

The Outdoor Condition: Reading Arendt on a Warming Planet

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Abstract: Is Hannah Arendt’s political thought relevant to the contemporary planetary situation? This article draws on *The Human Condition* and some of Arendt’s ancient and modern sources to answer this question, using a phenomenological distinction between outdoors and indoors to make sense of three likely types of artificial adaptation to a warming planet. Arendt’s account of the importance of the “body-bound senses” of an “earth-bound creature” need not result in the problematic fetishization of immediate rather than mediated knowledge, or of an “earthly nature” supposedly prior to and independent of the human artifice, but can draw attention to the narrowing of human beings’ “angle of receptivity” to a surprising and unpredictable reality. This perspective, however, also discloses the limits of Arendt’s work in the face of ecological transformations that are simultaneously planetary in scale and highly unequal in their consequences.

1. The “Thin Envelope of Atmosphere”

Early in the new year of 1958, prompted by an urgent request from her editor, Hannah Arendt sat down to compose, “in great haste,” a brief “Prologue” for *The Human Condition*, whose typescript she had delivered to the University of Chicago Press the preceding August.¹ On her desk,

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¹Arendt wrote the “Prologue” between January 2 and 5: Hannah Arendt to Alexander Morin and Irving Wasserman, January 2 and January 5, 1958, University of Chicago Press Records (UCPR), Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, box 39, f. 1 (“in great haste” is from her January 5 letter, also in the Hannah Arendt Papers [HAP], Manuscript Division,

apparently, were some clippings of recent articles from the *New York Times*. One story from the previous October, about the launch of Sputnik, characterized the Soviet achievement as a “step toward escape from man’s imprisonment to earth,” a phrase Arendt quoted, almost verbatim, on the first page of her text, though without identifying its source.² On the next page, again without attribution, she cited the prognostications of scientists that the manipulation of “frozen germ plasm from people of demonstrated ability under the microscope” would make it possible to “produce superior human beings.”³ This notion came from the *Times*’s coverage of a “scientific symposium” called “The Next Hundred Years,” which had been held the previous November at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel to celebrate the centenary of Joseph E. Seagram & Sons.⁴ And this scientific vision of a technologically produced “future man,” Arendt asserted, expressed the “same desire to escape from imprisonment to the earth” that had been manifest in the “relief” that greeted Sputnik’s ascent into the heavens.⁵ In the era of Elon Musk and the transgenic mouse, Arendt’s examples are unlikely to seem outlandish. Still, readers might be surprised by her suggestion that these examples make manifest the same desire. What could Arendt have meant by the term “earth,” such that she could see evidence of its “repudiation” in the public reaction to the Sputnik launch, and the “attempt to create life in the test tube”?⁶

The most straightforward answer is that Arendt used the term “earth” not only to refer to the planet, but also to advance a more general theoretical point about the relationship between what, in these opening pages of her book, she called the “given” and the “made.” The dream of artificially produced life amounted to a repudiation of the earth because it represented a “rebellion against human existence as it has been given”; it expressed the wish to “exchange” this “gift” for “something [man] has made himself.”⁷ Likewise, the launch of an aluminum-alloy satellite into outer space amounted to a repudiation of the earth, though not simply because it placed an “object

Library of Congress, Washington, DC, box 34). Arendt sent the MS on August 5, 1957; see Arendt to Morin, August 2, 1957 (in both collections).

²“The News of the Week in Review,” *New York Times*, October 6, 1957, sec. 4, 1; quoted in Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 1.

³Arendt, *Human Condition*, 2.

⁴Robert K. Plumb, “Scientist Doubts Freedom is Vital,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1957, 6; Arendt’s quotation is not verbatim. A clipping of this article survives in HAP, box 84, f. “Science”; a report of the symposium was published as *Proceedings of “The Next Hundred Years”: A Scientific Symposium* (New York: Seagram and Sons, 1957).

⁵Arendt, *Human Condition*, 2.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*, 2–3.

made by man" into the company of the "sun, the moon, and the stars." After all, if the reaction to this accomplishment had merely been "pride or awe" at the power of human beings, "who now, when they looked up from the earth toward the skies, could behold there a thing of their own making," the case of Sputnik might have been no different in kind from the construction of any other artifact.⁸ What mattered to Arendt was that people evidently hoped not just to see the satellite in the heavens but to follow it, to "go literally from here to the moon"⁹ or "to some other planet," where they would "have to live under man-made conditions, radically different from those the earth offers [them]."¹⁰ If the term "world" was Arendt's shorthand for the "human artifice"—for all those things made or fabricated by human hands—the term "earth" was her figure of all that which is "given" to human beings, and, especially, of the "basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man."¹¹

These days, of course, when people dream of going "literally from here to the moon" or to another planet, it is often in response to the threat of anthropogenic climate change, which seems likely to render significant parts of the earth uninhabitable in less time than has elapsed since Arendt's birth in Königsberg—that is, in the next hundred years.¹² That prospect did not haunt the pages of *The Human Condition*: while Arendt worried about the possibility that human beings might "destroy all organic life on earth," she was thinking of "atom bombs."¹³ Nor was it on the agenda of the scientists who gathered to discuss the future in 1957—at the invitation of an eminent Canadian distillery that had just begun to diversify into petroleum¹⁴—although their mostly cheerful forecasts of innovation and abundance were occasionally darkened by the same thought of atomic annihilation.¹⁵ Arendt seems to have been all too serenely confident that, barring a nuclear catastrophe, the cyclical patterns of "earthly nature"¹⁶ would continue on forever, exhibiting the same "changeless, deathless repetition" as the

⁸Ibid., 1.

⁹Ibid., 2.

¹⁰Ibid., 10.

¹¹Ibid., 7. On "givenness" see Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), chap. 3.

¹²David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019).

¹³Arendt, *Human Condition*, 149–50. On the significance of the prospect of nuclear annihilation in Arendt's work see Daniel Paul Zimmer, "The Immanent Apocalypse: Humanity and the Ends of the World" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2022), chap. 2.

¹⁴*The Canadian Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Seagram" (published February 13, 2012; last modified October 5, 2017), <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/seagram-company-limited>, accessed June 22, 2023.

¹⁵*Proceedings of "The Next Hundred Years,"* 17, 21, and 39.

