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Hannah Arendt's spatial thinking: an introduction

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ABSTRACT

Hannah Arendt is not among the philosophers most quoted by geographers and social scientists interested in the spatial dimension of social life; and when she is, authors typically cite one or two examples or concepts of her work, while neglecting to place her related propositions in the context of the various ways she refers to spatiality or territoriality. This paper aims to give a broad overview of her spatial thinking. More precisely, it presents the various spatial concepts Arendt uses (place, space, territory, world, location, etc.), and suggests that a tri-partite spatial ontology is at work behind her lexicon. Since such an ontological trilogy is never explicit in Arendt's work, it is compared to the architecture of Arendt's explicit theorization which is structured around different sets of concepts (identity/plurality; labour/work/action). Then, the paper explains that an ontological analysis of Arendt's proposals allows us to understand the major issues or tragedies that she focused on as being related to tensions between different forms of spatiality. I conclude that Arendt's extensive contributions in diverse conceptual and empirical fields are intrinsically spatially grounded.

KEYWORDS

Arendt, spatiality, space, territory, place, world

INTRODUCTION

References to space in Arendt's work are surprisingly frequent and heterogeneous, and her spatial vocabulary is rich and indeed often central to her argumentation. The most important term certainly is space itself, with its various specifications (public space, space of appearance, space of freedom, space of action, cosmic space, etc.), especially in *The human condition* published in 1958. Territory (either state or national) plays an important role in *The origins of totalitarianism* which made her famous as soon as 1951, but again in *On revolution* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, both published in 1963. The terms world, place, habitat, position and location are similarly used in many books and papers, while spatial objects and categories are often mentioned either for recalling the terrestrial nature of the human condition (Earth), or for specifying the context and modalities of political life (polis, cities, borders, camps, etc.), or even for taking advantage of powerful metaphors (desert, oasis) for comparing the political nature of social environments.

If some commentators of Arendt's work have already underlined the importance and richness of her spatial vocabulary (e.g., Canovan, 1994; Howell, 1993; Macaulay, 1996; Markell, 2011), most of them have focused on one of these concepts, categories or metaphors. Some philosophers or historians of ideas, for example, interested mainly in her critique of science, have concentrated either on 'Earth alienation' or 'world alienation' (e.g., Besse, 2003; Macaulay, 1996; Passerin D'Entreves, 1994). Her analysis of camps, refugees and statelessness has drawn the attention of political scientists, geographers and anthropologists (e.g., Caloz-Tschopp, 1997; Diken & Laustsen, 2005). Similarly, her theory of public space and realm has fuelled dozens of papers during recent decades (e.g., Benhabib, 1993; Cavarero, 2002; Dikeç,

2012; Howell, 1993; Mustafa, Brown, & Tillotson, 2013), and her analysis of national and state territoriality has been cited in political philosophy (e.g., Maloney, 2008). Meanwhile, her use of other concepts such as place, habitat or position have not drawn as much attention. Although academic attention towards the spatial dimension of Arendt's work has not been at all absent, it has nonetheless been fragmentary.

This paper is based on the idea that the richness of her spatial vocabulary and set of concepts deserves our attention as a whole. More precisely, though Arendt never happened to formulate an explicit theory of space(s) or spatiality in her political and anthropological philosophy, I think it is possible to uncover the overall coherency of her various references to spatiality throughout her numerous books and papers written between the early 1950s and mid-1970s. Beyond this, following other authors who have tried to make connections between some forms of spatiality in her work (e.g., Frampton, 1979; Markell, 2011), I want to show that such an approach allows a deeper appreciation of her spatial thinking and may provide fruitful directions for research into the spatial dimension of human collectives.

In the first of three sections, I work on the internal logic of differentiation and articulation of Arendt's spatial concepts and propose recognizing three spatial ontologies in her overall understanding of the human condition. In the second section, I make connections between this typology with the sets of spatial and non-spatial concepts she articulates the most frequently. In the third section, I explain how an ontological approach of Arendt's work can improve our understanding of her critical analysis of modernity.

A WORLD OF SPACES

Taken as a whole, Arendt's writing seems to draw upon a kind of analytics of the spatial dimension of the human condition. Indeed, Arendt's spatial thinking relates to her overall project to distance herself from traditional philosophy keen to speculate on 'human nature' or to dwell on an abstract, metaphysical conception of men,¹ seeking instead to ground her reflections in the idea that any human life, any human action, deserves to be interrogated in relation to its material basis, which takes spatial form or requires some kind of spatial arrangement. Therefore, Arendt's concern with space was guided by empirical evidence as well as a theoretical ambition to formulate a kind of anthropological philosophy and political theory encompassing spatiality. Behind the richness of her spatial vocabulary already underlined above, I propose discerning three spatial ontologies at work in her writing.

Taking place: bio-physical earth and the ontology of material entities and milieux

A first spatial ontology Arendt refers to is related to 'nature', and the spatial arrangement of its objects and specific processes. This is the spatiality of 'Earth' and 'cosmic space', as well as the geographical regions she happens to mention, notably in *The origins of totalitarianism* and *On revolution*, such as the vast North American plains or the rugged plateaus of South Africa. For Arendt, these material entities are somehow taken for granted; but she reminds us from time to time that modern knowledge concerning them has borrowed extensively from the abstract space of geometry and related sciences of physics, astronomy and topography.

