

THESIS

TOWARDS AN *AESTHETIC PRAXIS*:

HANNAH ARENDT, HERBERT MARCUSE, AND THE REALM OF NECESSITY

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ABSTRACT

TOWARDS AN *AESTHETIC PRAXIS*:

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This thesis attempts to put the vast works of Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse in conversation with one another. The study begins by examining the way both interpret the relationship between freedom and necessity, the latter of which is rooted most notably in the work of Karl Marx. Following this interpretation of their works I extract two notable ideas to begin building what I refer to as *aesthetic praxis*. This combination is centered broadly around Arendt's theory of action and Marcuse's theory of the imagination. The mixture of these ideas serves to investigate three corresponding elements of political affairs: 1.) the connection between the inherent unpredictability of political action and the future-oriented consciousness of political actors, 2.) the role of art, action, and aesthetic expression in times of political and social unrest, and 3.) the relationship between human activity, nature, and the growth of consumerism in the modern world. These pressing and often-overlooked areas of political science, I argue, can be better understood through the lens of an aesthetically driven conception of political action, where the dynamism of political activity and the growth of an aesthetic consciousness promote the development of new methods of self-discovery, thus transforming the realm of politics into a more open, connected, and engaged democratic collective.

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I. An Exploration of Freedom and Necessity: Arendt, Marcuse, and their Influences

Introduction

Throughout the tradition of political thought scholars have worked tirelessly to shape the contours of freedom in both structure and practice. Indeed, politics has often operated with the belief that freedom in its purest form is a self-evident truth, *sine qua non*, and by this understanding lawmaking and civilization shaping have assumed their modern image. Far from being the final stone unturned in the long march to a free existence, my aim is to charter an openly new discussion on freedom through the works of two individuals whose ideas have rarely been considered in unison: Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse. By “openly new” I refer to both exploratory and interpretive analysis. Thus, my attempts to understand freedom will *explore* its relationship to an often-overlooked conceptual idea—necessity—and *interpret* this relationship with an underlying normative foundation—i.e. with the aspiration of a human life dynamic in its character, guided by the vision of a potentially limitless future. This normative ambition of mine is best captured when considering Arendt’s notion of action in relation to Marcuse’s conception of the imagination, a theoretical combination that I will refer to as *aesthetic praxis*. This mixture of ideas acknowledges the limitations that define political action, *dynamis*, while also remaining sympathetic to the future-oriented vision that generates those actions, *dynitikós*. In addition, I hold that freedom in this sequence is best embodied as a type of political action experienced aesthetically, where aspects of individual life within society can begin to take on the ultimate form of art itself. The union of these concepts, as we will see, arises convincingly from the author’s discussions of necessity.

I take as my starting point Karl Marx’s interpretation of the relationship between freedom and necessity:

“the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite.” (Marx 1959, 593).

In this oft-quoted passage from *Capital*, Marx distinguishes a clear separation between freedom and necessity. The conversation that follows between Arendt and Marcuse will open up this idea for reinterpretation, and expand on it considerably so as to hone in a fully refined understanding of necessity, labor, aesthetics and freedom in relation to one another. As opposed to Marx’s desire of “overcoming” necessity, both Arendt and Marcuse advocate for the development of freedom *within* the realm of necessity, where the existence of necessity and human responses to it generate the very possibility of freedom.¹

In more ways than one, however, Arendt and Marcuse represent different sides of the political coin. Arendt was a consistent critic of Marx, an individual whose thought greatly influenced the work of Marcuse and other important members of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Conversely, Marcuse’s new-aged psychoanalytic orientation operated under the assumption that modern society was instinctually repressive, and that the only way out of this instinctual dungeon was through an expansion of the mind and its potentialities, which appears as contrary to the action-first yearnings of Arendt’s *vita activa*. Following directly from Marx, however, perhaps no two writers have devoted more time and discussion to the concept of

¹ See pg. 121 of *The Human Condition* and pg. 21 of *An Essay on Liberation*.

necessity than Arendt and Marcuse. In this thesis, I argue that the vast differences in their work might be overcome by analyzing one of the foundational elements of their distinct philosophies: the genesis of freedom that follows one's initial confrontation with necessity.

Typified in ancient Greek writings as *Ananke*, the Goddess of scarcity and fate, necessity can readily be understood as the basic activities existent in the life process. For the ancients necessity and material dissatisfaction—slavery, toil, domination—were a brute fact of existence. On this point Arendt reasoned, “the ancients...felt it necessary to possess slaves because of the slavish nature of all occupations that served the needs for the maintenance of life.” and continued, “To labor meant to be enslaved by necessity, and this enslavement was inherent in the conditions of human life.” (Arendt 1958, 83-84). The motivation for this early slave rationality was not driven by economic or productive gains, according to her, but instead rested solely on the desire to exclude labor from the human condition. Relying on Aristotle's differentiation between free and unfree men, Arendt concludes that ancient conceptions of the slave as “animal,” corresponding to *animal laborans*, were accurate, in that freedom was only attainable outside of necessity as the summation of human life.

Conversely, with the growth of bourgeois culture in the modern age, freedom appears to be attainable within the confines of a culture still governed by the necessity of the natural world.

In regards to this Marcuse states:

“that culture of the bourgeois epoch which led in the course of its own development to the segregation from civilization of the mental and spiritual world as an independent realm of value that is also considered superior to civilization. Its decisive characteristic is the assertion of a universally obligatory, eternally better and more valuable world that must be unconditionally affirmed: a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence, yet realizable by every individual for himself ‘from within,’ without any transformation of the state of fact.” (Marcuse 1965)

This definition, which Marcuse refers to as affirmative culture, brings to light his distinctions between civilization and culture, a continually developing historical product that now rests in the period of modern bourgeois capitalism. Within “civilization” lie labor and the realm of necessity, while “culture” contains leisure and the realm of freedom. “Technological civilization,” he says, “tends to eliminate the transcendent goals of culture.” (Marcuse 1965, 17). Marcuse’s fears echo his premises in *One-Dimensional Man*, the blurring of culture amidst civilization’s repressively historical past. This repressive development, however, also creates the conditions necessary for the self-actualization of individuals within society. In this light, the idea of necessity is a reliable antagonist to individual yearnings for freedom, and the struggles against it have produced the physical and mental horrors that have come to define previous centuries. Necessity can be understood as a humanizing trait; it is the fact of life that has come to elucidate earthly experience. In conversation with freedom the two come to constitute one another, make the other felt, and illuminate the most daunting questions of freedom through the most basic of human characteristics that Marcuse alludes to: the struggles of life itself. Methodologically, I employ the use of dialectical interpretation for this reason, as it best illustrates the inseparable relationship between the realms of necessity and freedom, while also moving us toward a more clear understanding of historical human development and emancipation.

Separately, the works of Arendt and Marcuse have been a heavy source of engagement for scholars of political theory and a host of other fields, including history, sociology, semiotics, and philosophy, among others. Works devoted to the late Arendt have often focused on her ability as a theorist of democracy (Henaff & Strong 2001; Knauer 1975), as a student of Heidegger (Young-Bruel 1998), and as a proponent of the Jewish community (Ring 1997, Felman 1978). Marcuse has also been noted in a number of ways: as a radical thinker and leader

of the new left (Kellner 1998; Cranston 1971), as a Marxist (Kellner 1984), and as a torchbearer of Freudian and psychoanalytic theory (Feenberg 2008, Boyers 1975; Lipshires 1974; Robinson 1969). These aforementioned works, however, focus on them separately as very distinct and often times conflicting thinkers. I believe providing a discussion of their similarities would prove to be even more illuminating.

On this point, few works have attempted to conceptualize their thought together, the most notable being *Heidegger's Children* (2000) by Richard Wolin and *Politics as Radical Creation* (2013) by Christopher Holman. The latter's work is especially striking in its original and incisive portrayal of Arendt and Marcuse's thought together. Holman's overall objective, if it is to be stated in one line, is to affirm Marcuse's understanding of essence, "the creative impulse in those [political] activities oriented toward the reinstitutionalization of the social formation," by reading his work in conjunction with Arendt's, which offers an "insight into politics as spontaneous and performative public action concerned with calling forth the radically new, new modes and orders that cannot be traced back to any prior moments in a logically organized causal sequence." (Holman 2013, 7). Holman argues that both authors respective deficiencies—Arendt's nonconcern with the social as an area of political performativity and Marcuse's seeming nonconcern with the political as more than a means to a utopian end—can be overcome and bring forth a new understanding of democratic action in the world.

Going somewhat in line with Holman's impressive work, I recognize the connection between Marcuse's creative impulse and the spontaneity of Arendt's insightful articulation of action in the public realm. This connection, however, emerges quite differently when taking necessity as the point of focus, and helps to shed novel on important questions regarding the

nature of human life, the active potential of aesthetics in times of political upheaval, and the concept of “world” as a politically relevant factor in environmental debates.

The discussion that follows will be structured in four main parts, spanning three chapters. First, the origins of necessity will be drawn out and understood. If, for both, necessity is a determining factor of freedom, then it is important to first understand how Arendt and Marcuse’s previous influences impacted the growth of their intellectual thought. In this regard, a genealogical rendering of Martin Heidegger, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx should suffice. This last section on Marx will represent both a staging ground and a jumping point, where the oasis between Arendt and Marcuse will begin coming into focus. Second, I will draw out Arendt and Marcuse’s specific illustrations of necessity and freedom separately, setting the ground for a possible area of convergence between the two. Following this I will engage directly with the author’s responses to the reality of necessity, highlighting important areas of synthesis and divergence. These pivotal synthetic responses, action (Arendt) and imagination (Marcuse), will allow for some critical reinterpretation.

Two clear pathways between our thinkers arise following this, distinctions that I will touch on only momentarily and revisit as the heart of the paper ultimately takes shape. The first is a genuine concern for the fulfillment and protection of the life process. Arendt refers to this as “the sheer bliss of being alive,” a certain delight that arises from the experience of life in its fullest and most human form. In addition to this, Marcuse’s affirmation that “work can become play” highlights the significance of genuine human activity in the fields of labor, where work and toil can become a liberated extension of aesthetic and artistic experience. Both of these stances make explicit the special importance of human life and its distinct natural processes. The second pathway, representing a key theoretical takeaway from the combination of these two authors,

concerns the quandary between political action and its relationship to future-oriented, emancipatory, imaginary, and utopic worldviews. How can we better understand action, as a distinct political phenomenon in the realm of human affairs, capable of unearthing unpredictable and unforeseen consequences, and its relationship to the future world that we work tirelessly to create this present world in the image of? This is a question that will be tackled as the first chapter comes to a close.

Finally, in the second and third chapters, two examples will be used to better illustrate the theoretical convergence of Arendt and Marcuse's thought, a practical and critical application of *aesthetic praxis*. These case studies will be centered on two crucial contemporary phenomena: the ongoing social unrest in Hong Kong, and human relationships with the environment in the 21st century. Let us begin.

Necessity in the Tradition of Political Thought: Heidegger, Freud, and Marx

The three individuals noted above need very little introduction. The ideas of Martin Heidegger have exerted a seminal influence on the development of contemporary European philosophy. Though his works are most notably associated with Phenomenology and Existentialism, there are important elements to consider in relation to necessity and freedom that were important for both Arendt and Marcuse. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic work, which during the 1950s and 1960s was an area of important focus for Marcuse and other Frankfurt School members, is important for two reasons. First, it greatly influenced Marcuse and became the subject of his first major book *Eros and Civilization*; and second, because Freud's conceptualization of Ananke relates back in many ways to Marcuse's formulation of necessity and his criticism of Freud, while also fortifying our ability to properly view necessity in the eyes

of Arendt. Finally, Marx represents the core theoretical interpretation of necessity that our two theorists deal with, and this will prove to be our ultimate focus throughout the thesis.

Heidegger and Necessity: Being, Thrownness, and Death

We begin with Heidegger here for one important reason: he is the only thinker amongst the three considered in this section to have had direct personal relationships with both Arendt and Marcuse. Traces of his thought can be found throughout the breadth of their works, and his impact on the young Hannah Arendt extended well beyond the classroom. She studied with Heidegger at the University of Marburg from 1924 to 1926, and during that time began a romantic relationship with the then 35-year-old Heidegger, who was married with two sons. Their personal relationship together is well noted, and has been the subject of increased speculation for some time. Intellectually, the thought of Heidegger, who during this period was one of the towering figures of philosophy in the world, influenced the young Arendt so much so that she once described him as “the hidden king who reigned in the realm of thinking.” (Young-Bruehl 2004). This influence guided much of Arendt and Marcuse’s thinking, so our focus here will be to understand where and how the concept of necessity appears in Heidegger’s work.

At the heart of Heidegger’s philosophical exploration of Being is the fundamental fact that humans are aware of their own concept of Being, the thoughts and manifestations of self that make them an utterly different “who” from the millions of other “theys.” Heidegger calls this authentic awareness *Dasein* (Heidegger 1962, 68ff). For Heidegger, the unity between freedom and necessity is critical in relation to *Dasein*, as one author states, “freedom must be understood not only in relation to this necessity, but more strongly, in its unity with the latter.” (Gilliland 2000, 3). In *Being and Time*, freedom is only understood in relation to the possibilities that exist outside of one’s control, such as cosmic forces and temporal limitations. Thus, the essential

ontological character of Being is freedom, and the relationship between those things one is able to control and their negative counterparts constitute the range of choices and human possibilities in the world. *Dasein*'s control, or lack thereof, produces interplay between the vivid projections of choice and possibility, while also displaying the thrownness of Being into the world of necessity. The existentialist movement that grew from Heidegger's intellectual presence contains this issue at heart, perhaps most notably in Sartre's "condemned to be free" thesis. Heidegger, however, quickly set out to distinguish himself from the existentialists, as evidenced by this remark in his *Letter on Humanism*: "Despite the fact that they emphasize the concreteness of existence, the existentialists fail to pose freedom as a question of being, i.e., to raise the issue of the way in which human decision is constituted by and unified with the thrownness or necessity of being." (Gilliland 2000, 3).

In addition to a sense of thrownness, the concept of "They" in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, also referred to as *das Man*, displays the characteristics of necessity and its place in human life. *Das Man*, according to John Lechte, "implies the external convictions of the collectivity to which one attempts to comply." (Lechte 2016, 6). The physical condition of *das Man*, the relationship between Being and the thrownness of Being into the realm of necessity, connect Heidegger's concept of life and death to the inescapability of necessity. Lechte argues, "Heidegger's necessity...must be understood temporally. Man is, on his view, radically temporal, which means that necessity is historical and fateful." (Lechte 2016, 49). This historicity, however, is much different than Arendt and Marcuse's. As opposed to Arendt's historical method as a criticism of tradition and a product of consequence, and Marcuse's historicity as repression and instinctual redirection, Heidegger's relates directly to the relationship between being and existence. In this way, it is much more limited and less explicit

than in the works of our two authors, and Heidegger devotes little time at all to necessity as an area of human life concerning labor, struggle, and work.

While there is little we can take from Heidegger regarding necessity in the Marxian, Arendtian, and Marcusean iterations, these questions of life and death will continue to make their mark throughout the duration of the thesis. Heidegger's necessity does show us, however, the elusive and underlying character of necessity in philosophical debates and, while not devoting an entire project or chapter to it in the way I attempt, it does provide a thoughtful exploration of the concept in relation to the finite nature of human life, which requires constant activity for prolongation in the realm of necessity. In the notable words of Albert Camus, "Perhaps the best way of making a town's acquaintance is to ascertain how the people in it work, how they love, and how they die." (Camus 2012, 4). This existential absurdism describes in many ways how necessity impacts the breadth of Heidegger's work.

Moving now from Heidegger to Freud, we will notice an important area of experience to consider when thinking about freedom and necessity: the conscious and the subconscious. Freud's psychoanalytic perspective casts light on a type of historicity, as Heidegger does, with an interesting area of focus and dissection, which Marcuse eventually builds on in his *Eros and Civilization*.

Marcuse's Psychoanalytic Origins: The Malleability of the Historical Moment

Marcuse, like other members of the Frankfurt School, made it his goal to reinterpret Marx in light of the failures witnessed in the USSR and amidst the growing marginalization of Marxist thought. Along with his Frankfurt School colleagues, namely Theodor Adorno and Erich Fromm, Marcuse was interested in combining these revitalized Marxist interpretations with Freudian psychoanalysis. In order to begin understanding the place necessity holds in the mind of

Marcuse, then, it is important that we first lay out some of his key psychoanalytic themes, which form the basis for his arguments of freedom and necessity that are drawn primarily from Marx.

The psychoanalytic ontology of Marcuse operates on the basis of a few key philosophical interpretations of Freud's psychology. These, while seemingly small in number, occupy an incredible range of thought in psychology and psychoanalytic theory, extending to some degree across almost all of Marcuse's works. From Freud, Marcuse derived *Eros*, *Thanatos*, the pleasure principle, and the reality principle. These core concepts form the foundation of his seminal work *Eros and Civilization*, which attempts to provide Freud's theory of the instincts and repressive society with an emancipatory element, an answer to the grave questions posed by Freud's still controversial work. Freud's conceptualization of repression can be thought of as a progression, where society is wrapped in a continued movement towards increased repression with seemingly no escape. In my view, Marcuse's attempt to grant this escape signals not only the historical and social components of psychological repression, but also their political significance (Marcuse 1955, xvii).

Beginning with the raging battle of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, Freud's theory is built around *Eros*, the purely libidinal desires and their excessive drive in the life processes. At the earliest stages of its theoretical development, the struggle focuses on the antagonism between the "sex (libidinous) and ego (self-preservation) instincts; at the latest stage, it is centered around the *life instinct* (*Eros*) and the *death instinct* (*Thanatos*).” (Marcuse 1955, 22). The latter of these conceptions is mine and Marcuse's ultimate focus, and it is from here that Marcuse and Freud begin with the recognition that the external world is not only opposed to the gratification of the

impulsive *eros*, but is actually hostile towards it. In response, the pleasure principle² reverts inward, overburdened and exceedingly suppressed by the restraints of the external world, conforming eventually to the sublimation of itself by the societal whole. Operating under the assumption that “happiness and freedom are incompatible with civilization,” Marcuse must begin by first showing the historical malleability of instinctual repression, grounding it in a philosophical and political base. Next, he must proceed from this ground with the assertion that repressive society produces the possibility to abolish repression, emphasizing, “the very achievements of repressive civilization seem to create the preconditions for the gradual abolition of repression” (Marcuse 1955, 5).

