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Hobbes nel Novecento

Modernità, politica, filosofia

a cura di Guido Frilli

ISTITUTO ITALIANO PER GLI STUDI FILOSOFICI

SAGGI

I 3

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Authoritarian Accumulation.
Hannah Arendt on Hobbes' *Leviathan*
and Bourgeois History*

Eva von Redecker

Many commentators, over the last hundred years, have found a problematic semblance between fascism and Thomas Hobbes' justification of tyrannical state-power¹. Hannah Arendt, too, in her monumental study *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, used Hobbes' *Leviathan* as a prefiguration of 20th century political catastrophe. But the way she did so is remarkably different from the standard critiques of overbearing sovereignty.

According to Arendt, Hobbes was horrifically prescient as the chronicler of endless accumulation. She reads Hobbes not as early modern advocate of absolutism, but as prophet of 19th century imperialist progressivism and 20th century totalitarian rule. She detects in his political theory the basic, and destructive, mechanism of bourgeois society:

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¹ See: C.D. Tarlton, *Rehabilitating Hobbes. Obligation, Anti-Fascism and the Myth of a "Taylor-Thesis"*, «History of Political Thought», Vol. 19, No. 3 (1998), p. 420f.

«Hobbes was the true [...] philosopher of the bourgeoisie because he realized that acquisition of wealth conceived of as never-ending process can be guaranteed only by the seizure of power, for the accumulation process must sooner or later force open all existing territorial limits»². What we find in Arendt's examination of the *Leviathan* is a nexus between liberal market rationality and imperialistic politics, a nexus between capital and conquest. As Zeynep Gambetti has demonstrated recently, Arendt's focus on corrosive and expansive power helps to understand contemporary fascism with its neoliberal roots³. Unlike Crawford MacPherson, who also established a firm link between Hobbes' political philosophy and economic rationality, Arendt emphasizes accumulation's darkest repercussions⁴. We have here a theory not of the possessive, but of the authoritarian individual, not of industriousness, but of destruction.

Arendt's idiosyncratic reading of Hobbes has been questioned repeatedly. Eric Voegelin mentioned in a letter that her reading seemed «dubious»⁵; subsequent commentators have called her interpretation of the *Leviathan* a «crude analysis»⁶ and «biased, inconsistent and *ad hoc*»⁷. Edgar Straehle urged that we dismiss the treatment of Hobbes in Arendt's totalitarianism book altogether and instead turn to «her second reading of the English philosopher» in *The Human Condition* and subsequent texts⁸.

² H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt & Brace, New York 1976 [1951], p. 146.

³ Z. Gambetti, *Exploratory Notes on the Origins of New Fascisms*, «Critical Times», Vol. 3, No. 1 (2020), pp. 1-32.

⁴ C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Philosophy of Possessive Individualism. Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011 [1962], pp. 95-100.

⁵ E. Voegelin, *letter from 16.03.1951*, «Hannah Arendt Papers», Library of Congress, document 10402, p. 1; I see absolutely no evidence that Voegelin's remark would have made Arendt change her mind about Hobbes, as Straehle considers. His main critique of *Origins* concerns other points and is forcefully rejected in Arendt's reply.

⁶ L. Bazzicalupo, *Hannah Arendt on Hobbes*, «Hobbes Studies», 9 (1996), 1, p. 53.

⁷ E. Straehle, *The Problem of Sovereignty: Reading Hobbes through the Eyes of Hannah Arendt*, «Hobbes Studies», 32 (2019), 1 p. 73.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

In her more philosophical sequel to *Origins*, Arendt discusses Hobbes (alongside a much more detailed critique of Descartes) in order to draw out the connection between scientific rationalism and modern world alienation. However, here Arendt also introduces Hobbes as the thinker of «a society relentlessly engaged in a process of acquisition»⁹, thus affirming a continuity with her earlier interpretation. Contra Straehle's periodization, I hope to show that Arendt's later, methodological interest in Hobbes clarifies the status of her reconstruction of the *Leviathan* in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt's reading of Hobbes might not be the most accurate, but it certainly does not diminish work, and nor is it simply guided by «her hostility to Hobbes»¹⁰. Arendt appraises Hobbes as modern political philosophy's «greatest representative»¹¹. Nevertheless, she treats him more as medium of an emergent social paradigm than as philosophical innovator. The radical and stunning idea she ascribes to Hobbes is that one could build a political structure and anthropological stance with nothing but the fundamental ingredient of the capitalist order: accumulation. The result is an economic polity which, as Arendt claims, anticipated the 19th century constellation of aggressive expansion and belief in progressive history. This is precisely the constellation which, according to Arendt, was to crystallize into totalitarian rule.