For Arendt, these entities located in empirical space are of no interest in themselves. She refers to them only because they give a varying material frame to the human condition that is her real interest. The Earth itself is conceived 'as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life ...' (1958, p. 52), and is the first spatial object she introduces in *The human condition* as if it was its very basic context of existence:

The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice. (1958, p. 2)

For Arendt, in a manner similar to Montesquieu and Tocqueville, whom she quotes several times, the very nature of such geographical entities at times influences social and political organization: for example, the vast North American plains are said to have influenced the kind of political organization promoted during the American Revolution (see 1990/1963; Maloney, 2008, pp. 217–231) and the ‘broad spaces of wilderness’ and the poor quality of the soils in South Africa are said to have been decisive in the adoption of the specific way of living of the Boers (1973/1951, pp. 191–192).

In so doing, Arendt ground her analysis on a very common understanding, dating back to early modernity, of the physical and living environment within which human beings are immersed. Her notion of place, borrowed from Aristotle, also refers to this ontology: ‘the location of one (man) can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects’ (1958, p. 57). Literally understood, this first spatial ontology suggests that human beings ‘take place’ in a biophysical setting, in natural space, and interact with/in it through experience.

This first spatial ontology is also the one in which she grounds her understanding of the pure materiality of objects, and the ‘biological life’ of animals and human beings. Referring to them in this framework, she mobilizes the concept of identity in its most frequent meaning in traditional philosophy: the identity (sameness) of the objects and of the organic bodies which take place in the biophysical world. However, as we will see below, at this scale, she constantly recalls that objects and living beings should never be understood according to this unique ontology (contrary to the dominant mode in sciences, for example) and that this ontology should be subordinated to a second one, the phenomenological.

Having a position: common worlds and the phenomenal ontology

For Arendt, as well as for the phenomenological tradition (Husserl, Heidegger, etc.) she was taught as a student, ‘world’ refers to another kind of ontology. If the world ‘contains many things, natural and artificial, living and dead, transient and sempiternal’ (1978, p. 19), these things are related to each other thanks to their common characteristic of ‘appearing’ before human beings:

All (these things) have in common that they appear and hence are meant to be seen, heard, touched, tasted, and smelled, to be perceived by sentient creatures endowed with the appropriate sense organs [...] In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, Being and Appearing coincide [...] Nothing and nobody exists in this world whose very being does not suppose a spectator. (1978/1971, p. 19, her emphasis)

Put this way, Arendt’s conception of the reality of objects does not lie in the first spatial ontology, derived from the objectification done by scientists who tend to subordinate phenomena and appearance to causal and functional relations with, sometimes imperceptible, ‘real’ entities.

This dual ontology already plays a dominant role in her writings in the 1950s, allowing her to underline what she describes as the very specificity of human lives on earth: building worlds and erecting a ‘home’ on earth:

If nature and the earth generally constitute the condition of human life, then the world and the things of the world constitute the condition under which this specifically human life can be at

home on earth ... without being at home in the midst of things whose durability makes them fit for use and for erecting a world whose very permanence stands in direct contrast to life, this life would never be human. (1958, pp. 134–135)

However, her writings in the 1970s subordinate ever more clearly the objectivity of things and beings from their appearance to living beings (human as well as animal): In the *Life of the mind*, following the philosopher Merleau-Ponty and the zoologist Adolf Portmann, whom she quotes several times – ‘not what something is, but how it “appears” is the research problem’ (Portmann quoted in 1978/1971, p. 28) – and opposing the traditional scientific belief in the dichotomy and hierarchy between ‘(true) Being and (mere) Appearance’, she states that

appearances (should no longer be) depreciated as ‘secondary qualities’ but understood as necessary conditions for essential processes that go on inside the living organism [...] the appearances are not there for the sake of the life process but, on the contrary, the life process is there for the sake of appearances. (1978/1971, p. 27)

In fact, compared to Heidegger, she is less interested in individual worlds than in ‘common worlds’, in the way human beings build and share common references to the things of their environment:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time. (1958, p. 52)

This means that, for Arendt, the materiality of the world is of some philosophical relevance when conceived of as the context shared by individuals living in a common world made of a multiplicity of appearances. In other words, her project mainly aims to understand how human beings, each perceiving things according his/her own ‘point of view’ and ‘position’, interact through the mediation of these things:

Under the conditions of a common world, reality is not guaranteed primarily by the ‘common nature’ of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object. (1958, pp. 57–58)

This led her to introduce the concept of plurality which allows her to underline the importance of the diversity of positions and points of view in the building of common worlds with the same set of material things:

‘nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is is meant to be perceived by somebody. Not Man but men inhabit the planet. Plurality is the law of the earth’ (1978/1971, p. 19).²

Taking a stand: speech, action and personal identity

The third spatial ontology adopted by Arendt refers mainly to the space of action or, as she curiously prefers saying, the ‘space of appearance’:

‘The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action’ (1958, p. 199).

