

“Fit to Enter the World”: Hannah Arendt on Politics, Economics, and the Welfare State

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What is the significance of the welfare state and struggles over social and economic needs for democratic politics? This article turns to Hannah Arendt's thought to articulate new possibilities for relating democratic agency and the welfare state, possibilities neglected by currently dominant deliberative and radical democratic approaches. Against critics who claim that Arendt seeks to purify politics of economic and social problems, I argue that she presents a sophisticated account of the vital importance of economic matters for public life. For Arendt, the danger is not the invasion of politics by economics, but rather the loss of the worldly, mediating institutions that allow economic matters to appear as objects of public concern. Reconstructing her account of these mediating institutions, I show that Arendt's analysis opens up novel insights into the relationship between democratic action and welfare institutions, drawing attention to how such institutions transform material necessity into shared objects of attachment, judgment, and action.

Does the modern welfare state reflect the principles and values of democratic self-determination? Or does it embody new, insidious forms of political power in contemporary society, forms that threaten a vibrant public life? These questions motivate long-running debates in democratic theory, especially the confrontation between deliberative and radical democrats. On the one hand, deliberative democratic theorists understand extensive welfare state provisions as securing for all citizens the necessary material preconditions for participation in democratic deliberation (Forst 2011; Habermas 1998; Olson 2006). For these thinkers, welfare provisions consummate the victory of universal democratic principles and solidarities over socioeconomic risks and instrumental market imperatives. For radical democrats, however, the universalistic view of the welfare state fails to confront the disciplinary and regulatory face of welfare provisions and, more broadly, the entwinement of the welfare state and the “peculiar exaggeration of power” characteristic of the modern state (Wolin 1989, 157; cf. Cruikshank 1999; Foucault 1977; Rose 1999). Against deliberative democratic efforts to secure a universal basis for social welfare institutions, theorists in the radical tradition focus on moments of insurgent contestation when such purportedly hierarchical institutional

structures are challenged and novel political claims are pressed. Yet, even as such critiques of the effects of welfare provisions provide a salutary challenge to the complacency of other strains of democratic theory, they tend to foreclose serious consideration of the engagement between popular democratic action and welfare institutions beyond episodic, negative moments of contestation and disruption.

This article turns to the thought of Hannah Arendt to articulate new possibilities for relating democratic politics and welfare state institutions—possibilities that are neglected by both deliberative and radical democratic visions of political life and that have been overlooked in the literature on Arendt's thought. Although Arendt does not elaborate a comprehensive theory of the welfare state, she does provide a range of conceptual terms that prove fruitful for thinking about the relationship between political action and economic forces in contemporary postindustrial societies. In particular, and contrary to the received wisdom about her thought, Arendt offers valuable resources for considering the role that welfare institutions play in allowing economic activities and processes to enter political life as the possible objects of public judgment and collective action. Indeed, she does so by calling into question basic assumptions that inform both the deliberative and radical democratic views of the welfare state: most centrally, their shared tendency to conceive of economic activities only in terms of instrumental rationality and technical calculation.

It may appear peculiar to turn to Arendt for inspiration on theorizing the significance of economic affairs and the welfare state for democracy. After all, as her critics argue, she notoriously insisted that economic and social problems were inappropriate objects of public debate and political action. Few aspects of her thought have attracted as much critical scrutiny and evoked as much frustration from even sympathetic commentators (Bernstein 1986; Pitkin 1981; 1998). More generally, Arendt's critics take her hostility to the social as a symptom of her desire, in the words of Jacques Rancière (2011, 3), to uphold the “idea of a specific political sphere and a political way of

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life,” distinct from both social and economic needs and means-ends, calculative thinking (cf. Breen 2012; Dietz 1994). Although for some scholars Arendt’s thought is valuable precisely for its uncompromising defense of the autonomy of political action (Villa 1995; 2008), many others seek to rescue Arendt from her apparently overdetermined criticisms of the social by reformulating her distinction between the political and the economic-cum-social: For instance, they claim that the distinction is about an instrumental and antipolitical ethos or mentality, rather than social problems as such (Myers 2013; Zerilli 2005); or else they emphasize Arendt’s criticisms of the modern administrative state (McClure 2008); or they argue that Arendt’s critique of the social constitutes a euphemism for her abhorrence of the practice of social climbing (Locke 2013).

Indeed, some of the most influential attempts to salvage Arendt on the social do so by appropriating her thinking for either the deliberative democratic or radical democratic view of welfare state politics. For example, Seyla Benhabib (1996) recasts Arendt’s distinction between the political and the social as one between “the *attitude of narrow self-interest* . . . [and] a *more broadly shared public or common interest*” (145, emphasis in original), whereas Bonnie Honig (1995) argues that the “[t]he permeability, inexactness, and ambiguity of [Arendt’s] distinction between public and private” opens up the possibility of attenuating such a distinction through ongoing contestation (146). Both these responses, however, misapprehend what is distinctive about Arendt’s account of political economy and so reinforce dominant, ossified understandings of the relationship between politics and economics. In their own ways, both the deliberatively and radically democratic responses still cast the economic as a domain of technical mastery, a domain that can be *politicized*, but only by transforming it with universal values or agonistic contestation, respectively. They therefore reinforce precisely what Arendt seeks to counter: the image of economic activities or mentalities as characteristically instrumental, particular, and private.

Here, I revisit Arendt’s analysis of political economy to argue that, far from stringently upholding the divide between politics and economics, she elucidates sophisticated accounts of both the possible interrelationships between them and the vital importance of economic matters in political life. For Arendt, I argue, the danger is not the invasion of politics by economics, but rather the reduction of economic matters to instrumental calculation. Against this reduction, Arendt provides resources for theorizing the economic, not as a domain of instrumental mastery and technical calculation, but as a site where material necessity and political action might be appropriately mediated. Arendt is as much, if not more, concerned about the *loss* of the contexts in which economic problems can appear as objects of shared concern as she is with the invasion of politics by instrumental or calculative mentalities and attitudes. She recovers what I call the worldly dimensions of the economic—the institutional conditions that allow economic matters to appear as possible objects of public deliberation and action. Her concern, in short, is not

with economic mentalities or means-end thinking as such, but rather with the loss of these worldly, institutional mediations of material necessity, a loss entailing the deleterious consequence that economic concerns tend to enter politics as mere matters of administration and technical mastery.

My reading of Arendt’s theory of political economy also allows us to resituate her critical attitude toward the welfare state. The question, I argue, is not why Arendt upheld such a rigid and unconvincing conceptual distinction between the political and the economic. Rather, it is why she failed to pursue her own insights into the worldly dimensions of the economic when analyzing social politics in modern welfare states. The answer resides in the logic of Arendt’s account of expropriation, which neglects the political agency that propels expropriation and the institutional mediations of even contemporary accumulative processes. Once these shortcomings are brought to light, Arendt provides surprisingly pertinent resources for theorizing the political and historical significance of welfare state politics, understood as world-building efforts to institutionally counteract the force of expropriative processes and restore a worldly dimension to economic activities and relationships.