In the context of Arendt's own work, it is of more than exegetical interest to trace the proto-totalitarian constellation back to «the only great philosopher to whom the bourgeoisie can rightly and exclusively lay claim»¹². Via the *Leviathan*, an often overlooked materialist strand enters Arendt's political theory. In tracing fascism back to bourgeois rule, Arendt elaborates the problematic of modern worldlessness not in contrast to Greek glory, but in consequence of capitalist world-appropriation. And more than the Frankfurt School versions of a bour-

⁹ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998 [1958], p. 31.

¹⁰ E. Straehle, *Reading Hobbes*, p. 73.

¹¹ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 300.

¹² H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 139.

geois-fascist nexus, Arendt's take allows for the interplay of multiple levels of accumulation: by market incentive and by violence; of property and of power, ending in expansion, or in extinction. Seen in this light, Arendt's «reluctant modernism» is based on an analysis of the primitive accumulation of sovereign violence¹³, and fundamentally connected to a critique of colonial rationality¹⁴.

Hobbes as a hinge in Arendt's theory of totalitarianism

Hannah Arendt wrote her *Origins of Totalitarianism* while exiled in New York in the years 1945 to 1949¹⁵. The book appeared in English in 1951. Four years later, the German edition was published by Piper in Munich¹⁶. Arendt turned the translation, which she executed herself, into an extensive editing process. She added a final chapter and inserted new passages, partly based on earlier German drafts for the book. She also changed the title to «Elements and Origins of Totalitarian Rule» to emphasize her genealogical search not for a singular source, but for a constellation of factors culminating in the Shoah.

¹³ This phrase was coined by Seyla Benhabib in her monograph on Hannah Arendt, cf.: S. Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2003.

¹⁴ Arendt's *Origin of Totalitarianism* has been called one of the constitutive books of postcolonial studies; P. Grosse, *From Colonialism to National Socialism to Postcolonialism. Hannah Arendt's Origins of Totalitarianism*, «Postcolonial Studies», 9 (2006), 1, p. 48. This does not alleviate the justified charges of racism made against her, see: M. Brumlik, «The scramble for Africa.» *Hannah Arendt's paradoxer Versuch, den Holocaust aus dem Kolonialismus herzuleiten*, L. Fritze (ed.), *Hannah Arendt weitergedacht*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2008, pp. 153-165; P. Owens, *Racism in the Theory Canon. Hannah Arendt and "the One Great Crime in Which America Was Never Involved"*, «Journal of International Studies», 45 (2017), 3, pp. 403-424.

¹⁵ E. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt. For Love of the World*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1982, p. 199.

¹⁶ H. Arendt, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft. Antisemitismus, Imperialismus, Totalitarismus*, Piper, München 2001 [1955].

Her monumental work is structured in three parts. The first is a history of modern antisemitism, the second an analysis of 19th century colonialism. The third and most extensive part contains Arendt's phenomenology of totalitarian rule. She considers this phenomenon to be a new, distinct, and unprecedented political formation. Totalitarianism, according to her analysis, is an unbounded form of fascism, different from tyranny or dictatorship, which are territorially limited and aim at a certain stability. It is described as perpetual motion, an ever-expanding and all-destroying process. The essence of that process, according to Arendt, is the loss of human initiative and spontaneity. People are reduced to mere functions of an overarching movement, they lose the ability to differentiate each other and to start something new. In her subsequent work *The Human Condition*, Arendt postulates that «plurality» is the condition for politics: «the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world»¹⁷. Totalitarianism is the first attempt in history to eradicate plurality entirely. The concentration camps signify the “success” of that attempt. In them, the German Nazis undertook the «mass manufacture of corpses», and also systematically dehumanized their victims by destroying, as Arendt reconstructs, their juridical and moral personae¹⁸.

