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A Case of Communicative Learning?:
Arendt's Overlooked Importance for Habermas's Philosophical Project

ABSTRACT Jürgen Habermas has sought to set critical theory on firm normative foundations by drawing on thinkers outside the canon of Western Marxism. My basic thesis is that Hannah Arendt is a crucial but underappreciated resource for his intellectual development. To make this point I focus on Arendt's importance for Habermas's work on the public sphere in the 1960s and the social theory he developed in the 1970s and 80s, despite his reluctance to cite her writings in his early career. More generally, I argue that reading Habermas critical theory through Arendt's political thought helps to clarify the importance of politics within his work, thus countering accusations that he is an abstract thinker of "high liberalism" uninterested in "real politics." A greater appreciation of Arendt's work as a condition of possibility for Habermas's philosophy demonstrates the importance of reading their work together as part of a common project, despite their disagreements.

KEYWORDS Hannah Arendt, Discourse Theory, Jürgen Habermas, Intellectual History, Critical Theory

Introduction

As the leader of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas has sought to rescue critical theory from “the pessimistic cul de sac” in which Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno found themselves after the publication of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944).¹ One of his strategies has been to look for resources beyond the canon of Western Marxism. This search has led him to engage with many currents of twentieth century thought, including the systems theory of Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann, the pragmatism of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, the linguistic philosophy of J.L. Austin as well as the analytic political theory of John Rawls. The resulting “intermingling of heterogeneous references” has helped Habermas produce an innovative philosophical synthesis.²

My basic thesis is that this standard narrative underestimates the importance of a key resource for Habermas’s intellectual development: that of Hannah Arendt. This oversight is visible in the fact that most summaries of Habermas’s philosophy overlook the crucial role Arendt played in clearing the ground for his discourse theory. For example, Hugh Baxter’s monograph, which focuses on Habermas’s theory of law, does not mention her at all. Similarly, Arendt does not appear in Matthew Specter’s intellectual biography. Even Martin Matušík’s examination of Habermas’s intellectual formation mentions Arendt only in connection with the trial of Adolf Eichmann.³

¹ Craig J. Calhoun, *Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 5.

² Razmig Keucheyan, *Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2013), 62.

³ Hugh Baxter, *Habermas: The Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Matthew G. Specter, *Habermas: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Martin Joseph Matušík,

This is not to say that Arendt's importance for Habermas's philosophical project has been completely ignored. However, it has been scholars of Arendt who have most frequently engaged this connection. However, by setting Arendt and Habermas on opposite sides of the communicative paradigm these accounts emphasize the differences between her agonistic political thought and his more rationalistic critical theory.⁴ One of the few exceptions to this tendency is Seyla Benhabib, who "associates her variant of [critical theory] with Habermas's 'communicative ethics' and Arendt's republicanism."⁵

My approach here diverges from both of these strands. Instead of emphasizing the differences between the two or trying to combine their insights, I argue that Arendt's importance for Habermas's theoretical development has not received the attention it deserves. I stress the similarities – such as the fact that both Arendt and Habermas offer "talk centric" rather than "vote centric" models of democracy – and the possibilities for mutual learning that emerge from reading them as part of a common philosophical project.⁶ In so doing I do not mean to downplay the important differences between them. However, I choose to highlight these overlooked parallels as part of a broader "story of

Jürgen Habermas: A Philosophical-Political Profile (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 21, 39.

⁴ See Margaret Canovan, "A Case of Distorted Communication: A Note on Habermas and Arendt," *Political Theory* 11, no. 1 (February, 1983); Bonnie Honig, "Towards an Agonistic Feminism: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Identity" in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Dana Richard Villa, "Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche and the Aestheticization of Political Action," *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (May, 1992).

⁵ Keucheyan, *Left Hemisphere*, 63. See Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

⁶ James Bohman and William Rehg, "Introduction" in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, eds. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), ix-xxvii; Mary F. Scudder, "Beyond Empathy: Strategies and Ideals of Democratic Deliberation," *Polity* 48, no. 4 (2016), 524-6.

encounters” in twentieth century social and political thought between Freiburg and Frankfurt, i.e. between phenomenology and critical theory.⁷

The kinds of assertions I make regarding intellectual influence are notoriously difficult to support. Corroborating such arguments invariably requires “making a number of assumptions and theoretical claims that are not always clearly articulated but that are nevertheless central to the construction of an explanation or interpretation.” These problems make it necessary to “be highly selective as to period, place, and problem.” To this end, I divide my argument about Arendt’s influence on Habermas into four stages.⁸ In the first period, which examines Habermas’s work in the 1960s, I explore his reticence to cite Arendt’s work despite her clear influence on his early work. In the second, I engage with her importance in helping Habermas to develop his central analytic concept of communicative action in the 1970s and 80s.

While Habermas underplays Arendt’s impact on his thought in the first two periods, her influence is more visible in the third. Since 1990 Habermas has sought to apply his highly systematic social philosophy to political theory. Many commentators have observed that this “political turn” has led him to modify some of his earlier ideas, such as the ideal speech situation and the consensus theory of truth.⁹ I place these

⁷ Fred R. Dallmayr, "Phenomenology and Critical Theory: Adorno," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 3, no. 4 (1976), 368.

⁸ Mark Philp, "Political Theory and History" in *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches*, eds. David Leopold and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 129-30; Knud Haakonssen, "Hugo Grotius and the History of Political Thought," *Political Theory* 13, no. 2 (May, 1985), 239. The first two of these periods closely mirror those provided by Duvenage, who does not discuss Habermas’s post-1990 political turn or his post-2000 engagement with religion in any detail. See Pieter Duvenage, *Habermas and Aesthetics: The Limits of Communicative Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

⁹ See James Gordon Finlayson, *Habermas: A very Short Introduction*, Vol. 125 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

revisions in context by highlighting the role that Habermas's increasing engagement with Arendt plays in this process, as is visible in the large uptick in his citations to her work.

In the final period, which starts just after the turn of the second millennium, Habermas directs his attention to the role of religion in the democratic societies of the modern, industrialized West. This move continues his explicit engagement with Arendt, focusing in particular on two of her key concepts: the human condition of plurality and the potential of natality to enable "new beginnings." This sustained reflection on Arendt leads Habermas to acknowledge the fundamental and irreconcilable differences between individuals within society. This leads him to distance himself from his previous attempts to purge public life and political institutions from explicitly religious influences and other ethical doctrines based on non-universal understandings of the good life.

The implications of my argument are twofold. On the input side, I seek to bring greater attention to Arendt's role as a key intellectual influence on Habermas and as a condition of possibility for his intellectual development. On the output side, the theoretical payoff for scholars of Habermas is to show how reading Habermas through Arendt can help to counteract overly rationalistic and idealistic interpretations of his work. This benefit is most visible the third and fourth stages, where Habermas focuses on the role discourse in the public sphere can play in leading citizens towards "mutual understanding" (*Verständigung*) without the need for agreement or consensus. Although Habermas is often accused of being a thinker of "high liberalism" whose thought cannot be applied to "real politics," examining his engagement with Arendt underscores the

centrality of politics to his philosophical reflections.¹⁰ My basic thesis is that an appreciation of Arendt's significance for Habermas highlights the importance of public affairs within Habermas's broader philosophical project.

