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Title: Invisible streams : Process-thinking in Arendt

Year: 2016

Version:

Invisible Streams: Process-Thinking in Arendt

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Abstract

For Hannah Arendt, some of the most distinctive features of the modern age derived from the adoption of a process-imaginary in science, history, and administration. This article examines Arendt's work, identifying what it calls the "process-frame" in her criticism of imperialism, economy, and the biologization of politics. It discusses an interpretation in which "natality" presents a completely alternative mode of temporality, a resistance to the process-frame. This interpretation, I argue, needs to be specified by taking into account that political action both interrupts and starts processes of its own. To confine and overcome the negative effects of process-framing, it is important to emphasize action as a world-building activity — something capable of establishing a relatively stable area of the common world by initiating processes of its own. Second, it is also important to cultivate ways of thinking and perceiving particular acts as meaningfully independent of all-embracing processes.

Keywords

Arendt, temporality, process, world, freedom

"The modern concept of process pervading history and nature alike separates the modern age from the past more profoundly than any other single idea," writes Hannah Arendt (2006a: 63). Accordingly, throughout her work, we find a continuous interest in processes. They play a definitive, yet somewhat overlooked, role in her analysis of the malaises of the modern age, especially the emergence of a consumerist society, and the related changes in the nature of work. They also define her thinking on the modern concept of history. However, even though some aspects of process-thinking are mentioned by most scholars, few have given sustained attention to the development of this concept.

This article seeks to refine our understanding of this aspect of Arendt's thinking by tracing and tying together the different strands of what I call the *analytics of process-framing* in her work. By this, I refer to the modes of apprehending phenomena as processes, especially in instances when we are not actively thinking what we are doing (cf. Arendt, 1998: 5). Process-framing is a historically developed way of organizing our experience of activities, including our involvement in them.[i] By directing attention to the political consequences of framing activities *as* something embedded in processes, I hope to offer fresh perspectives to Arendt's criticism of contemporary society, as well as

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to illuminate her thinking on freedom and worldliness. This idea is not only central if we want to understand what Arendt was saying but also provides a valuable perspective for critical scrutiny of contemporary political phenomena with the aid of her concepts. We are so accustomed to thinking about politics in terms of processes — e.g., of wealth, security, and health — that we tend to forget that this is a historically developed way of looking at the common world. Politics throughout the modern period have been seen, in Hartmut Rosa's (2013: 251) words, through the idea of "continuous task of progressively steering the path of societal development in the historical process." Faced with an event, we tend to make sense of it by "normalizing" it as a part of a pre-established historical trajectory — a revolution, for instance, is easily interpreted as a transition towards liberal democracy[ii]. Against this background, this article examines how Arendt's thinking on processes can help us understand the rhetorical and practical force of these ways of comprehending politics as well as their dangers. What kind of 'temporal regime' is constituted by process-framing?[iii]

The first part of the article traces Arendt's analysis of process-thinking from totalitarianism and imperialism to modern capitalist societies and their conceptions of politics and economy. I seek to highlight the continuous presence of this concept in Arendt's work and build connections between the different manifestations. In particular, I proceed from the analysis of the political rule of the bourgeoisie in *Imperialism* to

discussions on statistical uniformity, the administration of the social life processes, and the idea of history as a process in Arendt's works of the 1950s that were produced in very close proximity, i.e., *The Human Condition* and the essays "The Concept of History" and "What Is Freedom." There are also a long series of entries on different aspects of "process-thinking" in her *Denktagebuch* in the 1950s, suggesting that this was a period when her lifelong interest in processes was particularly intense.

Having discussed the emergence of process-framing and the particular threats it poses to political freedom and human worldliness, I engage with earlier literature around the topic and examine ways of overcoming these threats by political action. Two of the most extensive commentaries on Arendt's process-thinking are those of Kathrin Braun and Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves. For Braun (2007), Arendt contributes to the Foucauldian problematization of biopolitics analytically with the idea of processual temporality and politically by providing a non-processual conception of politics (natality) not available to Foucault. This presentation of natality and processes as diametrical opposites, however, simplifies Arendt's position by neglecting the process-character of political action. It also leads to a problematic equation of freedom and spontaneous disruption. Passerin d'Entrèves's (1994) presentation of Arendt's process-thinking is more versatile. However, his aporetic conclusion, according to which Arendt

shows a "deep ambivalence" towards the concept of process, remains unsatisfactory. It is not necessary to demand "*a* [non-ambivalent] attitude" towards process.

The concept of process suggested itself to Arendt in a variety of forms; as an *abstract* (metaphysical) category, it is almost devoid of meaning. We must make a distinction — an Arendtian move *par excellence* — between *different processes* and their varying political implications. For the dangerous and worrisome implications, I reserve the term process-framing. While not self-identical between different empirical contexts, this concept essentially implies an understanding of politics where the structures of the common world are subsumed to semi-automatic, invisible, all-embracing processes, against which concrete and individual events, deeds, and things are seen as functions at best. I discuss the collective practices of world-building — and the notion of processes native to them — as potential bulwarks against the negative consequences of process-framing. I conclude by touching upon the acceleration of various semi-automatic processes under contemporary capitalism and emphasize the importance of thought-processes along with the practices of world-building.