¹⁶Arendt, *Human Condition*, 2.

movements of the heavenly bodies across the sky.¹⁷ Even the basic concepts around which she organized *The Human Condition* can seem hopelessly out-dated: Travis Holloway has suggested that, in positing a “sharp separation between the earth and the world,” and endorsing the “parasitic” exploitation of the earth for the sake of the human artifice, Arendt was simply reaffirming the centuries of anthropocentrism that we now urgently need to unlearn.¹⁸ But other readers, including Laura Ephraim,¹⁹ Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen,²⁰ Lexi Neame,²¹ and Kelly Oliver,²² have painted a more complex picture of *The Human Condition*, one in which earth and world are interdependent, not starkly opposed, and in which Arendt’s concern for the human world and the political forms and practices it houses does not supplant but goes hand in hand with an ethos of gratitude for the givenness of the earth. On such readings, Arendt’s work, for all its limitations, is also a fruitful resource with which to diagnose and respond to what Ephraim calls the “mutual endangerment of biological and political life under carbon capitalism.”²³

In this article, I join this conversation from a somewhat different angle. I am sympathetic to readings that draw on *The Human Condition* to work out an Arendt-inflected account of the Anthropocene (as Hyvönen’s does) and to sketch out a distinctively Arendtian environmental politics (as Ephraim’s does), not least because they speak to big, pressing questions like “How did we get here?” and “What should we do now?” My more modest aim here, however, is to think alongside *The Human Condition* about the meaning of a few of the adaptations through which human beings are likely to try to cope with the consequences of climate change as it happens. “Adaptations” are not solutions, and they are certainly not ambitious transformations of the social and political order: they are low-hanging fruit, the

¹⁷Ibid., 96. For an acute critique of Arendt on this point see Alyssa Battistoni, “The Victory of *Animal Laborans*? On Arendt’s Worldly Philosophy” (unpublished MS, 2019; cited with permission).

¹⁸Travis Holloway, *How to Live at the End of the World: Theory, Art, and Politics for the Anthropocene* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), 76–77.

¹⁹Laura Ephraim, “Save the Appearances! Toward an Arendtian Environmental Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 3 (2022): 985–97; Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature? On the Politics of Science* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), chap. 1.

²⁰Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen, “Labor as Action: The Human Condition in the Anthropocene,” *Research in Phenomenology* 50 (2020): 240–60.

²¹Lexi Neame, “Where Do We Begin? Between the Given and the Technosphere” (unpublished MS, 2019; cited with permission). Neame pushes back against the notion of a stark separation between earth and world by showing how the human artifice, too, can become part of the “given,” thereby opening distance between the idea of earth and romantic fantasies of an untouched nature.

²²Kelly Oliver, *Earth and World: Philosophy after the Apollo Missions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), chap. 3.

²³Ephraim, “Save the Appearances!,” 989.

widely though by no means equally available techniques and technologies by which people are already starting to respond to the changing conditions of life on a warming planet.²⁴ They are worth thinking about not because they successfully rise to the massive scale of the climate crisis, but because they do not: it is precisely their smallness and inadequacy that makes it easy to overlook the ways in which, as they aggregate, they will further shape the conditions of human existence.²⁵

In keeping with this first downward shift in scale, this article is also oriented less by *The Human Condition's* biggest abstractions than by one of its smallest details—a specific condition that Arendt identified almost in passing as characteristic of life on earth, but which I had not noticed until I reread her prologue in the light of the clippings that served as her sources. As it turns out, Arendt elided the end of the sentence she quoted from that *Times* story about Sputnik, which actually said that the satellite launch “represented a step toward escape from man’s imprisonment to the earth *and its thin envelope of atmosphere*, and opened new vistas of knowledge and travel in space.”²⁶ Likewise, one of the participants in that Seagram conference, Dr. Wernher von Braun, had also predicted that in a hundred years “resort hotels with picture windows to take advantage of the magnificent view would be operating on the moon,”²⁷ adding that “all these places are pressurized and air-conditioned.”²⁸ I have no idea, and don’t much care, whether Arendt noticed or reflected upon these passages: what matters is that, either way, they can prompt present-day readers to notice and reflect on the second part of one of her own frequently quoted but often elided sentences. “The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition,” she wrote, and then continued: “and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in *providing human beings with a habitat in which they*

²⁴On how “adaptation projects . . . allow capitalist elites to stabilize their position amid planetary crises,” see Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (London: Verso, 2020), 15 and chap. 3.

²⁵On Arendt’s account, “the human condition” was not fixed by nature, nor was it only determined by large-scale transformations in the shape of human activity: “in addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions” (*Human Condition*, 9). One way to capture this recursive conditioning is via P. K. Haff’s concept of the “technosphere” as “the set of large-scale networked technologies . . . without which modern civilization and its present 7×10^9 human constituents could not exist” (“Technology as a Geological Phenomenon: Implications for Human Well-Being,” in *A Stratigraphical Basis for the Anthropocene*, ed. C. N. Waters et al. [London: Geological Society of London, 2013], 301–2); on Haff in relation to Arendt see Neame, “Where Do We Begin?”

²⁶“News of the Week in Review,” 1 (emphasis added).

²⁷Plumb, “Scientist Doubts Freedom is Vital,” 6 (glossing not directly quoting von Braun).

²⁸*Proceedings of “The Next Hundred Years,”* 44 (from the text of von Braun’s remarks).

can move and breathe without effort and without artifice.”²⁹ This condition is changing; how are people likely to adapt, and what will this mean?

I address these questions by discussing three stylized types of artificial adaptation to a warming planet, which I call the carapace, the prosthesis, and the enclosure (section 2). My wager is that the third kind of adaptation, and the phenomenological distinction it implicates between being outdoors and being indoors, is of special importance in reconstructing what is at stake in the others too, an argument I develop in conversation with *The Human Condition* as well as with an eclectic sampling of Arendt’s own sources, from Xenophon and Plato to Bertolt Brecht (section 3). This shows how Arendt’s account of the importance of the “body-bound senses” of an “earth-bound creature”³⁰ need not result in the problematic fetishization of immediate rather than mediated knowledge, or of an “earthly nature” supposedly prior to and independent of the human artifice, but can instead draw attention to the narrowing of what I call our “angle of receptivity” to a surprising and unpredictable reality (section 4). In conclusion, I briefly suggest that this same perspective can also disclose the limits of *The Human Condition* in the face of ecological transformations that are simultaneously planetary in scale and highly differentiated in their consequences (section 5).

2. Carapace, Prosthesis, Enclosure

In his sobering 2019 account of “life after warming,” David Wallace-Wells could still complain that mainstream discourse about climate change, at least in the United States, too often focused on rising sea levels and the consequent potential for catastrophic flooding, real though those dangers might be. Even “alarmist popular writing about global warming has been a victim of its own success,” he wrote, “so focused on sea-level rise that it has blinded readers to all the climate scourges beyond the oceans that threaten to terrorize the coming generations—direct heat, extreme weather, pandemic disease, and more.”³¹ Things change quickly. Although ambient levels of climate denialism, capitalist greenwashing, and panglossian technological optimism remain unhealthy, media coverage of climate change now seems less likely to fall back on the synecdoche of “melting icecaps” and more likely to acknowledge that warming has a wide range of interconnected consequences across the planetary ecosystem. Among the possibilities Wallace-Wells catalogs: the bands of time during which it is safe for human beings to labor or take leisure outdoors will continue to shrink, especially in humid climates. Deadly heat waves will become more frequent, and heat exposure will increasingly cause chronic illnesses. Atmospheric carbon may, all on its

²⁹Arendt, *Human Condition*, 2.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 260.