I proceed as follows. In the first section, I examine Arendt’s analysis of political economy in *The Human Condition*, arguing that her concern there is to provide an account of how economic activities—the self-interested pursuit of material ends—potentially open up new spaces of appearance and judgment. She thereby shows that economic activities, properly understood, are not reducible to instrumental calculation and technical mastery. In the second section, I argue that this account informs a constellation of concepts deployed by Arendt—class, interest, and property—that together constitute the worldly dimensions of the economic. In each case, she counters a reductively economic interpretation of the term, instead using these concepts to point to the institutional mediations between material necessity and political action. In the third section, I consider why, given her attempt to recover a nonreductive understanding of the economic, Arendt asserts that in the contemporary welfare state economic matters manifest themselves in the form of technical calculability and therefore as a dire threat to political freedom. I argue that the problem arises from her exaggerated and undifferentiated understanding of expropriation. Examining the logic of her account, I identify some of the theoretical and historical weaknesses of her conceptualization of the emergence of capitalist accumulation, weaknesses that subsequently inform her equivocal view of welfare state politics.

I conclude with some considerations and concrete examples of how Arendt’s theorization of political economy provides insights into, on the one hand, the political and democratic significance of the modern welfare state and, on the other, struggles over social needs. Indeed, despite her own pessimistic conclusions, Arendt provides compelling resources for a perspicacious analysis of the institutions we associate with the modern welfare state—not as the mere technical means

for the administration of needs and material necessity, but as mediating institutions that transform such necessity into the worldly interests and concerns that are possible, indeed unavoidable, objects of political activity. Such moments of worldly mediation are overlooked by both deliberative democratic defenders of welfare institutions (who view these institutions as the product of non-instrumental public reasoning) and by radical democrats (who reduce such institutions to their instrumental, normalizing effects). In drawing attention to these moments, Arendt thereby orients political reflection to the issue of how the various objects and institutions that mediate the domain of economic necessity become sites of public disputation. Political struggles over social and economic questions, from this perspective, are always also world-building practices: Even though their immediate end may be redistribution, state-building, or economic security, such struggles inevitably transform these demands into lasting aspirational and institutional objects, objects whose appearance cannot be grasped in terms of mere instrumentality. As objects—as worldly, tangible things—such goals and institutions themselves open up shared spaces of appearance and judgment. They thereby become the objects of democratic attachment and the occasions for the exercise of political freedom, augmenting our involvement with and concern for the world.

INSTRUMENTALITY AND APPEARANCE: POLITICAL ECONOMY IN *THE HUMAN CONDITION*

I begin with Arendt’s engagement with theories of political economy in *The Human Condition* (1958, hereafter, “HC”), in which she lays the conceptual foundations for the worldly approach to the economic I explicate in the next two sections. Yet, of all Arendt’s books, this one would seem to be an unlikely starting point for the recovery of a positive account of her attitude toward political economy. Often considered her most “Greco-philic” book, *The Human Condition* contains some of Arendt’s most caustic remarks about the ascendancy of economic and social problems in modernity, a fact that leads some commentators to insist we displace its importance for Arendt’s thought (Benhabib 1996; Canovan 1994). Indeed, Arendt’s analysis in the opening chapters of the book seems to confirm such concerns. There, she details how the reversal of the ancient Greek distinction between the public and the private—the emergence from the household and into the public of the concerns related to material necessity—leads to the rise of self-aggrandizing economic processes described by the discourse of political economy (HC 28–29). From the perspective of the ancients, the very concept of political economy is “a contradiction in terms” (HC 29). The channeling of economic forces into the public realm transforms the state into a bureaucracy, “a kind of no-man rule” (HC 40). Furthermore, the rise of public housekeeping means the ascendance of predictable “everyday behavior” over the extraordinary “rare deeds” that

“illuminate historical time” (HC 42–43). Thus, given Arendt’s desire to restore to political action the glory it obtained in ancient Greece, we can safely view her various accounts of economic activities throughout the book as a critique of the dangers they pose to politics.

However, this is far from Arendt’s last word on these matters. Her most critical analysis of political economy occurs before she has developed her own account of the relationship between the economic activities she terms “work” and “labor.” As Webster’s informs us, “economic” means “the process or system by which goods and services are produced, sold, and bought,” and Arendt’s analysis of the concepts of labor and work is an effort to grapple with the significance of such economic processes and the activities behind them, both in themselves and in relation to other forms of activity, such as participation in public life.¹ To jump ahead briefly: As Arendt distinguishes them, labor refers to activities focused on the unceasing satisfaction of biological needs, whereas work signifies those activities that transform raw materials into lasting tools and objects of the built human world. Work and labor, then, constitute two analytically distinct but interrelated aspects of economic activities, as Arendt interprets them. And although her discussion of labor and work seeks to identify aspects of such activities that, in her view, have been neglected by historically dominant interpretations of economic activities, her deployment of these terms nonetheless tracks to important facets of ordinary experience and linguistic usage: the association of economic activities with material scarcity as well as with calculative, means-ends thinking. Crucially, she challenges the notion that economic activities can be exhaustively understood in those terms and that they therefore always pose a threat to collective political life, which depends, in Arendt’s view, on a variety of perspectives and the exercise of nontechnical judgments on matters of collective concern (HC 175–248; Arendt 1992).

Notably, the contours of Arendt’s discussion of political economy early in *The Human Condition* are set by the ancient Greek interpretation of the distinction between politics and economics, which separated the private activities of the household, understood as a domain of domination and economic necessity, from the free public life of the *polis*. The discourse of political economy, in Arendt’s view, inverts the ancient Greek interpretation, elevating necessity and public housekeeping above political life. However, as recent commentators have convincingly argued, one of Arendt’s central concerns as her argument proceeds is to show how the ancient Greek understanding of the *vita activa*, combining labor and work into the single category of economic necessity, distorted subsequent philosophical and political reflection (Markell 2011; Tsao 2002). This section builds on these recent accounts in reconstructing Arendt’s positive attitude toward work and instrumentality, insofar as such activities mediate between subjective need and political action. For Arendt, such

¹ Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, s.v. “Economic.”

mediation is possible because things and objects, even as they are oriented toward the instrumental pursuit of goals, also potentially open up spaces of appearance and judgment—that is, they are potentially received and discussed in terms other than just technical usefulness and through that reception generate relationships between individuals concerned with the shape or appearance of the world. A space of appearance is thus a context that is constituted by shared objects of concern, a space in which both objects and the individuals discussing them appear.

This dual aspect of objects Arendt terms their worldliness, which reflects the human capacity to construct a lasting world of artificial objects that comprise a stable, meaningful location for various activities and affairs. One of Arendt's guiding thoughts is that the ancient Greek attitude toward material necessity obscured, in the tradition of political thought, the importance of work and thus the worldly aspect of everyday objects. In her view, that stability or worldliness can only be sustained if objects are seen not just as instrumentally useful but also as the objects of ongoing care, discussion, and judgment, in both the mundane contexts of everyday life and in the more rarified realms of art and culture. As we will see, this dual aspect of economic activities and worldly objects that Arendt articulates in *The Human Condition* provides the conceptual backdrop to her analysis of the worldly dimensions of the economic, which I discuss in the next section. To understand why, we must follow her detailed analysis of labor, work, and worldliness in *The Human Condition*.