In making these claims, I interpret Arendt as a theorist of action through speech, i.e. of the pluralistic, communicatively-mediated space "in-between" individuals.¹¹ I contend that what Habermas takes from Arendt – and then modifies for his own purposes – is a communicative, non-instrumental model of social action that is embedded in a "web of relationships and enacted stories." Focusing on Arendt's impact on Habermas – and on her importance in preparing the ground for his insights – highlights "a bond that casts his own philosophical commitments in a unexpected light."¹²

The argument is organized as follows: I start by outlining how Habermas draws on Arendt in his early work and detail their biographical connections. In the second section I argue that Habermas retained crucial Arendtian insights in developing the idea of communicative action even while his broader philosophical project drifted away from Arendtian themes in the 1970s and 1980s. I then show how Habermas's engagement with her work since 1990 has helped him to develop a political theory that stresses disagreement within the chaotic public sphere of "real" politics. The fourth, penultimate

¹⁰ Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹¹ For more on this reading of Arendt, see Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*; Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves, "Arendt's Theory of Judgment" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Richard Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Margaret Canovan, "Arendt, Rousseau, and Human Plurality in Politics," *The Journal of Politics* 45, no. 2 (1983).

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 181-8; Peter E. Gordon, *Adorno and Existence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 3.

part engages with Arendt's role in Habermas's turn to religion since 2000. The conclusion examines how a concern for concrete historical developments animates the broader theoretical projects of both of these thinkers.

Early Connections Regarding the Public Sphere

Despite the relative lack of attention given to Arendt by scholars of Habermas, he has recently started to acknowledge her impact on his work. For example, in 2011 Habermas observed, "I am indebted to [Arendt's *Human Condition*], especially its model of the Greek public sphere, for essential stimuli for *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*."¹³ This admission is surprising because Habermas rarely cites Arendt in his early writings. Most remarkably, her name only appears three times in Habermas's first book, even though it is redolent with Arendtian themes of open communication, publicity, human plurality and action conceived in terms of "words and deeds."¹⁴

All of the citations to Arendt in *Structural Transformation* (1962) are to *The Human Condition* (1958), where Arendt's develops her conception of politics as "action in concert." This is surprising, given some of the glaring differences between these two works.¹⁵ For instance, although both thinkers engage in historical reflection, Arendt looks to ancient Greece whereas Habermas turns to the bourgeois public spheres of Germany, France and England. Additionally, Arendt seeks to develop her conception of action

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Lure of Technocracy*, trans. Ciaran Cronin, English ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 110.

¹⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 19, 251, 255.

¹⁵ For more on these differences, see Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 200-202; Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 1992) ,73-98; Passerin d'Entrèves, "Arendt's Theory of Judgment," 27-8.

through a historical narrative that emphasizes how the exclusion of individuals from politics leads to the downfall of political orders. By contrast, Habermas highlights the importance of the public sphere as a space of reasons where “the authority of the better argument could assert itself.”¹⁶

However, these differences mask some important similarities. Although Arendt does draw inspiration from the Greek polis, Christian Volk points out that her thought “does not have its normative origin in Athens, but rather in the downfall of a European order based on the nation-state, the collapse of the Weimar Republic, and the rise of National Socialism.”¹⁷ It is the experience of totalitarianism that induces her to go back to the ancients in search of a different model of politics. This is made clear not only in *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), but also in the prologue and final sections of *The Human Condition*, where she argues that the development of the twentieth century require a return to an “active” form of life (*vita activa*) that places the “web of human relationships” at the center of the human experience or “condition.” These are the same concerns that drive Habermas’s project and his fear of a “political relapse” to National Socialism.¹⁸

In addition to their search for a solution to the pathologies of Europe’s experience of total war (1914-45), transforming informal communicative practice into formal decision-making is a central issue for both Arendt and Habermas. This concern explains

¹⁶ Christian Volk, *Arendtian Constitutionalism: Law, Politics and the Order of Freedom* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2017), 179-80; Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 36, 102-4.

¹⁷ Volk, *Arendtian Constitutionalism*, 172.

¹⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “Public Space and Political Public Sphere: The Biographical Roots of Two Motifs in My Thought” in *Between Naturalism and Religion* (London: , 2008), 17.

Habermas attempts to theorize how “critical publicity” (*kritische Öffentlichkeit*) can become a “constitutionally instituted norm” in the second half of *Structural Transformation*.¹⁹ Additionally, although Arendt is not usually thought of as an institutional thinker, she also recognizes the importance of communal political structures as a prerequisite for action. In *The Human Condition* she therefore argues, “Before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place.”²⁰ In this sense, they both realize that their shared communicative political paradigm will have to be linked to legitimate law created within formal institutional spaces.

The similarities between Arendt’s thought and *Structural Transformation* takes on new importance in light of her book *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (completed 1933, published 1958). This monograph, which served as Arendt’s *Habilitationschrift*, presents a quasi-biographical account of the hostess of one of the most prominent nineteenth century salons in Berlin. This is important for my comparison because Varnhagen’s salon is an excellent example of precisely the kinds of spaces Habermas focuses on in his historical description of the public sphere in *Structural Transformation* (which, interestingly enough, was also his *Habilitationschrift*).

It is true that Arendt’s *Varnhagen* did not make a big splash after its much-delayed publication in 1958. There is no evidence to show that Habermas read or was aware of this book when he was composing his work on the public sphere. However, this fact only serves to make this comparison more interesting, given the similarity of their

¹⁹ Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 237.

²⁰ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 194-5.

basic normative claims. Building on the example of Varnhagen's salon, Arendt argues that "for a brief time everyone who counted in society had turned their backs on the social rigors and conventions, had taken flight from them."²¹ This formulation bears a striking resemblance to Habermas's contention that these salons gave birth to "concept of the humanity that was supposed to inhere in humankind as such and truly to constitute its absoluteness" beyond the traditional boundaries of class, profession or religion.²²

The parallels between the arguments of Rahel Varnhagen and Structural Transformation go even deeper. Both thinkers also note how quickly the bourgeois public sphere passed away as the boundaries between the public and private realms that made it possible disappeared. In making this point, Habermas diagnoses a "structural transformation" whereby state institutions inserted themselves into "this intermediate sphere," replacing reasoned critical publicity (*kritische Öffentlichkeit*) with the "manipulative publicity" of modern public opinion (*opinion publique*). Similarly, Arendt observes that the "dreamed idyll of a mixed society" – which "was the product of a chance constellation" – "ceased to exist when the public world...became so overwhelming that it could no longer be translated into private terms."²³

It is perfectly possible that Arendt and Habermas developed their eerily similar reflections on the bourgeois public sphere separately.²⁴ However, even if this is true, it does not explain why Habermas papers over his indebtedness to Arendt in the 1960s.

²¹ Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 57.

²² Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 47.

²³ *Ibid.*, 176, 178; Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 57, 122.

²⁴ *Structural Transformation* was also influenced by a number of other thinkers, including Reinhart Koselleck and Carl Schmitt. See Michael Hofmann, *Habermas's Public Sphere: A Critique* (Lanham: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017).

Reading the original text of *Structural Transformation*, with its three brief references to *The Human Condition*, certainly does not make it clear that Arendt was one of the “essential stimuli” for the book, as Habermas admitted in 2011.

It is possible to identify a number of plausible and perfectly legitimate explanations for Habermas’s downplaying of Arendt at the time. The first focuses on her connection to Martin Heidegger. Habermas was infatuated with Heidegger’s thought as a young philosopher. However, he publicly rejected the philosopher he calls “the Great Influence” after Heidegger reprinted the *Introduction to Metaphysics* – originally delivered in 1935 – without removing a favorable reference to the “inner truth and greatness” of National Socialism.²⁵ Habermas’s critique of Heidegger focuses on the latter’s existential phenomenology. In particular, he argues that Heidegger’s approach results in a subjectivist contempt for communication and intersubjectivity.

Although Arendt’s emphasis on human plurality expressed through “words and deeds” makes it difficult to level this same accusation at her, she does draw on her teacher’s phenomenological method, which focuses on “recovering experiences and meanings that a layer of obfuscation had plunged into obscurity.”²⁶ Habermas has always expressed some reticence regarding phenomenology, largely due to what he sees as its ungrounded normative foundations. Like Theodor Adorno, he is wary of its “jargon of authenticity,” especially in light of the mass mobilizations within the Third Reich. It is

²⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 53-60; Jürgen Habermas, “Mit Heidegger gegen Heidegger denken. Zur Veröffentlichung von Vorlesungen aus dem Jahre 1935,” *Frankfurter allgemeine Zeitung* (25 Juli, 1953).