The development of process-thinking

> "the actual world is a process […] *how* an actual entity *becomes* constitutes *what* that actual entity *is* […] This is the 'principle of process'" (Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 27–28).

While process-framing emerged with full lethality only with totalitarianism, the development of this mode of perceiving the world reaches back to the initiation of modernity, the capitalist economy, and specifically, modern natural and historical sciences. Obvious differences aside, all cases are related by framing of the world through an idea of a constantly evolving process that subsumes particulars within itself. This section tracks the conceptual continuities at play by studying Arendt's work in a loosely chronological order (somewhat bending the curve of historical time) from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to *The Human Condition,* the essays of the 1950s, and finally, *On Revolution.*

The first major encounter with processes appears in the analysis of imperialism in part two of *The Origins* — particularly in the chapter, *The Political Emancipation of the Bourgeoisie.* Imperialism, the politics of constant expansion without an attempt at a "lasting assimilation of conquest," emerged when the growth of capitalist economies

encountered the limits of existing bodies politic, forcing the bourgeoisie into politics (Arendt, 1973: 126). The "surprising novelty" of the central political ideas of imperialism is explained, claims Arendt (1973: 125), by the fact that they originated from business speculation and were thus "not really political at all." Exemplified by the likes of Cromer and Rhodes, the imperialist mindset was dominated by "the language of successful businessmen" and a foreign policy whose only goal was the almost-limitless expansion of political power *without* the limitations set by bodies politic or other structures (Arendt, 1973: 126, 135–138). The result was a "supposedly permanent process which has no end or aim but itself" and in relation to which all political structures are seen as temporary stepping stones if not obstacles (Arendt, 1973: 137–138, 215–216). Imperial agents started to consider themselves as mere functions that serve to keep the process in motion and eventually "consider such functionality, such an incarnation of the dynamic trend, his highest possible achievement" (Arendt, 1973: 215).

This mode of thinking later lent itself to totalitarian applications. One of the foremost characteristics of totalitarian regimes was, Arendt (1973: 398, 425) argues, the fact that they were not governmental structures but *movements* that envisioned themselves as the executioners and accelerators of the processes of History or Nature. Totalitarianism was a system "whose very essence is aimless process" (Arendt, 1973: 216), where freedom

was "assigned to a process that unfolds behind the backs of those who act […] beyond the visible arena of public affairs" like a "river flowing freely, in which every attempt to block its flow is an arbitrary impediment" (Arendt, 2007: 120). The movement and process began to define and overrule every other perspective and consideration, all the way to the violent extreme.

It would be easy to point out that since totalitarian movements were fueled by process-thinking run amok, there is clearly something utterly dangerous in the very idea of process. This is the interpretative path taken by many of Arendt's readers when focusing on the aspects discussed in the present essay, especially those linking Arendt to the broader discussion on bio- and thanatopolitics[iv]. The administration of life-processes in societies of mass consumerism, the argument runs, contain a "violent core" analogous to — or leading to — the logic of totalitarian oppression (Duarté, 2005: 2, 8; Vatter, 2006, 144–145; see also Braun, 2007[v]).

However, over-emphasizing the link between liberalism and totalitarianism risks overrunning Arendt's own tireless emphasis on the importance of distinctions. The affinities between liberalism and totalitarianism call for sharper distinctions "because of the *fact* that liberals are not totalitarians" (Arendt, 1994: 405; see also 2006a: 98). Placing the emphasis on violence renders a restricted image of the problems and

dangers Arendt identifies with processes in contemporary societies. The managerialism and consumerism slowly eroding the world as a human artifice and its capacity to provoke free action (or grant meaning to it when it does appear) are serious concerns but are not reducible to totalitarian domination. Arendt's critical histories of the present demonstrate how the process-frame — rather independently of its totalitarian applications – compromises some of the central premises of democratic public freedom, as well as the tangible world of things produced by the "work of our hands."

The roots of the process-frame reach back to certain changes in the field of knowledge in the modern period. From the seventeenth century onwards, the sciences developed an "interest in processes, of which things were soon to become almost accidental by-products" (Arendt, 2006a: 57, 1998: 116, 232). Even in modern mathematics, "two and two *becomes* four: Process" (Arendt, 2003a: 524. English and emphasis original). The distinctively modern sciences (e.g., history, post-Darwinian biology, and statistics) are the case points. Arendt writes in the *Denktagebuch* (May 1954), "History and nature are complementary concepts of the modern age. Both assume a 'process' which then becomes 'development' and finally progress" (Arendt, 2003a: 482. My translation).

For our purposes, the modern concept of history is particularly pertinent. In late antiquity, speculations began to emerge that assimilated history to biological life, which

was understood then in a circular fashion. These remained mere speculations, however, until scientific developments (life as a rectilinear process in modern biology) and political events (especially imperialism and the aftermath of the French Revolution) interfered.