The interplay of *Eros* and *Thanatos* highlights the dialectical relationship that had become a foundational element of the critical theory movement. This dialectical connection between “civilization and barbarism, progress and suffering, freedom and unhappiness... reveals itself ultimately as that between *Eros* and *Thanatos*.” (Marcuse 1955, 17). Whereas Arendt emphasizes natality (birth) as the ability for humans to produce new beginnings, creating and preserving the spaces of life that allow for freedom to pervade throughout society, Marcuse argues that this possibility can only be realized when one notices the repressive nature of the space one is born into. The repressiveness of this space lends itself to the development of the reality principle, where the original operation of the instincts to seek gratification are redirected to perform the function determined for them by the organization of society. Against Freud’s claim that the reality principle is unshakable, Marcuse sets out to demonstrate that the reality principle, which he took to be the governing mechanism of life, can assume different shapes and functions under different social conditions. Marcuse’s strategy was thus to *historicize*

² For Freud, the pleasure principle develops, through aspects of instinctual repression and energy transferal, into the reality principle. The pleasure principle are the mental processes that strive for nothing but “gaining pleasure; [abstaining] from any operation which might arouse unpleasantness (‘pain’)...” (Marcuse 1955, 13).

psychoanalysis in order to combat Freud's skepticism regarding human civilization and the repression necessary for its advancement.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud develops the pleasure principle, "which draws up the programme of life's purpose." (Freud 1957, 27). Driven by the pleasure principle, the behavior of humans reveals the purpose and object of their lives: to become happy and to avoid displeasure. However, under the pressure of the excruciating possibilities of life, its incredible prospects for suffering, the pleasure principle itself changes into the reality principle, resulting almost entirely from the influence of its external environment and individuals biological endowment. It is here, away from the fields of labor and biological inevitability that the deathless repetition of nature prods its way into the mind of its subjects, themselves a biological segment of the natural world with which they are bound. The reality principle denotes the specific ontogenic repression of the individual within society, when the individual is faced with the need to operate, maneuver, and produce in the civilized world. According to Freud, the history of a people is the history of their repression. Culture constrains not only their societal but also their biological existence, not only parts of the human being but their instinctual structure. This constraint forms the history of societal progress and civilization itself begins when the primary objective of the human—"namely, integral satisfaction of needs—is effectively reduced." (Marcuse 1955, 11). With this, Freud understands the growth of repression as a transhistorical fact, not merely a side effect of specific social and cultural arrangements. Marcuse, on the other hand, proposes that these historical arrangements can be changed through the application of political action, and thus proposes a new term to denote this historical fact.

In developing Freud's strands of thought Marcuse proposes this new term, *performance principle*, to designate the specific historical context of the *reality principle*. At the advent of

civilization, the reality principle overcomes the original pleasure principle, causing a shift in individual's preferences from the attainment of pure bodily pleasures to more "rational" and restrained pleasure (Marcuse 1955, 13). Restrained pleasure culminates in societal progress, and the repression of natural tendencies forms the foundation for civilization to perpetuate its advancements in the name of reason, rationality, and progress. *Eros and Civilization* represents a passing of the baton from Freud to Marcuse, and in this theoretical exchange Marcuse goes beyond Freudian psychology into the philosophical and, more importantly, the political.

This transcendence beyond Freud helps to shed light on the relationship between freedom and necessity in Marcuse's philosophy. As Joel Whitebook aptly points out,

"In almost all known societies, economic scarcity (*Lebensnot*) has forced humans to devote the greater part of their lives to the struggle for survival. This in turn has required them to repress their instinctual life and to forgo the pursuit of "integral satisfaction" (EC 11). In other words, the reality principle, as it has historically existed, coincides with what Marx called "the realm of necessity." (Whitebook 2006, 85).

Marcuse's attempts to develop a conception of freedom within necessity, as we will see shortly, directly mirrors his yearning to emancipate the historically static view of the early Freud. In addition, Marcuse also extracted perhaps his most important tool for doing so from Freud, that of phantasy (imagination). Freud originally observed, "with the introduction of the reality principle one species of thought activity was split off...kept free from reality-testing and remained subordinated to the pleasure principle alone. This activity is phantasying." (Freud 2011, 222). Marcuse took this to mean that phantasy was spared from the development of the reality principle, stating, "As a fundamental, mental process, phantasy has a truth value all its own, which corresponds to an experience all its own..." (Marcuse 1955, 143). Because phantasy retains the functions of the psyche even after the dominant reality principle takes over, Marcuse makes the point that embracing phantasy can help to achieve emancipation beyond the current

reality principle, taking civilization to the heights of a new social order and a new way of life, the life of aesthetic gratitude and pleasure.

Interestingly, the acknowledgment of phantasy in the psyche leads one to a twofold conclusion:

1. Marcuse's use of Freud directly relates to the way he interprets Marx's idea of the realm of necessity, and shows us explicitly the importance of phantasy in this process.
2. Necessity does not only relate to specific physical limitations in the life process, but also corresponds to a type of psychological necessity, i.e., the ways in which scarcity impact the conscious existence of individuals within repressive civilization.

With these factors in mind we can now begin interpreting Marx and setting the stage for Arendt and Marcuse's specific formulations of necessity. It will be important to keep these psychological factors in mind as we probe the thought of the two, for they are critically important for Marcuse but appears as much less so to Arendt, who seems to write off psychological factors as an extension of the "darkness of the human heart." Once Marx is explained, however, these issues will become much more clear and malleable.

The Mark of Marx: Necessity and Freedom

I begin here with the quote originally pointed out in the introduction, as it is central to any and all debates concerning the separation of freedom and necessity:

"the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the

least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite.” (Marx 1953, 593).

In this well-known passage, Marx defines activity within the realm of necessity as aiming towards the satisfaction of vital human needs and the reproduction of human life. The plethora of debates that have followed his elaboration of this idea have tended to focus on Marx’s level of hope for the development of full freedom within the realm of necessity at the time of his writing, with some tending to interpret him as an optimist (Klagge 1986; Kandiyali 2017) and others as a pessimist (Arendt 1958; Marcuse 1969; James 2017). The optimists advocate that in Marx’s interpretation freedom can be experienced within the realm of necessity, as Kandiyali elaborates in response to James, “I argue that Marx is committed to a stronger claim than James wishes to make, namely, that freedom and necessity are not merely compatible but that participation in the realm of necessity is required for human freedom.” (Kandiyali 2017, 834). The more pessimistic interpretations, of which Marcuse places himself, take Marx at face value and argue, “Human freedom in a true sense is possible only beyond the realm of necessity.” (Marcuse 1964). According to this interpretation one is forced to recognize that even Marx admits in the passage above, “...it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity.”

The *true* realm of freedom, the development of human powers and capabilities as ends-in-themselves, begins beyond this realm, but requires the realm of necessity as its base. Marx holds onto the idea that activities within the oscillating spheres of freedom and necessity can become intrinsically valuable, but these activities are still undertaken in the service of external and alienated needs, which are separate from the fulfillment of human potentialities in a nonalienated society. Marcuse and Arendt noticed this limitation and sought to address it in radically different ways. Marcuse used this as a foundation for explaining the conscious

development of individual work in the fields of labor into aesthetic experience. Arendt, on the other hand, willfully criticized Marx for his over-abstractification of labor, *animal laborans*, as the essence of individual human life. Before we can come to an equal footing, then, these disparate issues must be worked through separately, ultimately setting the ground for each to answer questions about the other that have remained intensely scrutinized for some time.

Life as Bliss? Life as Struggle? Necessity in the Eyes of Arendt and Marcuse

By tracing the idea of necessity through Heidegger, Freud, and Marx, my goal was to elaborate on the nature of it's understanding in modern political thought and prove that it is at times an explicit concept and also a very hidden realm of thinking. Heidegger showed us that, although necessity is worth much critical engagement when discussing the nature and existence of Being, it is also a very hidden and amorphous idea in his philosophy, one that requires much reading into from a view premised on specific methods of interpretation. The work of Freud, especially in relation to Marcuse, elucidates the psychological factors that accompany the trials of sustaining oneself in the life process, and the way these factors impact the historical growth of society. Finally, in Marx, we come to the precipice of the debate on necessity, one that will ultimately grow as the paper continues. What I aim to accomplish now is simple: to consider the thought of Arendt and Marcuse separately, drawing on these previous thinkers when necessary in order to understand where they both stand in relation to one another. The following discussion will begin with Marcuse and then move to Arendt, eventually setting the stage for an area of combination, where both will be critical in understanding the others relative deficiencies, simultaneously paving a way toward a new understanding of necessity and the ideals of freedom that grow from it.

Marcuse's Radical Vision

Although in his *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse seems to admit that there would remain some level of alienation even after work becomes play,³ in his later works he begins to monitor more closely the “coalescence of freedom and necessity,” as Holman puts it.⁴ Hence, in *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse states, “Marx rejects the idea that work can ever become play. Alienation would be reduced with the progressive reduction of the working day, but the latter would remain a day of unfreedom, rational but not free. However, the development of the productive forces beyond their capitalist organization suggests the possibility of freedom *within* the realm of necessity.” (Marcuse 1969, 21). It appears, then, that Marx’s ideal of socialist liberation was not quite radical enough, as Marcuse further elaborates:

“He [Marx] underrated the level which the productivity of labour under the capitalist system itself could attain the possibilities suggested by the attainment of this level. The technical achievements of capitalism would make possible a socialist development which would surpass the Marxian distinction between socially necessary labour and creative work, between alienated labour and non-alienated work, between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom.” (Marcuse 1967, 413).

Marcuse’s utopian aspirations grew considerably throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s. These utopian ideals are a direct product of his interpretations of Freud and Marx, relating convincingly back to the coalescence of freedom and necessity. Utopia in this sense is best understood as the eventual development of freedom within necessity, where the human object, a function of socially necessary labor, can maintain modern levels of production in conjunction with a life that is aimed at fulfilling the full development of the individual and the society as a whole. On this point Marcuse assures us, “The transition from capitalism’s inevitable death to

³ See, for example, pg. 222 of *Eros and Civilization*: “To be sure, the scarcity and poverty prevalent in the world could be sufficiently mastered to permit the ascendancy of universal freedom, but this mastery seems to be self-propelling—perpetual labor.”

⁴ See pgs. 54-55 of *Politics as Radical Creation*.

socialism is necessary, but only in the sense that the full development of the individual is necessary.” (Marcuse 1964, 317).

Marcuse’s initial point of disagreement with Marx, as initially alluded to in the quote above, does not concern the disproportionate relationship between labor time and free time. Instead, the free time and the activities spent in free time determine the overall *content* of work and labor. In *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse gives us a piece of this, which he expands on considerably in his later work as *form*, with this passage:

“...the more external to the individual the necessary labor becomes, the less does it involve him in the realm of necessity. Relieved from the requirements of domination, the quantitative reduction in labor time and energy leads to a quantitative change in the human existence: the free rather than the labor time determines its content. The expanding realm of freedom becomes truly a realm of play... Thus liberated, they will generate new forms of realization and of discovering the world, which in turn will reshape the realm of necessity, the struggle for existence.”⁵

Two factors are at play in this unified transformation of the realms of freedom and necessity, concepts that Marcuse refers to as the “new sensibility” and the *aesthetic ethos*. In order to fully understand the Marcusean relationship between freedom and necessity, and how it will relate to Arendt, these ideas must be expanded upon to illuminate a full picture of historical human development and the struggles that necessity generates. The combination of these factors, Marcuse argues, would cause the “Emergence of a new Reality Principle: under which a new sensibility and a desublimated scientific intelligence would combine in the creation of an *aesthetic ethos*.” (Marcuse 1969, 24). The coalescence of freedom and necessity explained earlier calls for not only a complete redistribution of material wealth and labor time, but also a new *form* of society itself, i.e., the utopian future of Marcuse’s radical vision.

⁵ See pgs. 222-223 of *Eros and Civilization*.

The New Sensibility: Beauty, Imagination, and Form

“The new sensibility,” Marcuse firmly states, “expresses the ascent of the life instincts (*eros*) over aggressiveness and guilt...” (Marcuse 1969, 23). Embracing the instinctual *eros*, which has had its energy redirected into work for the proliferation of capitalist development, allows for the sudden growth of a new society guided by new ideals of self, no longer burdened by the Auschwitz’s, genocides, and excruciatingly dark moments of human history.

From the standpoint of the New Left, which during the heights of cultural and political revolution in the 1960s held Marcuse as its intellectual leader, individual participation in political processes and social movements affirmed the development of a new sensibility. Because of the active and participative nature of those within the New Left, guided by some newfound characteristics of a new sensibility, Marcuse held that it had become, and would continue to become, an embodiment of *praxis*, Greek for action.⁶ This call to action represented a radical break from the prevailing school of traditional Marxist thought, which had originally argued that the working class would, as a direct embodiment of *praxis*, rise up against the capitalist mode of production and thus change the ideological superstructure, where cultural factors like aesthetics, politics, beauty, and philosophy were contained. Instead, drawing intensively on his Freudian psychoanalytic perspectives, Marcuse argued that the true revolution against capitalist organization would begin in the consciousness, only then could it proceed to upend the dominant modes of production that still, in our modern times, dominate the structural mechanisms of society, both mental and physical.

The process of radically active social change, which was much more present in the writings of Marcuse than, say, those of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, was focused

⁶ Marcuse first elaborated on this point on pg. 25 in *An Essay on Liberation*, and it is one that continues throughout the development of his later works.

intently on the individual as opposed to the structure itself. If individual instincts were molded by the specific historical combination of societal structures and processes, then it would follow that a change in the instincts, the freeing of the pleasure principle, *eros*, would entail a radical change in the malleable structures of society at its current form of historical development. Hence, the new sensibility,

“emerges in the struggle against violence and exploitation where this struggle is waged for essentially new ways and forms of life: negation of the entire Establishment, its morality, culture; affirmation of the right to build a society in which the abolition of poverty and toil terminates in a universe where the sensuous, the playful, the calm, and the beautiful become forms of existence and thereby the *Form* of society itself.” (Marcuse 1969, 25).

The focus Marcuse places on individual consciousness, as we have seen, is indebted mostly to Freud. This focus, however, which has often been criticized as a crude biological determinist point of view,⁷ is more so intended to assist with an expansion of Marxist thought beyond the original Promethean logic of Marx’s later writings. On this point Holman states, “the turn to Freud is intended...to inject Marxian thinking with a more explicit concern with sensuous gratification.” (Holman 2013, 35). Taking, for instance, the fact that phantasy retains its image in the psyche, even in times of intense instinctual repressivity, the embracing of imaginative capabilities is the first step in this process towards a new sensibility.

Phantasy, in this way, plays a decisive role in the operations of the mental apparatus: “it links the deepest layers of the unconscious with the highest products of consciousness (art), the dream with reality;” (Marcuse 1955, 140). Phantasy, Marcuse argues, has a truth value all its own, which corresponds to a certain unique experience—“namely, the surmounting of antagonistic human reality.” (Marcuse 1955, 143). Imagination is able to create a universe of

⁷ This issue notably came to the fore in the growing disagreements between Marcuse and Erich Fromm. On this, Lawrence Friedman notes, “The essential problem for Marcuse, was that as the years went by, Fromm moved further and further away from the instinctual basis of human personality. He had instead embraced “positive thinking which leaves the negative where it is—predominant over human existence” (Friedman 2013, 195).

comprehension, one that is both subjective and objective. Take, for example, the artist who imagines a new and unique product of experience and makes it real. Behind this aesthetic, Marcuse writes, “lies the repressed harmony of sensuousness and reason—the eternal protest against the organization of life by the logic of domination, the critique of the performance principle.” (Marcuse 1955, 144). The rarified contextualization of artistic experience plays a pivotal role in the formation of the new sensibility, and the preservation of this transcendent experience is only preserved by *praxis*, in both its ability to preserve history and stories through the experience of others, and the unending consequences of its coming to be. The new sensibility thus becomes an *aesthetic ethos*, and this *aesthetic ethos* translates into the everyday experiences of the individual, where their life and labor can become an art form, a direct extension of the now liberated artistic consciousness they have embraced.

The development of this new consciousness would promote the development of a society free to realize possibilities and ultimately transform the realm of necessity in relation to the realm of freedom. “Technique,” according to Marcuse, “would then tend to become art, and art would tend to form reality: the opposition between imagination and reason, higher and lower faculties, poetic and scientific thought, would be invalidated.” (Marcuse 1969, 24). The “liberated consciousness” initially requires the realization that instinctual repression is not transhistorical, but instead a fact contingent on the specific organization of society at any given point in history; because society changes shape, so too does the form of repression within that society change shape. Once phantasy is embraced, in opposition to rationally irrational and dominant thought, the *aesthetic ethos* would lead society to promote a new form and a new image, guided by the new sensibility.

The Aesthetic Ethos:

The current rationality of progress, however, is a rationality of domination. Left to the auspices of nature and continuous everyday struggle, individuals have rationalized society's continuous advancement in such a way that domination has become an all-too-normal aspect of daily life. Interactions with nature, of which humans have constantly aimed to control, extract from, and produce within, impact not only one's view of the natural world but also the way one treats individual beings in the revolving confines of that world. The *aesthetic ethos*, guided by a new sensibility and enhanced connection to the imaginative and creative capacities, offers a method of transformation for this space, where artistic beauty mediates the interactions between the "rational faculties and sensuous needs." (Marcuse 1969, 30). This method of mediation is of great importance when one considers the nature of action and its unending consequences that have been felt throughout history. With the help of what Marcuse calls a *gaya scienza*, "a science and technology released from their service to destruction and exploitation," human beings would be free to embrace imaginative and aesthetic capabilities, which "then lead to a reality formed by the aesthetic sensibility of man." (Marcuse 1969, 31).

What the aesthetic ethos embodies—something that will work in concurrence with the radical and spontaneous nature of action in Arendt's philosophy—is a radical view of the world that binds humans together through their creatively beautiful and artistic capabilities. These capabilities, which have never been fully unleashed, would lend themselves to not only guide the development of free and liberated individuals operating within the realms of necessity and freedom, but also link their capacities together, thus leading the development of civilization, and of action at every moment in this development, with a harmonious vision of what this world will look like as an entirely new mode of progress cascades throughout time. This vision, while not

falling into the unpredictable and chaotic webs that define action in Arendtian philosophy, does very little to negate the dynamic character of action and the incredible effects it has on the world when it creates the future, the new and the beautiful.

Arendt: *The Intimacy of Freedom and Necessity*

In Marcuse we noticed that attempts to comprehend freedom and necessity focus on the historical reality of repressed instincts. The efforts undertaken to understand this repression result in a potential transformation of the realms of freedom and necessity, where the nature of one's work becomes liberated from the historical struggle of existence. Conversely, for Arendt, the relationship between freedom and necessity is understood much differently and relies on a few key features of her thought. To make light of this, I will first give a brief overview of freedom and necessity in *The Human Condition* and her critique of Marx, before focusing more intently on these core ideas, which will be of pivotal importance in the final third of the first chapter. These concepts: natality, labor, work, and action, will work in tandem with the ideas we have already drawn out from Marcuse. The most useful of these for our purposes, natality and action, will help to set up the rest of the discussion we have already set out to understand: the relationship between action in the present and its future consequences, the latter of which I have shown relates in many ways to one's imaginative capabilities.

Arendt views necessity as the driving force of the life processes. On this point, she says, "Necessity and life are so intimately related and connected that life itself is threatened where necessity is altogether eliminated." (Arendt 1958, 71). Far from resulting in the abolition of life itself, the continued efforts to overcome necessity are destructive because they only blur the line between freedom and necessity. The at times intolerable existence of necessity, while generating

the pain of human toil and cyclical responsibility, also produces a curious type of wonder in the eyes of Arendt. She refers to this as “the sheer bliss of being alive,” stating, “the ‘blessing or the joy’ of labor is the human way to experience the sheer bliss of being alive which we share with all living creatures...The reward of toil and trouble lies in nature’s fertility” (Arendt 1958, 106-7). Thus, Marx’s attempts to “supplant” the realm of necessity with the realm of freedom, according to her, actually negate its very possibility.

Her criticisms of Marx grow distinctively out of this intimate partnership that she envisages between the two realms and the correspondence between labor and appreciation for life, where “Man cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is won in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity.” (Arendt 1958, 121). Practically speaking, throughout history human labor has operated against necessity, and its overcoming represents the very real and true elimination of life, as we know it. It is said by Arendt that the goal of Karl Marx was to emancipate humans from labor, and in doing so he defined human beings as *animal laborans*: humanity in labor, commanded by necessity, and characterized by unfreedom. In overcoming necessity Marx “then leads him [humans] into a society in which his [their] greatest and most human power is no longer necessary.” (Arendt 1958, 105).