After her critical discussion of the rise of the social in the first portion of the book, Arendt introduces her “unusual” (HC 79) distinction between labor and work. Labor, as the activity corresponding to the “vital necessities” of “life itself” (HC 7), at first seems to be trapped by the cycles of biological necessity. But Arendt observes that, without a fixed objective context outside of nature, life cannot take on its cyclical rhythm: “It is only within the human world [built through work] that nature's cyclical movement manifests itself as growth and decay” (HC 97). Thus, labor, although distinct from work, nonetheless relies on work's capacity to build a durable context of lasting objects for the manifestation of cyclical necessity. Work, in these terms, creates what can broadly be termed everyday objects—things that are defined primarily in terms of their use or purpose, as with a table or a chair. Arendt quickly finds, however, that the internal logic of *homo faber*—humans understood in their capacity as workers and makers—undermines the very goal of erecting a stable world that led her to turn to work in the first place. Centrally, and in contrast to the repetitive cycle of laboring, the creation of everyday objects is primarily intelligible in terms of instrumentality. “Here it is true that the end justifies the means,” writes Arendt, “it does more, it produces and organizes them” (HC 153). The standards of *homo faber* are first and foremost instrumental, determined by the use of the final object *homo faber* produces. Though an object “is an end with respect to the means by which it was produced... it never becomes... an end in itself, at least not as long as it

remains an object for use” (HC 153). Yet, on these terms, Arendt finds that the world of objects can no longer fulfill its role as providing a stable context that mediates between subjectivity and the cycles of nature. When everyday objects are understood only as means, they inevitably get pulled back into the rhythms of necessity characteristic of labor: “[T]he life process takes hold of things and uses them for its purposes,” giving rise to a “process of growing meaninglessness where every end is transformed into a means” (HC 157). Although work was meant to build a context in which the human relationship to nature could be meaningful, on its own terms it is incoherent—“utility established as meaning generates meaninglessness” (HC 154).

At this point in Arendt's argument, then, her analysis of work seems to affirm her earlier pessimistic account of the rise of the social. Whatever the distinction between labor and work may be doing, Arendt nonetheless embraces a view of the private, economic sphere as an instrumental domain constantly overwhelmed by material necessity. Yet, as Arendt's argument proceeds, we see that the reduction of everyday objects and economic activities to instrumentality, far from being the starting point for Arendt's reflections, is actually the problem she seeks to diagnose and counter. This becomes clear in the course of her discussion of *homo faber*'s response to the problem of meaninglessness. Aware that instrumentality alone cannot establish meaning, *homo faber* searches for some source of meaning that can guide its instrumental pursuits. Against the world of everyday instrumentality, *homo faber* picks out some end or ultimate value and declares it beyond instrumentality, an “end in itself” (HC 155). Arendt registers two complaints against *homo faber*'s attempt to stop the meaninglessness of instrumentality by elevating an end-in-itself. The erection of an end-in-itself, she says, causes *homo faber* “to turn away from the objective world of use things and fall back upon the subjectivity of use itself” (HC 155). Unable to grasp the meaningfulness of the world, *homo faber* comes to understand all meaning as derived from the subjective, non-instrumental orientation toward an end-in-itself that gives objects their purpose. Arendt repudiates this move because it installs humans as the complete master over nature and the world, “robbing both of their independent dignity” (HC 156). This leads Arendt to her second complaint against the erection of the end-in-itself: that it misunderstands the nature of meaning and worldliness, which, we recall, refers in part to the way in which a stable world of objects orients and contextualizes other human activities. “Meaning,” Arendt writes, “must be permanent and lose nothing of its character, whether it is achieved or, rather, found by man or fails man and is missed by him” (HC 155). As Arendt observes, the very dignity of an instrumental activity depends on the ends of that activity being viewed as independent, an independence that cannot be manufactured by arbitrarily declaring something an end-in-itself.

Such concerns, Arendt notes, led Plato to react to Protagoras's belief that man is the measure of all uses and declare that the god, not man, is the measure

even of use-objects (HC 158–59). But Arendt thinks that this retreat to fixed, objective standards is no longer possible. Having identified *homo faber*'s need for a given source of meaning that transcends the domain of use, how does Arendt avoid the path taken by Plato? A first clue is to be found in Arendt's careful choice of words in her observation about meaning. According to Arendt, although Plato searches for transcendental or objective measures to govern the domain of use, she writes only that meaning must be “permanent” for it to help constitute the meaningfulness of the world. And in the final two sections of her chapter on work—“The Exchange Market” and “The Permanence of the World and the Work of Art”—Arendt gives an account of how the significance of objects can be permanent without transcendental grounds such that they can constitute the meaningfulness of the world. By attending to how objects form a space within which they and others appear, Arendt finds a source of meaningfulness that can ensure that the world fulfills its purpose of providing a stable context that mediates between the instrumental demands of necessity and the political realm of action. Although *homo faber* starts from the instrumentality of economic pursuits and so must turn to something non-instrumental—the end-in-itself—for a source of meaning, Arendt's account challenges the starting point of that effort: that economic activities and everyday objects are adequately grasped in terms of instrumentality.

The first change in the significance of objects occurs, Arendt argues, when we move from the privacy of production and use to the publicity of the exchange market. Once production is oriented toward exchange, “the finished end product changes its quality somewhat but not altogether” (HC 163). When objects emerge from the privacy of production and use and enter into the “public realm” of the market, their durability changes from durability in use to durability in exchange (HC 163). In that process, objects acquire a limited permanence that outlasts their immediate instrumentalization—what Arendt calls their value. Crucially, Arendt points to the fact that, in the market, objects appear as the source of such permanence. “Value is the quality a thing can never possess in privacy but acquires automatically the moment it appears in public,” writes Arendt (HC 164). This value is formed neither by private use and need nor by a distinct set of ultimate ends-in-themselves, but by the fact that objects “[appear] to be esteemed, demanded, or neglected” (HC 164). Thus, in the marketplace, objects acquire a new meaning and significance as they are subjected to the judgments of a public. However, such judgments remain limited, insofar as the criterion of the exchange market remains exchange and, thus, usefulness relative to other objects: In the market, objects “exist only in relation to some other thing” (HC 166). Although it opens up Arendt's alternative account of how we can talk about the meaning or significance of objects, of their ability to form a stable context for human action, the exchange market fails to sustain the permanence and meaningfulness of the world. The moment that the appearance in the public of the market

gives objects a new durability and imbues them with value, the market reabsorbs them into the relativity of exchange and, by extension, the flux of means and ends Arendt has already diagnosed.

Despite this failure of the exchange market to ground the permanence of meaning, Arendt's investigation of it has shifted the conceptual terrain where such permanence can be found. Rather than something intrinsic to the purpose of an object or descending from a transcendental source or end-in-itself, the exchange market reveals that value, permanence, and meaning, properly understood, come from the esteeming of a discerning public. Yet, even as the market opens up some space for evaluative judgment about everyday objects, a space not immediately overwhelmed by necessity, it nonetheless remains caught in the relativity of exchange. Finally, Arendt turns to a class of objects whose distinctive nature is to hold open this space for as long as they exist: the work of art (cf. Flynn 1991; Markell 2011, 31–34). Works of art, Arendt writes, are objects “which are strictly without any utility whatsoever and which, moreover, because they are unique, are not exchangeable and therefore defy equalization through a common denominator such as money” (HC 167). The work of art, because it is beyond use, “can attain permanence throughout the ages” (HC 167); it is actualized only when it is preserved so as “to shine and to be seen” (HC 168). Simply put, the work of art's purpose is to hold open a space of appearance in which it is talked about, evaluated, and passed on. It is this space that halts the decaying forces of necessity and exchange and ensures that in the work of art “the very stability of the human artifice . . . achieves a representation of its own” (HC 167–68). However, understood in this manner, the work of art—as something extraordinary that is removed from the domain of use-objects—only further highlights the instrumental nature of everyday objects.