By seeking to create free institutions that would stand against time, and because of the nature of the revolution itself as an *event* that interrupted time, the French revolutionaries had presented an image of politics that does not sit easily within the bourgeois notion of endless process. In *Imperialism,* Arendt (1973: 144) indeed comments that the revolution "with its conception of man as lawmaker and *citoyen*, had almost succeeded in preventing the bourgeoisie from fully developing its notion of history as a necessary process." However, the emphasis should be placed on the qualifier *almost*. In the years following the event, both spectators and actors alike started to perceive the revolution through the metaphors of stream and current — in other words, not as a result of free action but as an "irresistible process" (Arendt, 2006b: 49).

Furthermore, other factors proved more powerful in determining the image of history than the revolutionary events so that "it was conceded that not even the Revolution, which […] is still the greatest event in modern political history, contained sufficient

independent meaning in itself to begin a *new* historical process" (Arendt, 2006a: 81; emphasis mine). This indicates a refusal to grant individual political acts or events the kind of inherent, self-sufficient meaning they possessed in Greek and Roman political thought (Arendt, 2006a: 43, 64–65, 81). In the modern age, history is conceived as an "all-comprehending process," ranging from one infinity (past) to another (future). Especially in the philosophies of history, singular actions are situated into a narrative sequence that alone will disclose their true meaning, meaning that human beings are no longer capable of situating the events themselves. Greatness and potential immortality — seen as attributes of individual deeds and stable structures in antiquity — are now considered features of the flowing process (Arendt, 2006a: 58, 75, 85).

In post-revolutionary reflections, the necessary nature of historical processes "found its counterpart in the recurring necessity to which all human life is subject" (Arendt, 2006b: 59). This points towards the other central form of process-framing that developed contemporaneously with the idea of history as a process — namely, what Arendt calls "the social" or transformation of the life process to the foremost public concern. This controversial concept (e.g., Pitkin, 1998; Benhabib, 1996: 23–28; Bernstein, 1996: 17; Canovan, 1994: 117–120; Cf. Owens, 2012), I argue, can be seen in a new light if approached from the perspective discussed in this essay. The temporal configuration of process-framing plays a key role in these analyses of the "life process

of society," the modes of governing behavior, and the transformation of work and its products into a process of endless consumption.

In *Imperialism*, Arendt (1973: 336) discusses the economization of politics as a result of the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie and the emergence of consumption as the only yardstick of judgment. The pursuit of endless growth demanded stable, limited forms of landed *property* to be transformed into social *wealth,* which effectively means the "never-ending process of getting wealthier" (Arendt, 1973: 145). The natural fertility of life, understood in modern biology as a process without a *telos* or *péras* (Arendt, 2006a: 57, 1998: 105, 116, 232; Swift, 2013: 361; Heidegger, 1995: 265), was adopted as a model for the endless growth of the economy. The processes of wealth and consumption became liberated from the finitude of household existence, leading to an unforeseen growth in fertility and production. "In planning for an automatic continuous growth of wealth beyond all personal needs and possibilities of consumption," individual property and private interests lose their natural limitations and borrow from public affairs "that infinite length of time which is needed for continuous accumulation" (Arendt, 1973: 145). In the modern world, the functionalized public sphere and publicized private realm "constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself" (Arendt, 1998: 33).

"The social" as a form of rule is essentially tied to the modern nation-state, conceived as a large household whose function is to administer the growth and development of the societal life process. In James Barry's (2007: 107–108) conceptualization, the nation-state adopts a mode of "metabolic sovereignty," where a functional, formless and fluid-like dynamic replaces the monarchic principle of structural form. Since the nineteenth century, government has been conceived as the "protector not so much of freedom as of the life process, the interests of society and its individuals," which follows its inherent necessities (Arendt, 2006a: 150). The task of the newly emergent state bureaucracy and policies focused on the population as a biological entity was to steer individuals with the intention of permitting "an undisturbed development of the life process of society as a whole" (Arendt, 2006a: 150; 1998: 43–47; see also Owens, 2015: 4–5).

The intertwined considerations regarding economic growth, population developments, labor and consumption required the establishment of broader administrative machinery than ever seen before. This implied increasing demand for techniques — provided by the social/behavioral sciences — for 'managing' human affairs and prescribing "conditions to human behavior, as modern physics prescribes conditions to natural processes" (Arendt, 2006a: 59). The guiding ideal of this new societal formation thus became statistical uniformity. The ideal of a manageable, regulated, somewhat predictable process obviously led to a variety of policies whose aim was to act against

possible interferences to such a process, i.e., disturbances to the smooth functioning of society. Among these were remnants of traditionality still influencing the behavior especially of the "backward" classes, but conquerable with the aid of the new administrative sciences (Arendt, 1998: 42–44). It became necessary to regulate and "normalize" behavioral patterns of the population, to see behavior as a process from which statistical deviations are to be eliminated. Politics became a function in helping the societal process evolve. Political order started to occupy a secondary place *within* the social order. Furthermore, state bureaucrats and even seemingly radical political groups — women's or workers' rights movements or racial justice activists — habitually, as Zerilli (2005: 4–7) has argued, frame their causes as productive for the ever-smoother functioning of the socioeconomic processes.