Compared to the other two – the objectifiable spatiality of natural things and processes and the phenomenological spatiality of worlds and homes – the present one is truly original and has been the most commented by philosophers and social scientists (e.g., Honig, 1993; Topper, 2011; Yeatman, Barbour, Hansen, & Zolkos, 2011). Though it requires the other two, as I

emphasize below, this form of spatiality is fundamentally political, contextual and fragile. It is what gives ‘power’ to men:

‘power comes into being only if and when men join themselves together for the purpose of action, and it will disappear when, for whatever reason, they disperse and desert one another’ (1990, p. 175).

With such a contextual and intersubjective understanding of power and politics, Arendt radically and explicitly differs from Aristotle, who conceived man as an abstract political animal (*zoon politicon*); she also differs from any substantialist conception of the political; again, action and power are ‘situated’, as we would say today. They require the co-presence of people – such as the Pilgrim fathers signing a pact on the Mayflower, the assemblies of the ‘elementary republics’ called for by Thomas Jefferson, or the soviets in the early times of the Bolshevik revolution, mentioned several times in *On revolution* (1990/1963) – adopting different perspectives on the same object and interacting on this basis:

‘There is no truly political substance. Politics comes into being in intermediary space and it builds itself as a relation’ (1995/1956–1959, p. 11).

Therefore, this form of spatiality is praxeological. It requires human beings in co-presence, each having his or her own subjectivity and ability to objectify the others from their respective appearance; and it requires also the common will to take advantage of this co-presence for communicating. Contrary to the world of appearances in which animals also live, Arendt suggests that human beings appear in a specific way to each other, a ‘fully human’ way (1958, p. 37), in producing intentional spatial arrangements made of bodies and appearances for communicating. As such, ‘space of appearance’ is highly contingent:

unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, [the space of appearance] does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men – as in the case of great catastrophes when the body politic of a people is destroyed – but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever. (1958, p. 199)

For this reason, the space of appearance has also been said to be ‘performative’ (e.g., Mustafa et al., 2013).

It is worth noting here that, to explain the stakes of the space of action, Arendt invokes another meaning for the concept of identity: the personal identity (ipseity), the ‘who’, of an individual that results in action and speech. She insists on the difference between this aspect of identity and mere biophysical identity (sameness):

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice [...] This disclosure of ‘who’ in contradistinction to ‘what’ somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does. (1958, p. 179)

PLACE–POSITION–STAND AND ARENDT’S OWN TRILOGIES

As with the trilogy of spatial ontologies proposed above, the corresponding triad of phrases – Taking place/Having Position/Taking a stand – does not appear as such in Arendt’s writing. At most, the diversity of ontological statuses of the spaces she refers to is implicit, and she certainly never expressed an intention to formulate a spatial theory of human condition per se. Rather

than asking why she did not – which would be a rhetorical and highly speculative question – it is worth trying to understand how this ontological questioning complements her own vocabulary and typologies. In fact, we have already seen that the way she refers to identity (sameness), plurality and identity (ipseity) corresponds quite well with the ontological trilogy proposed here. But she gave this trilogy less importance and centrality than another, the one concerning human activities, which comprises the main set of concepts she develops in *The human condition* (1958).

Arendt's typology of human activities and its ontological implications

This book, devoted to the deep transformations introduced in the human condition by modernity, is based on an analytics of three types of human activities: labour, work and action. They are said to characterize any man in accordance with his concrete conditions.

At first glance, there are some similarities between this trilogy and the spatial one introduced above. Labour refers to the satisfaction of the basic needs (alimentation, shelter and reproduction) of a man (animal laborens), and to interpret the concept she systematically objectifies conditions of livelihood and survival:

Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself.
(1958, p. 7)

Said otherwise, labour is mainly understood according to the first spatial ontology, as '[these activities] are the least worldly and at the same time the most natural of all things' (1958, p. 96). In comparison, 'action', which Arendt holds in highest regard as the activity through which human beings are 'fully human', refers to the individual capacity to speak and interact with others in order to initiate something new in terms of agency: 'Truly political activities, [...] acting and speaking, cannot be performed at all without the presence of others, without the public, without a space constituted by the many' (1961/1954, p. 217). Indeed, action has to do with praxeological spatiality.

However, a deeper analysis of her own trilogy makes clear that it does not fully match the ontological typology proposed above. Action, for example, is often said to require built space as a setting for human interactions:

Before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space being the public realm of the polis and its structure the law (1958, pp. 194–195).

Symmetric evidence is at play for labour: if labour does not contribute to action and the space of appearance – 'The activity of labor does not need the presence of others' (1958, p. 22) – it nonetheless has relied more and more on pieces of work which belong to a third category:

Tools and instruments which can ease the effort of labor considerably are themselves not a product of labor but of work; they do not belong in the process of consumption but are part and parcel of the world of use objects. (1958, p. 121)

As a matter of fact, the third term of her trilogy of human activities – 'work' – designates homo faber's production of lasting artefacts. The ontological status of these artefacts is complex. They are indeed elements of the objective world and can be described as such: they are said to be parcels of materiality, liable to be eroded and to disappear, unless men labour at keeping them useful and efficient. But more important, their use depends on their appearance, providing a

lasting environment to human beings: ‘the things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life’ (1958, p. 137). Therefore, beyond being useful instruments for labour, as recalled above, Arendt sees them as pieces for the building of common worlds (such as monuments), the shaping of common experiences (such as ‘works of art’), as well as the necessary outputs of reification of thought. As such,

viewed as part of the world, the products of work – and not the products of labor – guarantee the permanence and durability without which a world would not be possible at all’ (1958, p. 94).

