucault did not embrace – for him the very notion of tradition was much more variegated, so that although one set of intellectual norms might certainly dominate others, the idea of a single all powerful tradition was distinctly unconvincing. Second, related to this, Foucault did not lay the same weight that Arendt did on totalitarianism and the Holocaust. Despite often mentioning German concentration camps as exemplars of a particular set of power-relations, there were surprisingly few references to the German extermination camps of Eastern Europe in Foucault’s work,[[71]](#footnote-71) and less stress on the utterly unprecedented nature of totalitarianism. If for Arendt, in other words, totalitarianism represented an entirely new phenomenon that demanded new theoretical tools to try to understand how it had come into being, for Foucault it could be analysed with more familiar weapons that he had honed in diagnosing the nature of the Enlightenment and modernity. (Certainly, there was no sense in which, for Foucault, the Holocaust had given rise to a new ethical phenomenon of ‘radical’ or ‘banal’ evil which required new ethical tools with which to understand it.) In short, there were ‘breaks’ in history for Foucault, but not one cataclysmic one.

Third, Foucault, unlike Arendt, did not claim – or at least only with much greater qualification – that humankind had basic fundamental capacities which remained more or less constant. Arendt, as we saw, maintained that humans retained the capacity for ‘work’ and ‘action’ even after the trauma of totalitarianism – and indeed argued that in some ways there were more opportunities to ‘act’ after the breakdown of the Western philosophical tradition. Foucault, by contrast, posited no such essential characteristics: for him, human behaviour was profoundly changeable, not least because the ways in which contemporaries chose to classify and explain their conduct could vary enormously. And finally, when writing his histories, Foucault was less exclusively focused than Arendt on political life. Such a claim, bluntly stated, might seem implausible, since Foucault’s concerns, particularly from the 1970s onwards, often had obvious political implications, – whether this was related to power and authority, carceral institutions, the regulation of sexuality, or government.[[72]](#footnote-72) But nevertheless, his position was distinct from Arendt’s, since although she did not believe that political life was the only sphere in which one could perform ‘action’, it was perhaps the pre-eminent one – a zone to be sharply distinguished from the inferior world of ‘the social’ and ‘society’ where mass politics and economic transactions ruled.[[73]](#footnote-73) By contrast, for Foucault, political questions were much more closely related to ‘social’ ones – any attempt to insulate the purely ‘political’ from the ‘social’ would simply have been nonsensical, since structures of power and knowledge pervaded both.

1. **Foucault, Arendt, and ‘Archaeology’**

Having set out where Arendt and Foucault sharply differ, we can proceed to examine the areas where the two are more comparable. In the first place, it is worth considering how closely Arendt’s work can be compared to Foucault’s more ‘archaeological’ arguments – as found in his histories of madness, *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Foucault’s ‘archaeological’ arguments were based upon the premise that historians should seek to understand human activities and innovations against a background of the ‘archive’ – namely the systems and practices (often unarticulated or assumed) which determined what counted as knowledge and correct behaviour in a given historical period.[[74]](#footnote-74) Rather than concentrating on the explicit intentions of historical actors, in other words, a more productive approach, Foucault argued, was to try to unearth the background norms and conditions that governed both their explicit actions and their intellectual horizons – rather as the Annales School had insisted that it was often more useful to concentrate on background conditions of geography and climate, rather than obsessing about particular individuals’ actions or specific political conflicts.[[75]](#footnote-75) Doing so, he maintained, was useful not only because it enabled historians to understand the conceptual horizons of a particular period, but also because it could diagnose the nature of intellectual change far better than seeking to detail it as the result of an unbroken tradition of innovations or of individual geniuses intervening to shake up conventional norms.