It might be argued that Arendt's description of the "social" forms of rule is better suited for describing the modes of administration of her own time than ours. Have we not given up the behaviorist ideal of predictably controlling human action? Contemporary approaches to "nudging" behavior — drawing from complexity economics and psychology — reject mechanistic interventions and former assumptions of (rational) subjects. Rather than making the process-frame obsolete, however, these changes in behavioral techniques actually accentuate the relevance of process-analytics. The focus has changed to modifying processes that already exist — the networks of relations and

"choice environments" — so that they produce (statistically often enough) the right kind of actions from the perspective of the wider societal processes (e.g., Cooke and Muir, 2012; Chandler, 2013). The Institute for Government, a U.K. think tank promoting "government effectiveness," for instance, suggests that focusing on processes that define "automatic or context-based drivers of behaviour" provides low-cost techniques for producing desired results (IfG, 2010)[vi]. If anything, process-framing is even more prevalent in contemporary behavioral sciences and market approaches than it was in Arendt's time.

Before moving on, another pertinent phenomenon is worth noting: the processualization of work and its products. The economic trend leading to a constantly accelerating process of consumption have taken their toll on work, which has morphed into what Markell (2011: 30) calls the "processual whirlpool of labor." Still in the early stages of industrial capitalism, the products of work enjoyed relative permanence in the world of appearances. The process of fabrication was seen as a means to an end product. The world of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is characterized rather by the permeation of fabrication with processes. Thanks to technical and social developments, production has become an endless process, whose acceleration

"can be assured only if its products lose their use character and become more and more objects of consumption, or if […] the rate of use is so tremendously accelerated that the objective difference between use and consumption, between the relative durability of use objects and the swift coming and going of consumer goods, dwindles to insignificance" (Arendt, 1998: 125).

Automation and consumerism are the twin culprits of this development. In *The Human Condition,* Arendt (1998: 149–151) ponders "whether machines still serve the world and its things" or if, she seems to suggest, "they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy world and things." Mechanization has "forced us into an infinitely quicker rhythm of repetition than the cycle of natural processes," leading to an imperative to consume all material things as quickly as possible (Arendt, 1998: 125–126). All products are now objects that "we no longer use but abuse, misuse, and throw away" (Arendt, 2003b: 262, 2003a: 349, 524–525). This attitude is harmful not only for work, but even to the activity of labor in its traditional sense[vii].

Process-frame and its discontents: world, freedom, meaning

This section expands upon the reasons that led Arendt to adopt a highly critical attitude towards process-framing. I believe the chief reason for her skepticism was that the kinds of processes described above undermine the conditions for exercising political freedom. This undermining comes in two main forms, which can be called the two malaises of process-framing. The first such malaise is the *dislocation of meaning from individual events to the overarching and endless process of history*. It was decisive, Arendt (1998: 307) argues, that "man began to consider himself part and parcel of the two superhuman, all-encompassing processes of nature and history, both of which seemed doomed to an infinite progress without ever reaching any inherent telos or approaching any preordained idea." The trouble is that, in Zerilli's (2005: 126) words, "the very idea of historical process, which alone gives meaning to whatever it happens to carry along, carries the risk of becoming denial of freedom." Freedom for Arendt relates to the capacity for a new beginning and of starting a new series, which is a priori disqualified by the idea of an all-encompassing process.

Furthermore, this dislocation of meaning eventually leads to its total loss. The experience of totalitarianism demonstrated that not only can speculative thinkers generate a plethora of different interpretations of the meaning of the historical process

but also that practically any hypothesis can be made "objectively" true if acted upon consistently. Likewise, the development of atomic sciences showed that the study of natural processes — viz. their creation in experiments — involves "subjective" choices by the researcher. Several natural laws can be applied to same phenomenon, hence losing the "solid objectivity of the given [...] rendering meaningless the one over-all process which originally was conceived in order to give meaning to [individual processes]" (Arendt, 2006a: 48–49, 87–89).

The second malaise is even more serious, threatening the very worldliness of human beings. The world, for Arendt (1998: 52), has a twofold character consisting of a tangible aspect of durable structures, buildings, usable objects, works of art, and other concrete creations of *homo faber* — the human being as a maker of things — and an intangible web of relationships brought into existence by human action. It is the combination of these two aspects that makes the world a meaningful home for human beings, capable of surviving beyond the lifespan of the individual and hence providing relative stability for their otherwise fleeting existence. The world, Arendt (1998: 137) says, "stands against" the needs and wants of its makers. Its commonness (*koinón*) transcends the subjective existence of human beings, opening up a space where and towards which a plurality of perspectives may arise. Without the world as a tangible and objective (in the sense of both *Gegenständigkeit* and *Objektivität*) space between human

beings, there would not be any unique *dokei moi* — comprehension of the world "as it opens itself to me" — nor plurality (see e.g., Arendt, 2007: 14).

The dominant position of the process-frame over the modern imagination has a 'fateful enormity' to it because it endangers both aspects of worldliness. Invisible processes have "engulfed every tangible thing, every individual entity that is visible to us, degrading them into functions of an over-all process" (Arendt, 2006a: 63)[viii]. The increasing porosity of the natural/social science division further accentuates this development, depriving the stability of the human artifice of protection from natural processes and transforming its tangibility into a bundle of inherently unpredictable processes that we merely try to steer in certain directions (Arendt, 1998: 126, 148–149, 296–301, 307, 2006a: 60). It is then nothing more and nothing less than the appearing world itself that is under the threat of being overrun by processes.