Therefore, none of the three concepts Arendt uses for typifying human activities can be correlated with a single spatial ontology.

Arendt’s focus of spatial partition

Moreover, Arendt tends to ground the differentiation of these activities in a specific mode of spatial arrangement. She often states that each type of human activity has (or should have) its specific location. This spatial differentiation is at the very basis of her opposition between the private and public realms. Arendt happens to state that in Ancient Greece, which serves as the main recurrent reference for her argument, the public realm requires the plurality – ‘The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised’ (1958, p. 57) – and specific locations – public spaces – where this plurality gives way to action (1968, p. 30), where what is said can be heard by others.

Symmetrically, the private realm in the polis of in Ancient Greece is said to correspond to a specific space devoted to labour, work and the ‘intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses’ (1958, p. 50). According to Arendt, the very meaning of private property in Ancient Greece was related to this spatial necessity:

the four walls of one’s private property offer the only reliable hiding place from the common public world, not only from everything that goes on in it but also from its very publicity, from being seen and being heard [...] a privately owned place to hide in. (1958, p. 71)

Meanwhile, this partition between public/private spaces was also a way of identifying the owners as members of the political community whose action makes public space what it has to be. Therefore,

the distinction between the private and public realms [...] equals the distinction between things that should be shown and things that should be hidden [...] each human activity points to its proper location in the world (1958, pp. 72–73).

I will recall below that Arendt grounds her critique of modernity with the observation that, from the early modern ages and much more profoundly since the nineteenth century, the very nature of the private realm has changed, labour and work invading the public realm, weakening at the same time the political role of the latter.

Said this way, Arendt’s three types of human activities and their corresponding locations in Ancient Greece long before becoming blurred by modernity, seem to be grounded in a normative spatial partitioning and ordering of the surface of the Earth in accord with the requirements of each activity (Kateb, 1984). This way of seeing has been deemed ‘territorial’, Arendt’s trilogy functioning ‘as disjunctive categories into which individual instances of human activity can be sorted, each of which properly belongs to a separate domain’ (Markell, 2011, p.

16).³ It explains why she highlights the roles of the legislator and the architect. The legislator decides what is public and what is private, and how to behave in both spaces:

The law originally was identified with this boundary line [...] between the private and the public, sheltering and protecting both realms while, at the same time, separating them from each other' (1958, p. 63).⁴

The architect shapes the built environment so as to make both private and public activities possible in their respective locations, making, as underlined by Frampton (1979), edifices that fit their respective requirements while shaping common worlds (the buildings contributing to collective edification).

It is worth recalling that this territorial way of seeing is also adopted by Arendt at other scales; she defines the polis itself according to the perimeter of application of the law – ‘The law of the city-state [...] was quite literally a wall, without which there might have been an agglomeration of houses, a town (asty), but not a city, a political community’ (1958, pp. 63–64); she also explains the state territory in a similar way:

'territory' [...] is a political and legal concept, and not merely a geographical term. It relates not so much, and not primarily, to a piece of land as to the space between individuals in a group whose members are bound to, and at the same time separated and protected from each other by all kinds of relationships, based on a common language, religion, a common history, customs, and laws. (1965, p. 263)

For Arendt, the polis as well as the state territory are mainly common worlds, anchored in phenomenological and praxeological ontologies, and their material aspect – ‘an agglomeration of houses’ or ‘a piece of land’ – is nothing more than a basis or instrument for their institutionalization.

To illustrate the kind of space the law of the polis or the territory delineates, Arendt happens to use geographical metaphors – ‘desert’ and ‘oasis’ (Goetz & Younès, 2009) – which conforms with her tendency to understand common worlds and politics with partitioned spaces:

Each law creates, from the start, a space where it is valid, and this space is the world in which we can move in complete freedom. That which stands outside this space is deprived of law and, strictly speaking, is devoid of a world: in terms of the community of human life, it is a desert. (1995/1956–1959, p. 125, my translation)

Conversely, ‘If we equate [...] spaces of freedom [...] with the political realm itself, we shall be inclined to think of them as islands in a sea or as oases in a desert’ (1990/1963, p. 275). At this stage of the paper, we can summarize its argument as follows: if Arendt gives much importance to the spatial dimension of human condition, she mainly casts her attention, especially in *The human condition* (1958), on how places and spaces are arranged according to the requirements of each type of human activity. Although her work does not explicitly theorize the diversity of ontological statuses of the space she mobilizes, I think that such a focus on ontology allows us to understand what is at stake in many of her analyses in *The human condition* as well as other milestones of her work.