³¹Wallace-Wells, *Uninhabitable Earth*, 59.

own, produce cognitive impairment; droughts will intensify dust exposure; fires will regularly produce air-quality emergencies, and increasing ozone concentrations as well as altered weather patterns will make unhealthy outdoor air a regular condition of life in an increasing number of cities.³² At an extreme, these developments may make some places simply uninhabitable, as much as if they had been submerged. But unlike the archetypal floods of scripture and epic, this will not happen everywhere or all at once, which will leave time and space in which to adapt.

What forms of artifice are people likely to reach for to make it easier to “move and breathe” under these conditions? One significant part of the answer is that it will depend on who they are, where and under what political circumstances they live, and where they stand in the interlocking inequalities of wealth, health, power, and regard that already stratify the globe. I come back to the implications of these “preexisting conditions,” to borrow the title of Samuel Weber’s recent study of plague and pandemic narratives, at the end of this article.³³ For the purposes of philosophical reflection rather than causal analysis, prediction, or prescription, I sketch three types of adaptation that might emerge, while keeping in mind that their “emergence” will not be natural or universal,³⁴ any more than the emergence of the practice of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic was natural or universal.

The first is in some ways the simplest, for it hews closest to the human body, and is readily conformable to the neoliberal tendency to convert public problems into challenges to individual resourcefulness and resilience. I call this the “carapace,” using the term broadly to refer to a wide range of protective equipment and material designed to insulate human bodies from an increasingly hostile atmosphere. The evocation of a hard shell is intentional, and is meant to resonate with midcentury images of modern human bodies as hybrids of flesh and steel to which Arendt occasionally referred,³⁵ as well

³²Ibid., 39–42, 100–104.

³³Samuel Weber, *Preexisting Conditions: Recounting the Plague* (New York: Zone Books, 2022), 13.

³⁴On the obfuscatory effects of the unreflective use of the evolutionary language of “adaptation” see Wainwright and Mann, *Climate Leviathan*, 68; for Arendt’s critique of the reduction of human activity to an evolutionary process see *Human Condition*, 322–23.

³⁵Arendt cited Werner Heisenberg’s image of technical instruments as “shells belonging to the human body as the shell belongs to the body of a turtle” (*Human Condition*, 153); this is her mistranslation of Heisenberg’s German text (*Das Naturbild der heutigen Physik* [Hamburg: Rohwolt, 1955], 14), which refers to the *Schneckenhaus*, “snail-shell,” as belonging to the *Schnecke*, snail; cf. Arendt, *Vita Activa, oder vom tätigen Leben* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960), 139. Arendt also referred to an unidentified scientist’s comparison of “modern motorization” to “a process of biological mutation in which human bodies gradually began to be covered by shells of steel” (322–23); on the echo of Max Weber’s *stahlhartes Gehäuse*

as with the various figures of the armored body that played an important role in interwar German culture and politics.³⁶ But it is not literal: examples of what I am calling “carapace” can perfectly well be soft, like the surgical masks and respirators that were already used in cities with high levels of particulate air pollution, became ubiquitous in many places during the pandemic, and are now being repurposed across North America as protection from hazardous levels of near-surface wildfire smoke. Other examples might include everything from the cooling garments increasingly worn by military personnel and first responders working in extreme conditions, to encapsulated hazmat gear, to the heat-resistant face shields used by welders and furnace operators.³⁷ Such personal protective equipment will not necessarily be net beneficial even for individual users, given its additional weight, and it can have significant carbon and microplastic footprints of its own; but that is unlikely to prevent it being marketed, bought, and used by people who can access it.³⁸

A second type of adaptation might be called the “prosthesis,” though what I have in mind are apparatuses that facilitate sensation and perception, and possibly also action or interaction, at a distance from the body. Again, the recent experience of the pandemic offers the example of teleconferencing software, which enabled certain kinds of work to be performed remotely in the face of the threat of viral transmission in offices and classrooms; the same technology can facilitate interaction across workplaces when outdoor travel is hazardous, or reduce its environmental impact. Advances in automation, robotics, and remote sensing are also increasingly likely to mediate human interaction with the outdoor environment as well as with unconditioned indoor spaces, sometimes replacing human labor, as is already happening in sectors like agriculture and mining, and sometimes by allowing people to monitor atmospheric conditions, for example by drawing on a network of air quality sensors to determine whether it is safe to go outside. But the category of “prosthesis” can also include older, simpler devices, like the

here, see Peter Baehr, “The ‘Iron Cage’ and the ‘Shell as Hard as Steel,’” *History and Theory* 40, no. 2 (2001): 165; though in *Vita Activa*, Arendt glosses the image as one in which “der menschliche Körper sich *schneckenartig* mit einem *Metallhaus* umgibt” (315, emphases mine), which weakens the resonance with Weber and, by recalling Heisenberg’s snail, suggests that he may have been the scientist she had in mind.

³⁶See Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, *Male Bodies: Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, trans. Erica Carter and Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), and Hal Foster, “Armor Fou,” *October* 56 (1991): 64–97.

³⁷See, e.g., the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s webpage on “heat,” <https://www.osha.gov/heat-exposure/controls> (accessed June 26, 2023).

³⁸On the environmental consequences of PPE waste see Sheng Yang et al., “Impact of Waste of COVID-19 Protective Equipment on the Environment, Animals and Human Health: A Review,” *Environmental Chemistry Letters* 20 (2022): 2951–70; on plastic waste (and Arendt) see Ephraim, “Save the Appearances!,” 988–90.

telescope—an instrument that played an important role in Arendt's interpretation of the significance of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution—as well as electrical and electronic ones that now seem mundane, like the internet and its various clients, or the telephone. If the carapace places a barrier between the body and a threatening atmosphere, the prosthesis bypasses the need to expose the body to outdoor conditions.

My third category of adaptation is the “enclosure”: the conversion of outdoor into indoor space for the sake of altering its atmosphere. This, of course, is as old as the practice of building shelters, but the active heating of indoor spaces has a far longer history than the active cooling and other forms of conditioning, like dehumidification and air filtration, that are most relevant in the context of a warming planet, and which were also the first technologies to demand and enable “permanently sealing off the inside from the outside,” creating what Gail Cooper calls “a totally artificial indoor environment.”³⁹ As Wallace-Wells notes, “the world will be adding 700 million AC units by just 2030,”⁴⁰ their voracious appetite for energy notwithstanding—and despite the fact that, as Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann put it, they “do not change the laws of thermodynamics” but merely move heat from one place to another.⁴¹ Just as the combination of automobility, attached garages, and air-conditioning helped make parts of the twentieth-century United States into a “constant interior,” more and more of the warming planet seems likely to be made into an indoor world: not necessarily like the ill-fated Biosphere 2, at least at first, but probably more like an airport or a mall, or a Phoenix or a Riyadh, or a Las Vegas casino.⁴² Through enclosure, the atmosphere itself is made into an object of deliberate manipulation and control.