While emphasizing the novelty of this form of rule, Arendt nevertheless sees it as actualizing tendencies and trends deeply entrenched in modern societies. The earliest moment she refers to is Hobbes' *Leviathan*. This work is more than just one “element”: if not *the* origin, then at least an original assembly of all the elements Arendt holds responsible for totalitarianism. «It had taken Hobbes, the great idolator of Success, three centuries to succeed», she writes in an ominous passage¹⁹. How is this trajectory possible, given that the *Leviathan* seems to lack the specific elements of totalitarianism, as it is neither an antisemitic or otherwise racist tract, nor a direct recommendation of imperialism?

¹⁷ H. Arendt, *Human Condition*, p. 7.

¹⁸ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 447ff.

¹⁹ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 144.

Arendt traces the prehistory of totalitarian rule in antisemitism and imperialism, but her argument is less immediate than one might think. She doesn't draw a straight line from the denigration of Jews and colonized people to Aryan supremacy in National Socialism. Totalitarianism is not the political organization effective enough to execute the social prejudices of the 19th century in murderous politics. Rather, what Arendt tries to draw out are structural features of modern mass societies which transform social prejudices into political forces. Arendt traces deep problems of social organization to which genocidal politics, unfathomable though this sounds, present themselves as a "solution".

Two motifs keep occurring throughout Arendt's analyses and cluster to form the two core fault-lines of modernity as she sees it. One is the uprooting and isolation of individuals in the industrial production process, the other is the subordination of politics to the idea of an irresistible historical process. The first factor, the desolation, could be roughly described as material – resulting from the significance and organization of labour – the second is more symbolic or ideological: the entrenched 19th century belief in progress. It is Hobbes' *Leviathan* which allows Arendt to methodologically unify her analysis. She finds both elements – the desolate individual, and the historical progressivism – in this text and exposes them as core features of Western modernity. Hobbes, she hyperbolically claims, saw it all, he formulated principles which culminated in full catastrophe three hundred years later, and yet all he did was draw the conclusions, ruthlessly, right at the outset, in the early phases of capitalist bourgeois society²⁰. But why would Arendt think that «since Hobbes was a philosopher», he would have such enormous foresight? We need to situate Arendt's interpretation of Hobbes' *Leviathan* within her own phenomenological approach, in order to clarify how she could consider his method simultaneously deeply mistaken and revelatory.

²⁰ «There is hardly a single bourgeois moral standard which has not been anticipated by the unequalled magnificence of Hobbes's logic. He gives an almost complete picture, not of Man but of the bourgeois man, an analysis which in three hundred years has neither been outdated nor excelled»; Arendt, *Origins*, p. 139.

“Reckoning” as Method

Already in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt frequently uses the phrase «reckoning with consequences» when referring to Hobbes' style of reasoning. The referenced passage can be found in chapter five of the *Leviathan*, entitled «Of Reason, and Science». There, Hobbes develops his epistemology. He compares concepts with numerical values, price tags as it were, and identifies valid reasoning as carrying out correct mathematical operations: «For Reason, in this sense, is nothing but Reckoning (that is Adding and Substracting) of the Consequences of generall names agreed upon»²¹. He goes on to develop this analogy on the example of a «master of the family» checking the bills. Good bookkeeping has to begin with each of the basic entries, and proceed from there to the final sum²². And this, Hobbes maintains, is the perfect model for scientific reasoning, too²³.

Arendt of course finds the idea of arithmetic conclusions from names abhorrent. Her late work, the theory of judgment advanced in *The Life of the Mind*, can be seen as the direct opposition to «reckoning»²⁴, and already in *The Human Condition*, she insists that quasi-mathematical thought forecloses any real understanding of the world²⁵. For Arendt, the deductive epistemology is unable to grasp new experiences and unique

²¹ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by R. Tuck, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, p. 32.

