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CAN POLITICAL THEORY PROVIDE A MODEL FOR RECEPTION?

MAX WEBER AND HANNAH ARENDT

Katherine Harloe

If we understand “the political” with Mouffe as the domain of ontological reflection on “the very way in which society is instituted” (8–9), it is clear that the recent growth of reception studies within classics has been prompted and structured by political concerns. Political questions were never far from the surface of Martindale’s influential 1993 manifesto for the adoption of reception-orientated approaches within classics:

The frames within which reading occurs, *and must occur*, become, on this view, provisional, pragmatic, heuristic and contingent, means of controlling textual indeterminacies by establishing the agreed procedures and goals. We cannot operate without them, but we can constantly (re-)make and unmake them and thereby the possibilities they open up or close off. The danger arises when they become naturalized or otherwise congealed as (occluded) metaphysical entities (i.e. categories of fundamental being). (1993, 14–15)

As his talk of “danger” shows, Martindale’s concern was not only to attack what he has repeatedly identified as a widespread and “conceptually flawed” “positivism” within the discipline of classics (2006, 2; 1993, 2–10). It was equally to unmask and criticize the broader implications of traditional models of reading, exposing the ways in which they systematically ignore and/or occlude the fact that “meaning is produced and exchanged socially and discursively” (1993, 7, 15), rendering all interpretation implicitly political.

Others have developed this suggestion of an inherently political dimension to classical reception studies. Biddiss and Wyke, for example, opened their 1999 edited collection *The Uses and Abuses of Antiquity* with the claim that “An appeal to the classical past constitutes a

modern strategy for defining or redefining genders, sexualities, races of nations, for conforming or contesting what is civilized and what is barbarous, and for determining who is to be a member of a given community and who is to be conversely marginalized" (16–17). In their view, the essays in their collection show that "classical antiquity, however protean in its modern manifestations, has been most regularly deployed to bolster a supposed cultural elite of white males and to marginalize or silence whatever that imagined community came to fear as its Other" (13). By making this prevalent use of antiquity explicit, their work might moreover be seen as contributing toward the disruption of this hegemonic structure. More recently, Goff and Goldhill have outlined notions of the classical tradition as a site where "various groups, not only a cultural elite, can have recourse to the notion of antiquity and shape it to their own quite diverse ends" (Goff, 12) and of classical reception as a series of "struggles over the past [that] engage and help form their participants" (Goldhill, 297). These studies move classics away from its traditional concentration on the historicizing or aestheticizing interpretation of ancient texts and objects, shifting the focus toward the social and political processes that shape and constitute agents, both historically and now.

It is interesting to note that as reception studies seeks to reconfigure classics in a more explicitly political fashion, it finds itself reaching for political metaphors in order to describe the processes of reception it is studying. This is often expressed as a frustration at the inadequacy of the hermeneutic metaphors of "inheritance" associated with studies of "the classical tradition," extended in some cases to criticism of the term "reception" (which Martindale adapted from the well-known *Rezeptionsästhetik* of Jauss in order to characterize the approach he sought to embed within classics). Thus, Goff seeks to dissociate the study of "classics and colonialism" from that of "the classical tradition," because she finds the terminology of the latter "too irenic" to capture the kinds of contestation classics has come under in postcolonial contexts (12–14). Concluding his study of the stakes of knowing Greek at various historical junctures, Goldhill reflects that "'Reception' is too blunt, too *passive* a term for the dynamics of resistance and appropriation, recognition and self-aggrandisement [*sic*] that make up this drama of cultural identity" (297). Both counsel replacing talk of "legacy," "inheritance," even "reception" itself, with a more

explicitly political vocabulary of “appropriation,” “resistance,” “struggle,” “contestation,” “collusion,” and “self-aggrandizement.”