Can Arendt's reflections on the earth and its repudiation shed any light on the significance of these artificial adaptations to a warming planet? One possibility is that *The Human Condition* stands as a general warning against the impulse to deploy human powers of instrumental rationality and technological inventiveness to “master the earth and the world,” as Oliver has put it, and that the carapace, the prosthesis, and the enclosure would all constitute expressions of what she calls a “dangerous hubris,” which responds to the consequences of earlier centuries of dominance and exploitation of the planet by doubling down.⁴³ But while the critique of hubris might be a

³⁹Gail Cooper, *Air-Conditioning America: Engineers and the Controlled Environment, 1900–1960* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 1.

⁴⁰Wallace-Wells, *Uninhabitable Earth*, 42.

⁴¹Wainwright and Mann, *Climate Leviathan*, 60.

⁴²Anthony Morey and Volkan Alkanoglu, “Architectural Purgatory: The Car, the Garage, and the House,” in *The Interior Architecture Theory Reader*, ed. Gregory Marinic (London: Routledge, 2018), 327.

⁴³Oliver, *Earth and World*, 27. Oliver's perspective emphasizes the affinities between Arendt's work and Heidegger's postwar writings on modern technology, on which see

fitting response to billionaire fantasies of Martian colonization or planetary geoengineering, it does not obviously capture the specific stakes of these transformations, which hardly seem like expressions of overweening human self-confidence.

Another possibility is that, even if these adaptations are small-scale and mundane, their cumulative effect might be to intensify the isolation or alienation of human beings from the earth in its givenness, cutting people off from a vital source of awareness of their own earthbound limitations, which is necessary to keep the activity of world building from running amok. Arendt's stylized account of the development of the modern natural sciences seems to suggest something like this: insofar as modern science interposes humanly made technologies of observation and measurement between us and the world, it cuts human beings off from the "reality" to which it promised reliable access. "Instead of objective qualities," she famously wrote, "we find instruments, and instead of nature or the universe—in the words of Heisenberg—man encounters only himself."⁴⁴

This second possibility is promising, especially insofar as it emphasizes the specific character of the experiences that these forms of artifice afford or inhibit, instead of treating them all simply as expressions of malign human willfulness. But it also risks implying that the problem with these adaptations, and perhaps with technology or artifice as such, is that they block the direct and unmediated experience of that which is given and not made. On this reconstruction, it would be as if Arendt were urging us to put down our devices and trust our senses, and indeed to direct those senses toward an earthly nature conceived, mythologically, as beyond or behind the human artifice, a nature to which we belong as embodied and sensate creatures but from which we have become alienated by the mediations we have built. Notice, however, that this reconstruction begins with one of these three kinds of adaptation—the prosthesis—and tacitly reads all three in terms of the problem of mediation and immediacy: just as the prosthetic senses extend human cognition at the cost of trapping people within an epistemic environment of their own making, the carapace and the enclosure, at different scales, protect the body at the cost of blocking its direct access to the earth to which it belongs. But this is not the only way to understand the force of Arendt's argument. What if, rather than give priority to the prosthesis and the problem of mediation, we read all three kinds of adaptation in light of the

also Benjamin Lazier, "Earthrise; or, the Globalization of the World Picture," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 3 (2011): 602–30, and Waseem Yaqoob, "The Archimedean Point: Science and Technology in the Thought of Hannah Arendt, 1951–1963," *Journal of European Studies* 44, no. 3 (2014): 199–224.

⁴⁴Arendt, *Human Condition*, 261. On Arendt's use of Heisenberg see Yaqoob, "Archimedean Point," 215–16; as Yaqoob observes, this line is a point of connection among Heisenberg, Arendt, and Heidegger.

phenomenon of enclosure, and the distinction between indoor and outdoor spaces on which it turns? Anyone who has ever opened an apartment window in Morningside Heights, after all, will know perfectly well that the difference between indoors and outdoors is not reducible to distinction between the human artifice and a supposedly pristine nature.

3. The House, the Cave, and the Sky

It is not easy to think with *The Human Condition* about the relation between outdoor and indoor spaces, for the theme never quite comes into the foreground of Arendt's book, and when it registers at all—either in her writing or in the texts and contexts that served as her points of reference—it typically does so as a figure for something else, something more abstract, and not as a topic over which to linger in its own right. One might think, for example, that the distinction between outdoors and indoors was simply a derivative cousin of the distinction between what Arendt called the “public” and “private” realms, which, on her stylized representation of “Greek thought,” were represented by the *polis*, or city, and the *oikos*, the family or household, respectively.⁴⁵ She knew and cited Xenophon's dialogue on household management, the *Oeconomicus*, in which the gentleman Ischomachus explained to Socrates that “I certainly do not spend time indoors, for my wife is more than capable of managing everything inside the house,” leaving him free to inspect his farms, train for warfare on horseback, and engage in public speaking—or, as Arendt glossed it, to live “a life spent outside, in the world.”⁴⁶ But this is, at most, partly literal: the subject of Xenophon's dialogue, after all, was the management of the whole *oikos*, which was not limited to the physical house (*oikia*) and its interior—some of which was actually unsheltered courtyard space—but extended to the whole of a property owner's “estate,” and therefore included all that outdoor agricultural labor and its supervision.⁴⁷ Likewise, public business in Athens was conducted both in open-air meetings

⁴⁵ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 24.

⁴⁶ Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 7.3; Ischomachus describes his daily routine at 11.14–25 (Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Xenophon, Oeconomicus: A Social and Historical Commentary* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1994]). Arendt cites *Oec.* 7.22, where Ischomachus explains that the natures of men and women are suited to outdoor and indoor work respectively, at 48n38.