A WORLD OF THREATS

In most of her publications during the 1950s and 1960s, Hannah Arendt focused on tensions or tragedies which took place mainly between the late-eighteenth and mid-twentieth century, but also, more broadly, since the beginnings of the modern period. These tensions or tragedies are highly diverse: while some are said to be central to contemporary and recent history – anti-

Semitism, totalitarian movements and regimes, increasing numbers of stateless peoples, concentration and extermination camps – others are described as major features of modernity since the Renaissance, with more pervasive influence, such as land expropriation. In many of her books and papers, she invokes space or spatiality as a factor or cause in analysing these tensions and tragedies, for example: the hunger for land and expansion in her explanation of imperialism (*The origins of totalitarianism*, 1951); the invasion of labour and work into public space (*The human condition*, 1958); the transformation of the status of land property in modern times (*The human condition*, 1958); the ‘earth alienation’ resulting from the progress of science (*The conquest of space and the stature of man*, 1963) and the deprivation of liberty of movement and freedom of speech in public space (*The origins of totalitarianism*, 1951; *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 1963). But the spatial dimension of her analysis is rarely theorized, and when it is, it is limited to the specific empirical domain she is addressing. At this stage, I want to argue that most of these tensions and tragedies, if not all of them, can be understood in reference to the various ontologies which characterize her way of dealing with space.

Earth alienation

Two of these tensions dwell at the intersection of the spatiality of modern science when it analyses the Earth and the spatiality of the world. They lead to a double diagnosis: Earth alienation and world alienation. Both were already present at the core of Heidegger’s phenomenology, and evident in studies in cultural history by contemporaries such as Koyré (1957), as both authors, quoted by Arendt, were intensely concerned with the dramatic transformations brought about by modern science.

Arendt introduces *The human condition* with an analysis of what she calls the double temptation of modern men: the ‘twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self’ (1958, p. 6). The first is fuelled by the attraction of men to ‘cosmic space’. In the first pages of the book, she illustrates this attraction with the launch of Sputnik, the first artificial satellite, by the USSR in 1957. This highly mediatized event stimulated Arendt’s thinking on the possible mass-flight of human beings from Earth, and the colonization of other planets. Elsewhere, she refers to the ‘conquest of space’ as the ultimate step of a process by which ‘modern science reached its most glorious and, at the same time, most baffling achievements’ (2007/1963, p. 48). As a matter of fact, Arendt, following Koyré, sees modern science (whose beginnings she traces back to Galileo) and the deep cultural revolution it provoked as the root of this first form of tension. It is in this vein that she is thus able to point to ‘Earth alienation underlying the whole development of natural science in the modern age’ (1958, p. 264).

For Arendt, this alienation is caused by the capacity of science to think about the universe from an imaginary point of view, the ‘Archimedian point’, which allows objectifying the components of the Earth and makes irrelevant both ‘perception of our five senses into the total awareness of reality’ and ‘normal language’, both usually forming the ‘common sense’ of men (2007/1963, pp. 43–44). Meanwhile, this renouncement by science of ‘common sense’ made room for a revolutionary transformation of our capacity to transform our environment, leading to alienation from nature as a specific dimension of Earth alienation:

Ever since man learned to master it (nature) to such an extent that the destruction of all organic life on earth with man-made instruments has become conceivable and technically possible, he has been alienated from nature (1973, p. 298).

Therefore, modern science and technology, by way of their manner of mobilizing abstract space and objectifying nature from an Archimedian point of view (ontology 1), are, for Arendt, the

very sources of this Earth alienation which fragilizes the anchorage of men's experience in their perceived environment (ontology 2).

World alienation

Broadly speaking, Arendt's concept of world alienation consists of the loss, by men, of their position in the world, or the loss of the world itself. Since the world she is interested in is a common world, the world alienation Arendt focuses on is more precisely 'the atrophy of the space of appearance and the withering of common sense' (1958, p. 209).

Parallel to her way of illustrating earth alienation with a specific technological event – the invention of the telescope by Galileo – Arendt associates world alienation with another foundational event: the Reform and the seizure of clergy properties (1958, p. 253 et seq.). This event opened a lengthy process, over centuries, of the progressive loss of the political and civic character of property, and the progressive transformation of property into a good liable to be bought, sold and privately accumulated:

Originally, property meant no more or less than to have one's location in a particular part of the world and therefore to belong to the body politic, that is, to be the head of one of the families which together constituted the public realm. (1958, p. 61)

Following the Reform and the influential works of Hobbes and Locke, who put private property at the very centre of their political philosophy, modern societies became

organization(s) of propertyowners who, instead of claiming access to the public realm because of their wealth, demanded protection from it for the accumulation of more wealth (1958, p. 68).

Therefore, the powerful move towards expropriation since the Reformation, which gave way to the commodification of land, has made land a material object (ontology 1) largely defined by its monetary value. It weakened or jeopardized the ability of man 'to build a permanent home for himself' (1958, p. 304) and the ability of private property to define the rules of speech and action in public space (ontology 3). Combined with the irruption of labour and work, once limited to private space, in the public realm (see below), these changes led to

the utter extinction of the very difference between the private and public realms [regarding this specific functionality], the submersion of both in the sphere of the social (1958, p. 69).

The rise of 'the social' and the weakening of individuality

More generally, Arendt relates world alienation to the rise of 'the social'. What she means by the latter can be defined negatively as the transformation of a people into a new form which constrains the differences between individuals: 'society expects from each of its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to "normalize" its members, to make them behave, to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement' (1958, pp. 39– 40). Behind this rising 'social' is a process which defines individuals according to their sameness (ontology 1) with no attention to the diversity of points of views and position, to plurality (ontology 2) and to the power of acting (ontology 3).