There are more than mere words at stake in this substitution. The terms by which processes of reception are characterized provide implicit models of those processes, which affect the ways in which researchers understand their own activities and their subjects of study. Yet within classical reception studies, the implications of these metaphors are rarely explored systematically: the efflorescence of case studies of classical reception seen over the past two decades has not, since Martindale, been accompanied by a similar wealth of extended theoretical discussions. Given that discussions of reception often make use of political metaphors, this is an area where political theory has a great deal to offer reception studies. Political theory may help to clarify what is at stake in these models: the implications that using each of them has for our understanding of reception and the limits of its applicability. The brief incursion into political theory presented below is intended as a contribution to this project of clarification.

Beyond this, however, I also aim to foreground an aspect of reception theory that has been deemphasized in its application to classics. This is the idea of reception as a form of dynamic interaction or communication between past and present, a “dialogue between work and audience” (Jauss, 19) or, in Iser’s more literary terminology, between texts and readers, in the course of which new meanings are generated. One problem with this model is its reliance upon an analogy between texts and actors in the communicative situations of social life: of texts as agents capable of “interacting” or “entering into dialogue” with their receivers.¹ Numerous questions may be raised about the strength of this parallel. Is it valid to treat the relationship between works and their receivers on the model of a face-to-face communicative situation? How strong a notion of agency would we need to attribute to such works in order for the comparison to hold? What difference does it make that “dialogues” between ancient works and modern receivers involve historically disparate “agents” that bring extremely different frames of reference to the interaction? What can this highly abstracted model tell us about the social and historical conditions under which communication occurs rather than, say, incomprehension or misunderstanding?

These and other problems prompted Martindale’s rejection of this

element of Jaussian *Rezeptionsästhetik*, arguing that it betrayed a residual faith in the “comforting ‘metaphysics of the text’” (1993, 17), the discredited hermeneutic model of texts as communicating perennial truths to audiences across history, insulated from the vagaries of social and political change. But despite the well-known problems with this model,² I believe that we cannot altogether do without it. For Martin-dale’s alternative fiction, “that texts can be appropriated for any position” (15), has difficulty accounting for what Jauss termed the “socially formative” character of past works (40): the ways in which they may indeed challenge, change, and shape receivers’ values, expectations, and goals. This is a story in which researchers into reception have a great deal of investment, as understanding reception as an interaction between works and receivers is a common way of justifying reception studies as a source of new insights into the understanding both of human agents and of texts. Moreover, it is arguable that the metaphor of “appropriation” is at least as likely to blind us to some of the political implications of interpretative practices as that of “interaction.” The root meaning of “appropriate” is, after all, to make something one’s own property, and its *locus classicus* is the state-of-nature theories of such early modern thinkers as John Locke:

He that is nourished by the Acorns he pickt up under an Oak, or the Apples he gathered from the Trees in the Wood, has certainly appropriated them to himself. No Body can deny but the nourishment is his. . . . And will any one say that he had no right to those Acorns or Apples he thus appropriated, because he had not the consent of all Mankind to make them his? (329–30; *Second Treatise*, bk. 2 chap. 5 par. 28)

This fiction is “comforting” precisely because it isolates the appropriating individual by placing him in the state of nature: Lockean appropriation takes place in a pre-political world, where there are no others to contest the individual’s decision to annex something as his own.

Despite the well-known problems with the interaction model, then, I do not think reception studies can afford to dismiss it. Moreover, insofar as critiques of it concern its abstraction from social and political conditions, political theory may again be of help. A great deal of political theory is concerned with the analysis of various kinds of human interaction, in particular with those that occur under conditions characterized by inequalities or asymmetries (of power, of

wealth, of status) and plurality or difference. As well as testing the limits of the interaction analogy for reception studies, political theory might aid us in formulating a model of reception as interaction that is not immunized against political and social considerations. It is to this end that I undertake an exploration of the two very different understandings of the political provided in the work of Max Weber and Hannah Arendt.