The *thingly* character of the world is being threatened by the transmutation of the products of work into consumer goods. This is no minor worry in itself, for work not only builds tools and use-objects but indeed the whole durable and appearing human artifice. Should we become *nothing* but members of a society of consumers, we would no longer know how to take care of the things of the appearing world because the attitude of consumption "spells ruin to everything it touches" (Arendt, 2006a: 211).

Forced into a process where the only permanence is to be found from the movement of the process itself, the world "becomes inhuman, inhospitable to human needs" and thus unable to foster a civilization (Arendt, 1968: 11, 1972: 79). In such a society, "we would no longer live in a world at all but simply be driven by a process in whose ever-recurring cycles things appear and disappear, manifest themselves and vanish, never to last long enough to surround the life process in their midst" (Arendt, 1998: 134; see also 2003a: 487)[ix]. Politics itself needs the world of things, not only for stability's sake but, as Markell (2011: 36) has argued, because it opens up the appearing reality that becomes the object of politics. Artifacts as meaningful appearances provide a given ground for "provocation and response" from which action arises.

This background of givens is required for political action to make new beginnings. No one can begin *ab ovo* because all action is already in some relationship to the world — both intangible and tangible — that was given on the moment of action (Arendt, 1972: 78–79)[x]. Reduced to a constant movement of a process, the world ceases to provoke meaningful political acts. The dominance of the process-frame undermines the world as a space of appearances by substituting events, deeds and things that can be seen and heard for invisible processes taking place behind the backs of actors, regardless of their willful intentions. As such, this daunting image of the overarching process character of society seems hopeless, robbing events of their independent meaning, turning action

into administered behavior, and subjecting political institutions to the semi-automatic processes of wealth generation.

However, Arendt was no prophet of doom — such a stance would actually imply the selfsame historical process-thinking she criticized. "Even when political life has become petrified and political action impotent to interrupt automatic processes," she writes, "the source of freedom remains present" (Arendt, 2006a: 169). The question thus becomes the following: how is political freedom to be reclaimed? How do we break free from the forceful grasp of the process-imaginary?

Natality as resistance to processes?

For many contemporary theorists, the question of opposing dangerous tendencies in politics translates into a question about the political subject. Accordingly, for many readers of Arendt, the way out of the malaises of contemporary politics is opened by political subjectivity corresponding to the concept of natality. Building on the biopolitical perspective discussed above, Vatter (2006: 145) argues that "biological life must be capable of becoming the subject […] of resistance to domination," and this becoming-the-subject-of-resistance is to be found from Arendt's reflections on natality (C.f. Esposito 2006: 177). For Braun, Arendt "outlines an alternative, non-biopolitical

understanding of politics, life and temporality captured by the concept of natality" that makes possible the "second birth" in action, opening the time of the interval (*bios*) between the subject's birth and death. This temporality of the interval, she argues, is diametrically opposed to the processes of totalitarianism and "the social" (Braun 2007: 18).

Indeed, it is central to Arendt's argument that the "articulation of natality" redeems human beings from the ever-recurring cycle of becoming (Arendt, 1998: 246) and that "historical processes are [...] constantly interrupted by human initiative, by the *initium* man is insofar as he is an acting being" (Arendt, 2006a: 170). However, it would be too easy to set action and natality against the process character of everything she criticizes in modern society. Matters are more complex than that. In this section, I argue, first, that this view altogether ignores some of the crucial aspects of action — namely its process character — and, second, that we should look beyond the question of political subjectivity, avoiding a position that, in Zerilli's (2005: 12) words, "makes agency the condition of any political existence whatsoever."

Regarding the first point, action does not only contain within itself subcategories that evoke the process-imaginary, such as the "processes of persuasion, negation, and compromise" (Arendt, 2006b: 86–87). In fact, Arendt (2006a: 85) holds, rather

unexpectedly, that the "very notion of process, which is so highly characteristic of modern science, both natural and historical, probably had its origin in this fundamental experience of action." Furthermore, "wherever man acts he starts processes" (Arendt, 2006a: 62). In the modern world, the human capacity for action, she says — rather surprisingly given the standard reading of her work — "has begun to dominate all others." *Without* the dominative role of our capacity for action, we could not have become so engulfed in processes. However, it is not the capacity for political action that we are dealing with here but our ability, through scientific procedures and modern technology, to let loose new natural processes. These processes, channeled into the human world, "may very well destroy the world *qua* world as human artifice" (Arendt, 1998: 152).

Perhaps these considerations are only valid for acting into nature, i.e., the application of the human capacity of action in a context where, properly speaking, it does not belong. This might seem like a reasonable conclusion given Arendt's description of political action as the "field of experience" of freedom and its further characterization as a "miracle" that interrupts processes. However, this kind of reading is based on a simplistic understanding of natality and omits parts of what Arendt says about action and the world as a web of human relationships in *The Human Condition*, remarks that are in line with her work as a whole as well: "the strength of the action process is never

exhausted in a single deed but, on the contrary, can grow while its consequences multiply; what endures in the realm of human affairs are these processes" (Arendt, 1998: 233).