The early writings of Marx offer only a glimpse of this transcendence of the human through communism. Here we have only a small piece of what the future of humanity might look like “... the necessary *actual* phase of man’s emancipation and rehabilitation. *Communism* is the necessary form and dynamic of the immediate future but not as such the goal of human development—the form of human society.”⁸ What is the ultimate goal then? Might we only be

⁸ Marx, Karl. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 79.

able to know once communism is embraced? Marx answers that we cannot know, because we are chained by “necessity”; communism is the resolution between “freedom” and “necessity.”⁹ The human, free from the bonds of necessity and labor, is now free to *create themselves*.

The contempt here, for Arendt, lies ostensibly in Marx’s ultimate focus. By ascribing the essence of the human being as a laboring individual, *animal laborans*, Marx aims for a society that disintegrates his own meaning of human life. The hope that inspired Marx’s argument was that free time will eventually emancipate humans from necessity and make *animal laborans* productive, and this for her, “rests on the illusion of a mechanistic philosophy which assumes that labor power, like any other energy, can never be lost, so that if it is not spent and exhausted in the drudgery of life it will automatically nourish other, ‘higher,’ activities.” (Arendt 1958, 133). Using the time since Marx as a point of analysis, Arendt concludes that free time has indeed increased but also shown us how the free time of *animal laborans* is spent, “never... in anything but consumption, and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his faculties become.” (Arendt 1958, 133). This consuming nature of the *animal laborans* continues to grow and harbors a danger “that eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption.”¹⁰

This pessimism on the part of Arendt has faced its share of criticism. The traditional conceptions of labor, which according to her Marx only flipped on its head¹¹, ushers in modernity under the conditions that we have either mainly “a society of property-owners, as in Locke, or a society relentlessly engaged in the process of acquisition, as in Hobbes, or a society

⁹ Marx, Karl. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, pg. 79.

¹⁰ Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, pg. 133.

¹¹ In *Between Past and Future* (pg. 24), Arendt makes the remark “Marx, not unlike Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, tried desperately to think against the tradition while using its own conceptual roots.” Her criticism of Marx arises from the Hegelian distinctions and dialectical materialism that glorifies labor and *praxis* while embracing a stateless and (almost) laborless society. These for her make the political nonexistent, and problematize the distinctions between public and private, as we will see.

of producers, as in Marx, or a society of job-holders, as in our own society, or a society of laborers, as in socialist and communist countries.” (Arendt 1958, 31). She argues that by privileging the concerns of society, “one super-human family,” modern political thought has eclipsed the Greek essence of the political and in its place now rests the social (Wolin 2001, 35). The decisive variable seems to be the relationship to necessity that these important thinkers embrace. All of them, she argues, have undone the importance of the political and have granted possession of it to *animal laborans*. The outcome of this is that, contrary to Marx, “none of the higher capacities of man are any longer necessary to connect individual life with the life of the species; individual life became part of the life process, and to labor, to assure the continuity of one’s own life and the life of his family, was all that was needed.” (Arendt 1958, 321).

It might appear as rather disingenuous, then, that Arendt only views Marx’s conception of labor and necessity as *animal laborans*, instead of in terms of material production (*homo faber*), or reason (*animal rationale*). In remaining sympathetic to Marx, however, one must acknowledge that perhaps Marx could not make all of these distinctions because labor in his writing is an activity that produces objects but also refines individual capacities within this process of creation. In short, he never seems to distinguish between labor and work because, as Holman helpfully points out, “labour contains aspects of all three of Arendt’s activities of the *vita activa*: labour is necessary for the species’ biological reproduction; labour is the creation of a stable, objective reality through the interruption of natural processes; and labour is praxis, is self-development, creativity, and the expression of freedom.” (Holman 2013, 134). Her analysis of labor does not, however, have to be entirely abandoned because of these potentially shortsighted slights at Marx. Instead, they actually offer us much room for reinterpretation in light of Marcuse’s ideas and his own criticisms of Marx, which we have already seen. Before

doing so, however, let us first draw some connections between her theories of natality and action to Marcuse, plotting areas of agreement and conflict.

Natality: The Miracle that Saves the World

Arendt's theory of natality is brilliant in its beautiful simplicity. Similar to the instinctual relationship between *eros* and *Thanatos* that Marcuse elaborates, Arendt posits that all three activities of the human condition—labor, work, and action—are intimately connected to the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality.¹² When one is born into the world they are a stranger to all, but with this birth they are granted the capacity to act, to make themselves known, and “the new beginning inherent at birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.” (Arendt 1958, 9). “The new,” she says later, “therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world.” (Arendt 1958, 178).

Where Arendt and Marcuse differ in their interpretations of birth and *eros*, however, is in the specific role human creative capacities contain in the world after the fact of birth. Marcuse's view of *eros* as the life instinct contains at its core the transcendent capabilities of creation when fostered in a genuinely new form of reality. Because *eros* cannot be freed from its shackles without a call to phantasy, then it would hold that the truly creative ability of the life instinct is the imagination itself, which remains pure even after the libidinal energy of the instincts is

¹² See pg. 8 of *The Human Condition*.

transferred to aspects of work and toil. Natality for Arendt, on the other hand, has a creative capacity that focuses much more on the relationships generated through action, what she calls a “cascading web of relationships,”¹³ which emphasize the dynamic and unpredictable nature of creation as the greatest strength of acting. In order to fully understand the creative potential in Arendt’s philosophy, then, we must interpret these webs in relation to Marcuse’s imaginary glimpses of human creation. Upon doing so we will have all of the necessary explanations, considerations, and theoretical interpretations from which to build an *aesthetic praxis*.

Arendtian Action: The Unpredictable

When one acts, they never truly know how those moments will be felt throughout the duration of their lives and the lives of others. Freedom in its most basic sense is premised on the ability of individuals to act, think, and change the prospects of their own life, both positively and negatively. Arendt, while writing on the relationship between freedom and necessity, expresses this fact wholeheartedly when she says, “what endures in the realm of human affairs are these processes [action], and their endurance is as unlimited, as independent of the perishability of material and the mortality of men as the endurance of humanity itself.” (Arendt 1958, 233). Action is at once generated by the confrontation with necessity and, once initiated following this confrontation, takes on a power that is wholly independent of the mortality of those perpetually stuck in the processes of life itself.

If one accepts Arendt’s theory of natality, that “the unexpected can be expected of him,” then one must also be willing to accept the unknowing consequences of action. Because of this Arendt states that unpredictability, and not frailty, becomes the decisive character of human

¹³ See Arendt’s discussion of “entangling relationships” on pgs. 233-234 of *The Human Condition*.

affairs (Arendt 1958, 232). The feeling of freedom and creation that is generated by one's encounters with necessity also paradoxically make us prisoners to self and other. In the words of Arendt, "Nowhere...neither in labor, subject to the necessity of life, nor in fabrication, dependent upon given material, does man appear to be less free than in those capacities [action] whose very essence is freedom and in that realm which owes its existence to nobody and nothing but man." (Arendt 1958, 234).

Human action possesses an enormous capacity of endurance, exemplified by the stories and knowledge we have gained from those whose lives have perished long ago. Thucydides, for example, could have never envisioned the impact he would have on the development of knowledge in the Western world, nor could he have imagined that his work would still be interpreted in many schools of realist thought, particularly in the field of international relations, as one of the first true historians in the Western world. The teachings of Buddha, while monumental during the period of his life, have immortalized him in theological and philosophical studies due in large part to the many interpretations that his actions and teachings created following his death. And Arendt, writing in a period of the 20th century that was experiencing political and cultural turmoil, never quite knew the impact she would have on knowledge, on a young man's thesis, or on the world at large, but she felt this burden and praised it with conviction. The same goes for all other human beings, and this burden is incredibly heavy, "the burden of unpredictability and irreversibility." (Arendt 1958, 233). One feels this burden every day, whether they find themselves in a situation where the choice they make decides the potential fate of another or themselves, or they feel weighed down by the intense responsibility to live their lives according to a personal code that they wish all others to adopt as

well (Kantian morality, Stoic philosophy, etc.). Regardless, one carries this extreme burden of unknowingness throughout the duration of their lives.

In the realm of human affairs this responsibility translates to the specific arrangements of social life we have come to embrace as a society, and the burden of democracy influences the United States perhaps more than any country, because it is a modern ideal first embraced and successfully implemented by them following the years of the Revolutionary War, and this fact remains, for better or worse. However, for as chaotically powerful as action can appear to be, one must never be willing to offer themselves completely up to the inescapable reality of unknowingness, and the dissolute possibilities of the future that they feel wholly incapable of controlling. Instead, what I propose is an exploration into this unknown, to cultivate an understanding of action and freedom in accordance with the necessities of life, in order to alleviate the pressures of creating a future world with no common ground to identify oneself on. I therefore wish to embrace an aesthetic method of understanding political action, and to ground this in the important debate that human freedom in the realm of necessity generates. To exemplify this experience, I turn to the creative potential of the imagination, which throughout history has been sheltered away for fear of exposing the true, unhidden, and explosively beautiful commonalties that unite all human bodies and revolutionary potentialities. This will be the remaining focus of chapter 1, and following this my method will be applied to the ongoing social movements in Hong Kong, a movement that I dub “The Aesthetic Revolution,” as well as the most pressing debate in the 21st century—the relationship between human beings and their natural earthly environment.

Aesthetic Praxis

At the beginning of this thesis I stated that my goal was twofold: to explore the relationship between necessity and freedom, and to interpret this relationship with an underlying normative foundation in mind, i.e. “with the aspiration of a human life dynamic in its character, guided by the vision of a potentially limitless future.” The former has mostly been accomplished, and so we must turn our attention to the latter for the remaining duration of chapter 1 and the case studies in chapters 2 and 3. Both of these normative ambitions have been explained separately:

- A.) Arendt’s *vita activa* has exposed us to the truly dynamic character of action in human life and we have seen the way this relates to her conception of freedom, necessity, and natality. Action is unpredictable and capable of bringing about the new, a process powered by the existence of necessity as a condition of human experience.
- B.) Marcuse’s interpretations of Freud, leading to his formulation of the performance principle, phantasy, the new sensibility, and the *aesthetic ethos*, have illustrated the malleability of historical conditions and the role phantasy plays in the shaping of a new reality. These utopian aspirations are not premised on a future that is presently unattainable, but instead rely on the fact that the conditions necessary for true freedom currently exist and have existed for some time.

The combination of A and B will require a much deeper understanding of creative human expression in the works of Arendt and Marcuse, allying ourselves with neither in particular, but instead adjoining them respective to their specific strengths and weaknesses. To begin this discussion we must also keep in mind the theoretical perspectives of both that have already been espoused, as these will be brought up when necessary in order to form a unique foundation from

which to build an aesthetically driven conception of *praxis*. I turn first to a foundational overlap between the two thinkers, the area of creative expression that they inherently share.

The Arena of Creativity: Life

In her uncompleted final work *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt writes, “[We] are of the world, and not merely in it,” and it is here that we, as creatures of the world and its processes, operate amongst and with each other as pluralistic beings (Arendt 1978, 22). To be “of the world” means to be eternally a product of its movements, which press inexorably on all living things and is wholly independent of human willpower. Thus, as Kimberley Curtis points out, “it [the realm of necessity] is independent of the human will and neither progresses nor regresses. It has no temporality; it is the realm of ‘being forever’, endlessly turning, ever-recurring in its boundless fertility.” (Curtis 1999, 26). That human beings are perpetually bound to this space is why Arendt refers to labor in the human condition as the experience of bliss, a sense of oneness with human beings and all of nature’s creatures. It is within this space, the world, as she calls it, that human creative potential ultimately lies. The creation of objects, cultural artifacts, and tools necessary for life—the products of *homo faber*—are things that act as the intermediary materials between appearance and reality. Arendt suggests that without these things, we would not be able to experience reality, or anything, objectively (Arendt 1958, 137). The gratification that comes from experiencing life and operating within its endless temporal limits give way to this creativity and illustrate the sense of bliss that comes from the eternal standpoint of the realm of necessity.

Similarly, Marcuse’s affirmation of essence is rooted in a distinction between the self-realization of beings and the external objects of their interactions, of which, in strictly this sense, the realm of necessity is an extension. Falling in line with the Marxian understanding of alienation, Marcuse finds that a thing only becomes a thing in itself when its external state

becomes integrated with its genuine being.¹⁴ On this idea he states, “Being-for-itself is not a state but a process, for every external condition must continuously be transformed into a phase of self-realization, and each new external condition that arises must be subjected to this treatment.” (Marcuse 1964, 139). These external conditions, like those of Arendt, which require constant understanding because they are conditions of worldliness themselves, are what have allowed dominance to permeate throughout the historical development of society, but at the same time present the possibility to abolish repression and discover freedom within necessity. The idea that work can become play for Marcuse emphasizes this and is generated by the self-realization of objects through aesthetic experience and genuine human potential. At the center of this self-realization is creativity. Marcuse views creativity as a distinctive characteristic of human life, and it is through creativity that human life can transcend its immediate reality and bring about the new, the unexpected, and the imaginary. The starting point for this realization is in labor, which Marcuse describes as “no mere activity; it is that in which every single activity is founded and to which they again return: a *doing*.” (Marcuse 1973, 13).

Both Arendt and Marcuse hold that the world is the center of creativity and this process originates, and will continue to originate, in labor. This is in no way a simple or novel idea, especially when considering the complexity with which they both describe this fact of life. Because necessity offers a sense of bliss and also the potential for an aesthetically driven life—the development of freedom within the realm of necessity—labor qua human self-fulfillment—then it in turn creates a bastion of experience through which to build an *aesthetic praxis*, the convergence of Arendtian dynamism and Marcusian imagination.

¹⁴ For an extended discussion on this idea, see Holman (2013) pgs. 20-24.

The Prospects for Utopia

I wish to preface the final discussion of *aesthetic praxis* with a consideration of utopia. In doing so I hope to accomplish two things: first, a response to the critics of Marcuse's utopian idealism as overly romantic, simplistic, and wholly unattainable, though I will not address some of the important feminist critiques of his focus on Freud's instinctual drives.¹⁵ And second, to merge this understanding of utopia with Arendt's discussion of utopian ideals and her criticisms of them, many of which refer back to Plato. It is my belief that a heightened comprehension of Marcuse will open Arendt up to these utopian possibilities.

A strong source of criticism for Marcuse has come from his perceived over-emphasis on dialectics, which seem to stress pacification and reconciliation. According to Martin Jay, there are two competing strains in Marcuse's thought: "first, the stress of radical action, on the deed, on self-creation as the only mode of authentic being; and second, the unity of opposites, the true harmony of pacified existence, the end of conflict and contradiction." (Jay 1985, 9). The harmony of a pacified existence, however, as Holman rightfully points out, "does not refer to a terminal point in historical time when the activity of the species – the overcoming of the gap between immediate reality and fulfilled potential – would in some way cease through the achievement of a harmonious positive essence." (Holman 2013, 31). Instead, Marcuse reminds us in *One Dimensional Man* that pacification of existence "means the development of man's struggle with man and with nature, under conditions where the competing needs, desires, and aspirations are no longer organized by vested interests in domination and scarcity..." (Marcuse 1964, 16). Thus, when earlier on that same page Marcuse states that "technological progress

¹⁵ An interesting article by Nina Power entitled *One Dimensional Woman* (2013) provides a weighted defense against this criticism of Marcuse. This is an important topic I would like to address in the future, but for purposes of time cannot do so in this project. See also *Marcuse and Feminism* (1979) by Margaret Cerullo.

would transcend the realm of necessity,” he means not the elimination of necessity altogether, but instead is referring to the aspects of domination which maintain the existence of necessity as an area of life determined by complete struggle, toil, poverty, and scarcity. The struggle itself is not overcome, necessity remains, but the struggle as an extension of domination is effectively eliminated.

The perceived danger that Arendt notices in emancipating humanity from labor, specifically in the context of Marx’s writings, is that it “will not only fail to usher in an age of freedom for all but will result, on the contrary, in forcing all mankind under the yoke of necessity...However, not even this utopia could change the essential worldly futility of the life process.” (Arendt 1958, 130-1). “Under the yoke of necessity,” in Arendt’s terms, actually refers to the fact that consumption will increase, thus simultaneously increasing the need for production, ending in what would appear to be the consumption of the entire world by human beings.

Utopian schemes, according to Arendt, break down as quickly as they are realized under the immense weight of human action and unpredictability. Because political life is hazardous and utopian imaginations almost always devolve into dystopian madness, as in the famous novels by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, Arendt’s conviction to “think what we are doing” is a testament to this. Political agents lack control of the public space and can never fully predict how their words or actions will affect the webs that descend from the space of appearances. The utopian wish to escape the dangers of politics arise from the conviction that human beings and their surrounding world are not forever but are always open to change and transformation (Arendt 1958, 11). Arendt grants the first genuine attempt to devise a utopian society to Plato, who in his *Republic* laid the roles and functions that would guide a perfectly just society. Indeed

this is difficult, almost impossible, because Arendt reminds us “the construction of a public space in the image of a fabricated object...carried with it only the implication of ordinary mastership, experience in the art of politics as in all other arts, where the compelling factor lies not in the person of the artist or craftsman but in the impersonal object of his art or craft.” (Arendt 1958, 227). Arendt might just as well make a similar critique along this vein against Marcuse’s attempts to liberate the creative imagination, but as shown in the previous paragraph, this is done with the full intention to preserve necessity, perhaps even discovering a more pure and human form of the realm of necessity, separate from the alienated and disproportionate realm that exists in an exploitative capitalist system.

I am not attempting to make Arendt a utopian thinker, but the discussion in this section clarifies some of Marcuse’s most important points on radical creativity and liberation, which Arendt would speak to in many ways. The utopia of tomorrow need not resemble a perfect world or a world of pure laborers. It will instead resemble the heights of a free society, where action creates dynamic relationships, and where the imaginative efforts of humanity—efforts to create a world free from exploitation, domination, and the continued expense of human lives as means to a destructive end—constructs a world that not only embodies aesthetic joy, but utilizes this aesthetic reality as a means to unite individuals across space and time, race and culture, political affiliation and economic system, whether democrat, republican, socialist, or capitalist.

Life as Dynamite, Life as Art

When one thinks of the word ‘action’ they almost immediately look outward, towards the plethora of movements and deeds that constitute reality, forming in many ways the edifice of human experience and destiny. Very few of us, I would argue, notice the many different forms that action can take, especially in the political sense of the term. For this reason the act of

writing, of speaking, and of growing together in the richness of an idea are not thought of in the same way as a marching crowd, a firefighter scaling a burning building, or an aircraft dropping a bomb during war. Every one of these acts, however, attribute the genesis of their activity to an idea—the crowd marching for a common cause, the firefighter working tirelessly for an institution created in order to protect human life, and the pilot dropping a weapon that was once a blueprint of mathematicians and physicists. All actions find at their respective source an idea, one that manifested so greatly that it became an indistinguishable part of reality. I find no reason to believe the idea of *aesthetic praxis* cannot have the same transformative effect.