Yet art, for Arendt, is not a matter of independent aesthetic objects and values; on the contrary, in her analysis of exchange, she points to how value is more fundamentally constituted by the appearance of objects to judging spectators. The significance of the work of art does not exist independently of that space of appearances. It is this phenomenological ground she gives for the nature of value and permanence that leads her to her last insight, one that finally undermines any reduction of economic activities and everyday objects to instrumentality. She writes,

Everything that is, must appear, and nothing can appear without a shape of its own; hence there is in fact no thing that does not in some way transcend its functional use, and its transcendence, its beauty or ugliness, is identical with appearing publically and being seen. (HC 173)

This quality of every object indicates how meaningfulness can have a permanence that transcends use: The significance of every object is to some extent determined by its public appreciation, an appreciation that indeed can be missed by whoever creates the object. Because the product of all instrumental action—its

end—appears to others, a core element of all instrumentality exceeds the terms of mere use and instrumentality. Such transcendence, however, is not constituted by some set of absolute standards or intrinsic values posited over and against the domain of material necessity and instrumentality. Rather, it comes about from within economic activities and everyday use-objects, because every object, no matter how ordinary, is “judged not only according to the subjective needs of men but by the objective [i.e., lasting, permanent] standards of the world where they will find their place, to last, to be seen, and to be used” (HC 173).

CLASS, INTEREST AND PROPERTY: THE WORLDLY DIMENSIONS OF THE ECONOMIC

Arendt’s phenomenological account of the significance of everyday objects opens up a way of analyzing economic activities as always exceeding the terms of instrumentality and technical control. It thus forms the crucial backdrop for her analysis of expropriation and modern capitalism, which, in her mind, risk transforming the contexts of economic activities such as to rob them of these worldly mediations. Before we can see the full significance of expropriation in Arendt’s thought, however, we must examine a constellation of concepts—class, interest, and property—that together fill out Arendt’s vision of the possible worldly and institutional mediations of material necessity and instrumentality.² Arendt’s unusual take on each otherwise familiar concept positions them as at once instrumental and non-instrumental, at once oriented toward some concrete goal or instrumental end while also holding open a non-instrumental space of appearance and judgment. Her analysis—focusing on the manner in which each concept mediates between subjective, material needs and political spaces of appearance and judgment—centrally rests on her observation that objects always appear and so are more than mere instruments that can be subject to the will of a single individual. Thus, Arendt’s analysis crucially extends her account of work and the non-instrumental aspect of economic activities and everyday objects.

Although elliptical, Arendt’s discussion of class in *On Revolution* (1963, hereafter “OR”) brings out this connection to her nonreductive account of work and the objects work creates. Arendt introduces her conception of class in the course of a discussion of the U.S. Constitution as a “tangible worldly entity” (OR 157). Arendt emphasizes the objective nature of the Constitution so as to separate it from any notion of collective will or homogeneous agency. Even as the people are the source of the power that animates the institutional space formed by the Constitution, they are not, for Arendt, what gives the Constitution its

² Commentators have at times considered these concepts independently as antidotes to the supposed emptiness of Arendtian politics (Markell 2011, 25–27; Zerilli 2005, 21–22, 105), but they have not reconstructed them together to provide a complete picture of Arendt’s attitude toward the political significance of economic phenomena.

specific function. Rather, she says, the importance of the Constitution is that it is

a written document, an enduring objective thing, which, to be sure, one could approach from many different angles and upon which one could impose many different interpretations, which one could change and amend in accordance with circumstances, but which nevertheless was never a subjective state of mind, like the will. (OR 157)

One of the structuring narratives of *On Revolution* concerns the relative absence of such worldly, shared objects in Europe, objects that could open up a space for need and necessity to appear as possible public concerns. Instead, social needs tended to enter public life there in an unmediated manner, which means they were never subjected to any sort of institutional reification into a tangible thing that could be the object of shared judgments. Thus, the fact that suffering was not transformed into a worldly object of possible public concern meant that the response was one of compassion rather than solidarity, with compassion an emotion that “abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matters, the whole realm of human affairs, are located” (OR 86). Similarly, the French revolutionaries’ attack on hypocrisy rested on an effort to bring subjective motives, which “are destroyed in their essence through appearance” (OR 96), into the political world without a mediating transformation into worldly interests.

Nonetheless, Arendt thinks there existed some important, albeit limited, mediating and worldly institutional structures in Europe. In place of a worldly object such as the U.S. Constitution, European society was stabilized by “interest, the solid structure of a class society” (OR 163). We should pause briefly to consider the strangeness of Arendt’s claim here. Although she echoes their concern with stability, Arendt’s view has none of the functionalist overtones of Hegelian social-integrative accounts of class as potentially cultivating consensual or non-instrumental values (cf. Tsao 2004). Nor does Arendt point to the role of class in producing a political elite capable of exercising political leadership—the problem at the center of Max Weber’s view of the relationship between class and stability (Weber 1946; 1994).³ Rather, Arendt points to “interest” as the avenue by which class contributed to social stability—the aspect of class that would seem the least political, especially given Arendt’s supposed hostility to economic and social interests, and so furthest from providing a worldly object such as the Constitution. At this point, though, Arendt gives her distinctive and

³ To be sure, this does not mean that Arendt is free of elitist assumptions, as when she worries that “there is no class left, no aristocracy of either a political or spiritual nature from which a restoration of the other capacities of man could start anew” (HC 5), or her statement that among “present-day worries” is that “of how to prevent the poor of yesterday from developing their own code of behavior and from imposing it on the body politic, once they have become rich” (OR 70). However, I think her elitist prescriptions, although problematic on their own, are more fundamentally driven by the reductive analysis of mass society that I challenge later. For instructive pushback against the charge of elitism, see also Villa (2008, 35–37).

idiosyncratic interpretation of the nature of such interests: “[T]his interest,” she writes, “was never an expression of the will, but, on the contrary, the manifestation of the world or rather of those parts of the world which certain groups . . . or classes had in common because they were situated between them” (OR 163–64). As with the Constitution, class interests are not a product of the will—of either subjective belief or else objective class consciousness that could, say, be represented by a party—but a worldly, tangible thing that at once unites and separates people, arising from a shared space in the world. Thus, although interests are produced by economic and social needs, they are not reducible to them. And this is because interests are always also the manifestation of the world, of how such needs are reified into worldly objects—interests—that open up a space of common appearance and judgment.