Action takes place in a web of relationships where everyone else is also capable of their own actions. Hence, "every reaction becomes a chain reaction and […] every process is the cause of new processes" (Arendt, 1998: 190). Process-character is as defining of political action as it is of acting into nature. The unpredictability, irreversibility, and contingency of the action processes have indeed been the cause of human frustration with action throughout "recorded history." Action, it can be claimed, "seems to fall victim to the very automatism from which it promised relief" (Schell 2002: 467).

This gives us grounds to argue that Braun (2007: 5) might present the matter too straightforwardly by arguing that Arendt presents a model for a non-processual form of political temporality. As Markell (2015: 15–16) argues in a recent article, action is not the heroic opposite of processes. Arendt (1998: 233) even says that the "burden of action" seems unbearable because it starts processes that are unpredictable and irreversible, imprisoning the actor to the consequences she or he cannot control.

Arendt (1998: 226–237) proposes two practices — harbored within action itself — that can potentially save human beings from this predicament. The counter-force to the irreversibility of the processes of action is forgiveness; to their unpredictability, it is the faculty of making and keeping promises. Forgiveness, especially, is often seen as the faculty that interrupts the automatic chain of consequences set off by action (e.g., Braun 2007: 19). However, as Passerin d'Entrèves (1994: 58) notes, merely referring to this capacity does not quite solve the puzzle. We still need to be more explicit about the role of processes in action on the one hand and the negative assessment of modern society on the other.

For Passerin d'Entrèves (1994: 6-7, 56–58), the fact that processes are prominent in both action and Arendt's criticism of modern society points to "an ambivalence which affected her assessment of modernity as well as her understanding of the relation between freedom and necessity." I am not convinced, however, that the concept of process demands *an* attitude. In Arendt's work, there is no ontology of process as an abstract category, only analyses of processes. We need to be more specific, then, and look at the nature of different process-imaginaries at play in the human world. As Jacques Rancière (2011: 5) argues in a different context, "there is no point in opposing exception to process. The debate is about the conception of the process." We need to

ask, more specifically, *how exactly is the process-character of action different from the process-frame discussed in the previous sections*?

To make the necessary distinctions, I will start with the following tentative formulation: the process-frame at play in social life and history invokes ongoing, evolving overall processes that can only be disturbed, perhaps disrupted, but not *inter*rupted. Political action both *starts and interrupts* processes. In making sense of political realities and concrete happenings of the world, it is often the interruptions that matter. The initiative inherent in action can be conceived as a rupture in the temporal register of the existing order to an extent that "[f]or a moment, the moment of beginning, it is as though the beginner had abolished the sequence of temporality itself, or as though the actors were thrown out of the temporal order and its continuity" (Arendt, 2006b: 198). Political action is "miracle-like" because it is in its nature to interrupt a series of events, "some automatic process, in whose context they constitute the wholly unexpected" (Arendt, 2006a: 168). Nonetheless, this break or interruption would be totally inconsequential if it did not begin some processes of its own.

The process-character of action is not merely a negative side effect of freedom. Political action, where human beings are conceived as authors of demonstrable events in the world, needs to start processes to fulfill the world-building and world-opening character

allotted to it[xi]. If action was nothing but a fleeting moment of disruption, it would hardly be able to even strive for anything like the foundation of freedom in lasting institutions. It is crucial that action involves not only surprising beginnings but also "completing, continuing, carrying through" (Markell, 2013: 126). If the first *inter* relates to the temporal break, there is also a second sense in which action is *inter*: it relates to the space of in-between that separates and brings human beings together. An "account of *political* freedom involves more than spontaneity; it must keep sight of freedom as practices of world-building (such as founding, promising, and judging)" (Zerilli, 2005: 27). What is more, the capacity of forgiveness, presented as the solution to the irreversibility of action, is itself dependent on the capability of building and keeping a world as a human in-between in existence. Without the world, there would be only "the law of the desert" – we would still be capable of releasing "devastating processes" with an inherent lack of moderation but without the capacity to make them stop or reverse them (Arendt, 2007: 190).

From this perspective, it is not useful to present action and process in a dichotomous fashion in which one corresponds to freedom and the other to necessity. It is exactly this kind of polarization that makes freedom incomprehensible by isolating it from all forms of processes. What we should emphasize, however, is that there is a tendency in all processes towards becoming *automatic*, and "it is in the nature of the automatic

processes to which man is subject […] that they can only spell ruin to human life"
(Arendt, 2006a: 168). Indeed, whenever Arendt describes instances of process-framing
she deems particularly dangerous, three features are usually invoked: (a) we are seeing a
"one consistent process" that (b) subsumes particulars within it, and (c) progresses
inevitably and in a "self-propelled" or "permanently self-perpetuating" fashion, usually
behind the backs of the actors. The tendency of processes to be subsumed to automatism
appears greatest when we subtract ourselves from concrete situations and the concrete
deeds that still constitute the web of human relationships and begin to think of society
as an overarching, singular, and super-individual process driven by its own immanent,
even auto-poietic, logic.