²² «The Use and End of Reason, is not the finding of the summe, and truth of one, or a few consequences, remote from the first definitions, and settled significations of names; but to begin at these»; Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 32.

²³ A detailed presentation of Hobbes' methodological commitments can be found in: D. Jessep, *Hobbes and the method of natural science*, T. Sorell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, pp. 86-107.

²⁴ For a profound defense of Arendt's theory of political judgement see L.M.G. Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgement*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2016; for a reconstruction of Arendt's later work as moral philosophy, see E. v. Redecker, *Gravitation zum Guten*, Lukas Verlag, Berlin 2013.

²⁵ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 272.

phenomena: «to reason in the form of reckoning with consequences means to leave out the unexpected, the event itself»²⁶.

And yet, much as Arendt resists the replacement of thought with «reckoning», she also accords it a certain disclosing function. Hobbes, in her words, could not grasp the «event» but he masterfully articulated it. Arendt associates Hobbes' alleged first principles with the breakthrough of a new historical formation. According to her, Hobbes «registered, with unequaled precision, the enormous shock of the event»²⁷. In his deduction from “first principles”, Hobbes spelled out the full grammar of bourgeois modernity – his omission of the actual event notwithstanding.

To comprehend Arendt's reconstruction of modernity's Hobbesian source code, it is worth pausing in order to ask what she actually considers to be «the event» in question. Arendt shows no interest in the confessional and dynastic conflicts shaping Hobbes' biography. Nor does she refer directly to the colonial constellation of the 17th century, when the Spanish-Portuguese empire started to decline and Anglo settler colonialism took off. Her constant reference to the “bourgeois” era seems weirdly anachronistic in a pre-industrial era²⁸ where wealth was still mostly based on landed property and agrarian production²⁹.

What allows Arendt to predate the rise of the bourgeoisie is a focus on capital in relation to the property form, rather than to waged labor. In the English edition of *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt defines the bourgeoisie as the class to whom everybody could belong «who conceived of life as a process of perpetually becoming wealthier, and considered money as something sacrosanct which under no circumstances should be a mere commodity for consumption»³⁰. In the German version, she is more explicit as to how this new, accumulative attitude was mediated via the notion of property. If translated verbatim, the German sentence reads: «it turned out that not everyone who had pos-

²⁶ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 300.

²⁷ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 273.

²⁸ L. Bazzicalupo, *Arendt on Hobbes*, p. 54.

²⁹ K. Pistor, *The Code of Capital. How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2019, p. 24.

³⁰ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 145.

sessions belonged to the bourgeois class, but that everyone was welcome in it who was ready to take part in the process of accumulating possessions. This meant regarding money under no circumstances as a means for consumption, and by no means simply using up one's property»³¹. In a subsequent passage – entirely missing in the English text – Arendt then elaborates how startling and novel this treatment of property as proto-capital is. Even preservation, she claims, runs counter to the nature of property, and expansion entirely contradicts it. Mortal human beings, who themselves vanish from the earth, have no better way to «secure» their property than to use, enjoy, and consume it³². According to Arendt, it is in the nature of property, as a human title over an object, to be perishable. Against this, the practice of property accumulation constitutes a paradigm shift and provides the «shocking event» which sets Hobbes' era apart from the ancient and medieval world.

If we consider early 17th century England, with capitalist social classes in the orthodox sense still absent, we can indeed observe a change in the nature of ownership. Hobbes was writing in the midst of the era often discussed as «primitive accumulation», which might be better described as «propertization»³³ or the coding of land as capital, to use Katharina Pistor's term³⁴. This process unfolded as enclosure on the ground, and as new, exclusive formulations of ownership rights in the courts. By 1600, most arable land in England was enclosed³⁵, cleared of commoners and used by the aristocratic owners not for consumption and status-warrant, but for profit. The intensification of ownership rights in the enclosures can be described as expansion, if not in territorial reach, then in control over the territory owned. In many cases, however, enclosures did also enlarge the holdings of the landed elite – an accumulation tendency fully unleashed in colonial conquest and settlement. The expansiveness of property thus predates the invest-

³¹ H. Arendt, *Elemente*, p. 330.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ E. v. Redecker, *Ownership's Shadow*, «Critical Times», 3 (2020), 1, p. 39ff.