But how exactly can we conceptualize class and interests as manifestations of the world and still retain their analytic force for understanding society? In focusing on their worldly dimension, Arendt’s account risks divorcing both interest and class from any association with economic considerations—of separating class from needs and risks arising from different relative economic locations, and interests from the instrumental pursuit of economic imperatives. Here the connection to Arendt’s understanding of work proves crucial. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies interests with

the matters of the world of things in which men move, which physically lies between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests. These interests constitute, in the word’s most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together. (HC 182, emphasis in original)

These objective things, Arendt notes, “var[y] with each group of people” who act in relationship to them (HC 182). Does this mean that such things are just given by the contingent circumstances into which people are thrown? To an extent, yes. But as *things*, as objects, they will always be the product of work and so, according to the logic of Arendt’s account, related to the demands of economic necessity. Indeed, one of the crucial functions of work is to transform “the naked greed of desire” and “the desperate longing of needs” into things that “are fit to enter the world” (HC 168).⁴ As such, interests will have the same double face as all objects. They will at once be born out of the specific material needs and structural risks that scholars typically associate with class and economic interest, just as everyday objects always retain their association with instrumental purposes. But as objectified transformations of those subjective needs, they will also be judged

⁴ I take it that Arendt exaggerates for rhetorical effect when she says that interests, as she understands them, “have no connotation of material needs or greed” (Arendt 2007, 722). I think Arendt here is trying to push back against moralized critiques of interest that, in associating them with greed and material needs, seek to elevate worldless criteria for evaluating the disinterestedness of public action (cf. Arendt’s discussion of goodness at HC 73–78).

according to standards that exceed mere instrumentality and thereby hold open a space in which they and others can appear. Class, in this view, is constituted by economic structures without being reducible to them. And this is because material necessity can never appear as such, but must be given a worldly shape.

The final element of Arendt’s understanding of the worldly dimensions of the economic is property. Property, Arendt writes, is “the privately owned share of a common world and therefore is the most elementary political condition for man’s worldliness” (HC 253). As with both class and interest, Arendt attempts to recover a more fundamental worldly, and so mediating, significance of property over and against its reductive association with economic instrumentality and material needs. Thus, whereas in the self-understanding of the ancient Greeks private property was almost entirely bound up with necessity and mastery, Arendt identifies that conception only as the “privative” trait of privacy—privacy from this perspective means “to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life” (HC 58). Although Arendt appears to think this understanding captures some important experiences—the association between privacy and “things that need to be hidden” (HC 73)—it also leads to the reduction of property to the isolated domain of “force and violence” required to master necessity (HC 31). She then goes on to distinguish the non-privative traits of privacy from this association with instrumental and technical mastery:

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. (HC 62–63)

Arendt’s picture of the non-privative trait of privacy captures aspects of property neglected by the ancient Greek understanding of the private mastery of necessity. Here, the private is not the domain of things that concern myself rather than others, nor is it a matter of things that can be technically mastered as opposed to those that call for a variety of perspectives. Indeed, the private signifies those aspects of the human world that escape our capacity for both conceptual and literal production and mastery.

The non-privative traits of privacy also alter the significance of property for politics. Although in the Greek conception privacy was necessary because it liberated citizens from material necessity, here property becomes a precondition for public appearance:

Not the interior realm, which remains hidden and of no public significance, but its exterior appearance is important for the city as well, and it appears in the realm of the city through the boundaries between one household and the other. (HC 63)

Property, here, is a worldly location, one that provides an opening into a common space of appearance while

also distinguishing one household from another (cf. Markell 2011, 26). Much like her conception of class and interest, then, Arendt's distinctive interpretation of property strives to at once capture its economic dimensions without reducing it to its most obviously economic aspect—the right of dominion over a certain set of things or goods. Rather, what Arendt points to as crucial about property is precisely how, although bound up with the private concerns of material necessity, it is always more than merely economic, mediating between the satisfaction of needs and the appearance of things in public.

On this basis, Arendt attacks liberal understandings of property. She writes,

The distinguishing mark of modern political and economic theory . . . in so far as it regards private property as a crucial issue," she writes, "has been its stress upon the private activities of property-owners and their need of government protection for the sake of accumulation of wealth at the expense of the tangible property itself. (HC 71–72)

Wealth, in Arendt's view, refers to property only as a bundle of consumable goods or instrumental objects, thus reflecting only that side of property that relates it to material necessity and the technical management of needs. So, a society can be at once wealthy—abundant in material goods and even having government protection for the private ownership of wealth—and still lack property, understood as tangible, worldly locations (cf. HC 61). The liberal defense of privacy in terms of the accumulation of wealth, which entails the unrestricted right to dispose over a domain of goods, obscures the worldly aspect of property that Arendt thinks is most vital—that it forms part of the durable context within which both individuals and common things can appear to be discussed and judged.

Indeed, the modern, liberal view not only obscures the connection between privacy and a worldly location from which to appear; it also eliminates the fuller significance of everyday objects that Arendt reconstructs in her account of work. In a footnote on Marx's awareness of world alienation, Arendt approvingly cites his view that the liberal understanding of property "considers things only as properties and properties only as exchange objects" (HC 254). The reductive understanding of property as ownership turns things into abstract properties disconnected from both use and, more importantly, the worldly question of appearances. With this view in mind, then, Arendt's understanding of property as a "location in a particular part of the world" (HC 61) is crucially bound up with her recovery of the full significance of everyday objects and economic activities. Much like all things, then, property in Arendt is both economic—a domain separated from the public realm because concerned with the instrumental satisfaction of material needs—and more than merely instrumental because it is also a location with an outer face, one that appears and opens up onto the public. Once property is reduced to mere ownership and dominion, it loses this mediating function and thereby

its role in contributing to the constitution and ongoing stabilization of a shared world.

In sum, Arendt performs a similar conceptual operation on class, interest, and property, with each illuminating the other. Against reductively economic interpretations, she attempts to recover and explicate the role each phenomenon plays in mediating between economic necessity and the world of common affairs. Doing so entails recovering the worldly dimensions of the economic phenomenon in question. In each case, modern perplexities come from a failure to grasp the worldly aspect of the phenomenon in question, reducing each to its private and subjective side—class as either an objective, structural characteristic or a subjective form of consciousness, interest as subjective preferences, and property as things at the subjective disposition of an individual or collective. I considered each concept at some length because it is only against this background that we can understand the full significance of Arendt's analysis of expropriation. For Arendt, the central characteristic of expropriation is the destruction of the worldly dimension of the economic, and the failure of the modern theoretical response to that expropriation, one that begins from a view of economic activities as entirely technical and instrumental, is its inability to articulate what we have lost—and so what we could regain.

INTERPRETING MODERN CAPITALISM: EXPROPRIATION, WORLD ALIENATION, AND THE WELFARE STATE

The foregoing sections have argued that Arendt, far from seeking to separate the political from the instrumental domain of economic activities, is centrally concerned to recover the worldly dimensions of economic activity. One implication is that any political theory that reduces economic matters to technical calculation and instrumental mastery reinforces the very developments Arendt seeks to diagnose. Yet few political thinkers are as associated as Arendt with the view that economic questions are technical matters, best solved by experts. Indeed, Arendt's careful analysis of the non-instrumental aspect of every use-object insofar as it appears—and of the dangers posed to worldly stability when those appearances are ignored in favor of mere technical calculation—seems contradicted by her insistence elsewhere that there "are things where the right measures can be figured . . . and are not subject to public debate" (Arendt 1979, 317). What explains Arendt's failure to pursue her insights into the non-instrumental and worldly dimensions of everyday objects and economic activities and to instead assert such a strong divide between the economic and the political?