A particularly modern danger emerges for *spectators* based on our tendency of seeing
and situating — i.e., framing — all political acts as parts of anonymous, invisible and
all-embracing processes. While the "source of freedom," as we saw, remains present
and capable of producing novel political acts, the dominance of the process-frame
hampers our capacity as spectators to recognize and acknowledge them as
independently meaningful. This tendency immediately reflects back on our active
political life, interfering with our ability to creatively respond to worldly events, hence
interfering with the opening up and preservation of the political spaces of freedom.
When society is seen as an all-encompassing process that is integrally tied to the

administration of biological life, the space for individual distinction and changing and re-building the world vanishes. As soon as deeds appear, they are subsumed to preceding processes and are hence denied as *inter*ruptive processes of freedom. In this way, the modes of acting, perceiving, responding, and preserving are closely intertwined and related to freedom.

In an attempt to both perceive and preserve political freedom, it is important to pay close attention to the *collective* and *institutional* aspects of politics, to which Arendt's focus changed especially in the works following *The Human Condition,* such as *On Revolution* and *Crises of the Republic*. My wager is that any approach that builds mainly on the subject's capacity for surprising acts — for resistance to or the rupturing of processes, as was mentioned in the beginning of the section — is insufficient. Instead, we should devote our energies to finding and appreciating practices of world-building that open the channels for the exercise of freedom anew.

When discussing action's capacity for new beginnings (i.e., natality), it is important to bear in mind that such a beginning is inevitably a new *process*, not merely a disruption. In a distinction from the freedom-threatening process-framing, the processes of action — changing, creating, or augmenting political institutions that facilitate political spaces — invite reflective responses, stemming the ever-present danger of automatism.

The processes set off by action are perhaps better described as a series of re-actions unfolding *before* the eyes of the actors, as opposed to hidden, ineluctable processes taking place *behind* the backs of those who act. Furthermore, while inescapably contingent and uncontrollable by a single agent, they can still contribute to the construction of a world which endures in time, standing against the flowing processes washing over it. By integrating the practices of promising, institution creation, or forgiveness into the web of actions, human beings are capable of meaningfully picking up and continuing the deeds of others, coordinating and arresting the quasi-automatic processes they release. Thus, it seems that we can only take shelter from the automatic, all-embracing processes that threaten us by participating in the processes of building a relatively stable world of things and institutions that provides security and meaning to the individuals it outlives.

Another reason for being wary of over-emphasizing the disruptive elements of action relates to the new modes of governance mentioned in section two. Contingency and unpredictability are accepted as part of the human condition and are treated as risks, possibilities and probabilities *within* the processes (e.g., Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008). Government programs throughout Europe and the U.S. aim to build 'resilience' against surprising events so that the societal life process can continue to grow and prosper despite the potentially disruptive effects of such events. The unexpected,

unpredictable, and contingent is, indeed, *expected* (and hence contained[xii]). In such circumstances, paying attention to the "endurance" aspects in beginning anew seems more reasonable than placing most of the emphasis on the prospects of achieving worldly change through disruptions. If action is supposed to *change* the world, instead of merely disturbing and "contesting" the processes already underway, it needs to engage in the attempt of creating worldly arrangements — first and foremost, institutions — that provide spaces for the exercise of action and freedom.

The plurality at play in political action and the practices of world-building also complicates its presentation as a capacity of a subject. For Arendt (1979: 310) "[r]eal political action comes out as a group act. And you join that group or you don't. And whatever you do on your own you are really not an actor." It is not merely a question of collectivity versus individualism, however, but that of overcoming the question of the subject altogether in favor of worldly arrangements that stand above and between subjects. What Arendt notes about the economic process of expropriation in the interview 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution' is representative of her thinking about the dangers of process-framing in general. "All our experiences," she says, "tell us 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" (Arendt, 1972: 212). Institutions, in this sense, stem from the revolutionary

tradition and its creation of public spaces, in-betweens where the issues of the common world can be addressed and "public happiness" experienced. Temporally speaking, institutions exist beyond the simplistic dichotomy between disruption and a process: without an effort towards institutionalization, the novelty inherent in political, especially revolutionary, action would not take root in the human world.

Conclusion

> "Things of this world are in so constant a flux that nothing remains long in the same state" (Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, no. 157)
>
> "Old men in the bad old days used to renounce, retire, take to religion, spend their time reading,   thinking – *thinking!* […] Now – such is progress – the old men work, the old men copulate, the old men have no time, no leisure from pleasure, not a moment to sit down and think."
> (Huxley, *Brave New World,* 47).