³⁴ K. Pistor, *Code*, pp. 23ff.

³⁵ K. Pistor, *Code*, p. 29.

ment cycles of mature capitalism. “Having to have more” is already the script of colonialism and enclosure, and their directly violent modes of accumulation are never entirely superseded by the extraction of surplus value. The question of capitalism’s ongoing dispossession has been subject to lively debates in recent years, especially because it opens the analysis of political economy to intersecting axes of domination such as patriarchy and white supremacy³⁶. What makes Arendt’s account stand out is that she identifies, from the get-go, a co-extensive political logic: «Only the unlimited accumulation of power could bring about the unlimited accumulation of capital»³⁷. This lesson, she claims, is taught best, and for the first time, by Hobbes.

The Property-Accumulating Individual

The core principle with which Hobbes himself equips his individual is the natural right for self-preservation. It is absolute and unquestionable and serves as the ultimate referent to justify the sovereign power of *Leviathan*. Hans Blumenberg has called the drive to self-preservation the key feature or «index fossil» of early modern rationality³⁸. It is a new principle, departing from scholastic conceptions of perseverance. In medieval theology, preservation was thought of as ongoing creation, as an effect of God’s perpetually re-affirmed will to hold beings in their existence. This transitive concept of preservation as achieved by an external force shifted to an intransitive understanding. From the early enlightenment onwards, it is the individual who is tasked with his own preservation³⁹. Hobbes’ mechanistic world-view precludes the Aristotelian option, which consists in assigning self-preservation to an

³⁶ For a brilliant overview, see: B. Bhandar, *Cultures of Dispossession: Critical Reflections on Rights, Status and Identities*, «Darkmatter Journal», Vol. 14 (2016); www.darkmatter101.org/site/2016/05/16/cultures-of-dispossession/.

³⁷ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 137.

³⁸ H. Blumenberg, *Selbsterhaltung und Beharrung. Zur Konstitution neuzeitlicher Rationalität*, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Mainz 1970, p. 3.

³⁹ Ivi, p. 21ff.

inner developmental *telos* and making it coincide with self-perfection. Instead, in the emerging contract theories, the individual will is tasked with the pursuit of existence. The desire to persevere is reinforced by the concomitant fear: not wanting to die, especially not a violent death. In Hobbes, fear-driven self-preservation immediately tilts into self-expansion⁴⁰. He famously argues, in chapter XIV of the *Leviathan*, that a right to «every thing; even to one anothers body» can be derived from the right to self-preservation⁴¹. Surrounded by equals capable of murder, absent a superior power, it is only rational for individuals to attack and plunder preemptively. Thus, universal war is inevitable until individuals refrain from executing their will to self-preservation, and submit to a superior authority.

Arendt examines the resulting edifice of the *Leviathan* from a somewhat slanted angle. First of all, she refuses to accept Hobbes' own direction of deduction. In a commentary consulted by Arendt, Michael Oakeshott had argued that Hobbes' conception of individual and of state are co-foundational and their sequence a mere choice of presentation⁴². Arendt stretches this further and claims that Hobbes' individual, far from serving as starting point, was rather a futuristic figment of his imagination, derived from the needs of the *Leviathan*: «a picture of man as he ought to become and ought to behave if he wanted to fit into the coming bourgeois society»⁴³. For Arendt the supposed basis – that peculiar understanding of self-preservation-cum-self-expansion – is exactly what requires explanation. And her own explanation consists in systematically carving out the congruence of this «new type of man»⁴⁴ with the principle of accumulation.

The individual as portrayed by Hobbes is, in a way, nothing but accumulation doubled back on itself. Accumulation with a vengeance.

⁴⁰ Comp. *ivi*, p. 50.

⁴¹ T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 91.

⁴² M. Oakeshott, *Introduction*, pp. VII-LXVI in: *ibidem* (ed.): *Leviathan or the Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil By T. Hobbes*, Blackwell, Oxford 1946, p. XXIX.

⁴³ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 143, see also p. 141.

⁴⁴ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 146.