²⁶ Dana Richard Villa, “Arendt, Heidegger, and the Tradition,” *Social Research* 74, no. 4 (winter, 2007), 984.

therefore possible that Habermas was wary of citing Arendt too frequently due to her connection to Heidegger and his existential phenomenology.

A second explanation for Habermas's glossing over of Arendt's influence on his thought can be linked to her well-known hostility to Karl Marx, a key theoretical touchstone for the critical theorists at the Institute for Social Research (Institut für Sozialforschung). Habermas was initially only employed at the Institute on a part-time contract, which may have made him wary of attacking Marx too openly. Although he had the support of Adorno, Max Horkheimer was suspicious of "the dialectical Mr. H." – as he referred to Habermas in his personal correspondence – for his political activism and his commitment to the rationalistic ideals of the Enlightenment.²⁷ Additionally, Adorno, on whose support Habermas was wholly reliant, and Arendt were on famously bad personal terms.²⁸ This animosity might very well have made Habermas wary of drawing on Arendt too frequently in the Habilitation he was planning on submitting to Adorno and Horkheimer.

The idea that these interpersonal difficulties might be the source of Habermas's reluctance to fully acknowledge Arendt's importance in his early work gain greater credence as a result of Habermas's account of his first meeting with Arendt. The two first encountered each other at a reception to welcome Habermas as the new Theodor Heuss Visiting Professor in Philosophy at the New School for Social Research in New York in 1967. Looking back upon this meeting, Habermas acknowledges feeling nervous and

²⁷ Horkheimer quoted in Stefan Müller-Dooch, *Jürgen Habermas: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 113.

²⁸ Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesha, eds., *Understanding Political Modernity: Comparative Perspectives on Adorno and Arendt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

intimidated. These emotions were immediately reinforced when Arendt approached him leading what he describes as “a kind of phalanx” composed of Hans Jonas, Aaron Gurwitsch and their wives. Habermas recalls that Arendt opened their discussion “strikingly head-on [verblüffend frontal]” with the words, “And so you come from this institute in Frankfurt...? [*Und Sie kommen also aus diesem Institut in Frankfurt...?*]”²⁹

This was not the most auspicious start to their relationship. Habermas notes that these words immediately “tore open the abyss [Abgrund]” that had formed two decades earlier between the German émigrés at the New School and his predecessors at the Institute, which had been associated with Columbia University in the early 1940s.³⁰ Despite these tensions, as well as the preexisting animosity between Adorno and Arendt, their rather unfortunate first meeting did not prevent Arendt from arranging and moderating a lecture Habermas held at the Goethe-Institute in New York. In his talk he compared the student protest movement in Berlin to its counterparts in Berkeley and Paris. Although the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* reports that “a very long and lively discussion ensued,” there is no information regarding Arendt’s reaction to Habermas’s lecture.³¹ However, it is clear that their personal interaction was strained by his connection to Adorno and the Institute.

Habermas may also have been reluctant to cite Arendt due to her conservative political views. In a letter to his friend, the publicist Hans Paeschke (dated 9 March 1966) Habermas confirms this concern and his evaluation of Arendt, describing her as “a

²⁹ Jürgen Habermas and Rachel Salamander, “Jeder von den Emigranten konnte nach 1945 nur als Jude zurückkommen!": Jürgen Habermas im Gespräch mit Rachel Salamander," *Münchener Beiträge zur jüdische Geschichte und Kultur* 6, no. 1 (2012), 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-4.

³¹ Müller-Doohm, Jürgen Habermas, 195-6.

frightfully reactionary, and yet even more impressive person [eine schrecklich reaktionäre, aber mindestens ebenso imponierende Person].” Relatedly, given Arendt’s focus on recovering a conception of politics from the Greeks, whose social relations relied on the existence of slavery and the exclusion of women to provide the leisure for an exclusively male citizenry to engage fully in the life of the polis, Habermas has also consistently criticized her elitism. Despite his reservations, however, in another letter to Paeschke, this one dated 21 March 1966, Habermas observes that “Mrs Arendt is a shining and very live counter-example to the sticky prejudice [zähe Vorurteil] that women cannot do philosophy.”³² He notes that she presents “a twofold rebuttal of an academic prejudice that my teacher Erich Rothacker had repeated in his seminar in the early 1950s, according to which ‘Jews and women’ supposedly can only amount to ‘second-rate starlets’ in philosophy.”³³

While the preceding concerns may have increased Habermas’s aversion to citing Arendt, they did not keep him from acknowledging some of the positive aspects of her work. Reflecting on Arendt’s *On Revolution* (1963) in an essay that originally appeared in *Merkur* – a journal edited by Paeschke – Habermas credits Arendt for “having the courage to rehabilitate the council system as the only form of republic that is thinkable today.” In his review of the German translation of this work, which appeared in 1966, Habermas praised Arendt for recognizing that “freedom from repression, the goal of all revolutions since the eighteenth century, will remain a chimera as long as political will-formation is not based on the principle of popular discussion without domination

³² Quoted in *Ibid.*, 195.

³³ Habermas, *The Lure of Technocracy*, 110.

[allgemeiner und herrschaftsfreier Diskussion].”³⁴

In making this claim, Habermas may be reading his own thought into *On Revolution*, which actually focuses more on the importance of local councils as the key sites of democratic life than on the abstract principles of discourse that are supposed to govern therein. Arendt does indeed argue for the importance of discourse in political life, noting, “Opinions are formed in a process of open discussion and public debate, and where no opportunity for the forming of opinions exists, there may be moods...but no opinion.” However, she says nothing about the rules that govern this “opinion-formation,” to use Habermasian language. On the contrary, she rejects the use of formal rules as a criterion of legitimate argumentation, arguing instead that rhetoric and persuasion have a key role to play in politics “seen in terms of performance.”³⁵

Regardless of the actual reasons for Habermas’s reluctance to cite Arendt, by his own admission his early work is more indebted to her than he was willing to admit at the time. Seyla Benhabib makes this point even more emphatically, arguing, “Jürgen Habermas is indebted to Hannah Arendt...through the latter's rediscover of the concept of the public space.” Additionally, she contends, “Habermas's crucial distinction between ‘labor’ and ‘interaction,’ which is at the origin of his concept of ‘communicative action,’ is deeply indebted to Arendt's critique of Karl Marx.”³⁶

Reflecting back on his visit to the New School during his commencement address

³⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophisch-Politische Profile* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 227. Although this essay was reprinted in the German edition of his *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, it did not make it into the English translation.

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 268-9; Dana R. Villa, “Beyond Good and Evil: Arendt, Nietzsche, and the Aestheticization of Political Action,” *Political Theory* 20, no. 2 (1992), 276.

³⁶ Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 199.

to the student body in 1980, Habermas also notes Arendt's importance in helping him to understand "the venerable distinction between poiesis and praxis." More importantly, he observes, "I have learned from H. Arendt how to approach a theory of communicative action."³⁷ This acknowledgment – combined with fact that Arendt's name only appears twice in the whole two-volume text of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) – raises important further questions about Arendt's influence on Habermas's thought between his work on the public sphere in the 1960s and his political turn after 1990.