This failure, I argue, is not primarily philosophical or conceptual, but rather arises from the internal structure of Arendt's sociological analysis of mass society. Central to her account of totalitarianism, Arendt's understanding of mass society rests on an exaggerated and undifferentiated view of expropriation as the institutionally unmediated destruction of stable, worldly

locations. In her analysis, the rise of modern mass society follows on the release of quasi-natural economic processes from the worldly institutional structures that previously constrained and mediated them. However, Arendt’s account of these processes tends to present them as depersonalized and automatic, neglecting both the social agents who historically propelled expropriation and the institutional structures that enabled those agents. Her disregard of these aspects of expropriation leads Arendt to view economic forces in modern, mass society as entirely unmediated and unworldly and, as a result, to restrict her analysis of the possible sources of worldliness to the domain of art and culture. Finally, Arendt’s neglect of the institutional mediations of modern economic processes leads her to a deeply ambivalent attitude toward the modern welfare state. Even as she expresses support for welfare institutions, Arendt interprets them only as external checks on economic forces, rather than as efforts to restore the stable worldly locations for and institutional mediations of economic activities in contemporary societies. However, if we view expropriation as always requiring institutional mechanisms and group agency to carry it through, Arendt’s own account of the worldly dimension of economic activities and processes provides resources to counter this pessimistic view, allowing us to see welfare institutions as objects that, even as they are bound up with the demands of material accumulation, create worldly bulwarks against expropriation and open up political spaces of appearance and judgment.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies expropriation as one of three events that set off what she calls the modern age, alongside the discovery of America and the invention of the telescope. She points in particular to the expropriation of monastic possessions during the Reformation, an event that sparked “the two-fold process of individual expropriation and the accumulation of social wealth [in contrast to property]” (HC 248). Expropriation, in Arendt’s terms, refers to the transformations that leave individuals materially dependent solely on selling their labor or, alternately, on the returns from capital investments. In this view, expropriation thus always requires some attenuation or elimination of the worldly, stabilizing mediations of economic activities, because such mediations are always, to an extent, beyond the reach of market forces and of instrumental economic imperatives. So, the expropriation of monastic properties, which brought those material goods entirely into the domain of the market and accumulation, created a new population of bourgeois, absentee landowners seeking to maximize returns on their capital. Unimpeded by preexisting networks of feudal obligations, these landowners were free to invest capital so as to increase agricultural productivity. And here we find the source of Arendt’s twofold process: Depressed food prices increasingly expropriated both the peasantry, who now had to sell their labor for wages, and the gentry, while capital demanded more and new opportunities for investment.

In Arendt’s terminology, the expropriation of monastic possessions transformed property into wealth, which is in turn different from capital. The full

significance of these events is obscured because of “the modern equation of property and wealth on one side and propertylessness and poverty on the other” (HC 61). As we have seen, although property is always tied to a concrete location in the world, wealth is just that side of property linked to control over goods and to material necessity: “[W]ealth remains something to be used and consumed no matter how many individual life-spans it may sustain” (HC 68). Thus, accumulation requires the transformation of property into wealth—precisely what Arendt understands by expropriation. Only as wealth—as the exclusive right to dispose over goods as one sees fit—can property be invested as capital and so generate ongoing accumulation and growth.

Expropriation, the deprivation of certain groups of their place in the world and their naked exposure to the exigencies of life, created both the original accumulation of wealth and the possibility of transforming this wealth into capital through labor. (HC 255)

Expropriation, in sum, entails the destruction of the worldly mediations of economic activities. This is further reinforced by the event on which Arendt focuses: the Reformation’s reaction to the Catholic Church, which Arendt interprets, in part, as an antiworldly reaction to the tangible, worldly presence of ecclesiastical property. Although it is ultimately grounded in “an other-worldly concern,” the “grandiose splendor attending everything sacred” nonetheless preserved the worldly experience of moving from a hidden, private domain into a shared space of appearance (HC 34). In other words, the sheer useless splendor of the Roman Catholic Church preserved, albeit weakly, the experience of worldliness that Arendt analyzes in her account of work and especially the work of art. Against this lingering worldliness of Catholicism, Luther and Calvin sought to “restore the uncompromising other-worldliness of the Christian faith” (HC 251), which demanded the expropriation of the worldly splendor of church property. As Arendt interprets it, then, the modern age began with an event that destroyed the remaining source of worldliness after the fall of the Roman Empire, and the event was only powerful enough to spark the process of accumulation because there was such a mass of carefully preserved and tended worldly objects—ecclesiastical property—available to be transformed into use-objects, wealth, and capital.

So, by focusing on the expropriation of ecclesiastical property, Arendt further calls attention to the antiworldly nature of expropriative processes in modernity. However, by focusing so exclusively on this single event, she leaves herself unable to fully account for a central problem: why this moment of expropriation had such a larger ramification than similar events in the past. After discussing the relationship between the Reformation, world alienation, and the rise of capitalism, Arendt then claims,

What distinguishes this development at the beginning of the modern age from similar occurrences in the past is that expropriation and wealth accumulation did not simply

result in new property or lead to a new redistribution of wealth, but were fed back into the process to generate further expropriations, greater productivity, and more appropriation. (HC 255)

But why was this occasion of expropriation different? Although Arendt is hardly explicit, we can reconstruct a partial answer from her discussion of what she calls the “process character” of action. All acts, in addition to disclosing the identity of the agent and drawing him or her into the preexisting web of human affairs, begin processes whose end can never be predicted or controlled by the initial agent. “The reason why we are never able to foretell with certainty the outcome and end of any action,” writes Arendt, “is simply that action has no end” (HC 233). This is the case because every act is constituted through the unpredictable responses of others, whose actions in turn are both the continuation of the process begun by the original act and the beginning of new processes. Although Arendt never fully develops the point, she seems to think that the process character of action comes to the fore to the extent that durable, worldly contexts for action are weakened.⁵ Such durable contexts channel the processes started by action such that they do not double back on the “islands of predictability . . . and guideposts of reliability” (HC 244) that protect human affairs. From this point of view, then, the Reformation had such an impact because the durable contexts of action were so weak that the forces of accumulation overwhelmed the remaining worldly bulwarks. Indeed, Arendt seems to make this point when she observes that

the process [of accumulation] can continue only provided that no worldly durability and stability is permitted to interfere . . . the process of wealth accumulation . . . is possible only if the world and the very worldliness of man are sacrificed. (HC 256)

However, the power of processes to overwhelm durable institutions is only one side of Arendt’s argument. The other is that acts become processes because they are carried through, sustained by the responses of others—responses that are always conditioned by the preexisting flow of processes but that intervene and redirect them to form the “web of human relationships” (HC 233). From this perspective, we should look for the actors who responded to the original moment of expropriation by using the state and institutional structures of power to augment it, giving it its processual character. Arendt, however, overlooks all the formal-legal, regulatory, and material transformations that were required to change property into wealth and to create a reservoir of expropriated individuals who could become laborers. Instead, Arendt views modern expropriation entirely in terms