When asking herself what fuelled this process, she points again to science (including psychology and the social sciences), and scientific conceptions of space, since for the scientist:

man is no more than a special case of organic life and [...] man's habitat – the earth, together with earthbound laws – is no more than a special borderline case of absolute, universal laws, that is, laws that rule the immensity of the universe. (2007/1963, p. 43)

Those who adopt the Archimedian point 'reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal' (1958, p. 45). From this point of view, '[human] activities will indeed appear to ourselves as no more than "overt behavior," which we can study with the same methods we use to study the behavior of rats' (2007/1963, p. 54). Arendt deemed the behavioural vision of man adopted by some social scientists the dominant vision of man in modern societies: 'behaviour has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationships ...' (1958, p. 41).

Arendt, however, questions several other modern institutions and ideologies which, in her view, have promoted a similar vision. Monotheistic religions are among them; being based on the belief that man has been created in the image of God, they are, according to Arendt, at the very origin of the idea that men are merely 'repeated instances, more or less, of the same' (1995/1956–1959, p. 33, my translation). But Arendt also points to nationalism which promotes 'ethnic homogeneity' (1973, p. 301). Against this conception of the nation emphasizing uniformity, she again advocates a conception elevating plurality:

The more points of view there are within a people, from which it is possible to consider the same world which all equally inhabit, the greater and more open the nation will be' (1995/1956–1959, pp. 153–154, my translation)

Therefore, for Arendt, sciences, monotheisms, nationalisms and social ideologies shape societies of individuals who are essentially all the same. Parallel to this equivalence of individuals – their sameness – is an equivalence of places (ontology 1), by which these individuals are defined and identified. Arendt's conceptions of society and the spatiality of places provide a frame by which she conceptualizes the uniformity of the whole and the equivalence of items, and the impossibility of recognizing the importance of individualities or sustaining a plurality of points of view.

This transformation has been fuelled by the metamorphosis mentioned above in the public and private realms, and in the spatial relation between them. With modernity, labour and work entered the public realm following the growing tendency of modern states to consider

the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping (1958, p. 28).

Thus the public realm, filled with social activities susceptible to control, became more and more a field of regulation of individual behaviours aiming towards conformism (ontology 1), to the detriment of action and speech (ontology 3). Meanwhile, the private realm was reduced to a place where 'intimate life' leads 'an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence' (1958, p. 50). The flight 'from the world into the self' (1958, p. 6) that Arendt mentions in the introduction of *The human condition*, parallel to the 'flight from the earth into the universe', ends up in an impoverished private space.

The 'tragedy of the nation-state': anti-semitism and statelessness

Beyond 'Earth' and 'world' alienations, Arendt points to a second set of tensions related to transformations in state territoriality. Analysing the rise and triumph of the nation-state, which she sees as the 'the partially successful conquest of the state by the nation' (1973/1951, p. 354), she points to the fact that the state was no longer able to protect:

all inhabitants in its territory no matter what their nationality, and [...] forced to recognize only 'nationals' as citizens, to grant full civil and political rights only to those who belonged to the national community by right of origin and fact of birth. (1973/1951, p. 230)

Therefore, under the pressure of nationalism, the state became accustomed to defining each individual as a 'member of the nation' (1973/1951, p. 231) – that is to say an instance of an objectified human grouping (ontology 1) – instead of according to his individuality (identity of the 'who') and specific contribution to the space of appearance (ontology 3).

More precisely, this 'tragedy of the nation-state', according to Arendt, is one of the sources of two major catastrophes that she patiently analyses in *The origins of totalitarianism*: anti-Semitism, which she sees as the result of a tendency to define the nation on a homogeneous basis; and statelessness, which leads individuals deprived of nationality to be 'thrown out of one of these tightly organized closed communities (nations) (and) thrown out of the family of nations altogether' (1973/1951, pp. 293–294). The stateless individual could no more hope for salvation than to find 'a way out of the barbed-wire labyrinth into which events had driven them' (1973/1951, p. 292). For Arendt, this stateless condition is not only a source of homelessness, but also of 'the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective' (1973, 296).⁵ In other words, statelessness emblemizes the collision of the spatiality of home and the spatiality of nation-states, as clearly expressed in this excerpt imbued with spatial concepts:

What is unprecedented [in the case of statelessness] is not the loss of a home but the impossibility of finding a new one [...] Suddenly, there was no place on earth where migrants could go without the severest restrictions, no country where they would be assimilated, no territory where they could found a new community of their own. This, moreover, had next to nothing to do with any material problem of overpopulation; it was a problem not of space but of political organization. (1973, pp. 293–294, emphasis mine)

If the rise of nation-states and the conflation of the territoriality of nations with the territoriality of states are seen by Arendt as a source of world alienation, the decline of nation-states, which according to Arendt starts at the end of the nineteenth century with imperialism, introduces yet another tension between different spatial ontologies prevalent in modern conceptions of nations and states.

The 'tragedy of the nation-state': imperialism and racism

For Arendt, the exploration of cosmic space is guided by the same kind of motivation as colonialism and imperialism. She states that colonial expansion was in part the result of man's hunger for space, aided by mechanical and technical progress which made huge extensions of space accessible and contributed to the 'shrinking of geographic distances' (1973/1951, p. 235).