As this idea has been generated throughout the duration of this thesis, it has also brought us to the summit of its idealization, where it can finally take on its ultimate form in relation to the many preceding streams of thought that have already been expressed. Like the idea of this thesis, humanity too has progressed along a continuum of experience, bridging the past to the future and connecting present moments to all that has come to pass and all that will come to be. The responsibility that befalls this current moment, the advent of humanity's place in the historical development of civilization, demands not only our greatest respect and admiration, but also our every effort to understand and improve the areas of it that neglect the importance of human life even more so than the intrinsic value of new ideas and worldviews.

Life as dynamite reflects the spontaneity of human action, linking the deepest layers of thought with the most superfluous and meaningless instances that constitute the range of choice and action in the unpredictable world of human affairs. It represents the dynamic characteristics of the life force, *dynamis*, and the unfolding of one's actions across the temporal finality of space and time. Because action is so powerful in this regard it comprises both the positive and the negative effects of human action—the liberation of human bodies from slavery and the dark

cellars of Auschwitz—blending them into understanding and transforming the world and all of those that compose it. At the core of this struggle we experience the limits of human life as corresponding to limits of the natural world: that one must eat, sleep, and labor in order to remain a part of this process. These activities, and their many interpretations, have led to the design of a world that sought to answer these inherent needs, culminating in the destructively beautiful world at present.

Life as art seeks to oscillate between this present moment and the possibilities of the future. It marries the historical realization of the present with the vision of a world that is no longer afraid of its deepest self, where the imagination supersedes the rigorous activity of rationalized domination and constructs a world that connects all bodies to the innermost parts of the individual and collective self; the repressed imagination which envisions a universe that in more ways than one reflects the deficiencies one feels every day, perfect flaws that one shelters away for fear of ridicule—for fear of being *too* human.

Aesthetic praxis, arising initially out of the conversation between freedom and necessity, thus becomes the theoretical convergence between dynamic action and human potential; a decisive call to the thoughts that connect individual to neighbor, friend to foe, and past to future. Necessity represents the physical impact of labor on the development of a free civilization, but also just as importantly recognizes the psychological numbing of human thought in relation to this historical development, limiting to an exorbitant degree the potential of humans to acknowledge and transcend this development. In action we find not only the possibility of creating the new, but also the impulse to fear how the new will ultimately unfold. In the imagination, however, untouched by the domination of the modern world, we find a deep-seeded link that recognizes the urge to fear one's innermost self, while simultaneously transforming this

impulse into the creative development of a new world and the aesthetic possibilities of being. Throughout history there have been developments in the world that have brought this manifestation to light, one of which is happening right now. As we will see, the ongoing battle in Hong Kong represents not simply an Aesthetic Revolution, but a genuine reconsideration of art in relation to the changeability of human affairs and political phenomena. This art not only sends a message aimed at the shaping of political structures and systemic processes, but also alludes to the possibility, and exemplifies this possibility, as life itself experienced and transformed into aesthetic reality.

II. Hong Kong's Aesthetic Revolution: Evoking the Imaginative Through Artistic Action

Introduction

Throughout the duration of chapter 1 it became increasingly clear that freedom and necessity are wrapped in an intimate, yet often overlooked connection to one another. Not only are they inherently related, but for both Arendt and Marcuse the idea of freedom in society requires a fully refined understanding of this relationship, leading to the development of freedom that instinctively grows from necessity, from labor and the many natural characteristics of human life—toil, struggle, repetition—that constitute the realm of necessity. It is in their responses to this relationship, where and how freedom is embodied, that the focus of chapter 2 takes as its point of discussion. For Arendt this freedom is encapsulated in the dynamic character of action, the genuine human capacity to enact the new against all overwhelming odds and predisposed beliefs about the nature of the world. Marcuse, on the other hand, found that freedom begins upon embracing phantasy, which contains the capacity to create a new *form* of the world once the imagination is personified in one's aesthetic potentiality, and together they form the mixture of an *aesthetic praxis*, the embodiment of art in political action, constructive of a world visible in the imaginative reality of artistic being.

The goal will be to continue strengthening an aesthetic form of *praxis* by way of an analysis of the ongoing social unrest in Hong Kong. Before we can make this analysis, however, it will be important to consider previous social movements and how the art there speaks to contemporary issues in Hong Kong. To do this I will focus on the Mexican Revolution of 1910, which throughout the 20th century was heralded for its use of art before and after the conflict. A comparative historical approach such as this grounds contemporary debates in the illuminative qualities that history can present. These considerations will help elucidate the meaning of art in

times of social and political unrest, allowing for a full development of *aesthetic praxis* in the specific context of Hong Kong.

The March of Humanity on Earth and Towards the Cosmos

“As an artist I have always tried to be faithful to my vision of life, and I have frequently been in conflict with those who wanted me to paint not what I saw but what they wished me to see.”

-Diego Rivera



Figure 1 The March of Humanity on Earth and Towards the Cosmos, by David Alfaro Siqueiros.

The title of this section, while at first glance appearing a bit random, was the title of David Alfaro Siqueiros' last great work, produced between 1964 and 1971 in Mexico City (Baddeley 1988, 89). Siqueiros was considered the last of the major revolutionary artists whose work impacted the struggle against the oppressive Diaz regime, along with notable names like Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Jose Orozco. Siqueiros and Orozco, unlike their fellow artistic pioneers, also took up arms against pro-government forces and were noted leaders of the revolution through both their aesthetic vision and the gallantry of their fighting on the battlefield. Together with Rivera, the three artists became known as “Los Tres Grandes,” or “The Big Three.” Along with Kahlo, who was ~20 years younger than Los Tres Grandes, having been born

in 1907, these four artists would alter the course of Mexican history and give life to the independence movement and the cultural renaissance that grew in its aftermath. The works of the above artists not only contributed greatly to the movement against the Mexican regime at the time, but also were critical after the revolution for establishing a distinct Mexican identity and voice. The significance of Mexico's artistic revolution was in part just this, that it both contributed to the struggles in 1910 but also, and perhaps more importantly, led efforts to "institutionalize" the effects of the revolutionary movement from the 1920s to the 1940s.

Outside Mexico, the revolution is remembered in large part by the murals of Diego Rivera, whose depictions of Mexican life shed very little light on the violence of the revolution itself, instead focusing on ethnographic and cultural elements of Mexican society. The murals are colorful, dense, and teeming with people in situations peculiar to Mexican life—rural fields, adobe buildings, and cobblestone streets—surrounded by flowers, *criollos* and *mestizos*. Look a little closer and one notices the blank, static faces of the people in the paintings, staring back with an almost expressionless type of candor. Siqueiros works, on the other hand, were noted for their violent colors, chaotic expressionist modes of thought, even employing the use of "progressive techniques and materials in murals that oftentimes blended visions of science and machinery to convey progress."¹⁶ Orozco, finally, "drew from European expressionism to portray the suffering of mankind, the horrors of war and the fear of a future dependence on technology in very straightforward ways."¹⁷

Despite their stark political differences, Los Tres Grandes played an instrumental role in the cultivation of a national identity during the years of political crisis in Mexico. As one author

¹⁶ A very useful website for understanding the breadth of Mexican Muralist works can be found at <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/mexican-muralism/history-and-concepts/>.

¹⁷ <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/mexican-muralism/history-and-concepts/>

states, “Their murals found inspiration in the visual remains of the Catholic conquistadores and the wall paintings of Aztec cultures in an artistic vocabulary that united the complex histories of the Mexican people. The actualization of these scenes through art served a social purpose: to establish a public, unrestricted dialogue. The Big Three had grown up during the time of Diaz, within a highly socially and economically stratified society, and the proliferation of information fought against these inequalities.” (Weigand 2016). The social and economic stratification in Mexico, while acting as the driving force behind the distaste for the Diaz regime, also created the potential for liberation, for an aesthetic moment, for *self-discovery*. The common feeling that held all three artists together, although disagreeing on certain political matters similarly to the disagreements between revolutionary heroes Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, was that art was not only revolutionary, but was the highest and most explosive form of self-expression.



Figure 2. Detroit Industry Murals, by Diego Rivera.

The mural seen in figure 2, for example, is one of Rivera’s most famous. It was created in Detroit between 1932 and 1933 to represent the separation that had grown between industrial workers and their bosses, the owners of the mode of production (in this case, Ford Motors). One author writes, “The half-face/half-skull in the central monochrome panel symbolizes both the

coexistence of life and death as well as humanity's spiritual and physical aspects, while the star symbolizes aspirations and hope for civilization. This heraldic image introduces another major theme of the cycle: the dual qualities of human beings, nature, and technology.”¹⁸ The incredible meanings dissected from these historical works are a testament to the impact they had on Mexico and the world after the revolution.

In Mexico the revolutionary power of aesthetic expression was not limited to murals and paintings, it also found its way into music, daily practices like cooking and going to church, and perhaps most significantly, in literature. Mexican poet Octavio Paz, in his work *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, reflected on the aspects of consciousness, individual and communal identification, and self-discovery that the revolution unleashed. According to art critic Philip Kennicott, “Paz described his country’s revolution as an existential event, liberating and channeling enormous energies of self-discovery. It wasn’t just a political project, and the ideology driving it was at best confused and disorganized. But there was, at least, an emergence from cultural stasis and solipsism into self-consciousness.”¹⁹ Like the static forms of social and political life that have defined previous societies destined to rise up against the forces that were empowered by these cultural undeviations, Paz found that the limits it imposed were fixated on the individual consciousness. These prevailing and dominant social conditions, he said, generate an extreme sense of fear, where one begins to live in a dangerous world and an even more dangerous debilitating sense of self-worth. “This reaction is justifiable,” writes Paz, “if one considers what our history has been and the kind of society we have created.” (Paz 1985, 30). The fear of self that was thrust onto Mexico played an integral role in the shape that Mexican society assumed

¹⁸ The quote and image were both found at the Detroit Institute of Arts website: <https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/detroit-industry-murals-58537>

¹⁹ This quote was found in an article from *The Washington Post* titled “Artists Helped Make the Mexican Revolution an International Phenomenon,” where Kennicott describes aspects of the revolution in relation to a new exhibit that had opened up to commemorate its international legacy.

which, according to Paz, is one that was very closed, structured, and impersonal. The Mexicans at that time, he feared, were denying the images of self-expression that had once been the lifeblood of their radiant history. These denials took root in the cultural productions of Mexican artistry, as Paz points out:

“The ritual complications of our courtesy, the persistence of classical Humanism, our fondness for closed poetic forms (the sonnet and the decima, for example), our love for geometry in the decorative arts and for design and composition in painting, the poverty of our Romantic art compared with the excellence of our Baroque art, the formalism of our political institutions, and, finally, our dangerous inclination toward formalism, whether social, moral or bureaucratic, are further expressions of that tendency in our character. The Mexican not only does not open himself up to the outside world, he also refuses to emerge from himself, to ‘let himself go.’”

The “emergence from self” is an often-overlooked component of revolutionary experience. It displays, on one hand, the common inference derived from many studies of social movements, the growth of a new social reality which is wholly dependent on the collective desire to rise up and against social formations that hinder the possibilities of freedom. On the other hand, however, Paz’s analysis unveils the emergence of new self-identities that can sprout from the realizations which accompany a redirection of the energies modern societies attempt to limit. This initial repression of self, he shows us, invades the artistic methods of expression in a society fixated on domination and control, where art displays the same closed identity characteristic of members in a closed society. One could assume that Paz’s awareness of this historical closedness prevalent in Mexican society allowed him to formulate the openness which he so desired, and his striking work is a profound example of the potential one has when they become aware of the possibilities constantly wandering in the threshold of their imaginative capacities.

The murals and literature that appeared during the period of Mexican independence all point to this conscious emergence, which works in tandem with the active efforts of revolutionary actors to transform both the physical world of institutions and public appearance, through collective action, and the intangible world of closed consciousness, the opening of the

imagination. It is this important relationship between action and the imagination that makes the artwork of early 20th century Mexico so necessary for understanding. Especially when one considers this specific time period, the incredibly complex relationship between the bodily actions and movements of political revolutionaries and the effects of the prevailing societal structure on the minds and consciousness of said actors becomes an important relationship to unpack. The following section will attempt to understand how this relationship is presented in both Arendt and Marcuse's work, which will then become the nucleus of our analysis in Hong Kong's current movement. For the prospects of an *aesthetic praxis*, the crucial nature of action and thought underlies the immensely difficult attempts to combine a theory of radical action with a corresponding theory of emancipatory imagination.

Reimagining Mind and Body: Thinking, Judging, and Perversity

The ritualistic and traditional forms of Mexican society that Paz draws out in his analysis are, in my view, directly related to his desire for a Mexican society capable of sustaining itself in a new, open manifestation of political and self-identity. This desire of Paz's is similar, in many ways, to my desires of an *aesthetic praxis*. By working through the difficult relationship between action and the imagination with the considerations from Mexico's movement in tow, one can better understand what it might mean to not only be capable of the massive change which accompanies action, and the corresponding limitlessness inherent in the creative and artistic consciousness in the minds of these actors, but coalesce these factors into the production and *form* of society. This, I believe, will not simply unlock art to the radical new images of openness that Paz felt necessary, but also translate into an element of *praxis* capable of both empowering the revolutionary activities of social movements, and displaying itself in the entire formation of a new social reality—allowing for society itself to embody the form of art. To accomplish this, the

ideas of Paz will be further elaborated along with Marcuse and Arendt's, opening up a discussion between the two on the imagination, and paving a way towards the conception of political *praxis* as dynamic action, imaginative potential, and life as a form of artistic being.

Paz, like Marcuse, alludes to the *form* of Mexican society, the stranglehold it can have on the development of individuality and self-expression, limiting both the societal well being of the community and the way individuals within that community come to know themselves. In a beautifully eloquent passage Paz expands on this idea, saying:

“In a certain sense the history of Mexico, like that of every Mexican, is a struggle between the forms and formulas that have been imposed on us and the explosions with which our individuality avenges itself. Form has rarely been an original creation, an equilibrium arrived at through our instincts and desires rather than at their expense. On the contrary, our moral and juridical forms often conflict with our nature, preventing us from expressing ourselves and frustrating our true wishes.” (Paz 1985, 33).

This section from Paz shows that in many ways the idea of Freud's reality principle and Marcuse's performance principle was already at work in his thoughts on Mexican society. The transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle, in the context of Marcuse and Freud, stresses a compliant restraint on individual joy and pleasure, leading to productivity and work that are wholly separate from pleasure. This transition fuels societal progress at the expense of individual flourishing and, in Paz's words, “[prevents] us from expressing ourselves and frustrating one's true wishes.” Because for him the form has also never been an “original creation,” he found that it was susceptible to change in the same way Marcuse did. While never displaying “original” creation, society was still susceptible to change, to new *forms* of creation, and the impact of Paz's work on the development of poetic and scholarly literature, in which one

author advocates “celebrating Paz is not only a duty but a political imperative,” shows us the potential of these exploratory modes of literary self-expression.²⁰

In creating, however, one also finds a requisite call to action, exposing a nakedness that Paz associates with modesty and the nature of human minds in relation to their physical bodies:

Modesty results from shame at one's own or another's nakedness, and with us it is an almost physical reflex. Nothing could be further from this attitude than that fear of the body which is characteristic of North American life. We are not afraid or ashamed of our bodies; we accept them as completely natural and we live physically with considerable gusto. It is the opposite of Puritanism. The body exists, and gives weight and shape to our existence. It causes us pain and it gives us pleasure; it is not a suit of clothes we are in the habit of wearing, not something apart from us: we are our bodies. But we are frightened by other people's glances, because the body reveals rather than hides our private selves. Therefore our modesty is a defense, like our country's Great Wall of China or like the fences of organ-pipe cactus that separate the huts of our country people.

The nakedness of the body, much like the nakedness of the mind when exposed in poetry and other artistic creations, always seems to be at odds with society. Throughout its development the body has been regarded as a staple of “love” and “affection,” which according to Marcuse “took place within a civilization which established possessive private relations apart from, and in a decisive aspect conflicting with, the possessive societal relations.” (Marcuse 1955, 200). This he refers to as the “polymorphous-perverse” nature of sex, “The societal organization of the sex instinct taboos as *perversions* practically all its manifestations which do not serve or prepare for the procreative function.” (Marcuse 1955, 49). The “fear of the body” that Paz explains hints at the repressive nature of civilized society. As the categorical dualisms of such things as sex, gender, nature, and society have grown, so too has the fear of the body and the unwillingness to embrace, and at times ever discover, uninhibited artistic and living expression. This also, however, with the help of Marcuse, exhibits the potential for flourishing within a different social setting where there could exist “a transformation of the libido: from sexuality constrained

²⁰ Taken from an opinion piece on the need to celebrate Paz 100 years after his death, written in the Dallas Morning News. <https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2014/03/31/why-octavio-paz-is-still-so-important-to-mexico-100-years-after-his-birth/>

under genital supremacy to eroticization of the entire personality.” (Marcuse 1955, 201). The polymorphous perversity of the libido reiterates Marcuse’s feelings on political freedom: a transformation of the instincts leading to a genuine transformation of organized society, which culminates in the negation of domination and the possibility of pleasurable labor, non-repressive existence, and life as an art form.

On the surface, this idea of human freedom is very much opposed to the Arendtian concept of freedom, of beginning and creating things anew. One must be sure to acknowledge, however, that these ideas are being presented on an uneven playing field. Arendt’s lack of focus on the school of psychoanalysis makes any direct criticism in this realm appear empty and unsympathetic. While she never engaged directly with Freudian psychoanalysis and only very minimally dabbled into Marxism or critical theory, Arendt was very much concerned with the nature of human thought and its relationship to the human body. And, while not perfectly parallel concepts, they actually offer much room for discussion.

Arendt’s theories of action and freedom have been absolutely pivotal so far, but her concerns for human freedom and action also relate to the *Life of the Mind*, the title of her final work. The book was intended to be composed of three parts: Thinking, Willing, and Judging. She passed away before completion of the final volume on judgment, with the very first page of the chapter sitting in her typewriter on the day of her death. The importance of judgment in the work of Arendt is pointed out nicely by Ronald Beiner, who was also the editor of Arendt’s

Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy:

“Arendt’s thought here is that human beings have commonly felt the “awesome responsibility” of freedom to be an insupportable weight, which they have sought to evade by various doctrines, such as fatalism or the idea of historical process, and that the only way in which human freedom

can be affirmed is by eliciting pleasure from the free acts of men by reflecting upon and judging them.”²¹

Broadly speaking, judgment is the ability for one to make sense of their experiences, to mix the perception of their senses with their own internal thoughts. The awesome responsibility of freedom—the power associated with generating effects that cascade throughout time—relies on the judgments of others for remembrance and historical permanence. The capacity to judge, Arendt says, is “the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking” and it “realizes thinking [and] makes it manifest in the world of appearances” (Arendt 1971, 446). Judging appears for her to be, then, a purely political way of thinking.

These “liberating effects of thinking” for Marcuse, however, are not in judgment and its political prowess. He instead finds those in the power of phantasy and the imagination. How might we, while keeping Paz’s considerations in mind, bring Marcuse and Arendt into a smoothly operating *aesthetic praxis*, where action and the imagination combine to power socially liberating movements and account for the nakedness of body and thought in modern political and social realities? Arendt tells us of a compass, the gift of understanding, which might help us find our way.