Thus, in *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault argued that an archaeological method could better explain the shift to ‘clinical medicine’ from the ‘medicine of species’ of the ’Classical Age’ by concentrating on the fundamental background conditions, rather than looking at more immediate causes. A key part of this shift, Foucault explained was the change from asking essentialist questions such as ‘What is wrong with you?’ to more specific, empirical questions such as ‘Where does it hurt?’, so that if one were trying to explain why there was an increasing acceptance of using corpses to obtain medical information, it was better to explain this in such epistemic terms – as opposed to citing changing religious or social attitudes (which seemed more immediate and obvious).[[76]](#footnote-76) So such ‘archaeologies’ could present a serious challenge to conventional intellectual histories. Another example of this was the respective positions given to the French naturalists Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) in being precursors to Darwinism. Conventionally, Lamarck was credited with being a closer antecedent to Darwin because he argued that species could change over time (through the inheritance of acquired characteristics), whereas Cuvier claimed that species were fixed permanently. But, Foucault argued in *The Order of Things*, in fact a deeper archaeological analysis revealed that although Lamarck’s theories were superficially more similar to those of Darwinism, in fact he remained wedded to the fundamental presuppositions of the ‘Classical Age’, since his position implied that any changes within species occurred without any reference to more general historical causes. By contrast, according to Foucault, although Cuvier claimed that all species had existed from the beginning, and so were not produced by historical causes, he nevertheless regarded life forms as essentially historical entities, and hence opened the possibility of them being formed by historical, evolutionary causes. Superficially, in other words, Cuvier seemed the more backward-looking theorist – but in fact his arguments revealed that he was much nearer to the archaeological assumptions of the modern period, rather than the ‘Classical Age’, and hence was in fact closer to Darwin.[[77]](#footnote-77)

To what extent can Arendt’s thoughts about history be aligned to Foucault’s archaeological approach to history? This is a complex question to answer because, as we have seen, Arendt offers at least three accounts of the Western tradition. It is certainly true that – as already noted – insofar as Arendt is insistent on the continuing power of the Western tradition, this is a position alien to Foucault’s. But there are two ways in which Arendt’s arguments in fact do resemble his. In the first place, her insistence in *The Human Condition* that the heliocentric theories of Copernicus, despite their ostensibly revolutionary implications, could actually be integrated into a conventional scholastic-Aristotelian framework, echoed Foucault’s archaeological arguments. For rather than such theories being revolutionary *per se*, direct precursors to Galileo’s revolutionary experiments in the seventeenth century, the implication of Arendt’s position was that Copernicus was still operating within a set of pre-modern assumptions. Only when Galileo was able to demonstrate the actuality of the earth rotating the sun with the use of much stronger lenses were the background epistemological conditions of the Renaissance truly disturbed.[[78]](#footnote-78) And secondly, related to the first point, as we have seen Arendt was emphatic that it was events that truly changed the course of history, not conceptual innovations – so that it was ultimately totalitarianism that had shattered the Western tradition, not the intellectual challenges posed by Marx, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in the nineteenth century.[[79]](#footnote-79) This strongly resembled Foucault’s position, because it was one of his complaints that traditional history tried to explain away and smooth over sudden breaks within the historical process – when in fact there was often no simple way of explaining the fundamental change from one set of background assumptions and practices to another. As Foucault put it himself in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: ‘discontinuity was the stigma of temporal dislocation which it was the historian’s task to remove from history’.[[80]](#footnote-80) To a certain extent, therefore, Foucault’s archaeological arguments about history have their echoes in Arendt’s work.

1. **Foucault, Arendt, and ‘Genealogy’**

‘Archaeology’ was not of course the only method of historical investigation that Foucault deployed. If anything, he is more famous for his ‘genealogical’ analyses, which did not so much reject archaeology as build upon it. These acknowledged the importance of background rules and practices for understanding human actions and institutions, but also sought to analyze their origins and effects more diachronically – since while archaeology was often able to provide excellent and provocative insights into what constrained human thought and conduct at a given point in time, it was less good at providing explanations of historical change. Providing a definitive statement of what Foucault meant by ‘genealogy’ is not straightforward, since he tended to deploy the method in practice rather than giving extended abstract accounts of it. But by examining his genealogies of the modern subject (and object) in *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, and the important essays ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, and ‘Nietzsche, Freud, Marx’, it seems clear that genealogy has four main features.