Sociological Divergence and Communicative Action

Habermas's early work shows some remarkable similarities to Arendt's political theory. However, in the 1970s and 80s his thought moves away from explicitly Arendtian themes and is more obviously influenced by his engagement with Parsons, Luhmann, Dewey, Austin and Mead. This presents something of a conundrum. On the one hand, Habermas retains an Arendtian emphasis on the discursive nature of power in developing the concept of communicative action in this period. On the other, the consensus theory of truth, the ideal speech situation and his commitment to agreement all seemingly run counter to Arendt's acknowledgement of "the irreducible pluralism that characterizes contemporary societies and the agonistic politics that stems from it."³⁸

Given Habermas's shifting interests and his preexisting reluctance to refer to Arendt, it is perhaps not surprising that few of the philosophical manuscripts he produced

³⁷ Jürgen Habermas, "On the German-Jewish Heritage," *Telos* 44 (summer, 1980), 128-9.

³⁸ Javier Burdman, "Knowledge and the Public World: Arendt on Science, Truth, and Politics," *Constellations* Forthcoming (2017), 1.

during this time cite her work. I have already referred to one of the main exceptions, the 1980 commencement address at the New School. Immediately after crediting Arendt for teaching him how to approach the idea of communicative action by stressing the human capacity for “acting in concert” coordinated by “words and deeds,” Habermas notes, “what I cannot see, is that this approach should be in contradiction to a critical theory of society.” Instead of seeing her as opposed to critical theory, Habermas contends that Arendt’s work is “a sharp analytical instrument for saving the Marxist tradition from its own productivist aberrations.”³⁹

Speaking an heir to the Western Marxist tradition, which stresses the Hegelian philosophical foundations of Marx’s early work, Habermas argues, “What Marx called *kritisch-praktische Tätigkeit*, revolutionary praxis in its most general sense, could not be elucidated more strikingly than by H. Arendt,” who “connects the emancipatory freedom that comes from being liberated with the creative freedom that arises out of the spontaneity of founding something new.” Appealing to Arendt’s influence on his early writings, Habermas notes that her focus was on how man’s “creative freedom” could be institutionalized in the public sphere. Although this is an important task, he argues that it overlooks “the descriptive question as to how that space of appearance which forms the horizon of everyday life actually works.”⁴⁰

In order to succeed in making these Arendtian insights compatible with critical theory, Habermas reinterprets her work through Marx’s early philosophical writings,

³⁹ Habermas, “On the German-Jewish Heritage,” 129.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 129, 130.

where he postulates that man's nature is to be a "free conscious producer."⁴¹ There is a certain irony to this move, given Arendt's conclusion that Marx's desire to unify the disparate identities of human beings into a single, economically-defined (and hence "productive") status signals the end of action, the withering away of the public space of appearance, and the death of the political. However, instead of getting caught up in the different spheres Marx and Arendt associate with freedom, Habermas seeks to bring them together into a single normative perspective.

In order to do this, Habermas turns to the concept of "the lifeworld" (*Lebenswelt*) developed by Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schütz. He distinguishes this area of life from the material space of "the system" by building on the work of Parsons and Luhmann. Following Marx, Habermas associates systems with material production governed by the instrumental use of power and money. By contrast, the lifeworld is the more "Arendtian" sphere of culture and unthematized background assumptions, where individuals coordinate action with each other through speech. Despite the interactions between the system and the lifeworld, Habermas argues that they must remain separate for society to preserve the status of individuals as communicative, social beings.⁴²

Habermas ultimately sides with Arendt over Marx, associating social freedom with communicative action in the lifeworld. Like the bourgeois public sphere of Structural Transformation, which served to legitimate governmental authority while remaining in the private realm, Habermas argues that the "communicative action" of the

⁴¹ Marx quoted in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), xxv.

⁴² Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas A. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984/1987), II.113-98.

lifeworld must exercise control over the operations of material systems, setting boundaries on its sphere of operation to prevent the “colonization of the lifeworld” (Kolonialisierung der Lebenswelt) by instrumental concerns.⁴³ This fear of colonization bears a striking resemblance to the argument of the second half of Structural Transformation, with its account of the destruction of the distinction between public and private that made the public sphere possible in the first place, and with Arendt’s analysis of the threat to “acting in concert” posed by “the rise of the social.”

Although Habermas’s critical-theoretic approach differs greatly from Arendt’s phenomenological search for the origins of basic concepts, both of their accounts rely on the separation of different spheres of life associated with different human activities. Thus, “Habermas provides... a reading which stresses her distinction between action and speech, on one hand, and work, labor, and instrumentality, on the other.”⁴⁴ It is hardly accidental that Habermas’s own social theory – developed in part through a reading of Arendt, despite the paucity of citations to her work – reproduces this same bifurcation by divorcing the system from the lifeworld and associating these two areas of life with strategic, instrumental rationality and communicative or substantive reason respectively.

What is most important for my argument is that Habermas uses the distinction between system and lifeworld to bridge the divide between Marx and Arendt. By expanding Arendt’s communicative insights so that they can serve as the normative foundation for his understanding of social interaction, Habermas sets out to save critical theory – and Marxism more generally – from the problems of dialectical materialism.

⁴³ Ibid., II.301-74.

⁴⁴ Villa, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 274.

This analysis also helps to explain why Habermas credits Arendt for providing him with “a first approach to a concept of communicative rationality which is built into speech and action itself.”⁴⁵

While Habermas draws heavily on Arendt, his work also differs from hers in important ways. As the previous quotation makes clear, he often associates the phrase “communicative action” with “communicative rationality.” This connection signals an important – perhaps even his most significant – departure from Arendt. Treating action and rationality almost interchangeably injects a deep-seated faith in the power of “the unforced force of the better argument” (*der zwanglose Zwang des besseren Arguments*). This connection of truth and rationality to politics marks Habermas as an heir to the Frankfurt School. In line with their commitment to Western Marxism, the founders of critical theory held that “Truth is a moment of correct praxis” (Horkheimer) and that “Practice follows truth, and not vice versa” (Marcuse).⁴⁶

In contrast to Habermas’s search for a discursively achieved “consensus theory of truth,” for Arendt the force of the better argument is anything but unforced. On the contrary, Arendt is wary of both “the utopian tyrannies of reason with which the philosophers wished to coerce men” and “tyrannies of ‘truth’...which, of course, politically speaking, are as tyrannical as other forms of despotism.” In contrast to Habermas’s rejection of rhetoric as a form of strategic action that seeks to win arguments through manipulation, Arendt sees persuasion as an essential part of “the passionate drive

⁴⁵ Habermas, “On the German-Jewish Heritage,” 130.

⁴⁶ Horkheimer and Marcuse quoted in Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination; a History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 83, 64.

to show one's self in measuring up against others" that defines the agonal nature of public life.⁴⁷ Although both Habermas's aversion to affect and Arendt's rejection of reason should not be overstated – a careful reading shows that each of them appreciates both reason and affect – their theoretical emphasis is different.

In his consideration of the relationship between their thought, David Luban argues that Habermas has transformed Arendt's idea of "action in concert" into "deliberation in concert."⁴⁸ This move is most clearly stated in Habermas's 1976 essay, "Hannah Arendt: On the Concept of Power," where he credits Arendt for proceeding from a novel model of action whose goal "is not the instrumentalizing of another's will for one's own purposes but the formation of a common will in a communication aimed at agreement." While Habermas immediately distances himself from the "phenomenological method by which Arendt's philosophy of praxis is carried out," he argues that her "intention is clear: She wants to read off the general structures of an unimpaired intersubjectivity in the formal properties of communicative action or praxis."⁴⁹

Once again it seems as though Habermas has taken Arendt's focus on communication and adapted it for his own purposes. In contrast to his model of communicative action, where individuals allow themselves "to be persuaded by the truth of a statement, the rightness of a norm, or the truthfulness of an utterance," Arendt's political theory champions a much looser form of agreement based on "the back-and-

⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 163, 246; Arendt, *Human Condition*, 194.

⁴⁸ David Luban, "On Habermas on Arendt and Power," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 6, no. 1 (April, 1979), 83.