Arendt grappled with the complexities of human thought, the *vita contemplativa*, throughout many of her later works. She expands on the idea of imagination, however, only slightly, attributing it mainly to “the understanding heart.” On this point she says, “we may call the faculty of imagination the gift of the ‘understanding heart.’ In distinction from fantasy, which dreams something, imagination is concerned with the particular darkness of the human heart and the peculiar density which surrounds everything that is real.” and, she continues shortly

²¹ Ronald Beiner, “Interpretive Essay: Hannah Arendt on Judging,” in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, ed. by Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 13

thereafter, “Without this kind of imagination, which actually is understanding, we would never be able to take our bearings in the world. It is the only inner compass we have.” (Arendt 1954, 322-323). Imagination as the inner compass of understanding is a useful device from which to diagnose what Arendt calls the “darkness of the human heart,” a phrase that appears in many of her works. This “darkness” arises from “the basic unreliability of men who can never guarantee today who they will be tomorrow.” (Arendt 1958, 244). This limited view of the imagination appears to be both a consequence of her untimely passing and her unwillingness to explore faculties that appear above or outside political purposiveness. As one author states, “Arendt's limited view of imagination is all the more curious when we recognize that the reproductive imagination is bound to the faculty of the understanding and thus to concepts in a way that is difficult to square with her own vigorous refusal of cognition as the task of political judgment.” (Zerilli 2005, 163-4).

For Arendt the concepts of judging, understanding, and imagining all worked closely with one another to solidify the importance of political life in the realm of human affairs. The importance of judgment in politics is twofold: 1.) it creates a generation of *inter-est*, the revelatory disclosure of one's self, which relates people and binds them together and 2.) it opens up the possibility for agreement and validity.²² These two factors allow for “the ability to see the same object from multiple perspectives.” (Zerilli 2005, 168). Imagination for Arendt, seen especially in her works involving Kant, is re-presentational. She attributes the faculty of imagination in Kant's work to what Parmenides referred to as *nous*, “that faculty through which you look steadfastly at things which are present though they are absent.” (Arendt 2014, 80). The imagination, which Arendt interprets as the connecting force between judging and thinking, thus

²² See in *The Human Condition* pgs. 181-182.

continues to affirm the possibilities of human freedom that underlie all of her most important ideas. It allows for understanding in times of agreement and disagreement, confirming valid realities that are exhibited in the process of conversation. These realities, Arendt argues, rely on the existence of “schema,” which are visions, forms, and products of the imagination. Arendt makes note of this when saying, “These schematic shapes are products of the imagination, although ‘no schema can ever be brought into an image whatsoever.’ All single agreements or disagreements presuppose that we are talking about the same thing—that we, who are many, agree, come together, on something that is one and the same for us all.” (Arendt 2014, 83). The imagination, in conjunction with judgment and understanding, thus represents schema and provides the connection of valid judgment that allows individuals to understand objects within societal life.

As Zerilli points out, however, “Arendt's account of judgment does not explore Kant's account of imagination as a generative force (which she associates strictly with genius and the creation of new aesthetic objects of judgment).” (Zerilli 2005, 173). Arendt’s unwillingness to engage with the generative capacity of the imagination, which is connected almost entirely to aesthetics and creativity, leaves an important door open in the discussion for Marcuse to fill. As opposed to the imagination as representation, connecting human’s through their capacity to judge and disclose themselves, “which are present though they are absent,” Marcuse allows for the integration of a generative imaginary that connects the vital active capabilities of Arendt’s theory with the prospects for genuine liberation and transformation.

The Marcusean imagination, according to Andrew Feenberg, “contain[s] a transcending content that is available to the experiencing subject as a sense of incompleteness or imperfection. That content must be attributed to the imagination rather than to immediate perception because

only the imagination has the power to project beyond the given toward an ideal form.” (Feenberg 2018, 1-2). The ability to project beyond the given toward the ideal generates the potential to discover a new, if unrealized, dimension of the imperceptible world. It is for this reason that Marcuse argues “It [imagination] aims at an ‘erotic reality’ where the life instincts would come to rest in fulfillment without repression,”²³ and this aim is also directed at the freedom of the human body, which both Marcuse and Paz agree has become undone in its perverse nakedness in the modern world. If Arendt’s conception of the imagination is representative, and this representational ontology relates most conveniently to understanding, then it would seem to follow that Marcuse’s affirmation of a generative type of imagination would correspondingly associate with liberation and fulfillment. In what follows, I argue that Arendt’s theory of action, while displaying the consequences of unending development, transformation, and historical change, is limited to some degree by the minimal attention she devotes to the imagination. Further, when she does devote her attention to the imagination and human thought, the representative character of imagining is less amicable to her *vita activa* than a generative and fulfilling conception of the imagination, which Marcuse offers. A combination of the two, which unites the generation of imaginative being with the incredible potentialities of creating the new, produces a transcendent type of *praxis* capable of expressing itself fully in the artistic nature of life—a reality that is currently on display in the streets of Hong Kong. To begin, I will explain the specific pieces of art in Hong Kong that will make this combination useful, and thus contribute to our growing understanding of the imagination and its relationship to politically active attempts at genuine social transformation.

²³ *Eros and Civilization* pg. 146.

Hong Kong's Aesthetic Revolution

One does not need to be a student of political science to understand the sheer magnitude of the ongoing protests in Hong Kong. Over this past summer and the months following, Hong Kong underwent one of the most pronounced political conflicts in its history. Beginning originally with a flawed and controversial extradition bill, the protests have now grown to oppose government ineptitude, socioeconomic inequalities, political deadlock, and the perceived encroachment on core values and liberties of Hong Kong via the strength of mainland China. The once peaceful demonstrations have now grown violent as both anti-government and pro-government forces clash in a battleground that could ultimately seal the fate of Hong Kong well before their agreed upon return to China in 2047.

Since June of 2019, protesters have marched throughout the streets following the introduction of a bill that would have allowed Hong Kong to extradite offenders to Mainland China, legislation that marked a perceived infringement on core democratic principles in the former British colony. Disagreements among the 22 major political parties that operate in the region, who separate themselves into three core groups—pro-Beijing (current government), pro-democracy, and loyalists—reached a boiling point as city leader Carrie Lam proposed and approved of the controversial bill (Chow 2019). As the protest grew, the bill was eventually thwarted, but riots persisted, and goals of democratic sovereignty have become the main topic of dispute.

The following analysis will not attempt a deep dive into the specific social and political context of the region's rich and colored history. Instead, it will be to understand the role art has played for the groups of protesters and the police forces that have clashed in response to these democratic threats. The use of art during these protests has become unlike almost anything in

recent political memory, and because of this I am thereby dubbing the movement an “Aesthetic Revolution.” I refer to the movement as a revolution not because it has successfully toppled or transformed the power structure in Hong Kong, but because it is revolutionizing the methods and tactics that define a modern social movement, especially in the realm of aesthetics. The type of art and its method of exposure has forced a reevaluation of aesthetics in areas of political conflict, and lends itself as a convenient case study for the development of an *aesthetic praxis*, where art not only embodies a political message, but aims to transform the very nature by which art is apprehended and digested by political agents, media, and governmental forces. This embodiment is characteristic of art’s capability to display the imagination of individuals, where it evokes a glimpse of future-oriented realities and attempts to make them possible. It also, just as importantly, impels individuals to act according to these genuine imaginative creations, and through this art begins to take on the form of daily practice—transforming the nature of its creation and the workings of society as a whole.

To be clear, the workings of an aesthetic conception of *praxis* are built on three foundational elements, which have partially begun to take shape. First, it is reliant on a uniquely dynamic conception of action that is capable of producing new, tangible social and political formations which appear now, and generally in all modern societies, as entirely impossible or unattainable given the current conditions and forms of civilization. Second, the possibility of creating these new social realities relies not only on the strength of action, but also the rediscoveries of self which exist in the phantasy of the psyche—the imaginative workings of the conscious mind, untouched by the repressive development of modern society. As will be seen, this type of imagination merges elements of both Marcuse and Arendt’s thought, empowering both the ability to understand the representative character of the imagination—to connect

individuals objectively through speech and action—while also generating a new vision of the world which becomes the summation of an active and revolutionary collective of actors. Finally, these two components contain the potential to both guide the revolutionary dimensions of action and the imagination, while also themselves taking on the form of society entirely, transforming the *ethos* of aesthetic revolutionary movements into the aesthetic form of society itself.

To explain these elements of *aesthetic praxis*, I will deal with four specific pieces of Hong Kong art: one that is unique because it is created in order to be destroyed, one that further exhibits the active character of art in Hong Kong, and two others that represent an oscillating image of the present, past, and future of the region. These last two works demonstrate that it is difficult to predict the future without dealing with the demons (or in this case huge sea monsters) of the past. As opposed to the works of the Mexican Revolution, which led the cultural renaissance in the aftermath of the bloody conflict, the work of protest art in Hong Kong is active during the revolts, and captures the imaginative elements of action that certain individuals in Hong Kong are stressing their fellow people to embrace.



Figure 3

This first image, or mini paper images, might look familiar. They are print outs of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Images such as these have been seen all around the streets of Hong Kong since the protests started. They are meant to be stepped on and wiped away, symbolically erasing his presence. Interestingly, this type of art opens up an important discussion for Arendt on the nature of art as a product of *homo faber*. Arendt argues, “The immediate source of the art work is the human capacity for thought,” and continues, “Thought is related to feeling and transforms its mute and inarticulate despondency, as exchange transforms the naked greed of desire and usage transforms the desperate longing of needs—until they all are fit to enter the world and to be transformed into things, to become reified.” (Arendt 1958, 168). Here it is quite clear that the earlier discussions of the imagination I pointed out in her lectures on Kant, the connection between thought, understanding, and the political relevance of judgment, were present many years prior as she wrote *The Human Condition*. This reification she attributes to transfiguration, saying, “In the case of art works, reification is more than mere transformation; it is transfiguration...” (Arendt 1958, 168). This type of transfiguration in art, however, is attributed to its permanence which, like other products of *homo faber*, “builds the durable things of the human artifice.” (Arendt 1958, 169). These specific types of protest art, however, find power in their limited durability. They retain the active political performativity that Arendt sees in art, much like the dramas and plays that were performances in Greek and Roman society, but they only remain momentarily before being washed away forever.

This is an entirely new type of aesthetic political marvel, much more advanced in its political applicability than such historically important works as Picasso’s *Guernica* or the poems of Brecht. The images of Xi do not attempt a transfiguration into a more beautiful and eternal masterpiece, their performative function is instead in a certain anti-transfiguration, which only

adds to their transcendent effect: the symbolic washing away of the powerful leader they conspire against. Marcuse reminds us that “art by itself could never achieve transformation,”²⁴ and the same is true of a durable transfiguration. Many revolutionary pieces of art in Hong Kong exhibit this same effect, they give a genuine glimpse of action and a vision of the future, but make little attempt to shine like the divine works of previous artists and previous centuries of durable, historic artworks. The generative power of these pieces of art lie absent from this transfiguration, and allude to the possible transformation of societal relations between China and Hong Kong.



Figure 4

²⁴ *Art in the One-Dimensional Society* pg. 118.



Figure 5

Not all pieces of art in Hong Kong have been wiped away, however, and shown here are two important examples. These pieces of art were produced by Hong Konger Lam Tung Pang and are now on display at the Hong Kong Museum of Art. The half man-half fish creature that you see in the foreground of the first picture is Lu-Ting, sometimes referred to as Lou Ting, a “mythical creature said to represent the identity of Hong Kong.” (Chow 2019). He stands overlooking a Victorian Harbor centuries ago, and is meant to depict the spirit of Hong Kong looking back over all of its previous history. Hong Kong playwright Wong Kwok-kui, who leads a Hong Kong Indie theater production group, has produced politically driven plays using Lou Ting as his main character. Here are his thoughts on the nature of Lou Ting, “On the one hand Lu-Ting’s cynical, he’s suspicious, but on the other hand he wants to find something to which he can feel an emotional attachment.” (Tong 2018). This attachment is mostly to his and his fellow Hong Kongers storied history, but there is always that ever-present gaze towards the future.

This is a future that artist Lam Tung Pang aimed to capture in his work. Look to the right, at the far end of the hallway, and you see a person holding a pair of binoculars facing the portrait of Lou Ting. The work, writes reporter Vivienne Chow, “demands the audience reflect on Hong

Kong's roots and connect them with the present while looking towards the future.” (Chow 2019). Seen here are two pieces of art work that do not engage directly with the political turmoil of the ongoing protests, instead suspending the reality of Hong Kong's unknown future into a realm of subjectivity, allowing the onlookers to decipher and create their own image of Hong Kong's future, which will always remain grounded in its storied and colorful past. The consequences of this art's impact are quite unknown still, but they empower the viewer to consider the dangerous pitfalls that mark this momentous event in Hong Kong's story. They display the potentialities of action, while also utilizing a generative type of aesthetic imagination to connect individuals between the past and the future. This message, we should hope, must stand the test of time.



Figure 6

The final piece of art for our purposes comes in the form of post-it notes. These Lennon Walls have sprung up all around Hong Kong and other parts of the world. The many notes are meant to express citizens' discontent with the government while also creating a colorful mural of paper, all composed of the voices that will most likely never be truly heard. Lennon Walls first originated in Prague, Czechoslovakia,

“following John Lennon's 1980 assassination, when an unnamed artist painted an image of the singer-songwriter along with Beatles lyrics. Because Western images and symbols were banned at the time in Czechoslovakia, the artwork was effectively a means of protest and was quickly covered over by Prague's secret police. But try as they might, the police could never seem to quell the steady stream of graffiti that the first tribute unleashed. The site became known as a place for anti-Communist political graffiti, which neither surveillance cameras nor an overnight guard stationed at the wall could prevent. Later, after the Velvet Revolution signaled the end of Communism in Czechoslovakia (and the subsequent Velvet Divorce, on January 1, 1993, created

the separate nations of the Czech Republic and Slovakia), the wall became a site for calls to activism worldwide.” (Geiling 2014).



Figure 7

And while Lennon Walls have an important history, the ones popping up all over Hong Kong are much different from their predecessors. They have not been confined to one space or area of the city, growing considerably throughout many street blocks and even making their home on government buildings, for a short period of time. When one wall is disassembled, another springs up, and the amazing amount of communication available to the protesters only aids the continuous fight against police forces.

These four pieces of art all exhibit a different type of emotional attachment to Hong Kong and the weight of its present revolutionary moment. They not only display a type of creative artistic action—caught in the process of drawing, painting, or posting notes—but also represent an inherent connection to the daily practices and lives of artists and citizens involved in the revolt. This is the true potential of a modern political movement, the convergence of daily practice and aesthetic creation, and it is exemplified by the type of artistic imagination on display in the Hong Kong revolts. By utilizing these specific pieces of art and the dialogue that has grown between the artists and citizens of Hong Kong, one can begin to witness the growth of a movement that harnesses the potential to change both the boundaries of aesthetic imagination and influence political action in a way never seen before. Though *aesthetic praxis* continues to

remain an important potentiality in social and political movements, the signs are presenting themselves in numerous ways, and it is this potential that I wish to capture in the final section of this chapter. This will entail a continued growth of the conversation that has already begun between Arendt and Marcuse—representational imaginaries versus generative imaginaries—allowing for a bridge to be drawn between that which is imagined, and that which is lived, between the heights of imagination, and the potentialities of action.

Aesthetic Praxis: Action, Imagination, and Generation

I wish to begin this section with a quote from Yeung Yang, one of the protesters in Hong Kong. Yang is a university lecturer in the region and has been one of the most prominent voices throughout the duration of the movement. She says:

“My take is, art cannot be suspended to make space and time for protest. I refuse to think of art and protest as dichotomies on the level of truth. I refuse to choose one over the other as if they are mutually exclusive on the level of truth. The conflict lies on the streets – each body, each missing body, counts. The challenge for us then becomes bigger: us, whom art calls for. We are called for not only by protests, but also by art. We need to become not only protesting bodies, but also supple and sensuous ones: drawing, painting, dancing, moving, jumping, touching, laughing, whistling, dreaming, day-dreaming, questioning, thinking...All these that we have been doing enrich our capacities to rule ourselves better.” (Yang 2019).

Yang is speaking to her fellow artists, calling for the utilization of art in times of political action, and pushing for those reading her letter to not only embrace the modalities of artistic creation, but to allow these transient qualities to influence and guide the way they act daily. When read in this light, art becomes a mediating factor between performative action and aesthetic imagination, where individuals can display their creative efforts while simultaneously allowing this expression to invade the inner-workings of the way they live and act. By opening up the representational formulation of the imagination in Arendt’s work and presenting instead a generative capacity to embrace imaginative potentialities, the power of one’s actions become

transcendent; so much so, that their art not only generates transformational political and social qualities, but also becomes a liberated extension of their lives.

In times of intense political and social unrest, when *reform* appears unnecessary and calls for the *reevaluation* of existing political structures, the representative aura of imaginative thought appears incapable of enacting the newness that is foundational to Arendt's philosophy. However, without Arendt's conception of the imagination, she says, "there would be neither the objectivity of the world—that it can be known—nor any possibility of communication—that we can talk about it." (Arendt 2014, 84). Hence, an introduction of the Arendtian imagination to Marcuse's does not require a total elimination of her theoretical position, because it appears to simultaneously strengthen Marcuse's own. The Marcusian imagination does not seem to consider the way certain imaginative faculties can be *grounded* in the realm of political affairs, and Arendt's take on the imagination provides just this. What she misses, however, is that the imagination might also produce certain objects or instinctual capacities that directly *transcend* the realm of politics and human affairs in general. Speech ultimately grounds political agents in the connectivity of a community, while phantasy produces a transformation of the instincts and considers the objects of speech itself.

The object of speech continues to remain powerless, however, in the face of a world whose very objectivity must be constantly brought into question, and whose systems of communication—not simply the *act* of speech, but its very *content*—must be critically engaged with to give the power of communication back to those whose ability to speak has been completely eliminated. We must not, for instance, only place focus on the *ability* to continue speaking, but also become aware *what it is we are speaking and not speaking about*. As a corresponding element of action, the art of speech for Arendt is crucial for both freedom and

political connectivity. Marcuse's work, however, proves to us that it is not so much a question of whether one speaks, but what it is one *does not* speak about.

"The object of dialectical logic," he writes in *ODM*, "is neither the abstract, general form of objectivity, nor the abstract, general form of thought—nor the data of immediate experience. Dialectical logic undoes the abstractions of formal logic and of transcendental philosophy, but it also denies the concreteness of immediate experience. To the extent to which this experience comes to rest with the things as they appear and happen to be, it is a limited and even false consciousness." (Marcuse 1964, 141).

Marcuse attributes "true consciousness" to the type Arendt's representational imagination explains, to the schema and ideas that are "present but not there." These are corresponding social facts, capable of producing validity and agreement, "the data of experience in concepts which reflect, as fully and adequately as possible, the given society in the given facts." (Marcuse 1964, 208). False consciousness, however, "if I speak of the mind of a person, I do not merely refer to his mental processes as they are revealed in his expression, speech, behavior, etc., nor merely of his dispositions or faculties as experienced or inferred from experience. I also mean that which he does *not* express, for which he shows *no* disposition, but which is present nevertheless, and which determines, to a considerable extent, his behavior, his understanding, the formation and range of his concepts." (Marcuse 1964, 209). If Marcuse is right in his assertion that the order and organization of class society has simultaneously shaped the sensibility, desires, and *imagination* of humanity, and I believe he is, then a radically performative type of imagination, which can generate and produce new modes of experiential creations, becomes necessary. This is especially true in the context of political revolutions, when a movement is aimed at securing the fate of an entire society in the face of a powerful authoritarian state system like the one in China. What are we left with after all of this?