In Arendt's analysis, modern society is conceived — via what I called process-framing — as an auto-poietic, self-organizing, all-encompassing process whose administrators embody the virtues of businessmen. After losing certainty in the life in the hereafter, citizens of modern societies tend to, in Nietzsche's (1996: 23) words, focus on their own

lifespan and receive "no stronger impulse to work at the construction of enduring institutions intended to last for centuries." Part and parcel with this development is that work has lost its serial, step-by-step character and has been turned into one flowing process, further depriving the human world of its "objective" character. In today's "neoliberal" global capitalism, we see the latest manifestation of this thinking. The logic of markets — combined with abstract discourse on freedom — is assumed to be the key for the further development of societal quasi-automatic processes. The demands of constant adaptation to such acceleration shrink the time-frame for thinking or judging the world politically into non-existence, hence contributing to the trajectory already underway[xiii]. Technology is an exemplary field on this score, driven no longer by the modern ideas of progress or development but rather by the need for constant 'innovation,' which naturally takes place within the process, not towards or beyond it. The only permanence is to be found from the process itself, "whose constant gain in speed is the only constancy left wherever it has taken hold." In modern world, not destruction but conservation spells ruin (Arendt, 1998: 253, 69)[xiv]. The acceleration of the process negates the possibility of any meaningful change in the worldly arrangements.

To counterbalance such tendencies, I argued, it is not fruitful to present action as a polar opposite of processes. Rather, we should acknowledge that action itself is innately tied

to processes, yet the processes initiated by action are different from the process-frame critically analyzed by Arendt. What creates endurance in the human world are the things produced by work, one the one hand, and the *processes* initiated by action, on the other. These processes of provocation, response, and world-building are potentially reflective and responsive to the extent that they manage to bypass the threat of automatism and functionalism inherent in all processes. Rather than conceptualizing action as a momentary disruption, then, it would be worthwhile to accentuate modes of perceiving and preserving freedom in the practices of world-building, in "building, preserving, and caring for a world that can survive us and remain a place fit to live in for those who come after us" and where freedom "can come out of hiding, as it were, and make its appearance" (Arendt, 2006a: 95, 169).

This brings us to yet another type of process: the unending and by itself resultless process — the "wind" — of thought that, given its nature as a stop-and-think, interrupts all worldly activity entirely (Arendt, 1978: 174–175). To counteract the hold of the process-frame, the activities of the political actor *qua* actor are not enough. It is equally important that our modes of presentation, framing, and perceiving particular acts are rightly attuned, and this can only be achieved if we — and not only Huxley's old men — take a moment to sit and think. Only in this way does it become possible to question the processes in which we have become engulfed, the vocabulary that frames our

apprehension, as well as to recognize the acts of interruption and world-building as particular, meaningful, and free.

Notes

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i The concept of framing, as I use it here, has several influences without following any of them directly. I should mention at least Heidegger (1977), Goffman (1986) and Butler (2009).

ii This tendency can be perceived, for example, in the European reactions to the Arab uprisings (see Hyvönen 2014).

iii In this sense, Arendt's reflections on the dangers of process-framing relate to recent discussions on the temporality of politics and society, especially the so-called process ontologies (e.g., Hutchings, 2008; Shapiro and Bedi, 2007). Some scholars, following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (2003: 239–240), opt for 'accelerationism': "But which is the revolutionary path? […] Not to withdraw from the process [of deterritorializing capitalism], but to go further, to 'accelerate the process.'" Others have sought to redirect attention to new modes of subjectivity (e.g., Braidotti, 2006: 176), the various "vital materialities that flow through and around us," (Bennett, 2010: x), the self-organizing processes in a "world of becoming" in which various human and non-human force fields interact in unpredictable ways (Connolly, 2011: 22).

iv As biopolitics has become one of the dominant frames through which politics is critically examined, commentators have not failed to notice the compatibility of certain Arendtian themes with this framework of analysis (Agamben, 1998: 4; Duarte, 2005;

Esposito, 2006: 11, 176–181; Hoffman, 2011; Vatter, 2006). Indeed, there are parallels between Arendt and Foucault's analyses of administering life, especially the biological processes of the population, through "adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic process" with the aim of securing "the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life" (Foucault, 1990: 136–141).

[v] Braun's discussion of Arendt's process-thinking relies heavily, but not exclusively, on the link between liberal-capitalist process-thinking and its totalitarian extreme.

[vi] Hayek was one of the forerunners of this kind of thinking. In a 1945 essay, he wrote, "It is a profoundly erroneous truism […] that we should cultivate the habit of thinking what we are doing. The precise opposite is the case. Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them" (Hayek, 1945: 528).

[vii] On the potentially positive aspects of labor in Arendt, see Markell, 2015: 15.

[viii] Tellingly, Arendt (2003a, 562) discusses these aspects of process-framing in an entry titled "Process and World."

[ix] Cf. Heidegger's (1991: 87) claim that the "circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption is the sole procedure which distinctively characterizes the history of a world which has become an unworld."

[x] *Pace* Schell (2002: 465), action is *never* a "kind of creation *ex nihilo*."

[xi] This bears some resemblance to Badiou's (2005) conception of Event as something that actualizes as worldly condition via processes of fidelity of subjects.

[xii] Here, I follow Hoffman's (2011) discussion of the "containment of unpredictable events" in Arendt and Foucault.

[xiii] Cf. Rosa, 2013: 15, 108–109, 117, 283.

[xiv] On acceleration of processes, see also Arendt, 2012: 76–77.

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