⁵ I draw this from Arendt’s observations about the modern channeling of action into the initiation of natural processes, as well as her discussion of promising. Such considerations, I believe, are also behind her view that action, “the most dangerous of all human abilities and possibilities,” has presently become “the center of all other human capabilities” (Arendt 2006, 63).

of a process that overwhelms durable worldly contexts, instrumentalizing all political institutions and objective things in terms of the demands of accumulation—the point at which her analysis becomes socio-theoretically undifferentiated, presenting accumulation too much as an unmediated, quasi-natural process. The focus on the process character of expropriation at the expense of the web of human relationships that sustains it has two important consequences. In the first place, it means the alternative Arendt poses—*either* a process of accumulation *or* a new, settled state of affairs—is poorly framed, because the original event of ecclesiastical expropriation *both* set off processes *and* helped created new state of affairs of actors and classes, such as the bourgeois, who sought to redirect such processes to their ends. Second, it means that Arendt exaggerates the self-propelling nature of accumulation and neglects the worldly, institutional channels through which accumulation always flows, which, once brought into view, also point to some of the worldly *limits* to expropriation, limits reflected in the institutional structures of contemporary welfare states.

Here, I focus on one significant implication of the latter for Arendt’s thought: her equivocal attitude toward the postwar welfare state. At times, Arendt expresses support for welfare institutions, but only on the grounds that they maintain the boundary between politics and unworldly modern economic forces, rather than because they restore, to some extent, the worldly dimensions of economic activities by limiting the scope of expropriation. In her 1970 interview published as “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,” Arendt says that

only legal and political institutions that are independent of the economic forces and their automatism can control and check the inherently monstrous potentialities of this process [of expropriation and accumulation]. Such political controls seem to function best in the so-called “welfare states.” (Arendt 1972, 212)

Here, she presents welfare state institutions as external checks or controls on economic activities and forces, boundaries that exist outside of these processes and that do not fundamentally channel them in a more worldly direction. However, because she views the welfare state primarily as a project of controlling unworldly processes of appropriation rather than of restoring to economic activities some degree of worldliness, Arendt at other times equivocates and identifies welfare politics as furthering or augmenting expropriation: “Overtaxation, a *de facto* devaluation of currency, inflation coupled with a recession—what else are these but relatively mild forms of expropriation?” (Arendt 1972, 211–12, emphasis in original). Although Arendt shared the view of many of her contemporaries that Keynesianism planning had successfully overcome distributive conflicts (cf. Habermas 1975), we should nonetheless note that Arendt downplays the political aspect of these different forms of expropriation. Although, for instance, inflation may indeed be a form of expropriation, it is expropriation mediated through

political and economic institutions that have distinct distributive and political dimensions; in the case of inflation, directing expropriation disproportionately toward creditors. More broadly, however, this means that Arendt never considers together the two sides of her analysis of her contemporary welfare state politics: the external, political control of economic processes and her call “to make a decent amount of property [in her distinctive sense] available to every human being” (Arendt 1979, 320)—that is, to think about what aspect of welfare entitlements and institutions represents both bulwarks against economic expropriation and worldly mediations of economic activities, mediations that allow needs and necessity to appear as potential objects of shared public action.

Finally, Arendt’s neglect of the institutional and worldly channels of expropriation leads her to an exaggerated diagnosis of late capitalism as a fully expropriated mass society and, further, to an unduly narrow view of the possible sources of worldliness in such a society. Central to her analysis of totalitarianism, Arendt’s critical view of the transformation of a class into a mass society—one bereft of worldly objects that can provide stability and orient action—dominates her postwar political perspective. In a mass society, individuals lack the sort of attachment to worldly objects and locations that could provide stability and orient their activities, a condition Arendt terms loneliness and that she thinks leaves individuals vulnerable to totalitarian ideologies (HC 58–59; Arendt 1951, 474–79). Under such conditions, Arendt argues, economic questions do indeed appear as matters of technical calculation: “[I]n our mass societies the political realm has withered away and is being replaced by that ‘administration of things’ which Engels predicted for a classless society” (OR 272). To a large extent, this is because the “experiences of worldliness escape more and more the range of ordinary human experience” and become increasingly restricted to the activity of artists (HC 323). The destruction of the worldly contexts that mediate material necessity means, for Arendt, that it is primarily artists who experience the attachment to objects and projects that allow them to overcome the dangerous worldlessness and loneliness of laboring and thereby to maintain a concern for the shape of the world. Yet, as I have been arguing, Arendt only comes to this conclusion through an understanding of expropriation and of a transition from a class to a mass society that neglects the worldly mediations of expropriation itself. And once such mediations are brought to light, it is doubtful there ever can be such a total expropriation of society, and thus that the experience of worldliness—of attachment to objects and of transforming subjective experiences and needs into tangible objects and interests—is ever so narrow.

CONCLUSION: ARENDTIAN SOCIAL POLITICS

I have argued that Arendt, contrary to the view of many of her critics, is deeply concerned with the appropriate

role played by economic matters in political life. For her, contemporary capitalist societies are marked not by the ascendancy of economic over political concerns, but by the destruction of the mediating institutional structures that render material necessity a possible object of collective deliberation and action. Yet, as we just observed, she fails to pursue her own argument and to consider how welfare state institutions could play such a mediating role; namely, by transforming needs into worldly objects that constitute spaces of judgment and action. Even when expressing support for the postwar welfare institutions, the overall tenor of her analysis presents social politics as furthering both an understanding of government as technical administration and as the expression of antiworldly, expropriative tendencies of modern capitalist accumulation.

Nevertheless, despite her own pessimistic conclusions, Arendt’s theorization of the worldly dimensions of the economic provides valuable resources for considering the significance of social welfare institutions for democratic life. From an Arendtian perspective, welfare institutions—ranging from various forms of collective insurance to regulation of economic activities to direct public provision of economic goods, such as housing or material sustenance—work to transform the bare necessities of material need into the objects of collective action. They provide a shared vocabulary and set of reference points for public deliberation about, and intentional action on, the demands of material necessity. The reification of bare necessity may take forms as mundane as an administrative record documenting an individual’s situation and needs or as elaborate as the construction of a housing project. Through this transformation of bare necessity into a possible object of public action, welfare institutions promise to restore a worldly mediation to economic activities and so provide a limit to expropriation in capitalist society, placing certain forms of property beyond the reach of accumulation and thus giving individuals a stable share of a common world. A pension, for example, can be fruitfully viewed as a worldly *object*—something that not only satisfies material needs of citizens but that also provides such citizens with a stable location in the world and a measure of glory or public esteem—as well as a worldly *interest*: something constitutive of a class of individuals who share a particular location in the world relative to a shared object.