When I refer to a "lived aesthetic" or the concept of "aesthetic being" I mean a theoretical combination of the two; one that is sympathetic to the political foundations of Arendtian philosophy, able to communicate in "the given society of the given facts," but is also open to the

possibility of a reevaluation and alleviation of the social facts that prevent the realization of radical change. Thus, when in her letter Yang states:

“Those who claim to rule have an insatiable appetite to kill dreamers – this has happened in human history – for they are afraid of those who can see right into their anxieties and unconscious, those who know of no boundary in their free mind. To rule ourselves, we must do better. Art is not safe, just as any other fundamentals of humanity are not when autocracy wants to lay claim on everything. If we feel forced to discard who we are that art calls for, we are letting arbitrary power destroy the fundamentals of humanity. To rule ourselves, we must do better.” (Yang 2019).

She alludes to both the ability to operate in the immediate contours of political life, “to rule ourselves,” but does so by calling on the generative ability of art and of the lives of artists to evoke the potential of imagination in the process of daily life. For if art remains mere phantasy it might never make possible Marcuse’s “society as a work of art” thesis, but if it never attempts to reach these transcendent heights it might correspondingly limit the ability to create the new which remains fundamental to Arendt’s work. An aesthetically driven conception of *praxis* remains sympathetic to the many characteristics of human action that are operative in the given society of given facts, but also reach into the realm of phantasy to question and utilize the political as an area of progressive and radical social change.

Arendt constantly reminds us that freedom is not entirely this inner faculty, be it judgment, understanding, or the imagination. Freedom is external; it is action and all of those beautiful repercussive effects reverberating throughout history. For as intensely as she and others in the philosophical and theoretical tradition have grappled with the immense questions of thought, reflection, and inter-subjective reality, freedom continues to lie in the even more intense performance of genuine being in the political and social worlds. With art acting as the middle ground between action and the imagination, one can envision the prospects of an active life guided by the imagination, and embodied in the mediating capabilities of art.

The spirit of living aesthetically has given rise to the many pieces of art in the region, and all of the pieces I explained exhibit a different aspect of this potentiality for a “lived aesthetic.”

The first demonstrates the power of art as a method of erasure, where symbolic artistic strategies can defy the permanence that most traditional works of art exude. This is no mere transfiguration; it is a transformation of the very method by which art can be taken in and thrown back into the realm of human affairs. It is a presentation of temporality, existing only as long as those wish it to exist, like the powerful undemocratic regime they also hope to wash away from their pavement. The second and third works were a call to the past and the future, two important pieces of art that interacted with one another to display a story and a relationship: between the history of their not-so-distant past and the future that they all look upon with black binoculars of hope. And finally, the Lennon Walls, a true type of lived aesthetic that relies inherently on the activities and actions of those whose words bring to life the blank walls of a society in turmoil.

What I aimed to capture in this chapter was part historical and part theoretical. To in one way exhibit the prophetic difference between the important revolution we are witnessing now and the one that gripped Mexico some 100 years ago. I also, however, attempted to generate an important discussion of the imagination between Arendt and Marcuse. Whereas Arendt sees the imagination and the action that springs from it as *representational* and purely political, Marcuse views it as a much more transcendental and transformational component, capable of *generating* a call to liberation and action. The corresponding aesthetic dimension that Hong Kong has generated alludes to the possibility, and Yang exemplifies this potential, of society becoming itself a work of art. Marcuse, writing in *Society as a Work of Art*, considers two dimensions of aesthetic experience that have undergone an intense fabrication in the development of modern civilization. These two dimensions, technology and art, have drifted apart throughout the historical growth of humankind. On this, he states, “”The two dimensions have drifted apart: in the real social world the domination of technology and technology as a means of domination, and

in the aesthetic world illusory semblance.” and Marcuse continues in the next paragraph, “Today we can foresee the possible unity of both dimensions: *society as a work of art*.” (Marcuse 2007, 128).²⁵ The unity between Arendt and Marcuse would resemble much of this mixture, between dynamic political action and imaginative aesthetic experience. The culmination of this combination, coming in full circle to the earlier discussion between the two on necessity, would radically transform the nature of human life, “of liberating and pacifying human existence – the idea of a convergence not only of technology and art but *also of work and play*; the idea of a possible artistic formation of the life world.” (Marcuse 2007, 128 italics added). Art alone cannot bring about this radical change in human life, because it requires the full development of a theory of action to enact its radical potential for change. The ongoing struggles in Hong Kong exemplify the potential for this combination, when modern technology transforms the way in which aesthetics impacts the world, when individual lives within that society embody this aesthetic yearning throughout their daily practices, and when, as is yet to be seen, this convergence transforms the structures by which society operates.

All of the art pieces from Hong Kong exhibit a different emotional aim and the corresponding active and imaginative capacities that produce this intention. Though much of their relevance is exposed in the feelings they generate and their method of exposure—be it on the pavement, in a museum, on a wall, or via the internet—they also exemplify a unique call to action which is constant and unending. In her letter to the artists and revolutionaries of Hong Kong, Yang stresses:

“Protest is one but not the only form of dissent. Art, by refusing normativity and by insisting on thinking differently is also dissent. We can put our routines regulated by society on strike as a revolt against arbitrary power that works its way into society. But we cannot put our capacity to imagine, think, and envision in art, from art, and through art on strike – for we cannot put life on

²⁵ This quote and others following are taken from an edition of Marcuse’s collected works titled *Art and Liberation*, edited by Douglas Kellner.

strike. To sustain art as dissent, we must try harder, to stand up and show up as who we are and what we are best at. This, too, is the fight for freedom and self-determination. To rule ourselves, we must do better than forcing ourselves to make false choices out of provisional dichotomies.” (Yang 2019).

In these expressly vulnerable displays of self seen here and earlier, Yang shows us the power of art as a method of expression, capable of dissent, and extremely powerful in its defiant message. She is in no way the spokesperson for all artists in Hong Kong, but one can hardly deny the pivotal dimension of revolutionary *praxis* she unfolds in her writings. The false dichotomy, which society inherently relies on to quell dissent and make “real” the distorted view of political-social life that actively and very convincingly contains individuals in their erroneous conceptions of self-potential, is embodied in the false dichotomy which exists between activity and art. As the inconceivable potentialities of action are unleashed during social movements, and the aesthetic, imaginative visions behind these movements create visual depictions of mind, body, and matter, they are often thought to come to a screeching halt as the movement either dies out, is squashed, or is granted some semblance of the change it seeks. When these many pieces of art are accompanied by a vision like Yang’s, where they not only create images and products of speech, literature, plays, and poetry, but also extend to the activities normally conceived of outside of art, they aim for a transcendence of the very dichotomy between art and action. This transcendence, embodied in *aesthetic praxis*, aims to utilize the intersection between these two elements of human potential, thus transforming society itself into a convergence of the imagination and action—life and society itself as a work of art. This possibility has continued to be promoted, first by Paz and other Mexican revolutionaries, and now by Yang and her fellow Hong Kong dissenters. It is yet to be seen what a world following this combination would look like, but the ingredients for its mixture are present and have continued to grow throughout history. It is now only a matter of who will open themselves up to this world, and whether their

taste buds could handle its intense flavor, before it changes the world and all of those open to its possibilities—which are becoming increasingly difficult to hide, repress, or deny.

The following chapter will continue to build on this discussion by introducing the environmental movement as another area of potential liberation and artistic transformation of the lifeworld. Broadly conceived, *aesthetic praxis* need not limit itself exclusively to theoretical explanations of necessity or political and social movements. I find that it can also be brought into environmental debates, potentially shaping the way the environment is viewed and the way labor within society can promote this view and utilize the environmental movement, much like the social movement in Hong Kong, as another avenue of change in the promotion of human well-being and flourishing. Let's proceed.

III. Necessity, Aesthetics, and Politics: Arendt and Marcuse on Consuming the World

Introduction

This chapter reconsiders the position of Hannah Arendt and the Frankfurt school of critical theory in environmental discourse. By taking the concept of necessity as a central theoretical concept, the works of Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse have so far broadened discussions concerning political freedom in chapter 1, culminating in the idea of an *aesthetic praxis*. This combination of ideas was then applied to the ongoing Hong Kong revolts in chapter 2, illustrating the role an aesthetically driven conception of *praxis* can have in modern social movements. I wish to continue this development now with a final discussion concerning environmental destruction. Specifically, this will include a critical analysis of modern viewpoints on human-environment relationships that play a part in the consumption and destruction of the natural world. I believe a continued understanding of necessity and the ideas between Arendt and Marcuse already discussed will help to cast light on a new method of conceptualizing environmental relationships relative to humanity's considerable growth throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

Necessity, I argue, forms the essential theoretical battleground of environmental debates, and its further unpacking will only enhance our understanding of a world that has physical limits, but is inhabited by individuals who possess a limitless potential to create a future that respects these limitations. In order to uncover this limitless potentiality, one must consider the ideas of Arendt and Marcuse within current environmental discourse. To do this, I will return to their initial discussions on necessity, and provide some contemporary literature which attempts to include the two in modern environmental theory. Following this I will lay out the role that Nature plays for Arendt and the Frankfurt School. Both, throughout the development of the 20th

century, became more aware of the pressing need to address environmental concerns and understand human conditions within the world. They did, however, formulate the idea of environmentalism much differently, and we will see how this impacts the combination of both into a robust aesthetically driven conception of *praxis*. Finally, the contents of *aesthetic praxis* in the environmental arena of critical theory will be explained. This theoretical growth will attempt to generate a new method of viewing the world, Nature, and human society in relation to one another. An environmentally developed *aesthetic praxis* will not only produce new areas of thought in human/nature relationality but could also utilize the environmental movement as another important area for human liberation and the flourishing of life as a whole.

Necessity as a Conceptual Environmental Tool

Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse are names that come up very rarely in environmental literature. Their ideas have had a minimal impact on the development of green thought, with only a few studies of Arendt focusing on consumption (Voice 2013) and distinctions between “world” and “earth” (Chapman 2007), while works devoted to Marcuse have focused on ecoaesthetic theory (Miles 2016) and capitalism (Luke 2000). The lack of synthetic work done between the two makes any attempt to do so both very exciting and very challenging, as one is presented with the demanding efforts of building an entirely new pathway of thought. With necessity as the central figure in these efforts, however, it is my hope that the ideas already uncovered between the two will lend themselves as an interesting exercise from which to design a new method of thinking about the environment and humanity’s place within it.

Hannah Arendt is not generally considered an environmental philosopher and is often criticized for valuing the world of human creation much more than the natural world from which these objects are drawn. Her intense focus on human life can often come off as anthropocentric,

but this focus does little to minimize the importance of nature in her many works. As Paul Voice points out, “Arendt is one thinker who takes up the ontological challenge of articulating a relation between nature and man, although she did not orient her discussion to the environmental issues we now face. In addition, her metaphysical and ontological thought is always deeply connected to a sharp concern with practice and action as well as the existential problem of meaning in human life.” (Voice 2013, 180). The sharp concern Arendt devotes to action has been heavily drawn upon throughout the thesis, and in an environmental context this call to action will remain a central asset from her thought to continue relying on. It is where this idea of action is generated from, the realm of necessity, that these few works on her environmental thought tend to gloss over.

Of the three elements that make up the *vita activa*, labor corresponds mostly to the realm of necessity and the biological makeup of human and animal bodies. Paul Voice describes labor in Arendt’s work as, “that dimension of our conditioned existence that concerns the satisfaction of our biological needs. It is the domain of necessity and sometimes violence, of reproduction and consumption, of the cyclical biological character of human animal life that is ‘wrenched’ from the earth.” (Voice 2013, 180-1). As opposed to John Locke’s famous passage on property concerning the “work of our hands,”²⁶ labor in Arendt’s philosophy corresponds to the work of one’s body, an endless natural process in which objects are consumed as quickly as they are produced. The once great care that existed between humans and the objects of their creation, the products of *homo faber*, has continued to diminish as advanced industrial society grows in its consumerist orientation. This enchantment with objects, the care and tenderness which they once

²⁶ This theme runs throughout most of Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government* (1963). See, specifically, chapter 5.

generated, are under threat “in a world where rapid industrialization constantly kills off the things of yesterday to produce today’s objects” (Arendt 1958, 52).

It is this type of consumerism, Arendt argues, that has arisen from the invasion of *animal laborans* into the areas of work and action that complete the *vita activa*. This takeover finds at its origins the realm of necessity, which “possesses a driving force whose urgency is unmatched by the so-called higher desires and aspirations of man.” (Arendt 1958, 70). Within these higher aspirations we would include desires, politics, aesthetics, philosophy and so on. In order to best understand our environmental dilemma, and embrace the possibilities of an *aesthetic praxis*, it would hold true that the realm of necessity and its continuous impact on human life must be understood. Voice attempts to do so in an interesting way, advocating through an Arendtian lens the concepts of *constrained consumption* and *unconstrained deliberation*. This type of approach highlights the need to ascertain the limits of growth in modern society, but also respects the human ability to deliberate over these needs and act accordingly to them.²⁷ I aim to make a similar argument with the use of necessity, focusing on Arendt’s critique of modernity and the democratic idea of plurality, which is significantly hindered by the growth of a consumer and laboring society.

Similarly, my use of Marcuse is inspired by many of Arendt’s concerns and criticisms of labor, which in the 21st century we can more successfully apply specifically to environmental debates. And, while Marcuse does not view labor as corresponding to *animal laborans* or modernity specifically, he does view the realm of labor as a central aspect of capitalist domination, continuing to advocate for the transformation of labor into an area of life that is pleasurable and non-alienating. He also, very crucially, recognized the environmental movement

²⁷ See *Consuming the World: Hannah Arendt on Politics and the Environment* by Paul voice. This specific argument is introduced on pg. 179 and continues on pg. 182.

as another area of potential liberation, emitting a call to action that opens up important areas of discussion for he and Arendt. These theoretical considerations: 1.) the ascension of *animal laborans* and the growing difficulties of pluralistic diplomacy and action, along with 2.) labor as a central area of exploitation and domination, containing at its core the possibility for liberation and radical active change, find at their source the realm of necessity. With the growing networks of neoliberal institutions, labor movements, and technological growth, the centralized focus of necessity becomes an important hermeneutic exercise for understanding human labor and its relationship to democratic and radical emancipatory action.

As worldwide systemic processes such as globalization, communication, and technological social advancement continue to progress, one's view of the environment and its products becomes increasingly complex and blurry. The growth of international trade and production networks muddies the idea of the natural world and makes any attempt to illustrate this relationship painstaking and increasingly difficult. A return to the basics, to labor and necessity in the work of Arendt and Marcuse, provides a useful solution to combat the complexity of the world in the age of advanced industrial capitalism. First, in order to fully understand Arendt's environmental position, and the intricate relationship that has developed between labor, nature, and pluralistic action, one must realize how this complex consumerist mindset has invaded all three areas of the human condition and upset the balance between labor, work, and action. Following this I shall move to Marcuse, and plot where and how these views could be embraced in the new theory of an environmental *aesthetic praxis*.

Arendtian Distinctions: The World of Waste

The historical development of human society has continued to open up new possibilities of conceptualizing environmental relationships. In the context of Hannah Arendt, I wish to

summarize three theoretical considerations that will be the core of our Arendtian focus, as they directly relate to Marcuse and his environmental position that follows. First, the loss of the world that Arendt brings up in her critique of modernity implies the overcoming of the political via the social, where the conditions of life that once made up private life—biological reproduction, well-being, and labor—have now grown to consume the political world and become the life-force of society. This invasion of labor into the political realm weakens the possibilities of plurality, because it promotes not the individual distinctions and human connections that enable plurality and action to permeate throughout society, instead invoking the existence of a “mass society,” where the pluralistic action of a democratic society becomes impossible, and nature is let loose in the public realm of human affairs. This growth debilitates the permanence of human life and the worlds of *homo faber* and *zoon politikon*, leaving the entire world open to consumption and destruction. Finally, the technological apparatus that is often hailed as the potential protector of the natural world actually promotes its destruction, “where no remedy can be found to undo what has been done.” All of this, however, reminds us even more of the power that action possesses, and the possibilities it contains to prevent the destructions of human life as a whole.

These three distinctions are important considerations to make as the difficulties of cultivating an open and practically useful environmental ethic continue to hinder successful attempts at environmental protection and resource management. The Arendtian concepts of earth and world are a useful exercise for beginning an environmentally focused exploration of her thought. As Anne Chapman points out, “Arendt’s categories of the world and the earth provide a way of understanding the different forms of environmentalism, and the various meanings of nature in human life.” (Chapman 2007, 443). They explain the different ways nature might matter to us while also bridging the relationship between contemporary environmental issues—

such as climate change, the destruction of natural habitats, and human overconsumption—and the seeming inability of countries and democratic entities to respond adequately to these challenges. Put differently, an Arendtian environmental lens helps to broaden one's understanding of the natural world while also speaking to the correlative effects it has on political life. The outgrowth of this relationship, which she takes to be technological advancement, has only increased the continued destruction of the world and the potential loss of a public realm capable of alleviating these existential concerns. By beginning with Arendt's world/earth distinctions and moving to the growth of *animal laborans*, the loss of plurality, and the enhanced destruction of the natural world via technological production, we can better understand the complex relationship between human ecological and biological existence, and its impact on the arena of public political life that is responsible for organizing these concerns into a coherent ethic, capable of sustaining both politics and life itself.

Though she might come off as overly anthropocentric, or human focused, Arendt's *vita activa* and the distinctions she makes between earth and world, public and private, labor and work, have generated important environmental questions concerning the nature of human life. The earth comprises everything in the human and natural world. It is that place where, in 1957, an "earth-born object made by man was launched into the universe," indicating the real possibility that human beings would not be bound to the earth forever; that they longed for an escape from every condition of life as they knew it (Arendt 1958, 1). Now, some 60 odd years later, human beings not only appear to be incapable of the escape they once sought, but are perpetually bound to a planet that is becoming hostile to the ways of life that have saturated the growth of modern society. The world, conversely, represents every part of human artifice - the composition of objects, cultural artifacts, and the makings of society as a whole. It is "the man-

made home erected on earth and made of the material which earthly nature delivers into human hands, consist[ing] not of things that are consumed but things that are used.” (Arendt 1958, 134).

The alienation from the “world,” the land of *homo faber*, is characteristic of the growth of consumerism and the increased emphasis on labor in capitalist society. This, Arendt says,

“is, of course, carried to a much greater extreme in the case of a laboring society than in the case of a society of producers. In his isolation, not only undisturbed by others but also not seen and heard and confirmed by them, *homo faber* is together not only with the products he makes but also with the world of things to which he will add his own products; in this, albeit indirect, way, he is still together with others who made the world and who also are fabricators of things...However, the people who meet on the exchange market are primarily not persons but producers of products, and what they show is never themselves, not even their skills and qualities as in the ‘conspicuous production’ of the Middle Ages, but their products. The impulse that drives the fabricator to the public market place is the desire for products, not for people, and the power that holds this market together and in existence is not the potentiality which springs up between people when they come together in action and speech, but a combined ‘power of exchange’ (Adam Smith) which each of the participants acquired in isolation. It is this lack of relatedness to others and this primary concern with exchangeable commodities which Marx denounced as the dehumanization and self-alienation of commercial society...” (Arendt 1958, 209-10).