⁴⁹ Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, 172, 175.

forth of debate and the practice of persuasion.”⁵⁰ She is concerned less with what Habermas calls the “coercion-free force with which insight prevails” and more with the ability of words to persuade individuals to act together for a common purpose. This is not a cognitive process, but one based on a form of storytelling that allows actors to “‘woo’ or ‘court’ the agreement of everyone else.”⁵¹

This focus on the ability of action to ground collective identity is also visible in Arendt’s examples – such as the Hungarian uprising of 1956 – which highlight the “spontaneous organizational efforts of the people themselves” that aim to form “a new body politic.”⁵² This emphasis is quite different from Habermas’s attempts to outline the formal criteria for discursive resolution of disagreements based on the “unforced force of the better argument” and reveals Arendt’s more agonal approach to politics. I shall return to this point in the next section, where I discuss their respective approaches to mediating the relationship between politics and law.

Although he does not cite or engage with Arendt frequently in this period, an examination of the available evidence shows that Arendt served as the theoretical inspiration for Habermas’s concept of communicative action. However, it is also clear that his “reconstruction of the communications concept of power contains, it must be said, more Habermas than Arendt.”⁵³ Reflecting on Habermas’s reading of Arendt, Margaret Canovan goes even further, contending that “it is a textbook case of...distorted communication.” Indeed, she notes that “in the course of taking up her ideas, he

⁵⁰ Ibid., 173; Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 93.

⁵¹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 254.

⁵² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 246, 25.

⁵³ Luban, “On Habermas on Arendt and Power,” 81.

transformed them very considerably, with the result that what he learned from Arendt was not quite what she would have liked to teach him.”

Canovan argues that Habermas’s lack of interest in the political implications of his hyper-rationalized interpretation of Arendt in this second period causes him to miss the core insight of her theoretical project: her focus on the inescapable plurality of human beings. Thus, agreement for Arendt cannot be based on “the intellectual business of discussion.” Instead, “the implication Arendt draws from this is that the public world and its institutions are the only means of holding plural individuals together in freedom.”⁵⁴

While she notes the inaccuracy of Habermas’s reading of Arendt, Canovan at least partially exonerates him, noting that “the distortion [is] caused not by domination, ideology or neurosis, but by intellectual vitality on the part of the reader [i.e. Habermas].”⁵⁵ She argues that Habermas’s misrepresentations of Arendt’s views are the result of his attempts to integrate her thought into his own philosophical framework. As I show in the next section, Habermas develops a less distorted reading of Arendt as a result of his renewed interest in political theory after 1990.

Convergence on Politics

After completing his two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) and positioning himself vis-à-vis the continent’s theoretical tradition in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), Habermas once again turned his attention to political theory. This shift is visible in the major works he produced in the 1990s, such as *Between Facts and Norms* (1992) and *The Inclusion of the Other* (1996). In contrast to his early

⁵⁴ Canovan, “A Case of Distorted Communication,” 107, 111.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

work, where he avoided citing Arendt even when discussing core themes related to her thought, Habermas's political writings are characterized by an explosive uptick of citations and references to her work. This trend is most pronounced in *Between Facts and Norms*, where her name appears 30 times.

In this work Habermas argues that “act[ion] in concert must be mobilized and effectively secured within the legal medium itself.”⁵⁶ In so doing he draws considerably on Arendt, linking the idea of communicative power to “a procedure of lawmaking that begets legitimacy.”⁵⁷ The connection he draws between democratic legitimacy and what he calls “healthy discursive processes” allows Habermas to translate informal communicative power into formal administrative authority (or administrative power, as he sometimes refers to it). This focus on the legal mediation of discourse also explains his joking reference to himself as “a lay jurist.”⁵⁸

Despite Habermas's deployment of the Arendtian concept of communicative power, it might seem as though his focus on the law would clash with Arendt's more performative search for the spontaneous “new beginnings” found in moments such as the Hungarian Revolution. However, recent scholarship has increasingly come to argue that “Arendt for too long has been ignored as an important constitutional thinker.”⁵⁹ As a result, these differences mask some important similarities.

⁵⁶ Kenneth Baynes, *Habermas* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 142.

⁵⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 135;

⁵⁸ Quoted in Specter, *Habermas*, 23.

⁵⁹ Angelica Bernal, “A Revolution in Law's Republic: Arendt and Michelman in Dialogue,” *HannahArendt.net* 1, no. 5 (2009), 4.

For instance, both Habermas and Arendt seek to respond to Max Weber, whose formal conception of rationally administered law seemingly leaves no space for the political. Much like Habermas, who contends that politics and law (as well as democracy and human rights) are “co-original” and “equi-primordial,”⁶⁰ Arendt also argues for the “dehierarchisation” of law and politics. She develops an “imperative conception of law” that creates a place for action, i.e. the state, that “is essentially organized and institutionalized power.”⁶¹ In this sense, Christian Volk notes that Arendt “desubstantializes the concept of law” by arguing that “the law is legitimate when it allows and enables political action to take place.”⁶² Despite their remaining differences – such as Habermas’s focus on the formal rules that govern legitimate decision-making compared to Arendt’s concern with the durability and stability of the political – their desire to turn the opposition between politics and law into a relationship is a key parallel that emerges from *Between Facts and Norms*.

As I pointed out earlier, Habermas’s work in the 1970s and 80s was fairly abstract and analytic, focusing on what identifying what he calls “the general structures of an unimpaired intersubjectivity in the formal properties of communicative action or praxis.” A key part of this system was the formalized model of the “ideal speech situation,” whose “defining feature...is that any consensus attainable under its conditions can count per se

⁶⁰ See Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*; Jürgen Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008)

⁶¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), 39, 51. See also Arendt, *Human Condition*, 198-9.

⁶² Volk, *Arendtian Constitutionalism*, 177.

as a rational consensus.”⁶³ This move is part of Habermas broader attempt to revise Immanuel Kant’s understanding of practical reason in terms of a “procedural rationality” that is not rooted in the individual, but in the intersubjective practice of communicative rationality. In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas observes that he is “[f]ollowing Arendt’s lead” in noting that the “self-referential structure of the public practice issuing from communicative power” can operate through “subjectless forms of communication that regulate the flow of discursive opinion- and will-formation in such a way that their fallible outcomes have the presumption of practical reason on their side.”⁶⁴ This approach allows Habermas to maintain a link between his understanding of politics and Kant’s moral theory by arguing that open debate allows individuals to treat the other as an end and not a means.

Despite her appreciation for Kant and Habermas’s explicit reference to her work, Arendt would resist this move. For her, communicative power is not something that needs to be linked to administrative power in order to ensure the legitimacy of the law in terms of its moral validity. On the contrary, she is interested in the state and its institutions only insofar as they enable individual judgment to become part of a broader, shared *sensus communis* that works through “the operation of reflection.” These judgments are not adjudicated by criteria of legitimacy or the fulfillment of moral validity

⁶³ Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, 175; Jürgen Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 97.

⁶⁴ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 486.

claims, but through the “communicability” the core ideas agreed to by the collective, which she argues “stabilize every factor of political life into a ‘lasting institution.’”⁶⁵

In contrast to the “ethical formalism” that Habermas draws from Kant’s moral theory in developing his discourse theory of law, for Arendt morality is a question of conscience, of the “internal dialogue” between “me and myself, the two-in-one” required to live with oneself and one’s deeds.⁶⁶ She is less interested in Kant’s moral theory and his second Critique of Practical Reason (1788) than his political writings and the third Critique of the Power of Judgment (1790). Thus, instead of an ethical formalism of practical reason, Arendt seeks to “allow an ethics of power to develop out of judgment [Lässt sich eine Ethik der Macht aus der Urteilskraft entwickeln].”⁶⁷ Her theory is not based on fundamental moral principles, but on a historical narrative about the durability of a free and stable political order. Volk concludes that this difference in their respective readings of Kant can explain many of the philosophical disjunctions between Habermas and Arendt: “practical reason, knowledge and the epistemic function of democracy on the one side; [the] political power of judgement, experience and the emphasis on the dimensions of meaning of political action on the other.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 68, 40, 72; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 229.