⁴⁷ Xenophon, *Oec.* 1.5. On *oikos* and *oikia* see Pomeroy, *Xenophon, Oeconomicus*, 31 and 213–14; Douglas M. MacDowell, “The *Oikos* in Athenian Law,” *Classical Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1989), 10–11; on the way the enclosed courtyard “incorporates the ‘outside’ on the ‘inside’” see Rush Rehm, *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 57. Arendt preferred *oikia* to *oikos*—*oikos* appears only once in *Human Condition*, in a quotation (81n6)—but she treated *oikia* as the equivalent of “home” and “household,” not “house” (24, 33, 183), perhaps reflecting Aristotle's use of the two words interchangeably at *Pol.* 1252b.

and indoor council-chambers and temples, and the *agora* was both an outdoor space and the constellation of partly and wholly enclosed structures that surrounded it and gave it its shape.⁴⁸ Of course, Arendt's own understanding of the significance of publicity and privacy did not simply reproduce Athenian civic ideology; but even in passages that do not make reference to Greece, her concepts seem only loosely and connotatively connected to outdoor and indoor spaces, and to their association of these spaces with exposure and shelter respectively. Surely Arendt didn't mean that exposure to the "implacable, bright light of the constant presence of others on the public scene" could literally only take place outside!⁴⁹

To make matters even more complicated, Arendt's metaphors could sometimes change their polarity, particularly when she was writing about Plato—perhaps because, at least on her understanding, Plato had initiated a tradition that recast the *polis* as a locus of necessity, to be ruled by the philosopher as the despot ruled the household, though now for the sake of the true freedom of philosophical contemplation rather than the spurious "freedom" of public speech and action.⁵⁰ And the distinction between outdoor and indoor spaces, of course, is central to the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*, which begins with Socrates's invitation to "imagine human beings living in an underground, cavelike dwelling [*oikēsis*]," bound and constrained to look only at the flickering shadows projected by firelight onto the wall in front of them, and proceeds to describe the release of these "prisoners" and their long ascent out of the cave "into the sunlight"—which, given the layout Socrates describes, would presumably involve first climbing into the choking cloud of smoke from that fire before emerging into fresher air.⁵¹ (Even in Plato, the "sphere of vision" is more closely intertwined with the breath and lungs than we might expect.)⁵² Arendt read this allegory, flatly, as Plato's celebratory account of the philosopher's flight from the "dark cave of human affairs," where everything is mere appearance, into the "bright sky of ideas" where the "true essence of Being" can be seen, and

⁴⁸For an accessible history and "tour" of the Athenian *agora* see Alex Gottesman, *Politics and the Street in Democratic Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), chap. 1.

⁴⁹Arendt, *Human Condition*, 51.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 14, 222–25.

⁵¹Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992), 514a–515e; Greek in *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), online at Perseus Digital Library, <http://data.perseus.org/texts/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg030> (accessed June 28, 2023). This thought about smoke was provoked by John Henry Wright, "The Origins of Plato's Cave," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 17 (1906): 140 (and does not depend on his speculative identification of the Vari Cave in Attica as the inspiration for the allegory).

⁵²Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 36, and see 62–67.

thus as an account of the source of the philosopher's authority to impose his standards on the cave dwellers when he returns.⁵³ Famously hostile to this tradition of political philosophy, Arendt did not quite counsel her readers to remain in the cave instead—the metaphor was too prejudicial simply to invert—but she pursued and described a form of political theory that did without the pathos of transcendence; that is, which did not seek to escape the “common world of human affairs,” whose medium is appearance and whose currency is opinion, in order to seek and find a truth somewhere outside it.⁵⁴

Maybe, then, *The Human Condition* was just too caught up in the flexible metaphorical potential of indoor and outdoor spaces to be of much use here, where the question is what it means when outdoor spaces are literally enclosed. But there is a curious moment in Arendt's book at which the relation between the figurative and the literal comes into the foreground, precisely in connection with Plato, and with the themes of eyes and sky. Just as Plato, on Arendt's reading, had used the allegory of the cave to locate truth in a metaphorical “sky of ideas,” he also suggested that the organs of reception of this truth were the metaphorical “eyes of the mind”—actually the “eye of the soul,” *tēs psuchēs omma*⁵⁵—to which, Arendt wrote, “mathematical and ideal forms” were “given” in the same way that “sense data were given to the organs of the senses.”⁵⁶ In light of Arendt's tendency to track all the wrong turns in the tradition of political thought back its supposed founder, we might expect her to have invoked this metaphorical doubling of the eyes and sky as evidence of Plato's implication in the long history of metaphysics that culminated in the forms of earth alienation characteristic of modern technoscience.⁵⁷ Yet she did almost the opposite. In a surprising moment of partisanship on Plato's behalf, she argued that his use of the

⁵³ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 226–27.

⁵⁴ Arendt, “Tradition and the Modern Age,” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 25; this text (like “What Is Authority?” in the same volume) contains a fuller reading of the allegory than appears in *Human Condition*.

⁵⁵ Plato, *Rep.* 533c, which does not explicitly counterpose this eye to a different, bodily organ; moreover, Socrates's suggestion that the “vision” of the soul can be directed both “downwards” at appearances and “upwards” at “true things” (519a–b) should make us wonder whether the eyes of the body *are* the eyes of the soul. For a fuller reintegration of *aisthēsis* into Plato's philosophy see Jill Frank, *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's “Republic”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), chap. 6.

⁵⁶ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 266.

⁵⁷ This would have aligned Arendt with Heidegger, who, even as he distinguished ancient *technē* from modern technology (“The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* [New York: Harper & Row, 1977], 14–16), also suggested that Plato determined the metaphysical essence of modernity “long in advance” (Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in *Off the*

figure of the “eyes of the mind” marked his distance from modern science and its “entirely un-Platonic” version of the so-called mathematization of nature, which did not simply make the practice of geometry preparatory to philosophical contemplation, as Plato had, but used the symbolic language of algebra to “reckon with entities that could not be ‘seen’ by the eyes of the mind.”⁵⁸ Like any powerful metaphor, it seems, Plato’s doubling of eyes and sky had not entirely separated the figurative and literal registers after all: the notion of the eyes of the mind “was based, albeit implicitly and even when it was used in opposition to the senses, on an ultimate trust in bodily vision.”⁵⁹

This detail from *The Human Condition* suggests a different way of thinking about the broader shape of Arendt’s engagement with Plato. At first, that engagement seemed to have little to do with the literal experiences of being enclosed or outdoors: at issue was the valence of an abstraction, the “public realm” or “common world,” which the allegory had figured as a cave, just as it had figured the achievement of truth as a kind of seeing, out in the sunlight. Now, though, it seems that Arendt was also concerned to show how Plato’s use of allegory and metaphor kept his abstractions bound to the concrete phenomena by which he figured them: as long as philosophy appealed to the “eyes of the mind,” its activity and object-domain could not be wholly separated from the familiar experience of the embodied perception of ordinary things. From this perspective, bringing political theory back down to earth would not mean reembracing the (figurative) inside as opposed to the (figurative) outside: it would mean bringing the allegory’s figure of movement between the cave and the open sunlight back into the register of concrete experience. One way to do this would be to attend to Socrates’s representation of the difficulty of learning in terms of the uncomfortable adjustment of the eyes to changing levels of light, resulting in what Arendt called a “loss of sense and orientation.”⁶⁰ These are experiences of transition, at once sensory and political, between one space and another; what might they mean if they were not conceived as transitions between this world and an altogether different one? Another way to do this would be to ask in a similar spirit about the significance of being able to look up and see the sky.

There is not much in *The Human Condition* about the sky, apart from a handful of references to Plato’s “sky of ideas,” and to the abolition of the

Beaten Track, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 69).