For Arendt, this expansionist imperative contradicts the basic principles of nation-state territoriality. Indeed, with colonization, European states expanded on surfaces which had nothing to do with national territories; they encompassed populations who had nothing to do with the nations that nation-states had held as their social foundations. Arendt sees this paradox as a major source of modern racism – the staging of ontological differences between original European nations and colonized people in order to reconcile this contradiction – and the bureaucratic management of colonized peoples. The expansionism of colonial empires, based on an imaginary of available lands waiting to be seized (ontology 1), collided with the territoriality of nation-states, which was built on nationalism and a common sense of belonging (ontology 2), and 'could only destroy the political body of the nation-state' (1973/1951, p. 125).

Totalitarianism and the ‘killing of man’s individuality’

Following imperialism, Arendt focuses on totalitarianism, also seen as a form of nation-state decadence. The forms of spatiality she refers to for understanding the rise and nature of totalitarianism, however, are more numerous and their articulation is more complex.

A totalitarian movement is said to be ‘international in organization, all-comprehensive in its ideological scope, and global in its aspiration’ (1973/1951 p. 389). It aims at universal domination which flouts all rules of coexistence between states and between nations. However, in seizing state power, and framing itself within the territory of the nation-state, ‘it obviously puts itself in a paradoxical situation’ (1973/1951, p. 389): it is led to use state power and the national imaginary to serve its wider ambitions. Taking over the means of the state, it masters the instruments both for the external conquest of space and the internal conquest of human spirits by way of propaganda. And, for Arendt, totalitarian propaganda is the most sophisticated form of negation of phenomenological experience. It aims to create

the gruesome quiet of an entirely imaginary world’ (1973/1951, p. 353), disconnected from experience. Propaganda aims that ‘modern masses [...] do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself (1973/1951, p. 351).

Therefore propaganda, as a sophisticated tool for the negation of phenomenological experience, plurality and common worlds (ontology 2), as well as the public realm as a whole (ontology 3), gives way to a society of similar and ‘atomized individuals’ (1973/1951, p. 407) (ontology 1): ‘The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective’ (1958, p. 58). For describing what is at stake with totalitarianism in this regard, Arendt again takes advantage of powerful spatial metaphors: ‘Total terror’, which is for her the advanced stage of totalitarianism:

substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions [...] By pressing men against each other, total terror destroys the space between them. (1973/1951, pp. 466–467)

Though Hobbes, often quoted in her work, is not mentioned here, this sentence almost perfectly evokes the towering figure of the frontispiece of the Leviathan, his body made of subjects in perfect alignment with one gaze and one perspective – that of the sovereign.

Camps as the ultimate spatial tools of totalitarian regimes

Concentration and extermination camps are the ultimate expression of the project of totalitarianism – ‘the true central institution of totalitarian organizational power’ (1973/1951, p. 438) – and, we should add, of its spatial dimensions.

She devotes many pages to this question in *The origins of totalitarianism* and in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and once again she mobilizes the various conceptions of man and identity which are at stake in this context. Camps are said to negate individual worlds and individuality even more than propaganda, but on the same mode. The process of negation itself is conceptualized this way: negation of the moral person; then the ‘killing of man’s individuality’ (1973/1951, p. 455); then the transformation of human beings ‘into specimens of the human animal’, into pure bodies; and finally the killing of the bodies. These camps are said to be the ‘laboratories’ of totalitarian ideologies:

What totalitarian ideologies therefore aim at is not the transformation of the outside world or the revolutionizing transmutation of society, but the transformation of human nature itself. The concentration camps are the laboratories where changes in human nature are tested ...
(1973/1951, p. 458)

But, as she goes on:

Human nature as such is at stake, and even though it seems that these experiments succeed not in changing man but only in destroying him, by creating a society in which the nihilistic banality of homo homini lupus is consistently realized, one should bear in mind the necessary limitations to an experiment which requires global control in order to show conclusive results. (1973/1951, p. 459)

Throughout her analysis, Arendt makes clear that this dehumanization at play in the camps has a strong spatial dimension. And her explanation is built on the same set of spatial concepts and ontologies than runs through her entire work. Camps isolate individuals from relatives and friends; they deprive them of their freedom of movement, speech and action; and they do away with all private space of being and interaction. All along this process, before culminating in the killing of bodies in concentration camps, personal identities had been denied, 'human beings be(ing) transformed into specimens of the human animal' (1973/1951, p. 455), not long after the destruction of civic identities with 'denationalization'. For Arendt, the camps are the stage where cold and hyper-rationalist objectification of things, places and bodies, 'according to strictly "scientific" standards' (1973/1951, 458) (ontology 1) is adopted to deprive their occupants of common worlds (ontology 2) and deny them any capacity for political action (ontology 3).