Not self-preservation as pursued by a free individual aware of his natality and mortality, but self-preservation as envisioned by a will fixated on avoiding death at all costs. All agency descends into power-hoarding. Power, for Hobbes, is the means to acquire and secure propertized goods, and therefore becomes the primary target of accumulation. Arendt emphasizes that every other ambition – «riches, knowledge, and honor» – is secondary to the fundamental power-passion of an individual driven by nothing but private interests⁴⁵. When Arendt speaks of private interests, it is important not to miss the pejorative connotations of private as “privatus”. Those are not just egoistical interests, but deprived ones, lacking political potency and personal autonomy. Hobbes’ assertion that private and public goods coincide – further consolidated in later liberalism by the fiction of an invisible hand of the market – is diametrically opposed to Arendt’s own view⁴⁶. What she calls «the aimless, senseless chaos of private interests» is a threat to politics, not their matrix⁴⁷. Furthermore, for Arendt, private interests are not even, in a narrow sense, “individual”. They do not originate in the singular person, but are derived from a sociality premised on competition around interchangeable goods. In turn, they degrade the Hobbesian individual to a derived status, to a function of society devoid of the independent capacity for judgment. Arendt quotes Hobbes’ statement that an individual’s value is their price. «This price is constantly evaluated and re-evaluated by society, the “esteem of others,” depending upon the law of supply and demand»⁴⁸. Set extrinsically, the value is never fixed, and never safe. It is produced analogously on the material and on the symbolic level⁴⁹. Power is thus always already both, the capacity to

⁴⁵ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 139. This passage makes it hard to uphold the interesting claim advanced by Peg Birmingham, who argues that Arendt and Hobbes were aligned in their appreciation of glory; comp.: P. Birmingham, *Arendt and Hobbes: Glory, Sacrificial Violence, and the Political Imagination*, «Research in Phenomenology», 41 (2011), 1, pp. 1-22.

⁴⁶ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 139; T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 119, 134.

⁴⁷ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 142.

⁴⁸ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 139; T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 63.

⁴⁹ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 139.

secure property as much as the capacity to secure recognition. Just as every individual is programmed to desire all goods, they are all set up to desire a monopoly on public opinion in order to execute symbolic “price control” and make sure that they themselves come first in the recognition order. It reads a bit as if Arendt, if not Hobbes, were already describing a digital capitalist order of click-based ratings. At any rate, these mechanisms of competitive accumulation set the slippery slope towards violent conflict.

One of the defects of Arendt's reading of the *Leviathan* is that she seems to completely ignore the difference between state of nature and the situation after the contract. She writes of power-thirsty, property-scrambling individuals as though the civil war never ended. *Leviathan* without *Leviathan*, as it were. However, from a certain angle, this reading is correct. The *Leviathan* is the *Leviathan* – the all-encompassing superior power – because Hobbes' individuals know no inner limit. They just yield to an external one. Much as their reason – the rational calculus of self-preservation – commands them to seek a contract of reciprocal submission to authority, their desire remains bound to that life's expansion by all means. Post-contract, individuals are of course supposed to know the law, but it remains external and instrumental to them. The law is valid as an emanation from sovereign authority, and is not substantiated independently: «The Commonwealth is based on the delegation of power, not of rights»⁵⁰. There is thus a continuity of anarchic self-preservation from before the contract when Hobbes' individuals – unlike John Locke's *connoisseurs* of natural law – know no right or wrong, just expansion and loss of power.

Finally, that criterion – knowing the expansion from the loss of power – is also prior to any individual's right. Those who do not serve power accumulation turn into «a dangerous nuisance»⁵¹. Hobbes' theoretical construct predestines certain individuals as those that are to be annihilated. Whoever refuses the contract is thereby declared free prey, an enemy to be crushed. But it is not just resistance, but also

⁵⁰ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 141.

⁵¹ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 144.

biopolitical destiny which can render individuals “superfluous”. As Lorenzo Bernini has shown, drawing on a passage from chapter XVII of *De Cive*, Hobbes’ sovereign with his monopoly on ascribing value to life may also «decide which of his subjects should be considered fully human»⁵². The Leviathan has the explicit right to order the death of someone who is seen as unfit – «a child of an unwonted shape», to use Hobbes’ language in an example⁵³.