⁶⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 104; Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture," *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (1971), 442. See also Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 177.

⁶⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch: 1950 bis 1973*, eds. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (München: Piper, 2002), 818.

⁶⁸ Volk, *Arendtian Constitutionalism*, 180.

Moving on from their respective interpretations of Kant, I want to argue that appreciating Habermas's engagement with Arendt – and reading his later work in this light – makes it clear that politics and real world debates are central to his broader philosophical project. Instead of focusing on the implicit validity claims to truth (Wahrheit), truthfulness (or sincerity [Wahrhaftigkeit]) and normative rightness (Richtigkeit) that are inherent in linguistic communication, in his political theory Habermas has returned to the public sphere as the chaotic site of informal opinion-formation that underpins modern democratic practice. He contends that “organized opinion-formation, which leads to accountable decisions within government bodies, [must remain] permeable to the free-floating values, issues, contributions, and arguments of a surrounding political communication” that occurs in real public debate. Instead of focusing on the formal procedures of the ideal speech situation, Habermas comes to argue that political decisions are the “fallible result of an attempt to determine what is right through a discussion that has been brought to a provisional close under the pressure to decide.”⁶⁹

This shift in emphasis helps to clarify the relationship between Habermas's formal social theory and the role that the communicative norms he develops there play in real public debate. For example, in *The Theory of Communicative Action* Habermas argues that “understanding is considered to be a process of reaching agreement [Einigung] among speaking and acting subjects.” However, while he maintains his commitment to agreement as an ideal, in his political theory he stresses the space for reasonable disagreement – what Arendt refers to as pluralism – within the public sphere

⁶⁹ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 485, 475.

of a liberal-democratic society.⁷⁰ In applying his moral theory to politics, Habermas still holds out “the assent of all citizens in a discursive process of legislation that has been legally constituted” as an aspirational goal, but he recognizes that in practice this ideal will have to be instantiated in imperfect ways.⁷¹

As a result of these considerations, Habermas notes that modern, pluralistic societies that can no longer expect full agreement even on fundamental issues. In his political theory he therefore drops some of the language of consensus (Konsens) and agreement (Einigung or Einverständnis), stressing instead the idea that open communication in the public sphere can lead citizens “mutual understanding” (Verständigung) of their differences without full unanimity. Patchen Markell argues that in light of his political theory it is possible to reread Habermas’s previous “orientation toward agreement” simply as a call for “a foreswearing of the mechanism coercion and influence...in the pursuit of one’s goals and a corresponding commitment to provide reasons for one’s claims if they are challenged.”⁷² This interpretation – which is made

⁷⁰ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, I.286-87. For more critiques that helped push Habermas in this direction, see Thomas A. McCarthy, "Legitimacy and Diversity: Dialectical Reflections on Analytical Distinctions" in *Habermas on Law and Democracy: Critical Exchanges*, eds. Michel Rosenfeld and Andrew Arato (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), James Bohman and William Rehg, "Discourse and Democracy: The Formal and Informal Bases of Legitimacy in between Facts and Norms" in *Discourse and Democracy: Essays on Habermas's between Facts and Norms*, eds. René von Schomberg and Kenneth Baynes (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

⁷¹ Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 110.

⁷² Patchen Markell, "Contesting Consensus: Rereading Habermas on the Public Sphere," *Constellations* 3, no. 3 (1997), 390; also Stephen K. White and Evan Robert Farr, "'No-Saying" in Habermas," *Political Theory* 40, no. 1 (2012), 33-40; McCarthy, *Legitimacy and Diversity*, 151-2.

possible in part by Habermas's engagement with Arendt – narrows the gap between their two theories, at least to a certain extent.

This is not to say that Habermas has completely abandoned his rational framework in order to embrace a more Arendtian model. He has not. Habermas maintains his commitment to the counterfactual of the “unforced force of the better argument” as the regulative ideal of communicative action. However, it is sufficient for a successful and functioning public sphere “that participants abide by some basic rules of civility, including a commitment to listen as well as speak, and, when one speaks, to do so in good faith and sincerely, rather than with an eye to strategic manipulation.” If it succeeds in meeting these requirements, Habermas believes – or perhaps hopes in the Kantian sense – that the better arguments presented within what Benhabib calls a “discursive, communicative concept of rationality” will win out in the long run.⁷³

Some might object that this newfound flexibility is the result not of Habermas's engagement with Arendt but of the fact that political theory is less conducive to idealization than the underlying basis of communication and social interaction. However, this claim makes little sense. In recent decades political philosophers have produced a number of highly abstract models. Perhaps the most notable example is Rawls's “original position,” which seeks to reach political agreement by forcing abstract individuals to choose the basic principles of justice that will govern their future society while sitting

⁷³ Simona Goi, “Agonism, Deliberation, and the Politics of Abortion,” *Polity* 37, no. 1 (2005), 60; Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community, and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, 5. See also W. T. Martin Robert, “Between Consensus and Conflict: Habermas, Post-Modern Agonism and the Early American Public Sphere,” *Polity* 37, no. 3 (2005), 365-88; Seyla Benhabib, *Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 73-98.

behind a “veil of ignorance” that blocks out all of the features that will define their position within the social order (ethnicity, education, talents, etc.).⁷⁴

Habermas engages deeply with Rawls during this period, criticizing him precisely for his excessive formalism and his blindness to the inescapable fact of human plurality. Instead of having individuals abstract away from their individual identities, as Rawls requires, Habermas encourages citizens to both embrace and transcend their particularities in order to build a “we-perspective” that takes these differences into account. He argues that precisely by taking “the perspective of everyone else and thus project[ing] herself into the understandings of self and world of all others,” individuals in a society can reach a political understanding with each other. Unlike Rawls, who seeks to homogenize the uniqueness of citizens through the methodological device of the “veil of ignorance,” in his political theory Habermas seeks to “include the other” by recognizing the need “to cope with the irreducible plurality of worldviews” in the modern public sphere.⁷⁵

This formulation – and its emphasis on the importance of individual identity in political life – is strikingly similar to Arendt’s argument regarding the importance of human plurality in politics. It is also reminiscent of her claim that the world of politics built on “words and deeds” is where individuals can appear as “unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatably entities.”⁷⁶ Habermas even cites Arendt’s notion of plurality in stressing

⁷⁴ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁷⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “Reconciliation through the Public use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls’ Political Liberalism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 92, no. 3 (March, 1995), 117; Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 81.

⁷⁶ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 97.

the important role that interaction with others plays in human individuation.⁷⁷ By focusing less on ideal speech and more on a common commitment to making mutually binding decisions through shared institutions that respect the input of all citizens, Habermas's political theory begins to sound like a slightly rationalized, more systematic version Arendt's agonistic conception of politics as "acting in concert." In this sense, it is possible to say that "Habermas's conceptions of action and power, inasmuch as they reflect Arendtian commitments, demonstrate that disclosure in the political realm entails the configuration of a new space of political interaction among actors."⁷⁸

I have already shown how Habermas's increasing engagement with Arendt during his political turn has led him to reframe some of his more rigid, idealistic formulations, such as his commitments to the idea of ideal speech and the consensus theory of truth. This is part of a broader attempt by Habermas to "distanc[e] himself from his earlier uncompromising formalism." In moving from social theory to politics, Simone Chambers notes that Habermas has been forced to admit that "practical discourse is primarily intended to be an undertaking in the real (less than ideal) world by real (less than ideal) social actors." In his political theory therefore, "majority rule should be understood, not as a resting point on the way to a counterfactually anticipated consensus, but as a means of provisional closure in an ongoing process in which citizens learn from one another's

⁷⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Future of Human Nature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 120.