CONCLUSION

This paper has aimed to show how spatial references, common throughout Arendt's oeuvre, may be understood as collectively embodying a multi-faceted spatial ontology. Arendt never herself produced a typology of these forms of spatiality, and never tried to shape a spatial theory of modernity and political action per se. Rather, she put at the very centre of her argumentation concepts that differentiate the conditions of collective existence of individuals (sameness, ipseity and plurality) and the modalities of human activity (labour, work and action). Her references to space are guided by a concern to continually recall the empirical basis of the human condition. Nonetheless, it is striking to note how constant she is in mentioning the role of places and locations, and the importance of spatial arrangements and territorial institutions, and how often she uses powerful spatial metaphors (walls, oases, deserts, etc.) when shaping and arguing her anthropological and political philosophy. This paper has demonstrated how she combines and differentiates, often in a hierarchical way, three spatial ontologies: a 'natural' space (where things and beings naturally take place), a phenomenal space (built by a multitude of individuals for shaping common worlds according to their respective positions), and a praxeological space (through which individuals take a stand).

The importance given to spatial features in her work and understanding of the human condition informs what has been at stake with space in modern times, and what kind of social spatiality she envisioned and advocated. In history of man, space matters because people live in specific places and environments which accordingly provide various opportunities for habitation and organization; space matters because everything and being enters human reality through its appearance, and because each individual uses the senses to engage with distances and positions while constructing a point of view; space matters because the plurality of individuals means a multiplicity of points of views and relative positions, which have to be shared and discussed

for making possible common worlds. Space has been particularly at stake during the last centuries because modernity has propagated forces threatening the constitutive spatiality of individuality and common worlds: modern science has promoted a conception of the physical and organic world where appearances are seen as secondary and illusory, and societies are reduced to atomized individuals; modern theories of social contract, nationalism, imperialism and totalitarianism have successively or simultaneously denied plurality and the necessity of a corresponding public space for the shaping of action. The worldly spatiality she calls for refers to ancient models, mainly the Ancient Greek cities, where the institutional and material shaping of spaces and places allowed individuals to hide in private realms and to appear to each other in public realms.

While this analysis of Arendt's work was conceived as a contribution to Arendtian studies, it is also aimed at encouraging readers specialized in the spatial dimension of social theory to engage more closely with her work. Arendt's work, beyond providing rich lines of analysis regarding what she terms the 'space of appearance' and the 'space of action', and offering useful critical approaches to nation-state territoriality, invites us to move beyond any narrow or singular conception of spatiality and to deepen our understanding of how spatial ontologies articulate in human activities and institutions. An important challenge for exploring the continuing relevance of Arendt's spatial concepts, therefore, would be to apply them to contemporary facts or processes. Though many scholars have been keen to study refugee migrations and camps, or collective protest in public spaces (from the Indignados movement to Occupy, the Arab spring and Nuit debout) during the last decade, often while quoting Arendt, very few have taken advantage of the overall frame she provides for understanding the various spatial dimensions of these phenomena. Regarding collective protest in public spaces, for example, Arendt invites us to produce a political anthropology of such human movements and gatherings that sheds light on their material arrangements, the experiences of individuals involved, and the processes of world alienation and world making which are at stake. Such an analysis could lead us to conclude that contemporary societies are experiencing deep transformations, variously supporting, challenging or nuancing Arendt's diagnosis on modern societies: are we witnessing in public space today the continuing triumph of societies made of atomized individuals, mainly labouring, or a renewed space of plurality and action, nurturing the 'who' of distinct identities, with all the political implications this implies?

NOTES

1. Arendt refers to 'men', rarely to 'human beings', and never to 'men and women'. Though using 'men' to designate all human beings, men as well as women, is no longer acceptable in contemporary writing, I will retain it here in order to remain as faithful as possible to Arendt's language.

2. Since plurality and the diversity of positions and points of views on objects are decisive in the spatiality of common worlds, Arendt happens to write that love, a concept to which she dedicated her Ph.D. thesis, is 'worldless' and that when we are thinking we are 'nowhere'. For Arendt, two persons being in love, or making love, annihilate the 'in-between' of their bodies not because they are close to each other, but because, for Arendt, love annihilates their respective individuality: 'the in-between [...] is cut' (2002, Nov 1951); 'the world disappears under the empire of passion' (1995/1956–1959, p. 137). This is why she writes that love is independent of location, and '(in love) the differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives' (1958, p. 57) are meaningless. Regarding to thinking, she explains that it is somehow a-spatial: to the question 'where are we when we think?' Arendt answers: 'Nowhere'. The reason for this lies in the fact that for Arendt the thinking being escapes phenomenal

experience, transcends specific places, and deals with universals instead of material things and beings which surrounds him or her: 'the thinking ego, moving among universals, among invisible essences, is, strictly speaking, nowhere; it is homeless in an emphatic sense' (1978/1971, p. 199).

3. Markell adds however that this disjunction follows a set of functional relations between the categories (as seen above for private property).

4. Following Carl Schmitt's 'Nomos of the Earth', she grounds this development in the ancient etymology of the Greek word for law (nomos), which originally means 'spatial fragmentation'.

5. We should mention that in this quote Arendt uses the noun 'place' with a different, non-Aristotelian meaning than found in most other occurrences in her writings.

6. She refers several times to Cecil Rhodes, who for Arendt embodies this obsession, and for whom 'expansion is everything' (1973/1951, p. 124). In *The origins of totalitarianism* he is quoted in an epigraph: 'I would annex the planets, if I could'.

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