I begin with Weber, as I believe his articulation of the political contains features that are canonical for much modern thinking about politics. His discussion of the political must be understood within the context of his conception of sociology as “a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action” (1978, 4). “Political” denotes a particular category of social relationships, which are in turn defined as “the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes into account that of the others and is oriented in those terms” (1978, 26). In his celebrated lecture on the vocation of politics, Weber distinguishes “politics” in the broadest sense, comprising “any kind of *independent leadership in action*,” from a narrower sense in which it denotes those social actions concerned with “the leadership, or the influencing of the leadership, of a *political* association, hence today, of a *state*” (1948, 77). The state is, famously, defined not by its ends but by its means, as “a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* [violence] within a given territory” (1948, 78; see 1978, 54–56).

This brief summary makes the nub of Weber’s understanding of politics clear. His account is centered around two concepts: domination or rule (*Herrschaft*) and force or violence (1948, 78; 1978, 53). Political relationships involve the domination of one individual or group over another, and—although Weber’s theory canvasses a number of different ways by which that domination may be sustained (custom, self-interest, perceived legitimacy)—the presence of violence in his very definition of the state reveals its centrality within his view of politics as the ultimate means by which the subordination of one group to another is assured.

The understanding of political relationships as relations of domination has been important in many of the studies in reception mentioned above. The collections edited by Goff and by Biddiss and Wyke

provide examples where the relevance of classics to individuals' and groups' attempts to influence the leadership of states or other forms of association has been well demonstrated. Nevertheless, there are at least two reasons why this understanding of the political does not provide much help in understanding those interactions between readers and texts that have been the concern of reception theory.

One question is presented by Weber's analysis of the concept of (social) power, of which domination forms a category. Weber defines power as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance" (1978, 53). This makes the existence of domination contingent upon that of a conflict of interests between dominator and dominated, which prompts resistance by the latter.³ It is far from clear what could be analogous to such "resistance" in the case of the work-receiver relationship. Iser concedes that "an obvious and major difference" between text-reader and social interactions is that "A text cannot adapt itself to each reader with whom it comes in contact" (1978, 166), but it would surely be to stretch a point to assimilate this textual inertia to the active resistance presupposed by Weber; nor indeed can a text intervene in its interactions with readers in order to respond to or try to correct their interpretations. If the presence (or even the possibility) of resistance is a constitutive element of domination, this seems to rule out construing text-reader relationships in this fashion.

The second problem is that, on Weber's analysis, relationships of power seem hardly to constitute a type of *interaction* at all. For in defining power as "the ability to carry out one's will despite resistance," Weber leaves no room for the possibility that the dominating agent (call her A) will be changed or developed in any way by her interaction with the dominated (B). It is the mark of A's power over B that she is able to carry out her will *despite* B: her preexisting projects are left unaffected by B's attempted resistance. The definition of power as the ability to carry out one's will despite resistance does not recognize any role for the agency of the dominated. There is little space in this account for the socially formative character of reception, its ability to provide not only new insights into texts but also new self-understandings on the part of readers.

Another way of putting this is to say that Weber's discussion assimilates *social power*—a form of relationship between agents—to an

individual agent's *causal capacity*, or general ability to be a cause of effects in the world. As Foucault states, this latter is essentially a power "which is exerted over things and gives the ability to modify, use, consume, or destroy them"; it is therefore conceptually distinct from social interactions, which involve "relationships between partners" (786). If applied to text-reader relations, the work or text—far from being attributed any agency in the interaction—is treated as a thing: either an obstacle or an instrument to the realization of pre-formed readerly intentions or projects.

From Arendt's point of view, the disappearance of the conceptual possibility of interaction when the political is understood as a relationship of domination is only too predictable. It is symptomatic, in her view, of a historically induced impoverishment of human practices and imagination, which has led to loss of awareness of our capacity for the kind of *interaction* that forms the genuine content of the "political." More specifically, it results from the substitution of a conception of politics as *making* for one of politics as *action*. Let us examine what she thinks is at stake in this substitution.