⁷⁸ María Pía Lara, "Is the Postsecular a Return to Political Theology?" in *Habermas and Religion*, eds. Craig J. Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 75. Habermas's use of the word "disclosure" here is interesting, as this is a key concept introduced by Heidegger, and which both Arendt and Benjamin also use. For more on this idea, see Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

interpretations without necessarily agreeing on shared principles or a single right answer.”⁷⁹

In contrast to his earlier avoidance of Arendt, his recent work “offers his interpretation of Arendt’s legacy in his own political theory,” particularly as regards the power of people to influence parliament through the informal public sphere as well as the idea that “acting in concert” can – in Habermas’s words – play the role of the “authorizing force expressed in ‘jurigenesis’– the creation of legitimate law – and in the founding institutions.”⁸⁰ Compared to his earlier readings of Arendt as a theorist of “the principle of popular discussion without domination,” Habermas now emphasizes her distinction between political power and violence, where the latter can act as an communicatively-mediated “authorizing force” for “the creation of legitimate law.” Instead of emphasizing agreement, Habermas now quotes Arendt in order to stress the “enlarged mentality” made possible by the “human ability not just to act but to act in concert.”⁸¹ While this interpretation may not be completely accurate as an interpretation of Arendt, it is certainly less “distorted” than the readings of her work that Habermas offered in his second period.

⁷⁹ Simone Chambers, *Reasonable Democracy: Jürgen Habermas and the Politics of Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 155; William Rehg and James Bohman, "Introduction" in *Pluralism and the Pragmatic Turn: The Transformation of Critical Theory: Essays in Honor of Thomas McCarthy*, eds. William Rehg and James Bohman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 6. For an example of Habermas modifying or “clarifying” his idea of truth, see Jürgen Habermas, "From Kant's 'Ideas' of Pure Reason to the 'Idealizing' Presuppositions of Communicative Action: Reflections on the Detranscendentalized 'use of Reason'" in *Pluralism and the Pragmatic Turn: The Transformation of Critical Theory: Essays in Honor of Thomas McCarthy*, eds. William Rehg and James Bohman (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 28.

⁸⁰ Lara, “Is the Postsecular a Return to Political Theology?,” 89; Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 148.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 148.

Arendt in Habermas's Religious Turn

Arendt's influence is visible not only in Habermas's political theory, but also in the writings of his post-2000 "theological" turn, which was motivated by the attacks of 9/11 and the religious conflicts that followed in its wake.⁸² His explicit engagement with religion is a major change in the direction, as geopolitical events have forced Habermas to confront the depth of actual disagreement over crucial issues at the heart of people's moral and religious convictions. Although he did not engage extensively with religion in the 1960s and 70s, when he did so it was through the prism of Marxist ideology critique that saw religion as a source of repression. However, in his second period he moves towards a position inspired more by Max Weber and Émile Durkheim than by Marx. In line with the secularization thesis, Habermas argues that the process of modernization has translated the basic insights of the sacred into a secular vocabulary that is accessible to all.⁸³

Habermas's recent work goes beyond even Durkheim in admitting "the possibility of a continued 'migration of theological contents into the secular.'" Given the growing awareness that "something is missing" in our "ambivalent modern age," he affirms not only that "philosophy must be ready to learn from theology," but also that "religious

⁸² Austin Harrington, "Habermas's Theological Turn?" *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 37, no. 1 (2007), 45-61; Giovanna Borradori, ed., *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁸³ Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. II., 77-112. C.f. Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 247.

convictions have an epistemological status that is not purely and simply irrational.”⁸⁴ Referring explicitly to Arendt, he argues that the realm of the sacred has a role to play in “those spontaneous and inspiring countercurrents that emerge, in opposition to a highly bureaucratized politics, within civil society and the political public sphere.” Religion is no longer simply part of the genealogy of reason; it has become a resource of normative inspiration in the present.⁸⁵

In this period Habermas repeatedly notes that “Arendt has pointed to ‘plurality’ as a fundamental characteristic of human existence.”⁸⁶ Although he retains his belief in the possibility of discourse to bridge these differences, he has become somewhat less sanguine about the possibility of rational conversation to fully overcome these fundamental disagreements. This shift is related to the broader failure of the secularization thesis. As Peter Berger points out, “Our age is not an age of secularization. On the contrary, it is an age of exuberant religiosity, much of it in the form of passionate movements with global outreach.” Given the continued salience of religion, Habermas notes that Europe is the outlier: “Viewed in terms of world history, Max Weber’s ‘Occidental Rationalism’ now appears to be the actual deviation.”⁸⁷ As a result,

⁸⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Reply to My Critics" in Habermas and Religion, eds. Craig J. Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 353, emphasis in original; Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 43, 50; Jürgen Habermas, *An Awareness of what is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, ed. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010). Also Simone Chambers, "How Religion Speaks to the Agnostic: Habermas on the Persistent Value of Religion," *Constellations* 14, no. 2 (2007), 219-21.

⁸⁵ Habermas, "Reply to My Critics," 357.

⁸⁶ Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 120.

⁸⁷ Peter L. Berger, "Globalization and Religion," *Hedgehog Review* 4, no. 2 (Summer, 2002), 10; Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion*, 116.

Habermas comes to argue that modern societies might benefit from the presence of believers, who are able to salvage (bergen) valuable resources for solidarity and moral motivation from their faith traditions.⁸⁸

As part of his more frequent engagement with Arendt in this period, Habermas has also credited her ideas in other contexts. For example, the posthumous publication of Arendt's *Jewish Writings* (2007) lead Habermas to recognize her as a "clever historian of anti-Semitism." He notes how astutely she analyzes the impossibility of full assimilation for Jews, who were granted the "curious compliment that one could no longer even tell their descent; they were supposed to be Jews, but not be like Jews."⁸⁹ This helps Habermas to reaffirm his long-standing argument about the central place of the Holocaust in postwar German identity.⁹⁰

Habermas also builds on Arendt in his rejection of human genetic manipulation. Although he seeks to translate a number of religious objections to such interference into secular terms, he has also deployed her concept of natality to bolster his argument. Habermas starts by noting that Arendt is one of the few philosophers to recognize that birth "being a natural fact, meets the conceptual requirement of constituting a beginning we cannot control." This lack of control is important because the "expectation of the unexpected" is "invested with the hope for something entirely other to come and break the chain of eternal recurrence." He argues that intentional interference endangers this the

⁸⁸ Habermas, "Reply to My Critics," 348.

⁸⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *Religion and Rationality: Essays on Reason, God, and Modernity*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 51.

⁹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, "Pre-Political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State?" in *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, ed. Florian Schuller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 32-3; Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 58.

possibility of the unexpected within the natality of birth by inserting direct human intentions into this process.⁹¹

Habermas concludes that although an individual born in this way may be able to come to terms with “the sedimented intention of a third person in one’s hereditary factors,” she will not be able “to see the programmer’s intention, reaching through the genome, as a contingent circumstance restricting her scope of action.”⁹² The predispositions inserted into an individual’s genetic code mean that a child has no longer been “born unto us” (Arendt) with unexpected possibilities, but has been born to serve a particular purpose. This adds a level of predictability to birth that endangers its status as a potential site of “new beginnings.”⁹³ This engagement with Arendt has even caused him to move away from some of his earlier concerns about her reactionary political views. For example, in 2009 Habermas even exclaimed, “I never thought that any version of ‘conservatism’ would apply to me, but ‘bioconservatism’ is a wonderful term!”⁹⁴

It can hardly be a coincidence that Habermas has increasingly drawn on Arendt as he has sought to translate his social theoretic understanding of communicative action into political and religious terms. A possible explanation for this change of heart is that as the undisputed leader the Frankfurt School, Habermas may now feel more comfortable confessing his debt to Arendt than he was as a young scholar in the 1960s. Additionally, he may still be fighting “the ugly prejudice that women cannot do philosophy.”⁹⁵

⁹¹ Habermas, *Future of Human Nature*, 58.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹³ David Ingram, *Habermas: Introduction and Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 143.