First, building on his more ‘archaeological’ arguments, one of the key points of genealogy was to stress the arbitrariness of innovations, of historical change. One of Foucault’s key complaints against conventional historical explanations was that these tend to produce stories about the past which minimized the role of chance, retrospectively providing narratives which smoothed out the radical and often unpredictable breaks that have occurred historically – with the result that such changes were made to seem inevitable. Rather than attempting to provide ‘deep’ explanations for important historical changes, in other words, the genealogist attempts to undercut these by drawing attention to how haphazard these changes were, with often ‘lowly’ rather than ‘high-minded’ causes. As Foucault put it himself in ‘Nietzsche, Freud, Marx’: ‘whereas the interpreter is obliged to go to the depth of things, like an excavator, the moment of [genealogical] interpretation is like an overview, from higher and higher up, which allows the depth to be laid out in front of him in a more and more profound visibility; [so that] depth is resituated as an absolutely superficial secret’.[[81]](#footnote-81) Second, on a related point, a genealogical approach was suspicious of anything that resembles a metanarrative, whether this be that of the Enlightenment, with its claims of inevitable liberalization and increasing individual autonomy, or Marx’s, with its predictions of increasing alienation and inevitable revolution. Precisely because of its emphasis on the chance-like, haphazard nature of events, in other words, the whole point of genealogy was to stress the importance of alternatives – to point out that alternative outcomes and histories were possible.[[82]](#footnote-82)

Third, given that genealogies were designed to show how contingent historical development had been, they could also be used to criticize present norms, Foucault argued – and indeed one of his primary aims in formulating them, was because he believed that certain aspects of the present were ‘intolerable’.[[83]](#footnote-83) Formulating a genealogy of how disciplinary procedures had developed from a theatrical, demonstrative set of punishments in the pre-modern period to a precisely defined set of punishments in the eighteenth century (under pressure from humanist reformers) to a full-scale disciplinary regime (epitomized by Bentham’s Panopticon) was therefore not simply designed as an exercise in formulating an alternative history, as far as Foucault was concerned. Rather it was designed to highlight the contingent nature of modern disciplinary practices, and hence open a space for alternatives – a task that Foucault believed was particularly important, since bureaucratized disciplinary procedures had not been confined to prisons and the criminal justice system, but rather had become a paradigmatic model followed by many other institutions, including schools and hospitals.[[84]](#footnote-84) Fourth, however, Foucault was keen to stress it was not the case that by ‘exposing’ the contingent nature of modern disciplinary procedures which objectify us we could easily become free and ‘autonomous’ in some simple and naïve sense. On the contrary, precisely because he believed that social relationships were always intertwined with power relations, Foucault argued that the conceptualization of the modern subject was itself something that needed to be subjected to genealogical analysis – the idea of a free, choice-making individual, relatively free from societal interference was as contingent as anything else. It was thus not false, but also historically contingent. To quote Foucault himself: ‘individuality is neither the real atomistic basis of society nor an ideological illusion of liberal economics, but an effective artefact of a very long and complicated process’.[[85]](#footnote-85) And indeed the desire to formulate the right kind of language and conceptualization of autonomy was precisely why Foucault in his last works was seeking to reach back to ancient Greek and early Christian histories to interrogate the nature of subjectivity. To quote *The Uses of Pleasure*: ‘it appeared that I now had to undertake a third shift in order to analyze what is termed “the subject”. It seemed appropriate to look for the forms and modalities of the relations to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject’.[[86]](#footnote-86)

To what extent can Arendt’s approach to history be aligned with a Foucauldian conception of genealogy? In some ways her arguments followed such an approach closely. As we have seen, Arendt was deeply critical of several aspects of modernity, and particularly of the instrumentalizing and technocratic impulses that she felt had been stimulated by post-Galilean science and naïve Enlightenment optimism – since this had encouraged conceptualizing history as a ‘process’ and inhibited the ability of humans to ‘act’. As such, a vital part of her argument was to emphasize the arbitrary nature of such changes, and hence to draw attention to the alternatives – so that, just as for Foucault, writing history or ‘telling stories’ about the past was designed to be a method of critique, not just description. Such storytelling about the past was crucial for this type of critique, Arendt thought, in harmony with Foucault’s position, because it helped to highlight that history was *plural* - it had been the folly of both the Roman tradition and then the Hegelian-Marxian conceptions of history to try to try to incorporate all the diverse narratives of human experience into one story.[[87]](#footnote-87) And if producing such plural narratives, Arendt believed, was to some extent easier in a post-totalitarian context, after the breakdown of the Western tradition, this did not mean that she – any more than Foucault – believed that human individuals could obtain self-conscious ‘autonomy’ in some simple sense. Rather, she argued, as we have seen, when human beings were able to ‘act’ freely they were initiating activities that were deeply unpredictable, to such an extent that they revealed aspects of the actors’ personalities that had been previously unknown to the actors themselves.[[88]](#footnote-88) So no more than Foucault did Arendt believe, as a normative goal, in a self-conscious liberal ‘subject’.