⁵⁸Arendt, *Human Condition*, 265. This argument pushed back against the midcentury tendency to position Galileo and his twentieth-century heirs as Platonists, e.g. Alexandre Koyré, “Galileo and Plato,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4, no. 4 (October 1943): 400–428.

⁵⁹Arendt, *Human Condition*, 275.

⁶⁰Plato, *Rep.* 515c, 515d–e, 516e; Arendt, “Tradition and the Modern Age,” 36.

old “dichotomy” between earth and sky, sometimes cast as deities, by the modern picture of the universe as a continuous space governed by a single set of laws.⁶¹ But when Arendt revised the book for publication in German, she added an epigraph to the prologue consisting of the opening and closing stanzas of an early poem by Bertolt Brecht, the “Hymn of Baal the Great,” which she elsewhere described as a song in praise of “the sky that was there before man was and will be there after he has gone.”⁶² In Arendt’s translation, the poem begins and ends this way:

When Baal grew up inside the white maternal womb there was the sky,
great and still and pale, young and naked and immensely wondersome,
as Baal then loved it when Baal came. . . . When Baal was left to rot
inside the earth’s dark womb, there still was the sky, great and still and
pale, young and naked and immensely wonderful, as Baal had loved it
when Baal was.⁶³

This is not an austere “sky of ideas,” for Baal was, Arendt says, “the god of the drunkards, the gluttons, the fornicators.”⁶⁴ Nor does the sight of the sky make Baal feel at home on the earth: here as elsewhere, Arendt wrote, Brecht emphasized the “majestic indifference” of sky and sun to those who live under them.⁶⁵ Nor does this sky quite stand for an immaculate nature, for on her reading, Brecht’s early expressions of “gratitude for earth and sky, for the mere fact of being born and alive,” respond precisely to the “terrible freshness” and the “horrible innocence” of a world “swept clean” by four years of slaughter and destruction.⁶⁶ Why be grateful to see such a sky—much less one that hasn’t been swept clean but filled with haze, not over years but over centuries?

4. Angles of Receptivity

The architect Wolfgang Meisenheimer once described the difference between indoor and outdoor space this way: while the interior is “closed all around,” the exterior space surrounding a building is “conceived of as being unending, even though it seems limited to various degrees all around us, while from

⁶¹See, e.g., Arendt, *Human Condition*, 262–63.

⁶²Arendt, *Vita Activa*, 7; Hannah Arendt, “Bertolt Brecht, 1898–1956,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 231; and see Patchen Markell, “Politics and the Case of Poetry: Arendt on Brecht,” *Modern Intellectual History* 15, no. 2 (2018): 520–22.

⁶³Arendt, “Bertolt Brecht,” 231n37.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 230.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 231. On indifference, see also Jennifer Fay’s even more radical effort to imagine “an estranged and selfless relationship to an inhospitable or even posthospitable earth that may not accommodate us” (*Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018], 20).

⁶⁶Arendt, “Bertolt Brecht,” 228–29 (emphases added).

above offering an open, limitless expanse.”⁶⁷ These lines helpfully capture the sense of release that accompanies the transition from an interior to the outdoors, as well as the role that the sight of the sky plays in that experience, even if it only appears as a sliver. Moreover, Meisenheimer’s description does this without elevating that sense of release into something as grand as “freedom”; without caricaturing interiors as necessarily cramped and stifling places of confinement or imprisonment (some are, but others can feel capacious and permissive) and without fetishizing the outside as a paradise. After all, outdoor space can be intimidatingly wide or threateningly busy or quiet; and is, in any event, inevitably shaped by human artifice: most obviously in the case of the urban outdoors, but also in the case of the parks and preserves whose presentation of a supposedly intact “nature” depends on, even as it obscures, violent forms of dispossession and expulsion.⁶⁸ The crucial difference is simply that the indoors lends itself to being designed comprehensively, as some kind of whole, with an eye toward facilitating certain patterns of use, movement, and encounter and discouraging others; and while outdoor spaces have also been subject to the same sort of design, sometimes in a highly rationalizing and regimented spirit, the fact that they are not fully enclosed makes it more challenging to impose a totalizing form upon them. (The aggressive policing and surveillance of outdoor spaces, along with the construction of physical and symbolic barriers to inhibit movement across social boundaries, confirm this point.) What matters about the outdoors, from this perspective, is that it is intransigently interstitial; and to be outdoors, as a sensate creature, is to be exposed through the senses to a wider field of possibilities for the unanticipated—we might say, peripheral—summoning of one’s attention.⁶⁹

This hypothesis, I think, reveals something crucial about *The Human Condition*, and not just about the place of the outdoors in the book, but also about Arendt’s broader account of the political significance of the embodied senses. That account can sometimes be obscured by her reputation for uncompromising hostility to the fact of human embodiment; but it is there: in her chapter on labor, for example, Arendt explained that the senses, with their receptivity to the “reality of life,” including its pains and its pleasures, are

⁶⁷Wolfgang Meisenheimer, “Of Hollow Spaces in the Skin of the Architectural Body,” in *Toward a New Interior: An Anthology of Interior Design Theory*, ed. Lois Weinthal (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), 626; Meisenheimer also describes the transitional spaces between interior and outside as “zones of doubt,” where people negotiate the uncertain dynamics of entry and exit, “half protected, half exposed” (628).

⁶⁸See Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁶⁹Pace Cavarero, who, with Hans Jonas, characterizes sight as active and detached in contrast to our “passivity” in relation to sound (*For More than One Voice*, 37).

central to the human condition, such that to feel, see, and hear only “vicariously”—as Herodotus said the masters of enslaved people did—“would not only rob biological life of its most natural pleasures but deprive the specifically human life of its very liveliness and vitality.”⁷⁰ Later she argued that the receptivity of the senses also allows people to feel the reality of the world, made of both the concrete artifice that human beings build upon the earth, and the web of relationships woven and rewoven in this environment through speech and action.⁷¹ These passages stand in the background of her consideration, in the book’s last chapter, of the fate of the embodied senses in the wake of “the invention of the telescope and the development of a new science that considers the nature of the earth from the viewpoint of the universe.”⁷²

As we have seen, Arendt focused on the way in which these developments interposed manmade instruments between the senses and the world, starting with the telescope and ending with the algebraic equation, a mathematical instrument that “ceases to be concerned with appearances at all.”⁷³ Yet her worry was not that the rise of instrumentally mediated knowledge has left us with no reliable access to the “real world”: she was not operating within what Linda Zerilli has called the “skeptical problematic,” fetishizing a lost immediacy as if it were a solution to an epistemic problem.⁷⁴ But what else might be at stake in the supplementation and displacement of the embodied

⁷⁰Arendt, *Human Condition*, 120. Against the view of Arendt as hostile to embodied labor see Ayten Gündoğdu, *Rightlessness in an Age of Rights: Hannah Arendt and the Contemporary Struggles of Migrants* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 129–39.