⁹⁴ Quoted from a personal letter in Ian Hacking, “The Abolition of Man,” *Behemoth: A Journal on Civilization* 2, no. 3 (2009), 14.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Müller-Doohm, *Jürgen Habermas*, 195.

Although he notes that “[t]oday her political philosophy is a fixed part of the curriculum,” such misogynistic ideas are unfortunately far from dead.⁹⁶ Given the reservations he voiced about the discipline of philosophy early in his career, when he was in a rather tenuous position, emphasizing her work may be an attempt to use his position to further open the canon to new thinkers.

There may also be more substantive reasons for this reversal. Although the controversy over Heidegger’s Nazism continues, the publications of Arendt’s writings on Judaism, as well as her correspondence and *Denktagebuch* (intellectual journal), may have allayed some of Habermas’s fears about her theoretical approach. In particular, these previously unpublished, private writings demonstrate the profound influence of Jaspers, a figure that Habermas also admires, on Arendt’s political thought. Connecting Arendt more to Jaspers than Heidegger may have helped Habermas to acknowledge her as an important touchstone for his philosophical project.⁹⁷

Regardless of the actual reasons for Habermas’s newfound willingness to publically acknowledge his debt to Arendt, it is clear that his recent desire to apply his theoretical insights more directly to politics has led him to reengage with important insights from her work. Although much of the secondary literature has overlooked this connection, Villa makes an important point in noting that “as a motto, ‘the recovery of the public realm’ captures, more or less adequately, the primary goal of Hannah Arendt’s

⁹⁶ Habermas, *Lure of Technocracy*, 110.

⁹⁷ Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, 45-52. A similar dynamic may be at play in stressing Arendt’s connection to Walter Benjamin, who is also a touchstone for Habermas’s thought. See Gregg Daniel Miller, *Mimesis and Reason: Habermas's Political Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).

political philosophy and the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas.”⁹⁸ Although this statement applies most obviously to his recent work, I have argued that Habermas’s under-appreciated debt to Arendt is visible throughout his philosophical project.

Concluding Reflections

My basic thesis is that Arendt’s increasing influence on Habermas’s thought helps to explain the greater flexibility and appreciation for human plurality in his recent work. My argument shows that engaging Arendt can help to clarify the transition from the abstract, rationalistic and highly systematic social theory of Habermas’s second period to his more political theory, which emphasizes real political discussions in the chaotic public sphere. I have also sought to provide some explanations for why Habermas has engaged so extensively and publicly with Arendt in his later work after downplaying her significance in most of his early writings.

This argument also has important implications for the history of twentieth century continental political thought. As intellectual history, it is part of a broader scholarly attempt to provide “a new vantage point on the history of European thought in the later twentieth century insofar as existentialism and critical theory are rightly considered two of the largest camps whose interrelations were rarely cordial.”⁹⁹ Habermas’s recent emphasis on “mutual understanding” instead of agreement or consensus as the goal of political discourse and his newfound openness to religion are the products, at least in part, of his engagement with Arendtian insights about the role of dialogue in producing the

⁹⁸ Dana Richard Villa, "Postmodernism and the Public Sphere," *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 3 (Sept, 1992), 712.

⁹⁹ Gordon, *Adorno and Existence*, 8.

“enlarged mentality” necessary for citizens divided by irreconcilable pluralism to “act in concert.” Habermas’s willingness to engage with Arendt in his second and third periods may thus also provide him with a greater awareness of the possibilities for fruitful interaction between critical theory and phenomenology by making him somewhat less wary of drawing on insights from this tradition.

Despite these theoretical and institutional differences, both Arendt and Habermas are committed to engaging in open public debate. Additionally, their perspectives are both defined by their personal “confrontation with the legacy of the Nazi past.”¹⁰⁰ This leads to a number of interesting confluences. For example, Habermas’s vocal endorsement of the European Union bears a striking resemblance to her own surprising for the European movement.¹⁰¹ Additionally, his calls for the development of a global “postnational constellation” capable of implementing a Kantian “world domestic policy” (Weltinnenpolitik) without world government is strikingly similar to Arendt’s fragmentary, incomplete suggestions regarding the possibility of a federated “framework of universal agreements.”¹⁰² The frequent forays of both Arendt and Habermas into political affairs shows that far from being an abstruse undertaking, political theory can and should have an effect on the real world.

The fact that both Arendt and Habermas both seek to bring theory and praxis together also has important implications for how political philosophy can be integrated

¹⁰⁰ Habermas, “Public Space and Political Public Sphere,” 17.

¹⁰¹ William Selinger, “The Politics of Arendtian Historiography: European Federation and the Origin of Totalitarianism,” *Modern Intellectual History* 13, no. 2 (August, 2016).

¹⁰² Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, ed. Max Pensky, trans. Max Pensky (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001); Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 93.

into the study of politics. In contrast to calls from sympathetic critics like David Mayhew for political theory to become “a source of ontological illumination” that focuses on “what positive political science complicatedly is,” both Arendt and Habermas argue that empirical questions cannot be separated from normative concerns.¹⁰³ They contend that ontological investigations into “the nature of political reality” cannot be separated from assumptions about what that political reality is and should look like. This connection between the is and the ought is immediately visible in the important role that the idea of crisis plays in their “problem-driven” approaches to politics.¹⁰⁴

Despite their differences, both Arendt and Habermas are engaged in what Horkheimer calls “philosophically oriented social research.”¹⁰⁵ For Arendt what is important are not the timeless problems of philosophy “that may be of great relevance to man in the singular,” but the issues that arise from within contemporary political life. This is most visible in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), where she identifies political evil and statelessness as the most daunting problems of the twentieth century. Based on her investigations of the interwar crisis in Europe, where “the nation had conquered the state,” Arendt argues, “We become aware of the existence of a right to have rights...and a right to belong to some kind of organized community, only when

¹⁰³ David R. Mayhew, “Political Science and Political Philosophy: Ontological Not Normative,” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 22, no. 2 (June, 2000), 192-3.

¹⁰⁴ Ian Shapiro, “Problems, Methods, and Theories in the Study of Politics, Or what's Wrong with Political Science and what to do about it,” *Political Theory* 30, no. 4 (2002).

¹⁰⁵ Max Horkheimer, “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research” in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 14.

millions of people emerge who had lost and could not regain these rights because of the new global political situation.”¹⁰⁶

Although Habermas draws his inspiration from a different theoretical tradition than Arendt, he too seeks to use empirical research to inform critical “diagnoses of the present” (Zeitdiagnosen). His blend of diagnostic analysis followed by normative reflections on possible solutions to the problems revealed in the pathologies of the present is visible in his recent work on the European Union. In these political writings he responds to the problems that have revealed themselves since 2010 by blending empirical analysis and normative reflection on how things ought to be with a call to political action directed to both the leaders and the peoples of Europe. This has led him to engage in debates not only with empirical political scientists regarding the future of Europe, but also leading political figures.¹⁰⁷

Despite their differences, Arendt and Habermas bridge the empirical/normative divide in their academic writings and in their interventions in the public sphere. Unlike some public intellectuals, who use their stature to make partisan interventions, both Arendt and Habermas use their political writings to test and apply their theoretical ideas to the real world. Reading Habermas through the lens of Arendt not only reveals her crucial importance to his theoretical development as an intellectual forerunner for discourse theory; it also helps to clarify the central importance of political concerns for

¹⁰⁶ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 4; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Brace Harcourt, 1951), 275, 177.

¹⁰⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Crisis of the European Union: A Response*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Habermas, *Lure of Technocracy*.

Habermas, thus countering accusations of him as an abstract thinker whose thought is irrelevant to “real politics.”