However, there were also three significant reasons why Arendt’s approach to history and tradition cannot be fully identified with Foucauldian genealogy. In the first place, although it is true that Arendt did stress the importance of ‘chance’ in history, and that what truly causes historical change are ‘events’ rather than the development of new ideas, this is to some extent belied by her strenuous attempts to explain the advent of totalitarianism in *Origins*. Despite stressing its unprecedented nature, in other words, as we saw ultimately Arendt did partially explain its arrival by the ‘crystallization’ of certain concrete historical phenomena – namely imperialism, racism, and the decline of the nation-state. Foucault would not have felt the need to do this. Second, although entirely willing to admit the ‘low origins’ of certain historical developments – not least of totalitarianism itself – Arendt did not put quite so much emphasis on this point as Foucault. For her, more ‘high-minded’ intellectual innovations, such as those put forward by Marx and Kierkegaard, could sometimes have quite important historical effects, even if their implications took time to appear fully. And lastly, as we noted at the start of this section, if some kind of self-conscious individual autonomy was an ideal Arendt found naïve, nevertheless she remained wedded to the idea that ‘action’ remained the quintessentially human activity, even in a post-totalitarian age; by contrast Foucault was a much more thoroughgoing historicist.[[89]](#footnote-89) Despite all the similarities, therefore, Arendt’s approach to history only be labelled ‘genealogical’ with qualifications.

1. **Conclusion**

This article has sought to compare Arendt and Foucault’s attitudes to history and tradition, arguing that although neither of these thinkers can be regarded as historians in a conventional sense, for both the historical dimension of their thought was crucial. Initially, we examined Arendt’s attitude to tradition, and determined that she put forward three slightly different arguments about it. Thus first, in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere, Arendt lamented the alienating effects of ‘world’ and ‘earth’ alienation, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards, arguing that the doubt these engendered led to a distrust of the senses, and ultimately a degraded utilitarian mindset. Second, Arendt also put forward arguments which indicated a mistrust of the Western philosophical tradition as a whole – on the basis that it was biased in favour of contemplation over the active life in general, that it had a special problem with ‘action’ proper in view of its unpredictability, and because although tradition had provided moral and political guidance for centuries, it nevertheless upheld a very particular set of values. These, the Roman trinity of tradition, religion, and authority, had proved durable, but privileged ‘making’ over ‘acting’, were contingent, not inevitable, and were ultimately unequal to the task of preventing totalitarianism. And finally, we observed that Arendt had put forward a set of arguments in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to explain exactly the Western tradition had broken, stressing the importance of tensions between ‘state’ and ‘nation’, the rise of limitless imperialism, and the practice of racism. None of these made totalitarianism inevitable, but they posed severe threats to traditional understandings of politics.

Next, we turned to Foucault, arguing that although he put forward various different arguments about history and tradition, his approach differed from Arendt’s in four important ways. First, Foucault was much more sceptical that there was *one* Western tradition at all, and certainly did not agree with Arendt that the trinity of religion, tradition, and authority was as significant as she thought. Second, in any case Foucault did not lay the same weight as Arendt on the effects of totalitarianism, and did not believe that it had affected Western thought as significantly as she did. Third, Foucault did not agree with Arendt that human beings had, relatively permanently, three ‘fundamental’ abilities that constituted the ‘human condition’ – in that sense he was more fully historicist than Arendt. Finally, Foucault differed from Arendt in writing his histories in a way that distinguished politics from society so sharply: for him the two were much more closely intertwined.