⁷¹Arendt, *Human Condition*, 208–9.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 248. “The invention of the telescope” was Arendt’s conventional but misleading shorthand for Galileo’s telescopic observations of the moon and planets starting in 1609, which were announced the next year in *Sidereus Nuncius, or, the Sidereal Messenger*, trans. Albert van Helden (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); on Arendt and Galileo see Ephraim, *Who Speaks for Nature?*, 48–57; Yaqoob, “Archimedean Point,” 209–11.

⁷³Arendt, *Human Condition*, 266. When Heisenberg announced in 1958 that he had captured the basic structure of all matter in one equation, however, he unveiled it at a sensational scientific conference in Berlin, speaking in a 1200-seat auditorium, in front of an orchestra, with the formula projected behind him on a screen (presumably not by firelight): Cathryn Carson, *Heisenberg in the Atomic Age: Science and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. 115–22; and see “Assumptions of Symmetry,” *Time*, May 5, 1958, 53 (featuring a photo of Heisenberg alongside an engraving of Plato).

⁷⁴Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 28 and passim. Zerilli focuses here on the “skeptical problematic” in relation to debates about foundationalism within feminist theory; for her concise placement of Arendt in relation to skepticism, see her “The Skepticism of Willful Liberalism,” in *Skepticism, Individuality, and Freedom: The Reluctant Liberalism of Richard Flathman*, ed. Bonnie Honig and David R. Mapel (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 52n3.

senses by such prostheses? What else does our existence as sensate creatures do for us, if not to provide (or fail to provide) reliable knowledge? An analogy to enclosure suggests an answer: just as the interstitiality of outdoor space widens the sensate creature's exposure to stimulus and summons from the world, the crucial distinction between the embodied senses and mediating instruments is not that the senses are more reliable because they are more immediate, but that they are more radically receptive, and thus more intrinsically capable of surprising us, precisely because they were not themselves artificially constructed.⁷⁵ The telescope employs, mobilizes, and enhances vision, yet it does so precisely by narrowing its frame: it has to be pointed; it presupposes that you know where to look. Likewise, an algebraic formula allows you to represent certain relationships that are not visible without its mediation, but it does so just because and insofar as it has been made for that purpose. And the use of seismic detection may allow you to "observe" an underground nuclear explosion, but it does not expose you to the "indefinable, unbelievable brilliance of the atomic flash," in the words of a *Los Angeles Times* reporter who had been two miles from a detonation at Yucca Flat in 1953.⁷⁶

From this perspective, the significance of the technological adaptations likely to characterize life on a warming earth is that they all, in various ways, threaten to narrow the angle of human beings' receptivity to reality. The carapace insulates and protects the body from a hostile atmosphere, but it can also deaden and restrict sensibility in ways both obvious and subtle. Anyone who wore eyeglasses through the pandemic will have mundane experience of the interdependence between masked breathing and fogged vision; testimony to the restrictions of hearing, voice, and peripheral vision imposed by more substantial breathing apparatuses can be found in the recollections of Britons who had been drilled in the use of gas masks—"anaesthetic shield[s]" that were designed to protect the "seats of the senses" but created "a restrictive, minimal sensory environment"—as

⁷⁵Here I develop a different but complementary aspect of Arendt's argument than does Ephraim, who argues that the trouble with "experimental" phenomena (one version of instrumentally perceptible phenomena) is that they are "more difficult for human spectators to perceive than the natural givens they replace." *Who Speaks for Nature?*, 63 (emphasis original).

⁷⁶Gene Sherman, "Times Man with GI's Sees Atom Explosion," *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1953, 4. On the implications of the fact that "no one has seen a nuclear explosion in more than thirty years and the number of people who have ever seen one is dwindling," see Jeremy Bernstein, "At Los Alamos," *London Review of Books*, December 20, 2012, 6–7, and *Nuclear Weapons: What You Need to Know* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chap. 9. On the "prosthetic senses" of "computer screens and seismic monitors," which inspired my own use of "prosthesis," see Joseph Masco, *The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 73.

children in the 1930s.⁷⁷ Prosthetic sensation, too, as I have suggested, achieves its gains in range at the expense of a certain kind of breadth—the kind that enables the integration of focused and conscious attention to an object with a receptivity to unexpected or peripheral stimuli, as well as with a not-yet-conscious sensitivity to what might be called the mood of an environment.⁷⁸ And even as the increasingly intensive enclosure of space will help sustain an indoor environment that supports comfortable movement and respiration, it will also shelter people, to a greater or lesser degree, not just against the surprising and peripheral encounters that interstitial outdoor space enables, but also against the temporary “loss of sense and orientation” involved in the move from one kind of space to another, and against the uncanny experience of standing on an earth and under a sky that was not made for us.

The foregoing sketch needs to be complicated in at least two ways. First, these various kinds of adaptation will not always move in the same direction or be mutually reinforcing, and they can intersect in surprising ways. As recent experience has shown, the valences of indoor and outdoor space can change rapidly, at least from a public health perspective: during the pandemic, masking was practiced more widely indoors than outdoors, at least in the United States, while the current series of air quality emergencies has made it more common for people to put on a mask when leaving than when entering a building, making the enclosure within one kind of artifice also feel like a release from another. And second, these generalizations notwithstanding, the meaning of being indoors or outdoors, whether literally or figuratively, will not be the same for everyone, any more than the meaning of a domestic interior is the same for men and women, or for prosperous homeowners and the people they hire to do their cleaning. This is partly because warming is likely to have severer consequences sooner in the global South than in the relatively wealthy states of Europe and North America, and partly because the shape and availability of these adaptations will depend on existing forms of social inequality, both locally and globally.⁷⁹ Indeed, some forms of adaption by enclosure will be meant to protect wealthy people, cities, and countries not only against a threatening outdoor environment, but also against the influx of climate migrants.⁸⁰ And these qualifications bring us, finally, up against the limits of *The Human Condition* to speak to the present planetary situation.

⁷⁷Gabriel Moshenska, *Material Cultures of Childhood in Second World War Britain* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 25.

⁷⁸See Yves Citton, *The Ecology of Attention*, trans. Barnaby Norman (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), chap. 4.

⁷⁹Wallace-Wells, *Uninhabitable Earth*, 24–25, 131–33.

⁸⁰Wallace-Wells cites estimates from the World Bank and the UN of 140 and 200 million climate migrants by 2050 (*ibid.*, 133).