For Arendt, it is Plato who furnishes the paradigmatic conception of politics as making. His *Republic*, with its blueprint for an ideal city, its insistence on hierarchical relations not only between agents but even between parts of the soul, and its assertion of an objective standard of reason epistemically accessible to those who rule, is not only the original but also the purest exposition of this model. His *Statesman*, with its foregrounding of the notion of rule, also reveals the motivation that renders politics as making an attractive idea to human beings: the dream of right government as an escape from, and solution to, the fragility and disorder of human affairs. For Arendt and Plato, the paradigmatic activity of "making" is the work of a craftsman in creating a durable object such as a bed or table. In such cases, an agent takes natural material and shapes it into an object fit for human purposes in accordance with a preexisting idea (*eidōs*) that guides his activity. Arendt holds that making plays a crucial role in human life, not so much—as we might expect—as a means of satisfying human needs but rather as a way of humanizing the earth: of creating material objects that "bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human existence" (1998,

8, 145). Nevertheless, when politics is understood along these lines three problems emerge. These are the issues of isolation, instrumentality, and violence.

The political is supposed to be an aspect of human interaction, but “making” is not really a kind of *interaction* at all. In its archetypical form, it involves one agent, material, and a form that governs the transformation of that material into an object. Insofar as a specific case of making involves more than one agent, Arendt insists that we must understand those who take part either as laborers, whose own agency is suppressed and who are used instrumentally, or as their classical counterpart, Plato’s master craftsmen, who contemplate the Ideas but relegate production to their subordinates (1998, 222–23; 1961e). This ideal of coordinated behavior where one agent directs the activity of others is, she claims, the source of modern conceptions of the political that foreground the notion of rule. As we have already seen, this is not a promising model for interactivity.

More serious consequences of this understanding of politics follow from its instrumentality. In what Arendt regards as its “proper” sphere (the fabrication of durable objects) making is an instrumentally rational activity governed by the categories of means and end. It involves a foreseeable and attainable goal, which determines how the activity proceeds and the means and material used (1998, 53–59, 143). Significantly among these means, the goal also limits the extent of the violence that, Arendt insists, is intrinsic to every process of fabrication (139). The instrumental character of making contributes to its attraction for human beings, as it promises a sense of fulfillment upon completion of the made object. When we try to shape relationships between agents after this model, however, it is deformed beyond recognition. This is, first, because the political activity of making has no definitive moment of completion. Whereas making proper terminates in the existence of a material object, the activity of “making” human-kind—pretensions of philosophers notwithstanding—has no end point. Its claims to predictability and control are also constantly refuted: it “is forever defeated by the actual course of events, where nothing happens more frequently than the totally unexpected” (300). But the most fundamental problem is that as an instrumental form of activity, the ends and thus the meaningfulness of making must be supplied from somewhere beyond the activity itself. Once making is

emancipated from its proper sphere and becomes a paradigm for all interaction, it is implicated in a corrosive and potentially infinite search for final ends and meaning, accompanied by a similarly boundless recourse to violent means (228). The nihilistic consequences of politics as making are implicated in the production of that complex of feelings of “superfluity” and “omnipotence,” together with readiness to deploy violence, which, in Arendt’s view, prepared agents in the twentieth century to embrace totalitarianism (1998, 153–59; 1973, 460–79; see Canovan, 23–28).