If Arendt admits to a certain difference pre- and post contract, it resides not in the basic passion for power, which is a constant feature, but in where that power is settled. Always external to the individuals themselves, it springs first from an unregulated competition and is later contained by the Leviathan. In the presence of an over-awing power, the power-hungry animals submit to the continuation of accumulation over their heads. The individual, whom Arendt ultimately sees as a «poor meek little fellow», then turns into a «cog in the power-accumulating machine, free to console himself with sublime thoughts about the ultimate destiny of this machine»⁵⁴. Irrespective of such dreams, Arendt goes on to argue that the weakness for accumulation which tied the individual to the «machine» in the first place, corrodes the latter, too.

The Power-Accumulating State

Arendt resists the idea that the state pacifies individuals by protecting them and their property from each other. She also resists the idea that this state itself is ever at peace⁵⁵. There is no limit which any Leviathan would need to respect, in fact he becomes a more perfect Leviathan the greater units he can usurp – as long as he is indeed powerful enough to rule them. However, just as with the individual

⁵² L. Bernini, *Queer Apocalypse. Elements of Antisocial Theory*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2017, p. 145.

⁵³ Ivi, p. 144.

⁵⁴ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 146.

⁵⁵ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 142.

power-hungry by association with new propertylogics, Arendt identifies a prior mechanism for the Leviathan's expansiveness. Not just external competitiveness with other states, but also an inner necessity, arising from a social order premised on acquisition. The core argument which Arendt develops is that the mere accumulation of property, as a supposedly purely economic process, cannot proceed without preceding and perpetual accumulation of power. This would be an obvious point to make if accumulation of power meant intensification. That, after all, is the whole point of the *Leviathan* in its own terms: to give rise to a greater authority over those individuals who would otherwise turn their individual powers lethally against each other. But what Arendt means is that the property-expanding logic she sees as operating through individuals likewise steers their state. The Leviathan must not only be erected, but constantly expanded. Only by growing can it stabilize the acquisitions pursued. Not a stable authority protecting property, but an expansive power paving the way for accumulation.

Arendt reflects on the necessary boundlessness of political power, once it is tasked with protecting capitalist property, in two ways. One is elaborated in the chapter following her consultation of Hobbes. With regard to the New Imperialism, over the course of which nearly the entire African continent was colonized by European powers between 1870 and 1914, Arendt promotes a Luxemburgian analysis. Only by annexing new territories as investment grounds can capitalist accumulation continue. And – this is Arendt's addition – only given colonized territory can the “superfluous” members of European societies be sent somewhere and pose as “owners” despite their economic dispossession at home. The category of race is operationalized to distinguish accumulators from those dispossessed of ownership rights, and mediates this process. Arendt notes that Hobbes, while eschewing any explicit racial logics, cleared the ground for reification of humans by presenting individuals as stripped of any shared ties or capacities⁵⁶. Only by con-

⁵⁶ «For there is, under the conditions of an accumulating society, no other unifying bond available between individuals who in the very process of power accumulation and expansion are losing all natural connections with their fellow-men. Racism may

stantly growing more powerful, Arendt concludes, can the Leviathan safeguard the accumulation process which the private interests of his subjects dictate.

Arendt's second account of catastrophic progressivism is more abstract. While the Luxemburgian theory of imperialism served to spell out the spatial logic of accumulation, it is with the help of Walter Benjamin that Arendt brings to the fore accumulation's temporal logic. She quotes the passage about the *angelus novus* from Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* at length in the German edition of *Origins*. The concluding sentence also made it into the English version: «What we call progress is [the] wind [that] drives [the angel of history] irresistibly into the future to which he turns his back while the pile of ruins before him towers to the skies»⁵⁷. At the time of Arendt's writing, this image was not at all as ubiquitous as it has become in contemporary critical theory. In fact, it had not even been published in English, to the embitterment of Arendt, who had been tasked by Benjamin himself with handing the manuscript over to his colleagues at the exiled Frankfurt Institute⁵⁸.