5. The People Out of Doors

There is good reason to wonder whether *The Human Condition* will have anything useful to say about the conflictual politics of these adaptations to climate change. The book is often as relentlessly generalizing as its title: Arendt tended to abstract from the forms of inequality and hierarchy that characterized postwar Europe and America, not to mention—and she didn’t—relations between the global North and the global South. This was not a mere playing-out of some basic theoretical commitment on her part: for example, to the restoration of the classical Greek imaginary in which the unfreedom of some was the condition of possibility of the freedom of a few. *The Human Condition* represented a rejection, not a resurrection, of an approach to political freedom that tethered it to relations of ruling and being ruled.⁸¹ Rather, her tendency to abstract in this way was the upshot of a specific and hugely problematic premise about the shape of the postwar world, or at least of Arendt’s corner of it: that the political emancipation of the working class, the development of the welfare state, and the sheer abundance of the postwar capitalist economy meant that the forms of unfreedom characteristic of the contemporary world no longer involved the unjust rule of some over others, but, as it were, a relation of society as a whole to each and all of its members.⁸² “Rule by nobody,” as she called it, is at the same time rule over everybody;⁸³ and so, when she wrote about the tendencies that worried her in midcentury American society—from the rise of automation, to the development of a culture oriented toward the consumption of disposable goods, to the advent of a “society of jobholders”⁸⁴—she described them as tendencies that afflicted “us,” with that first-person plural remaining easy and undifferentiated. This emphasis on what “we” are unthinkingly doing to “ourselves” had some understandable, even admirable motivations: among other things, it was meant to work against the smugness and self-congratulation that too often characterized expressions of ascendant Cold War liberalism.⁸⁵ And she was a perceptive diagnostician of the dystopic tendencies that lurked within the postwar American economy’s promise of leisure and abundance. Yet that economy had never extended its promise of prosperity

⁸¹I develop this claim at length in *Politics Against Rule: Hannah Arendt and “The Human Condition”* (in progress).

⁸²In a notebook entry from April 1952, Arendt, reviewing the success of the “American experiment” in achieving “relative justice,” economically speaking, immediately added that “the palpable danger is that now *everyone* equally becomes a slave of necessity.” Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch 1950–1973*, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich: Piper, 2002), 202 (my translation, emphasis original).

⁸³Arendt, *Human Condition*, 40.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 322.

⁸⁵On Arendt’s relation to Cold War discourse see Markell, “Politics and the Case of Poetry.”

equally; and had Arendt been looking, she could have seen the ways in which relatively vulnerable citizens, such as Black industrial workers in the urban North, were already beginning to bear a disproportionate share of the effects of the slow-moving transformation of the Fordist order, including via the extension of automation.⁸⁶

There are also understandable and admirable reasons for theorists, writers, and activists concerned with anthropogenic climate change to reach for the language of what “we” are unthinkingly doing to “ourselves”: it can be a way to capture the sheer scale of the phenomenon, and of the interventions that it now demands.⁸⁷ Nor does this language necessarily indicate ignorance, willful or otherwise, of the unequal effects of climate change: Wallace-Wells, whose book is composed largely in a powerful version of that first-person plural, also writes forcefully about “the problem of environmental justice,” which he would prefer to call the “climate caste system” or “environmental apartheid.”⁸⁸ Still, even Wallace-Wells never quite confronts the possibility that, beyond being vectors of unequal suffering or sources of war and disorder, these structures of inequality and domination might be or become axes of political conflict and struggle. Studying that kind of politics, even when it comes to something as global as the atmosphere, still seems to require staying close to the ground—as in Chloe Ahmann’s account of a coalitional campaign against an incinerator project in Baltimore, in which the question of whether and in what sense air pollution was “everyone’s problem” was as much an object of dispute as the incinerator itself.⁸⁹ Even here, though, there is one last way in which Arendt, via the distinction between outdoors and indoors, might help.

In eighteenth-century North America, the term “out of doors” was frequently used to characterize the people of the British colonies, and then of the postrevolutionary United States, acting “outside of the legal representative institutions” by which they were governed, sometimes in mobs and crowds and sometimes through “extralegal associations.”⁹⁰ Historians rarely linger over the relationship between the literal meaning of “out of doors” and its figurative use to refer to action and association outside official channels. Yet Benjamin Carp’s study of popular politics in eighteenth-century Philadelphia has shown how conflict between Pennsylvania’s legislators and their constituents

⁸⁶Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), chap. 5.

⁸⁷If anything, its scale remains too restrictive: see Dipesh Chakrabarty’s discussion of the relation of the global and the planetary in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

⁸⁸Wallace-Wells, *Uninhabitable Earth*, 24.

⁸⁹Chloe Ahmann, “Atmospheric Coalition: Shifting the Middle in Late Industrial Baltimore,” *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 6 (2020): 462–85.

⁹⁰Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 320–21; see also Benjamin H. Irvin, *Clothed in Robes of Sovereignty: The Continental Congress and the People Out of Doors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 22.

played out on the thresholds between the indoor spaces of government and the outdoor spaces that surrounded them: on the steps of the old Court House, for example, from which leaders would speak to the people in the square below, and which voters would occasionally ascend to cast their ballots, and later in the yard of the State House (now Independence Hall), where radical Philadelphians held boisterous meetings for decades prior to May 1776, when “four or five thousand people gathered in the rain” to push their recalcitrant Assembly toward independence.⁹¹ By the 1760s and 1770s, the “barriers separating indoors from outdoors” themselves had become the object of controversy, as Philadelphians fought against what one of them called the “absurd and tyrannical custom of shutting the Assembly doors against you, whose interest and right it is to enter whenever you think it necessary to your security.”⁹² We might well suspect that that custom of shutting the doors responds, among other things, to the seeming limitlessness of outdoor space: an invigorating source of sublime experience for the crowds that appear to fill the streets as far as the eye can see, and a threatening one for those indoors.⁹³

I do not invoke these linguistic and historical examples to idealize popular assembly as a reliable locus of democratic and egalitarian values. Still, they might stand as a productive counterpoint to the idea that a confrontation of the phenomenon of climate change either requires or can produce a form of political agency that finally brings all of humanity together around a common purpose and project. In the last pages of *The Uninhabitable Earth*, Wallace-Wells expresses the hope that his unblinking portrait of climate change and its consequences might do this kind of mobilizing and unifying work, in the same vein as figures and images like the “Gaia hypothesis,” or “spaceship earth,” or the earth seen as a “Pale Blue Dot” from Voyager 1. “Personally,” he concludes, “I think that climate change itself offers the most invigorating picture, in that even its cruelty flatters our sense of power, and in doing so calls the world, as one, to action. At least I hope it does.”⁹⁴ But will flattery get us anywhere? I am more inclined to think that if anything is going to forge the political will necessary to slow the processes that are rendering the earth uninhabitable, or to distribute the consequences of those processes more justly, or, most ambitiously of all, to transform the shape of the basic institutions of the modern, capitalist social order, it will be the persistent, forceful, and disorienting confrontation of powerful actors and institutions by the people out of doors, their political senses rendered acute by the same atmosphere that’s also killing them.

⁹¹Benjamin L. Carp, *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 172.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 195.

⁹³On the experience of sublimity in the aesthetic constitution of popular assemblies see Jason Frank, *The Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁹⁴Wallace-Wells, *Uninhabitable Earth*, 228.