The skill and craftsmanship that had once protected and reified the durability of the public world of politics, where both action and speech reside, is undone in the alienated growth of modern consumerism and labor. Arendt’s critique of modernity, which she refers to as the “loss of the world,” alludes to the replacement of the public realm of politics, speech, and action with the social realm, stressing privacy and economic interest. This loss would not only contain the elimination of these political elements, but also the conception of the world as a place of things to be used, instead of consumed. As labor conquers other spheres of the human condition, we not only lose work and action, but also labor itself. The danger here, “dazzled by the abundance of its [nature’s, necessity’s] growing fertility,” would mean that human beings no longer recognize the futile efforts of their consumption, which is unable to fix itself to any object that it consumes once it is gone forever. The distancing has continued to grow—between screen and pupil, nature and human, self and other—a distancing that is characteristic of the growth in

modern labor and consumption. The importance of this societal transformation for environmental discourse is explained nicely by Paul Voice:

The public realm of political action is thus overtaken by a notion of the common good, by the domination of mass society and a subordination to the imperatives of consumption. This invasion by the principles of labor into both the realms of work and action is the peculiarly modern perversion of the human condition, according to Arendt. Instead of eating so that we can build and speak, we consume what we build and we cannot speak because, as it were, our mouths are full. We sacrifice permanence and immortality (the fruits of our work) in order to consume, and we sacrifice our individuality and plurality in the blankness of consumer society. (Voice 2013, 180-1).

The loss of the public implies the corresponding loss of durability, of the permanence which contains an almost divine kernel of human life and experience within it. The blankness of a consumer society increases productivity for the purposes of consumption, and with it reinforces the traditional worldview of the environment as “a collection of natural resources” from which to consume endlessly (Devall & Sessions 1985, 43). The endless consumption of a finite world leads to continued environmental degradation, if not total destruction, and presents both the nature of politics and discourse with existential threats as well as the entirety of life itself. These concerns were not at the center of Arendt’s theory at the time of her work, but with the rise of consumption and environmental destruction, it is a problem that now deserves our every effort to address and radically change.

Arendt’s concern with the public and private is a central element of her work, and there are many passages from which to illuminate this problem, but this paragraph from *Men in Dark Times* is especially striking in its precision:

“Nothing in our time is more dubious, it seems to me, than our attitude toward the world, nothing less to be taken for granted than the concord with what appears in public which an honor imposes on us, and the existence of which it affirms...But the world and the people who inhabit it are not the same. The world lies between people, and this in-between—much more than (is often thought) men or even man—is today the object of the greatest concern and the most obvious upheaval in almost all the countries of the globe. Even where the world is still halfway in order, or is kept halfway in order, the public realm has lost the power of illumination which was originally part of its very nature.” (Arendt 1968, 4).

This potential loss of the public realm is directly related to the loss of *homo faber's* world, where the consumption that is characteristic of modern society now begins to consume the political agencies and aspects of democratic life that promote a healthy and vibrant public realm. This represents the important link I alluded to earlier, the connection between a world of consumption and a world losing its political character, the ability to adequately respond to environmental dilemmas. The destruction of a healthy and pluralistic public realm not only promotes the “waste society” that will be expanded upon shortly, but also the loss of *zoon politikon's* uniqueness which is exhibited in speech and action. As this waste economy grows, and the public loses the political characteristics that allow it to connect human beings in responses to societal threats—not limited strictly to environmental harms—then politics and human community lose their connective element which is exhibited fully in the existence of human plurality. A life without speech or action, Arendt tells us, “is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.” (Arendt 1958, 176). From this the prospect of a waste economy grows, and one begins to wonder how these concerns may be alleviated. These are the answers I will now seek out.

Arendt begins her conclusion in the chapter on Labor by stating, “One of the obvious danger signs that we may be on our way to bring into existence the ideal of the *animal laborans* is the extent to which our whole economy has become a waste economy, in which things must be almost as quickly devoured and discarded as they have appeared in the world, if the process itself is not to come to a sudden catastrophic end.” (Arendt 1958, 134). The growth of this waste economy would not only include the most obvious signs of environmental waste—plastics, hazardous wastes, and emissions—but also those wasteful side effects of technological consumerism—upgraded iPhones, airpods, and computers—which are pushed yearly for profit

with only minimized changes and “advancements.” These elements of waste carry with them a genuine capacity of integration, where they become essential parts of daily life, thus promoting the continued profit of technological industries and the harmful environmental side effects of their consumption. It is not a question of *whether* one should obtain and use these products, but *how* they do so.

In considering this question one usually acknowledges that consumerism is a largely negative aspect of a true environmental ethic. This is due, in large part, to its radical distancing of the human being from the natural world. The more dangerous realization that many would fail to make, however, is that the consumerist mindset of *animal laborans* is entirely hostile to the collective identity of a democratic society. The growth of consumption in the world has correspondingly separated human beings from both nature and other, transforming the collective quality of society into a realm of “otherness,” where one recognizes their neighbor even less so than they recognize the intrinsic qualities of the natural world with which they are eternally bound. Arendt’s rhetoric when discussing labor is characteristic of the haunting reality that would unfold as this development continues.

The disorder of the public and social world, much like the disorder of the human condition that this phenomenon has given rise to, the potential victory of *animal laborans*, greatly impacts the permanence of life as a whole. If the world of human affairs and human life is no longer durable, then there is no reason to believe this toxicity will not open up the natural world for unending consumption and destruction as well. The corresponding loss of tradition that has arisen from this change is why Arendt returned to the origins of political experience in Greek *polis* life. From this return to the past grew her theory of action and the possibilities it unleashes in the world when embraced. Action presents the strongest possibility of transcendence, a

method of human lived experience able to rescue the permanence and durability of human life and the natural world itself. This, however, is not so easy. Arendt reminds us that the growth of the modern age has utilized the life force, labor, as the way in which to assert itself in the process of historical human development. From this the social reigns supreme, and socialized humankind becomes the object of focus, i.e. the essence of humanity and human society. On this point she says, “Socialized mankind is that state of society where only one interest rules, and the subject of this interest is either classes or man-kind, but neither man nor men. The point is that now even the last trace of action in what men were doing, the motive implied in self-interest, disappeared.” (Arendt 1958, 321). With the growing victory of *animal laborans* in the 20th century unfolding into the 21st century, there is a correlative loss of both *homo faber* and *zoon politikon*. The world of fabrication—permanence, stability, durability—and the world of action—freedom, plurality, and collectivity—are effectively reduced.

The reduction of *homo faber* and *zoon politikon* not only alludes to the loss of permanence, freedom, and plurality, but also correspondingly makes possible the “mass society” Arendt obstinately fears.²⁸ This type of mass society, a society of laborers, would initiate a level of sameness within the world, where “no common men...can prevent the destruction of the common world, which is usually preceded by the destruction of the many aspects in which it presents itself to human plurality.” Further down the same page she warns us, “But it [the loss of plurality] can also happen under conditions of mass society or mass hysteria, where we see all people suddenly behave as though they were members of one family” (Arendt 1958, 58). Hence, when Arendt refers to society as “one super-human family,” she means that the things “related to the life of the individual and the survival of the species” became a political matter, and with it

²⁸ Arendt writes extensively on the growth of mass society in many of her works, specifically *Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and *Between Past and Future*.

greatly weakened the importance of private life, thus leaving these once private matters in the open eyes of the public realm. (Arendt 1958, 29). At its *very* extreme, this would potentially resemble those of Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, where totalitarian governance, “whose chief aim is to make it possible for the force of nature or history to race freely through mankind, unhindered by any spontaneous action,” and recreate the horrors of the recent past (Arendt 1973, 465). This, again, is at the extremities of possibility, but the danger is always lurking. One of the reasons for Arendt’s intense fear of mass society is that with plurality’s loss also comes the loss of the common world, “when it is seen only under one aspect [labor] and is permitted to present itself in only one perspective [consumption].” (Arendt 1958, 58).

Not all hope is lost, however, as Arendt continues to remind us of the true power that action possesses. The capacity to begin something anew often appears “in the guise of a miracle,” because it not only sets off a chain of events that contain miraculous and unforeseen qualities, but also because it reminds one that their potential is due in large part to the pluralistic *ethos* of a collective society, a democracy. Thus, when Arendt defines labor as, “an activity in which man is neither together with the world nor with other people, but alone with his body, facing the naked necessity to keep himself alive,” she alludes to the fact that Marx’s labor movement could never transcend the specific organization of capitalist society, because a movement lacking pluralistic solidarity is no movement at all (Arendt 1958, 212). The loss of the world represents the loss of this collective. A world that Chapman defines as, “the place that human individuals inhabit with others. It gives meaning to the life of the individual and the life of the community of which they are a part.” (Chapman 2007, 435). Acting human beings thus become a link to one another, and action helps to reinforce a collectivity that becomes easily lost

in the name of historical “progress,” the endless consumption of nature and the loss of the human world.

Environmentally, the potential solutions to this problem have grown into the mindset of techno-political institutions and the individuals who compose them, where labor and consumption have become the canonical pillars of modern life. The growth of the modern technocracy, while often thought of as a solution to these problems, is hindered by the attempts of humanity to remedy the functions of action and plurality *outside* of political affairs. She warns us of this apparatus when saying:

“Because the remedies against the enormous strength and resiliency inherent in action processes can function only under the condition of plurality, it is very dangerous to use this faculty in any but the realm of human affairs. Modern natural science and technology, which no longer observe or take material from or imitate processes of nature but seem to act into it, seem, by the same token, to have carried irreversibility and unpredictability into the natural realm, where no remedy can be found to undo what has been done...Nothing appears more manifest in these attempts than the greatness of human power, whose source lies in the capacity to act, and which without action’s inherent remedies inevitably begins to overpower and destroy not man himself but the conditions under which life was given to him.” (Arendt 1958, 238).

The “greatness of human power” continues to remind us of the true power that action possesses. This amazingly potent last line proves that even though the growth of the modern age has carried with it a glorification of labor and productivity,²⁹ the potentialities of action are always present. Technology appears for Arendt as a substitution for human action, an extension of the continued loss of the public world to the social worlds of reproduction and consumption, where the earth becomes fodder for the development of human life. Thus, the redemptive qualities that she continually notices in action and speech are under attack, and they now appear to be insufficient in their attempts to save the world from human consumption and destruction.

In her chapters on Labor and Work, Arendt shows us that *animal laborans* could be redeemed from the cycle of endless biological determinism in the realm of necessity by the use

²⁹ *The Human Condition*, pg. 4.

of fabrication, the introduction of *homo faber*. Additionally, Arendt proves to us that *homo faber* can be redeemed from meaninglessness, the loss of all tangible values, only through the interrelated elements of action and speech, which produce meaningful stories and products of durability. The remedies of action that she speaks of in the above quote, which work intimately with the pluralistic tendencies inherent in action and speech, are the capacities to *forgive* and make *promises*. Both, I'm sure you recognize, are reliant on the ability to speak and act in concert with other human beings. "Without being forgiven," she says, "our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover..." Furthermore, "without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart..." (Arendt 1958, 237). This ability to promise and forgive further opens up a rhetorical dimension of performative politics, and its combination with a cognitive imaginary makes use of both practical political action and the vision of a new political reality. Writing on Arendt's ideas in the context of the relay hunger strikes in South Korea, Gooyong Kim and Anat Schwartz write:

"The transformative dimension of promises is also embedded in the human affect, which contains anticipation, hope, and potential. When participants in strikes and other protests declared, 'I will never forget,' they issued a binding promise not only to the victims but also to the entire nation for the sake of founding lasting political communities based on empathy and egalitarian resistance." (Kim & Schwartz 2017, 200-1).

I believe the utilization of this dimension with an enhanced awareness of the political potentialities inherent in the aesthetic dimensions of individual and environmental movements can become the foundation for a new environmental ethic. Within this foundation we find Arendt and Marcuse, a base that I will continue to build in what follows.

And yet, as the growth of consumerism and the loss of a tangible democratic identity continue to grow, the ability to speak, act, make promises, and forgive do not appear powerful

enough to undo the substantial and toxic regularities which have impacted human-environment relationships in the 21st century. They must, in my view, be combined with a new element of human action and thought, thereby strengthening their practical political effects with the cultivation of a new vision—a generational type of vision—capable of linking individuals beyond their immediate abilities to speak and act in concert with one another. This linkage is one that Marcuse presents to us in the form of phantasy, of the imagination, and the creation of a new capacity which connects individuals in a pluralistic democratic society. Arendt admits in the opening pages of *The Human Condition* that she “confines [her]self...to an analysis of those general human capacities which grow out of the human condition and are permanent, that is, which cannot be irretrievably lost so long as the human condition itself is not changed.” (Arendt 1958, 6). The human condition does, however, appear to be changing, and with the radical changes ongoing throughout the natural world and their repercussive changes in the world of politics and human affairs, we must be open to changing along with it.

To be clear, the work done in this chapter has moved along a continuum of historical development. The distinctions between “earth” and “world” pointed out by Arendt show the ways in which the activities that were once only present in the social-private realm—reproduction and consumption—have become the driving force of politics and political activity in the public realm. Once this overcoming reaches its apex in development, politics begins to lose its pluralistic tendencies, those of action and speech, which allow for the collective responses to societal threats (in this case, environmental threats). Finally, the response that is generated from this lack of pluralism, the techno-political apparatus of modern industrial society, replaces the transcendent qualities of human action and makes the entire earth a product of consumption, replacing action with the biological fodder of the life force. In response to this,

Arendt holds onto action and its remedies—forgiveness and the making of promises—to continue empowering action and its ability to create “the new.” This appears, in my view, as partially inadequate, because environmental destruction and human connectivity continue to be threatened by the growth of consumption and alienated human labor, which can, in fact, be saved by the introduction of Marcuse’s concept of phantasy, producing a new remedy for action so as to strengthen the power of plurality, democracy, and human action in the 21st century. The rhetorical and imaginative dimensions present a powerful alternative to quell the growth of consumerist industries inherent in advanced industrial capitalism. This idea will continue to be expanded upon, and in doing so an environmental *aesthetic praxis* will begin coming into focus.

A Marcusian Movement: The Environment and Radical Social Change

In the previous section Arendt’s critique of modernity was invoked to illustrate how the development of modern society and its emphasis on labor, consumerism, and technology has impacted the relationship between the private and public realms of human life. I argued that these problems greatly reduce the ability for states to respond adequately to the growing environmental issues of the 21st century. This exploration accomplished two things: 1) it broadened the view of the natural world in relation to human life and 2) it explained how this view relates to political life, and how it might be used as a catalyst for a new conception of action in the world. In what follows, I shall explore Marcuse’s work and attempt to understand the nuances of his environmental position, along with the Frankfurt School’s as a whole, so we might take pieces from both he and Arendt to form a capable and revolutionary environmental ethic. As will be seen, Marcuse’s new sensibility and emphasis on phantasy work more closely with the considerations already espoused by Arendt than many would think, and his utilization of the environmental movement as another genuine arena of liberation only adds to the

transformative needs and potentials of continuing to develop robust environmental and political theories.

There is, as it were, much room to grow in this chapter, because many of the environmental considerations that come from Arendt's theory are reinterpretations of her work in light of contemporary environmental crises. The environment was never a strict area of investigation in her work, which can be attributed mostly to the time period she was writing in. The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, on the other hand, were much more focused and explicit on the need to venture into environmental discourse. The growth of critical theory, as we have seen, arose amidst the rise of fascism in the industrial centers of European society, namely Germany. They sought to account for the failure of the socialist revolution that Marx originally theorized in his 19th century works. The members of the Frankfurt School identified two correlative deterrents to the success of the workers revolution, which Tim Luke aptly points out: "On the one hand, state repression could effectively crush many workers uprisings, as they witnessed in Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Italy from 1918 into the 1920s. And, on the other hand, state intervention in the economy increasingly maintained low rates of unemployment, acceptable levels of pay, and modest measures of social welfare benefits, which kept most workers fairly mollified under the existing regime." (Luke 2003, 238). At the same time, the culture industry continued to reaffirm the principles of unmitigated consumption that Arendt had grown fearful of. "The culture industry," writes David Held, "produces for mass consumption and significantly contributes to the determination of that consumption." (Held 1980, 91).

The critical theorists around this time, especially Marcuse, realized that the perpetuation of this consumerist industry relied on the continual destruction of nature. In light of this Marcuse argued "the violation of the earth is a vital aspect of the counterrevolution." (Kellner 1982). In

one of his last works, *Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society*, Marcuse articulated his socialist vision in light of the continued growth of capitalism and the ongoing environmental destruction around the world. The essay argues that a genuine and radical form of ecology requires a transformation of human consciousness, and a reconsideration of the methods used to protect the environment against destruction, consumption, and pollution. Marcuse argued, like Murray Bookchin around the same time³⁰, that the dominance of human over nature directly mirrored the dominance of human over human, and a radical transformation in one would correspondingly lead to a change in the other as well. The relationship between capitalist advancement, human exploitation, and the domination of nature is one that exhibits the many contradictions of advanced society that Marcuse continuously points out, including:

“a contradiction between capitalist productivity and nature, for in its quest for higher profits and the domination of nature, capitalism inevitably destroyed nature. Capitalist production manifested an unleashing of aggressive and destructive energies which destroyed life and polluted nature. In this process, human beings are transformed into tools of labor and become instruments of destruction. Introjecting capitalism's aggressive, competitive, and destructive impulses, individuals themselves engage in ever more virulent destruction of the natural environment and anything (individuals, communities, and nations) which stand in the way of its productive exploitation of resources people, and markets. (Kellner 1982).

The contradictions are inherent to the message of capitalism and illuminate the fact that capitalist tendencies might in fact destroy the world before humans can ever destroy each other. It was for this reason that Marcuse advocated fiercely for the growth of an international environmental movement, much like his support for the civil rights movements, feminist movements, and gay rights movements of the time. All of these, he believed, evoked the potentiality of a new sensibility on display operating against the dominant strains of thought that defined the 20th century.

These movements, however, were often marginalized and weakened by the power of the state system. Marcuse found that this was due, in large part, to their authenticity and the sheer

³⁰ See *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982) where Bookchin advocates for many of these same ideas.

reality that an obstruction of a dominant system required both mass organization in political parties, and a willingness to operate outside of the political or the social. There is a conflict between individual and whole, as shown by Marcuse in *Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society*:

The individualization and somatization of radical protest, its concentration on the sensibility and feelings of individuals, conflicts with the organization and self-discipline which is required by an effective political praxis. The struggle to change those objective, economic and political conditions which are the basis for the psychosomatic, subjective transformation seems to be weakening. The body and soul of individuals have always been expendable, ready to be sacrificed (or to sacrifice themselves) for a reified, hypostatized whole - be that the State, the Church, or the Revolution. Sensibility and imagination are no match for the realists who determine our life. In other words, a certain powerlessness seems to be an inherent characteristic of any radical opposition which remains outside the mass organizations of political parties, trade unions, and so on. Modern radical protest may seem condemned to marginal significance when compared with the effectiveness of mass organizations. However, such powerlessness has always been the initial quality of groups and individuals which upheld human rights and human goals over and above the so-called realistic goals. The weakness of these movements is perhaps a token of their authenticity. Their isolation is perhaps a token of the desperate efforts needed to break out of the all-embracing system of profitable domination. (Marcuse 1992, 37).