Finally, however, we observed that in fact there were also some significant points of agreement between Arendt and Foucault. Foucault’s ‘archaeological’ position, insisting on the importance of underlying norms and practices found echoes in Arendt’s discussion of the adoption of the heliocentric system in *The Human Condition*. Moreover, his ‘genealogies’ of technology and the self resembled some of Arendt’s arguments. Like Foucault, Arendt criticized the instrumentalizing and technocratic impulses stimulated by post-Galilean science – since this encouraged the conceptualization of history as a ‘process’ and inhibited the ability of humans to ‘act’. Moreover, it was a constant refrain in Arendt’s work, as it was in Foucault’s, that Western historical developments had been contingent not necessary – and that as such, it was entirely legitimate for us to seek alternatives, sometimes from history itself. But lastly, Arendt did not, any more than Foucault, believe that adopting such alternatives would easily lead to self-conscious individual ‘autonomy’; both would have regarded such a hope as naïve. While far from identical, therefore, the two thinkers to some degree share similar thoughts about the nature of tradition, and their insights should arguably stimulate us to think more deeply about the nature of our political choices and historical understandings.

1. To be specific: *Arendt Studies* and *Foucault Studies*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For just a few examples, see L. McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender, and the Self* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), L. Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), and J. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*, 4th edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For just two examples, see, on history, J. Goldstein (ed.), *Foucault and the Writing of History* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), and, on theory, A. Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in Critical Social Theory* (Boston: MIT Press, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd edition (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958). For Arendt on European democracy, see L. Rensmann, ‘Rethinking European Democracy after its Legitimation Crisis: On Hannah Arendt and the European Union’, *Journal of European Studies*, 49 (2019), 217-238; for ‘radical evil’, see R. J. Bernstein, ‘Reflections on Radical Evil: Arendt and Kant’, *Soundings*, 85 (2002), 17-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A. Allen, ‘Power, Subjectivity, and Agency: Between Arendt and Foucault’, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 10 (2002), 131-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. J. Tully, ‘The Agonic Freedom of Citizens’, *Economy and Society*, 28 (1999), 161-182. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. K. Braun, ‘Biopolitics and Temporality in Arendt and Foucault’, *Time and Society*, 16 (2007), 5-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1972), M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, and H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondworth: Penguin, 1973).Even in this case one can make this contrast only with qualifications, since Foucault was seriously (and notoriously) intrigued by the success of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 – see B. Ghamari-Tabrizi*, Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 3 vols, trans. R. Hurley (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1986), Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Arendt’s appeal to Socrates as a paradigmatic exponent of ‘thinking’, in ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture’, *Social Research*, 38 (1971), 417-446, and (by contrast) Foucault’s insistence on the importance of the ancient ‘care of the self’, which he believed had been underplayed by contrast with the Socratic demand to ‘know thyself’ – see M. Foucault, ‘L’hermeutique du sujet, 1981-82’, in *Résumé des Cours, 1970-1982* (Paris: Julliard, 1989), 145-149. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For Heidegger, compare H. Arendt, ‘Martin Heidegger at Eighty’, in M. Murray (ed.), *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 293-303 and R. Nichols, *The World of Freedom: Heidegger, Foucault and the Politics of Historical Ontology*, as well as D. Owen, ‘Politics, History, Freedom: Arendt, Foucault and the Politics of Genealogy’ in this issue; for Marx, see (for example), the section on labour in *The Human Condition*, 79-135 and M. Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Freud, Marx’, *Cahiers de Royaumont*, 6 (1967), 183-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See H. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. R. Beiner (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982) and M. Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, trans. C. Porter, in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 32-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For one example of this, see N. O’Sullivan, ‘Hannah Arendt: Hellenic Nostalgia and Industrial Society’, in A. de Crespigny and K. Minogue (eds.), *Contemporary Political Philosophers* (London: Methuen, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For a good guide to the complexities of Arendt’s developing thought on the Greek polis, see M. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 136-143. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 50-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Arendt, *Human Condition,* 83-84, 96, 98, 106, 118-119. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 95, 137, 167-70, 182. See also H. Arendt, ‘The Crisis in Culture’, in *Between Past and Future* (New York, NY: Viking, 1968), 209-210. Arendt’s idea of worldliness was clearly related to Heidegger’s notion that people ‘dwell’ in the world rather than simply being in it in the same way that water exists in a glass. See M. Heidegger, ‘Being, Dwelling, Thinking’, in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 175-181. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See particularly Arendt, *Human Condition*, 179-180. There were clear existential origins to this conception: for which see L. P. Hinchman and S. K. Hinchman, ‘Existentialism Politicized: Arendt’s Debt to Jaspers’, *Review of Politics*, 53 (1991), 435-348. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 184-186, and see below, footnote 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 170-172. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 171. For more on ‘thought’ see below, footnote 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 248-257. This vision of modern mass society as being conformist, egocentric, and lacking roots in tradition was a spectre which haunted a number of early twentieth century thinkers – see R. Bellamy, ‘The Advent of the Masses and the Making of the Modern Theory of Democracy’, in T. Ball and R. Bellamy (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 70-103. Arendt was especially interested in Alexis de Tocqueville’s version, as noted in Canovan, *Arendt: A Reinterpretation*, 117 n. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 258-259. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 257-262. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 262, 1-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 265-268 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For the decline of common sense, see H. Arendt, ‘The Crisis in Education’, in *Between Past and Future*, 173, Arendt, *Human Condition*, 284 – without a common world and a common sense to understand it, humans became mere ‘animals who are able to reason’. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 264-265, 298 – where Arendt cites Vico as claiming that one could have better knowledge of human history than of nature, since this was the product of humans’ own activities. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 305-313. It is important to emphasize, however, that it was not the logic of ideas alone that caused this – since events can never be entirely reduced to ideas. See particularly, Arendt, *Human Condition*, 313. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 291-294. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 296. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 14-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 228-229, H. Arendt, ‘Religion and Politics’, *Confluence* 2/3 (1953), 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 222-228. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 224. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Arendt, ‘A Reply’ [to Eric Voegelin’s review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*], *Review of Politics*, 15 (1953), 82, H. Arendt, ‘What is Authority?’, in *Between Past and Future*, 133, where she specifically linked the advent of Hitler and Stalin to the vanishing of the fear of hell – ‘the most significant consequence of the secularization of the modern age’. More generally, see Canovan, *Arendt: A Reinterpretation*, 68-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. H. Arendt, ‘Tradition and the Modern Age’, in *Between Past and* Future, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See for example, Arendt, ‘What is Authority?’, 101: ‘[Conservatism and liberalism’s] inability to distinguish … progress or doom, testifies to an age in which certain notions, clear in their distinctness to all previous centuries, have begun to lose their clarity and plausibility because they have lost their meaning in the public-political reality – without altogether losing their significance’. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Arendt, ‘What is Authority?’, 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Arendt, ‘What is Authority?’, 109, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Arendt, ‘What is Authority?’, 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Arendt, ‘What is Authority?’, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Arendt, ‘What is Authority?’, 125-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Arendt, ‘Tradition and the Modern Age’, 26: ‘neither the twentieth-century aftermath nor the nineteenth-century rebellion against tradition actually caused the break in our history. This sprang from a chaos of mass-perplexities on the political scene … which the totalitarian movements, through terror and ideology, crystallized into a new form of government and domination … the break in our tradition is now an accomplished fact’. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. For this view, see, most famously, M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Noerr, trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007) – and for an equally famous critique, J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See H. Arendt, ‘Proposal to John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation’, cited in ‘Introduction to Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: Fifty Years Later’, *Social Research*, 69 (2002), v. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. See, for example, H. Arendt, ‘The Concept of History’, in *Between Past and Future*, 78-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 350: ‘the explosion of 1914 and its severe consequences of instability had sufficiently shattered the façade of Europe’s political system to lay bare its hidden frame’. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 58-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. See the chapter on ‘The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man’, in Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 349-396, especially at 353, and 383-384. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. See Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 162-163, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 248-249. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. See Arendt, ‘Tradition and the Modern Age’, 26: ‘Totalitarian domination … in its unprecedentedness cannot be comprehended through the usual categories of political thought … [its] “crimes” cannot be judged by traditional moral standards or punished within the legal framework of our civilization’. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Arendt, ‘Tradition and the Modern Age’, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. This is not to suggest that ‘thinking’ was not highly important: partly as a result of the Eichmann trial, Arendt began to conclude that this ability was crucial to our ability to act morally – since ‘thinking’ was the basis of our conscience, and hence set limits to our behaviour. If we are ‘thinking’, in other words, then we are forced to live with the consequences of our actions, to justify them to ourselves. See H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 2 vols., vol. 1, ‘Thinking’ (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), 5. For an excellent essay on this, see R. J. Bernstein, ‘Arendt on Thinking’, in D. Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 277-292. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. The abilities that we need to ‘judge’ correctly, Arendt argued, were imagination and common sense: imagination to represent objects not longer present, and common sense so that one could obtain ‘judgements’ that were publicly acceptable and overcame individual prejudices – see Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 75. Moreover, Arendt appeared to believe that ‘thinking’ also played a vital role in liberating judgement, something that might well be vital ‘in the rare moments when the chips are down’ – see Arendt, ‘Thinking and Moral Considerations’, 446. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Crucially, Arendt argued, storytelling relied not upon theories, but imagination and judgement: see H. Arendt, ‘On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessin’, in *Men in Dark Times* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 20, and Arendt, *Human Condition*, 184.A key point here is that this implies not merely a plurality of *actions*, but also a plurality of *stories* for Arendt – integrating history into one seamless narrative is likely to be an abstraction. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. M. Foucault, *Histoire de la Folie a l’Age Classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), M. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* trans. A. Sheridan (New York, NY: Vintage, 1973), M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York, NY: Vintage, 1970), Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: ‘An Introduction’, vol. 2: ‘The Use of Pleasures’, vol. 3: ‘The Care of the Self’. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. G. Gutting, ‘Introduction’, in G. Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. See, for example, the development of ‘representation’ in Foucault, *Order of Things*, 35, 43, 306 or in Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 33-34, 50, 73-74. (For a good guide to the latter, see H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* [Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982], 143-152.) [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. See Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. See. S. Kessler, ‘Foucault and the Holocaust: Epistemic Shift, Liminality, and the Death Camps’, *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust*, 28 (2014), 139-154. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. A major theme in this work in particular is the degree to which modern social sciences, and hence modern states, are intent upon controlling bodies precisely – for examples, see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 137-138, where he wrote that ‘the historical moment of the disciplines was the moment when an art of the human body was born … entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it … [producing] an increased aptitude and an increased domination’, and Foucault, *History of Sexuality* vol. 1, 143, where he insisted that ‘bio-power brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge/power an agent of transformation of human life … Modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence in question’. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. See, for just one example, Arendt, *Human Condition*, 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. See Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 46, S. Lotringer (ed.), *Foucault Live: Interviews*, 1966-1984 (New York, NY: Semiotext[e], 1989), 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. See Foucault’s positive allusions to the work of the school in Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. See the useful summary of Foucault’s position in T. Flynn, ‘Foucault’s Mapping of History’, in G. Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Foucault, *Order of Things*, 287-304, especially at 300: ‘[Cuvier] introduced a radical discontinuity into the Classical scale of beings; and by that very fact he gave rise to such notions as biological incompatibility relations with external elements, and conditions of existence; he also caused the emergence of a certain energy, necessary to maintain life, and a certain threat, which imposes upon it the sanction of death; here, we find gathered together several of the conditions that make possible something like the idea of evolution’. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 258-260. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. See above, footnote 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Freud, Marx’, 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. This theme pervaded Foucault’s work, but for just one example highlighting the importance of the method for providing present alternatives, see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. For discussion, see A. Glucksmann, ‘Michel Foucault’s Nihilism’, in *Michel Foucault: Philosopher*, trans. T. Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992), 336-339. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 205 – and for good discussion Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 188-194. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, ‘The Use of Pleasure’, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. See above, footnote 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 190-193. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. For this reason, although Foucault has sometimes been labelled a ‘neo-conservative’, not least by Habermas, there is arguably a better argument for saying that Arendt has a conservative aspect to her thought. For some thoughts on this theme, see M. Canovan, ‘Arendt as a Conservative Thinker’ in L. May and J. Kohn (eds.), *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-89)