In her interpretation, Arendt equates the wind of progress with the imperative of accumulation. But why would it amount to the ultimate catastrophe? And how does it run through the Leviathan? Individual property accumulation, as mentioned at the outset, is limited by the natural lifespan of humans. In order to envision it as an infinite process, this time period needs to be transcended. This is what the Leviathan does: it provides the immortal structure onto which the incessant continuation of accumulation can be projected. Individual property accumulation cannot be infinite, but political poweraccumulation is. The individual might die, but the Commonwealth keeps conquering. It is with these considerations that Arendt provides an argument for why expansive accumulation should be inevitably self-destructive, as opposed to “merely” oppressive. This is sobecause the deferred limit returns, this

indeed carry out the doom of the Western world and, for that matter, of the whole of human civilization»; Arendt, *Origins*, p. 157.

⁵⁷ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 143.

⁵⁸ Comp. Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, p. 166f.

time as the limit of the globe. Arendt glosses the all-too-contemporary businessman who is annoyed that he cannot annex the stars, and states in no uncertain terms that at the point of external limitation, the conquest will not stop, but turn annihilation inward:

«...the power-accumulating machine, without which continual expansion would not have been achieved, needs more material to devour in its never-ending process. If the last victorious Commonwealth cannot proceed to “annex the planets,” it can only proceed to destroy itself in order to begin anew the never-ending process of power generation»⁵⁹.

Destruction, as the liminal form of possession, thus returns. It is at once accumulation's highest form and its end. Composed of individuals with private interests, the Leviathan can, according to Arendt, never hold. His contractual base lacks the component of truly political matter. «[P]roperty and acquisition», she writes, «can never become a true political principle»⁶⁰. She elaborates in *Elemente und Ursprünge* that the latter would have to fulfill the task of providing immortality, that element which mortal individuals cannot import⁶¹. The immortality of possession in accumulation is hollow, it piggybacks on political duration instead of founding it. Thus, the supposedly powerful structure remains instable, constantly threatened by dissolution, «a vacillating structure»⁶². Moreover, as Arendt spells out, again only in the German edition, the private interests imported into the Leviathan infect it with something worse than instability: destruction:

«For then it turns out that private interests, which have stolen from the immortality of the commonwealth their super-human duration, have thereby, in turn, carried that element of destruction, which inevitably

⁵⁹ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 146f..

⁶⁰ H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 145.

⁶¹ H. Arendt, *Elemente*, p. 328.

⁶² H. Arendt, *Origins*, p. 142.

pertains to private interests, back into the commonwealth: because they remain bound to human and therefore mortal possession»⁶³.

The Leviathan is set up to transcend the limit which the individual lifespan places on accumulation. Borne by the expansion of sovereign power, accumulation becomes infinite. But as such, it eventually runs into a new limit, marked by Arendt as the geographical limitation of the globe. Besides this outer limit, we can now see that the supposedly transcended limit of properties' consumeability also comes back to haunt the Leviathan. This, at least, is the structure of the argument which Arendt presents when she maintains that «mortal possession» brings forth «destruction» at the heart of the political body. The «future» of accumulation is always already a «pile of ruins».

Conclusion

Only totalitarianism, according to Arendt, has openly affirmed the trajectory of infinite power accumulation necessitated by bourgeois property accumulation. The processual principle was venerated in social Darwinist ideas of a racial logic unfolding through world history, and in the apotheosis of restless fascist mass-movements. Arendt's dissection of the Leviathan provides a template for the spacial and temporal script of totalitarianism. It also serves to expose the self-destructive trajectory of infinite accumulation. This progress does not work. However, the demonstration that expansion will eventually turn against itself spurs little hope for dialectical resolution. The process set in motion by fear-driven self-preservation and delegated to a political body destined for infinite expansion might be self-destructive, but only once nothing other than that self is left. By then, it is too late to save any of the rest of life from destruction. Arendt's interpretation of Hobbes is no doubt a rather willful exercise in backwards-reading. However, it also sets an example for finding the seeds for catastrophe where it is not yet too late.

⁶³ H. Arendt, *Elemente*, p. 330 [transl. EvR].