This same powerlessness, one may argue, is also apparent in the work of Arendt. The growth of the modern age, the loss of the world, and the world alienation exhibited by individuals during the period of modernity appear powerless against the radical need for change, to discover parts of the intellectual tradition worth embracing following the rise of fascism. The power apparent in these mass movements, which Arendt showed present the dangers of a complete loss of plurality, are exhibited here by Marcuse as a way of “freezing” or “isolating” the political process, and the potentialities of radical movements as a whole. The ability for mass corporations, unions, or social groups to freeze out radical movements is a uniquely solid area of agreement between the two, though they arrive at this destination by travelling very different paths. And though Arendt was not a radical critical theorist, she would be quick to criticize these attempts to minimize the speech of groups whose prospects for change are greatly reduced by the process of “freezing” or “isolating” individuals and groups from the political process. As a proponent of action and the meta-political capacities that generate action, it is not difficult to see that a consideration of both

Marcuse and Arendt would allow the new sensibility to grow, and generate a genuine theory of action that embraces radical change against all preconceived odds and mass ideological formations, thus becoming a powerful tool for liberation.

This is, in part, the goal of an *aesthetic praxis* in environmental discourse. By re-centering the focus of environmental debates on the concepts of necessity and labor, one can better understand the processes that form the foundation of capitalist consumption and alienation, thereby focusing these debates on a discussion of political action, radical aesthetic self-consciousness, and the reintegration of “the political” as a method of genuine transformation. The illuminative qualities of developing a new environmental consciousness work in tandem with social movements in other areas of society. They combine the radical and transformative needs of an aesthetic Marcusean vision, with the boundless, unpredictable, and connective aspects of the *vita activa*. This does require, however, a certain medium of expression capable of connecting the ideas of Arendt to Marcuse’s. As witnessed in chapter two, the integration of their theories of imagination—representative for Arendt and generative for Marcuse—combined to strengthen each other’s relative deficiencies and promote the active political performativity of art in times of social upheaval. Going in line with this, perhaps an exploration of Marcuse’s environmental *aesthetic* vision might speak volumes to the natural *political* vision of Arendt, thereby strengthening both a radical theory of action and signaling a transcendent change in the ideological consciousness of political actors.

The radical nature of Marcuse’s aesthetic vision has produced some interesting commentary concerning the environment³¹. The *ethos* of an aesthetic vision is not necessarily premised on one’s ability to find a natural beauty in the world beyond one’s self. It instead

³¹ See, for example, Burke (2011), Campbell (2011), Feenberg (2011), and Miles (2016).

focuses on an exploration of the dialectical relationship between human-nature, consciousness-structure, and the change that accompanies pluralistic movements aimed at restructuring the dominance of the current political and technological elements of society. What one discovers during an exploration of Marcuse alongside Arendt is an intense call to plurality, solidarity, and action. In time, and as we have seen throughout the thesis, one will notice that the disparities between the two begin to chip away as their concepts of action, aesthetics, and the imagination are explored in unison. Before doing so, I wish to ally ourselves with the eco-consciousness of Marcuse and explore this theoretical separation that exists between he and Arendt.

In his last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse argues that a turn to aesthetics is justified when realizing the “miserable reality” that political change is unlikely to occur (Marcuse 1978, 1). The relationship between aesthetics and politics, however, is increasingly dim and spotty, as Marcuse acknowledges when saying, “Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness...of the men and women who could change the world.” (Marcuse 1978, 33). Thus, one immediately realizes the distinct relationship between aesthetics and action, where aesthetics alone cannot enact a change in the world and must rely on actions innumerable and infinite characteristics. The lack of action or, better yet, the growing *disability* of action in modern society forms the core of environmental struggles, where movements aimed at the attainment of an economic and political structure capable of protecting the environment run into perpetually increasing obstacles.

As technological capacity grows and human cities expand, the separation between humans and nature becomes an immutable fact of environmental discourse and reinforces the difficulties of acting in concert with an aesthetic and ecologically driven vision of the world. The genuine distancing that Arendt alludes to in my analysis, from humans to one another and

humans to the natural world, might also be referred to in our case as *alienation*. Steven Vogel points out two different types of alienation that have made their rounds in environmental debates:

“a romantic one - sees contemporary human technological practices as outside of nature but still imagines the possibility of some other sort of practices...that would be it, and so believes alienation to be something that could in principle be overcome. Another version – what might be called the tragic one – instead views an irreducible distance between humans and nature to be an unavoidable element of the human condition, and therefore rejects the idea that any final elimination of alienation is really possible.” (Vogel 2011, 190).

Vogel favors the latter view, and argues that something like this latter view is also characteristic of the Frankfurt School.³² The distinctions that Marcuse makes between *basic* and *surplus* repression mirror an argument of this nature, where Marcuse acknowledges that *basic* repression denotes “the ‘modifications’ of the instincts necessary for the perpetuation of the human race in civilization.” (Marcuse 1955, 35). The challenge for a critical theory of society, much like Marcuse’s acknowledgment that some basic levels of repression are necessary in civilization, is not to abolish labor or alienation entirely, but rather to imagine a world where labor and human-nature relationships can be a source of instinctual gratification. Marcuse holds firmly onto the idea that labor is humanity’s area of self-expression, which Marx originally argued himself, and that the activities done in the process of laboring can be molded into activities that are not rugged or trying, but instead aesthetic and pleasurable. Marcuse would entertain Arendt’s idea that “without defending himself against the natural processes of growth and decay, *animal laborans* could never survive,” with an added premise that the processes one engages in during the struggle against necessity’s “growth and decay” might themselves be transformed into a more pleasurable possible existence. This pleasure originates in the instincts, and from it one can cultivate an environmental aesthetic similar in many ways to the aesthetic considerations of

³² See chapter 7 “On Alienation and Nature” by Steven Vogel in the edited volume *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, edited by Andrew Biro (2011).

Marcuse's works on art. This will reinforce the growth of a distinct human ability that can, in Marx's amazingly put phrase, "form things in accordance with the laws of beauty."³³

Initially, this formation requires an almost infuriating level of vulnerability. For as vulnerable as individuals appear in Arendt's philosophy when speaking and acting, leaving one's self open in a courageous fashion to be interpreted by all others but themselves in the confines of history,³⁴ the ability to embrace the innermost parts of self in the imagination can be even more daunting. The almost infinite growth of the consumerist industry, however, and the cultural industry that supports its unending consumption, makes this turn to art, aesthetics, and the imagination necessary. Whereas the acts of speech and storytelling rely inherently on plurality and human connectivity, the autonomous nature of art and aesthetics might actually enhance the prospects for a greater collective behind a common and unified vision. George Kastiaficas, writing on his theory dubbed the "eros effect," points out, "At a time when consumerism envelops the continent of Desire and weapons of mass destruction destroy the foundations of the Beautiful, art's own autonomous logic might be its foundation. The resolution of this apparent contradiction is the understanding that within art's formal aesthetics, a truth is contained that transforms society." (Kastiaficas 2017, 47). The call for art today as a pillar of an environmental ethic strengthens the democratic possibilities of plurality and action, while realizing a revolutionary consciousness beyond the consumerist mindset that continues to plague the growth of an ecologically friendly society. This current imagination, Marcuse says, "has become wholly functional: servant to instrumentalist Reason." (Marcuse 1972, 107). Once unleashed as a new pillar of a pluralistic democratic society, however, it might take the shape of "a scientific imagination free to project and design the forms of a universe without exploitation and toil."

³³ Quoted in Marcuse's *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, pg. 67.

³⁴ *The Human Condition* pg. 187.

(Marcuse 1969, 19). Further, in *Art and Revolution* Marcuse alludes to what he calls the “strategy of realization.” Because art and Marx’s “laws of beauty” cannot directly transform society without a corresponding call to action, he argues that realization “rather means finding the *aesthetic* forms which can communicate the possibilities of a liberating transformation of the technical and natural environment.” (Marcuse 2007, 166). This liberation would, in a way, give a voice back to nature. The transformation, however, requires both an instinctual call to liberation—the integration of a new, aesthetic rationality—and a call to action—the active emancipatory voice of nature and of the humans that must answer its cries for help.

The difficulties of cultivating an aesthetic awareness of the environment lie in the aforementioned power of capitalist industries to respond quickly and convincingly to any attempts at a transformation of its structure. In what follows, I argue that these two revolutionary steps, aesthetic liberation/imagination and dynamic action, are actually one in the same process. These corresponding human potentialities, drawn from Marcuse and Arendt, work jointly to promote the possibilities of a world that does not simply protect nature and the human lives caught in its every interaction, but simultaneously proliferates the growth of both human life and the natural world. This, I take to be the final discussion of *aesthetic praxis*.

An Environmental Aesthetic Praxis

Though it might seem uncharacteristic, I wish to begin here first with a quote from Edmund Husserl:

“In whatever way we may be conscious of the world as universal horizon, as coherent universe of existing objects, we, each “I-the-man” and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this ‘living together.’ We, as living in wakeful world-consciousness, are constantly active on the basis of our passive having of the world... Obviously this is true not only for me, the individual ego; rather we, in living together, have the world pre-given in this together,

belong, the world as world for all, pre-given with this ontic meaning... The we-subjectivity... [is] constantly functioning.”³⁵

This passage, written in 1936, represents Husserl’s first known invocation of the German term *Lebenswelt*, which literally translates to “world of life.” Husserl, who was one of Marcuse’s earliest teachers and the founder of the Phenomenological tradition in philosophy, used the term to describe the perceptive world of sense experience. According to Andrew Feenberg, “The *Lebenswelt* is the world of lived experience, what Marcuse calls “unpurged, unmutated experience,” in contrast with the restricted notion of experience that underlies the natural sciences. Experience in this sense includes more than the empirical facts. It is fraught with values that are sensed along with the given.” (Feenberg 2018, 4). This evaluation of the sensed and the given implies a coherent interrelatedness between the ideal and the real. The coexistence of the two oscillates between the world of the individual “me” contained in the ego, but also the collective “we,” of which a world is tangibly and intangibly shared. In the process of creating an environmentally aware conception of the natural world and the world of politics, this understanding becomes necessary when discussing the active and imaginary content of human existence. For the prospects of an environmental theory built on political action, human community, and aesthetic imaginaries, the *Lebenswelt* presents itself both to us and Marcuse as a useful starting point to begin formulating an aesthetic conception of political praxis. Marcuse’s critiques of Husserl, which David Held nicely points out, “suggests (and often implies on Marcuse’s reading of his work) one particular standpoint; that is, from the standpoint of an interest in controlling the environment.” (Held 1980, 166).

In his *Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse greatly reinterprets the *Lebenswelt*, saying, “The aesthetic universe is the *Lebenswelt* on which the needs and faculties of freedom depend for their

³⁵ Taken from *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1936/1972).

liberation.” (Marcuse 1969, 31). In the sentences that directly follow this line, Marcuse speaks of the “*practice of creating an environment*” in harmony with the liberation of aesthetic imagination, thus striving for a “pacification of man and nature.” This, however, is still quite misleading, and I shall explain why. To strive for a pacification of humanity and nature implies that at no point in time has the human life world, *Lebenswelt*, existed in harmony with the natural world. What I believe Marcuse is instead searching for is a *repacification* of humanity and nature, which has now arisen following the domination of nature by the growth and development of human labor power in capitalist society. There have been many instances, especially in those of Native American cultures, where human populations not only lived in harmony with the natural world, but also produced distinct rhetorical dimensions to elucidate and explain this relationship. The Potawatomi Tribe of North America, for example, used the word *Puhpowee* extensively, which describes “the force that causes mushrooms to push up from the earth overnight.”³⁶ For all of the knowledge accumulated in the industrial and political centers of Western society, no word has been developed to explain this unique and inherently aesthetic relationship between humanity and nature which has been experienced by so many indigenous and native cultures throughout history. This proves to me that what one should be searching for in the cultivation of an environmental *aesthetic praxis* is not the *expansion* of the imagination to touch ideas and experiences which have never existed, but instead to return to the primal, succulent roots of the experiences that have always, and will always, remain present to us.

The continued growth of a consumerist and laborious capitalist society has manipulated the once pristine existence of a *Lebenswelt* free from the fetters of exploitation, domination, and dangerous collective identities. The same unpredictability that Arendt theorized had become the

³⁶ A wonderful article by Robin Kimmerer titled *Learning the Grammar of Animacy* (2017) describes this amazing relationship between tribe and earth. A special thanks to my colleague, Martha Bierut, for providing me with this piece of unique literature.

foundational component of human affairs is not only exclusive to human development and political performativity. As the growth of natural science and “objective” rational understandings of the world shaped human feelings toward the natural world, this same unpredictability was unleashed into the environmental realm. Arendt tells us, “This started harmlessly enough with the experiment in which men were no longer content to observe, to register, and contemplate whatever nature was willing to yield in her own appearance, but began to prescribe conditions and to provoke natural processes.” As these processes of control and experimentation grew, however, “we eventually learned how to ‘repeat the process that goes on in the sun,’ that is, how to win from natural processes on the earth those energies which without us develop only in the universe.” (Arendt 1958, 231). Though she seems to be, in a way, praising these unpredictable consequences of human action in the natural world, they present very real and present dangers to the establishment of a healthy human relationship with the earth. The embeddedness of natural processes in the actions of human beings speaks to the interdependent relationship between political activity in the realms of social and natural sciences, and the corresponding *vision* of nature that these activities produce. The unending consequences of action, while empowering to a large degree the ability of human beings to produce new potential realities, greatly hinder the prospects of creating a sustainable collective of human actors and political agents. The prospects for human plurality, as it were, are greatly reduced by the lack of a coherent understanding of the earth as not only an arena touched by human action and the awesome possibilities present in the political realm of society, but as the corresponding root of human flourishing and well-being as a whole.

These are not, however, meant to be degenerative attacks on the philosophies of Arendt and Marcuse. Instead, the growth of the intellectual tradition since the 1950s and 1960s provide

us with the added luxury of understanding how these concepts of action, control, and domination in nature might instead be reimagined to alleviate the intense pressures being put on the earth and the human beings who are exploited in the name of what we have come to refer as “progress.” Just as Marcuse argued the utopian resources necessary to create a future world free from exploitation and domination already exist, cultures like the Potawatomi and many others prove to us that the aesthetic and imaginative vision of nature already have existed and continue to exist, waiting again to be embraced. The practical political effects corresponding to this imaginative potential are shown to us by Arendt as the capacities for speech, promise making, and the deliberative workings of a pluralistic society, which with the ascension of *animal laborans* and the labor movement as a whole are weakened in their attempts to cultivate a democratic entity capable of utilizing these capacities to respond to environmental concerns. The organization of nature under these existing circumstances, devoid of a common political or conscious vision, “offers greater capacity for control, but deprives man from finding himself in nature, beyond and this side of alienation; it also prevents him from recognizing nature as a *subject* in its own right – a subject with which to live in a common universe.” (Held 1980, 243). In an *aesthetic praxis*, this universe is both common to the political capacities inherent in a vibrant public realm and the common vision of nature beyond these political formulations, a conscious and aesthetic vision of nature as the fodder, not of labor or development, but of human potential to flourish beyond domination and the continued strangulation of natural resources which promote the overall exploitation of nature and humanity. It is, at its core, not so much viewing human society and the natural world as a pristine painting which enacts a separation between the imaginary and the real, but instead a convergence of the two, like reading John Muir and using a purple flower as a bookmark. As the continued threats of pollution, natural disasters, and climate change proliferate

in the human and natural worlds, a vision capable of undoing the perverse separation existent between political control and aesthetic understanding molds an entirely new environmental ethic which, amazingly, is able to combine the prospects for democratic action and plurality, with a vision of the natural world free from domination and the exploitation of capitalist consumption.

IV. Conclusion

*But how do we fashion the future? Who can say how except in the minds of those who will call it
Now?
-Miller Williams*

Given the extensive amount of material touched upon in this thesis, let me first begin by returning to the most important points made throughout. In chapter 1 the dive into necessity began by tracing the concept through the works of Heidegger, Freud, and Marx. This exploration showed us that necessity was not only present in their philosophical and political works but influenced to some degree the growth of Marcuse and Arendt's thoughts on necessity and its relationship to freedom. The remainder of chapter 1 was focused on an intense examination of freedom and necessity in the works of Arendt and Marcuse, where two very critical ideas were fleshed out for our theoretical use. First, Arendt's theory of action and its corresponding qualities—natality, plurality, and unpredictability—were touched upon to signify the dynamic and powerful character of political action. My initial focus was on the concept of unpredictability, which can generate a cascading web of relationships throughout time, bringing about new realities that are almost inconceivable at the time of action. This unpredictability, however, while strengthening greatly the *power* of action, limits to some degree the active attempts to cultivate a world based on a shared democratic, utopian vision. Because of this, I turned to Marcuse's concepts of phantasy and the imagination, which contain his formulations of the new sensibility and the *aesthetic ethos*. The weakness that I witnessed in Marcuse's conception of these imaginative elements is the blurriness by which the "new sensibility becomes, by token, *praxis*." Thus, my attempt to join the two into an aesthetically driven conception of *praxis* alleviated these shortcomings by combining his radical emancipatory vision

with Arendt's intricate theory of dynamic action, while simultaneously opening up Arendt to the radical possibilities inherent in the consciousness and imaginative elements of thought.

The second chapter continued to expand on this idea by tracing the importance of art in times of social and political turmoil from the Mexican Revolution in 1910 to the ongoing protests in Hong Kong. This quasi historical-philosophical analysis allowed us to witness the different ways in which Arendt and Marcuse conceive of the imagination. Both imaginative capacities—the representational and the generative—helped to solidify the importance of pluralistic movements while also, in a way, opening both Arendt and Marcuse up to the ideas of the other. This, along with the rhetorical and aesthetic dimensions of political action being witnessed in Hong Kong, suggested the possibility of realizing Marcuse's ambitious attempts to cultivate the creation of society as a work of art.

Finally, chapter 3 brought *aesthetic praxis* into the arena of environmental debates. Though there are many different factors that play a marked role in the destruction of natural habitats, climate change, and loss of biodiversity, this chapter took as its focus the growth of consumerism within modern capitalist society. Again, *aesthetic praxis* displayed both the power of action and the strength of an aesthetic and imaginative consciousness. When embraced, I argued that it could alleviate Arendt's concerns of the "loss of the world," which arose for her in modernity. The radical imagination of a Marcusian vision contains the potential to not only reconnect individuals within the pluralistic *ethos* of a democratic society, but also to utilize the environmental movement as another genuine area of human liberation. The autonomous nature of art, which David Held pointed out nicely to us, could indeed transform the peripherals of society and the individuals it composes. This would, in turn, not simply rewrite the relationship between human and nature, but also promote the flourishing of all life as a whole.

The solutions to all three of these areas of political inquiry, I must admit, have not yet become anything close to a legitimate political reality. If they had or were, I would most likely not be painstakingly advocating for their continued understanding throughout the world. Like the realm of necessity, however, and all those activities one engages in everyday so they may wake up tomorrow only to do them again, these activities are unending. One does not choose, as it were, to devote their time to necessity or the many areas of life it impacts. They, instead, do so because they must. One must, to a certain degree, labor in order to sustain their health and the health of their family, community, and friends. One must operate everyday in a world of social interaction and, as we have seen in Hong Kong, this world is constantly changing as the struggles of life continue. And finally, one must also interact with nature, which we are all eternally and deathlessly revolving within—not merely interacting with but living within as it simultaneously lives through us. The message necessity sends to us is clear, and it echoes much of the political message that springs from its existence: the fight is never over, the work is never done, and the world is never at the heights it is quite possible of reaching. Though the words of this thesis are coming to an end, the *work* that it implies continues. For it surely must, lest we allow the world to become the fractured image of a still unblemished vision, waiting in the tomorrows we cannot yet predict, and the future we have all the power to create.

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