Both deliberative and radical democratic theorists neglect these worldly, mediating aspects of welfare institutions. For deliberative democrats such as Jürgen Habermas, the welfare state reflects an effort to “erect a democratic dam against the colonizing *encroachment* of systems imperatives” (Habermas 1992, 444, emphasis in original). Habermas interprets the welfare state as both a response to crisis tendencies within the economy and as the legal embodiment of the universal presuppositions of communicative interaction (Habermas 1987, 350–56; 1998, 121–31). Welfare institutions work to protect domains of communicative interaction and public deliberation from invasion by the “norm-free” rationality of economic and administrative subsystems (Habermas 1987, 185). Arendt shares with Habermas

an aversion to economically reductive views of the welfare state and politics in general, such as orthodox Marxist analyses that reduce welfare institutions to the stabilization of underlying economic forces or relationships. However, Habermas's strategy, which corrals instrumental rationality within the economic subsystem, risks presenting economic activities as equivalent to instrumentality as such. In this regard, Arendt's rejection of economically reductive views of politics is more radical: She wants to go beyond distinguishing between politics and economics so as to diagnose the historical and institutional conditions under which the economic appears as a domain of technical mastery that could replace politics in the first place. As a result of his theoretical strategy, Habermas views market rationalities as a problem only insofar as they generate crises and overstep their appropriate boundaries. For Arendt, on the contrary, the emergence of even well-functioning capitalist expropriation requires a sacrifice of the worldly aspects of economic activities and so threatens to rob individuals of the stable attachments that mediate between the economic and the political. Consequently, Arendt opens up a more capacious view of the stakes of struggles over welfare institutions: They are not just struggles to defend fragile domains of communicative action and public deliberation from the instrumentalizing force of the economic subsystem. Equally, if not more, important on her view are efforts aimed at rebuilding the worldly contexts that allow for economic matters, even as they are bound up with instrumental demands, to appear as the shared objects of politics.

Radical democratic theorists similarly worry that Habermas's stark division between subsystems of instrumental processes and of communicative action forecloses thinking about the politicization of economic institutions and activities (e.g., Breen 2012, 2, 82–84). Like Arendt, such theorists call attention to the objectifying work that disciplinary welfare institutions undertake—the manifold processes that transform social needs into administratively manageable objects. However, Arendt goes beyond such radical democratic critiques of welfare institutions by allowing us to see how such objects are also potentially *worldly* objects, irreducible to technical mastery. Critics of the disciplinary effects of administrative politics again risk taking for granted what Arendt seeks to counter: the reduction of economic matters to calculative rationality. For example, Nancy Fraser (1989) rejects Habermas's view of the economic subsystem in favor of an approach that treats terms such as the economic as “cultural classifications and ideological labels” (166; cf. Clarke 1993). To designate something as economic or part of the economic system, then, is to “depoliticize” it by casting it as a matter of private ownership or technical planning (Fraser 1989, 168). Similarly, Rancière (2010)—who, as we already observed, criticizes Arendt for divorcing the political from the social—advances a view of politics as “a process, not a sphere” (70). The process of politicization takes place against what Rancière calls the police order, which locates all individuals in terms of their “different functions, places and interests” and reduces

the political community “to the relations between the interests and aspirations of these different parts” (36, 42). Politics, in contrast, occurs when individuals and groups challenge these official, institutionalized designations and the distinctions (such as between properly political and merely economic matters) that ground the police order.

Implicit in Rancière's argument, however, is the assumption that interests are something that the police order can fully represent without any “supplement”—that is, that they can be definitely known and so subject to technical control (2010, 36). Yet, as Arendt argues, such a view neglects the worldly nature of interests—the potential that interests also constitute open-ended relationships and invite judgment and discussion among similarly situated individuals, thereby exceeding any attempt to impose on them a technical, knowable order. In an analogous way, Fraser takes for granted that the economic or administrative management of needs requires their depoliticization, reconfiguring them in terms of fixed, authoritative definitions. Fraser, Rancière, and radical democratic critics of welfare institutions all point to a vital moment in political life: when hierarchical structures of social need interpretation and need management are disrupted, turning passive clients into active citizens. However, by accepting the notion that economic and administrative structures are reducible to technical control and rationalized need management, radical democrats, in the same manner as Habermas, tend to foreclose a consideration of what, from the Arendtian perspective I develop here, is of crucial importance: whether, on the one hand, welfare state institutions are world-expanding or world-building (i.e., that they constitute new, political relations and open possibilities for collective judgment and action), or, on the other, whether they only further world alienation (i.e., that they represent social needs and economic affairs as entirely matters for technical expertise and management). Habermas, Fraser, and Rancière preemptively assume they do the latter. An Arendtian view leaves this a widely open question.

Indeed, the history of welfare institutions provides rich examples of these world-building moments—moments that often cut against the statist and authoritarian intentions of the original architects of such institutions. For example, Bismarck's landmark social reforms—sickness insurance (1883), industrial accident insurance (1884), and disability and old age insurance (1889)—were quite explicitly motivated by the desire to, in his own words, “reconcile the majority of the workers with the existing order of the state,” thereby averting more fundamental political democratization of the German Reich (quoted in Stolleis 2013, 51). More broadly, many of its advocates saw the German welfare state as a means to master the contingency of human affairs: For influential economist Gustav Schmoller, social reforms sought to secure “a position” against “chance” by intervening “confidently and deliberately into the order of nature” (quoted in Grimmer-Solem 2003, 172). However, in crucial respects these reforms did not have the intended effects. On the contrary, many of the resulting welfare

institutions, most notably the sickness insurance funds, became bastions of social democratic agitation even under the repressive Bismarckian anti-Socialist laws, leading to repeated calls for a government crackdown (Ayaß 2010; Hennock 2007, 151–65; Steinmetz 1993, 126–27).⁶ By 1902, an estimated 100,000 worker representatives sat on the boards of these funds, marking them out as one of the most democratic public institutions in the largely authoritarian German state (Ritter 1986, 79).

Thus, even as socialists recognized that Bismarck’s intention was to transform the political demands of workers into technically controllable social needs, they were able to engage with these welfare institutions as worldly, mediating structures by insisting that workers and activists play an active role in their democratic administration. In this regard, such institutions functioned to mediate certain bare necessities—in the case of sickness insurance, biological life itself—so as to transform them into the possible objects both of technical management and of collective judgment and action. These workers and activists, increasingly participating in the administration of these institutions, were not just concerned to disrupt authoritative patterns for interpreting the interests of workers. More fundamentally, they sought to ensure that such institutions were structured so as to bring out the worldly, non-instrumental aspect of these interests, thus constituting spaces of appearance, judgment, and participation. In 1902, socialist activist and labor leader Paul Umbreit encapsulated well the socialist attitude toward Bismarck’s social reforms: Self-organized workers either “assist the state, which seriously wants to undertake social reform, in combating unhealthy exploitation or they wrest real social reforms from that state which views the protection of employer interests as its sole purpose.” Through this popular engagement with welfare state institutions, workers can “direct [social reforms] to new possibilities,” reworking such institutions so that they “call on and organize workers themselves as the most knowledgeable interpreters of their own wishes and demands” (quoted in Sweeney 2006, 412–13). Workers thus took up Bismarck’s unacknowledged invitation to judge his work, responding to what he initiated so as to create new, worldly sites of public appearance and judgment, thereby opening up unforeseen horizons of democratic action.

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⁶ Bismarck himself was more resigned to this fact, reflecting his awareness of the limits of hierarchical state power. As he remarked in response to demands for a crackdown, “the insurance system must be lubricated with a drop of democratic oil if it is to run properly” (quoted in Hennock 2007, 162).

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