What is the significance of Arendt’s critique for our attempt to understand the political as a form of interaction? We began with the Weberian use of “political” to denote social relationships that involve relations of power: either force or domination and subordination. Arendt claims that the instrumentality inherent in all “rule” excludes these forms of coordinated behavior from counting as genuine interaction. Clearly, she has a much more demanding conception of what this involves than does Weber. While her critique of politics as making contains much that will be familiar to anyone acquainted with the critiques of modernity propounded by Horkheimer and Adorno, Lukács, or indeed Weber himself, Arendt’s positive sketch of politics has sometimes been dismissed as obscure, confused, or simply too idiosyncratic to merit examination.⁴ If we are to accept her account of the rise of politics as making, this will be unsurprising, for part of her argument is that we have developed and internalized a conception of the political that is not only mistaken but obscures the nature of genuine interaction. Nevertheless, she is more sanguine than her one-time teacher Heidegger about the possibility of recovering this conception and its associated practices. For she holds that although modern agents are unable to *think* this kind of interaction, they are still capable of *living* it, and indeed that some of her contemporaries had done so by participating in revolutionary uprisings or organizations, such as the French resistance (1961c, 3–5). Moreover, she suggests that tradition and in some cases language itself can preserve traces of this form of interaction even in an age where its practice has vanished (1961e, 164). This is why Arendt builds up her picture of the genuine content of the political by discussing a series of more-or-less concrete examples, most of which are drawn from classical antiquity.

Foremost among these is the ancient Greek polis as represented in Homer and other, pre-Platonic works of literature and art (1961e, 163–64). In what follows I take the Homeric *agorē* (assembly) as my paradigm, as it is a site to which Arendt returns again and again throughout her writings. For Arendt, the *agorē* signifies primarily a space or realm constituted in such a way that a distinctive kind of interaction—which she terms simply “action”—can occur. In contrast to the domination model of politics explored above, this realm is characterized by the simultaneous independence and dependence of those who enter it. Participants in the *agorē* are independent in that they meet as an association of (formal) equals: no one is able to dominate the others (1961e, 164; 1998, 32–33). Yet speakers in the *agorē* also depend on one another in the far-reaching sense that each has need of the others as audience for and respondent to his words and deeds. “Every activity performed in public can attain an excellence never matched in privacy; for excellence, by definition, the presence of others is always required” (1998, 49). The *agorē* is constituted as a gathering of human beings for the sake of speech and action; without a plurality of actors, this space would simply not exist.⁵

This is also underlined by Arendt’s emphasis on the Greeks’ tendency to compare politics to such performative activities as seafaring, dancing, flute-playing, and theater (1998, 152–55). Each of these can be understood as an instrumental activity aimed at the production of a particular object or state of affairs: trade in the case of seafaring, entertainment for the performative arts. Arendt emphasizes a contrasting perspective according to which the quality of each activity is disclosed in the excellence or virtuosity of the performance itself. Although a form of human distinction, such virtuosity requires publicity for its realization, the presence of others who recognize and acclaim it as such.

The mutual dependence of participants in the *agorē* does not, however, preclude the possibility of conflict, as the spectacular quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon that commences the *Iliad* makes clear. For Arendt, the political realm is simultaneously a space of association and of distinction. This is so because human agents are unique beings who occupy different locations in the world and therefore bring different opinions and perspectives to bear upon words and deeds (1998, 57–58). Free exchange of views in the *agorē* may—indeed, it

likely will—bring about the contestation as much as the confirmation of individual opinions. It is not essentially or even primarily a space for the attainment of consensus.⁶

This makes action in the *agorē* a fundamentally risky undertaking. To act in public is to show oneself to a plurality of other agents who may contest one's actions and whose differing perspectives one can neither fully anticipate nor control. Arendt holds, however, that the existence of this realm is highly significant for those who enter it. For, consistent with the phenomenological background to her thought, she holds that it is only through acting in public that one discloses and discovers who one is (1998, 50–51, 175–81). Moreover, it is only by acting in this realm that human beings manage to overcome (albeit partially) the transience of human affairs. Without the “web of human relationships and enacted stories” constituted by the responses of others, human actions would immediately pass into oblivion:

[T]here are finally the “products” of action and speech, which together constitute the fabric of human relationships and affairs. Left to themselves, they lack not only the tangibility of other things, but are even less durable and more futile than what we produce for consumption. Their reality depends entirely upon human plurality, upon the constant presence of others who can see and hear and testify to their existence. (1998, 94–95)

Can an analogy be drawn between action in the Arendtian *agorē* and the interactions of classical works and their receivers? Initially this may seem implausible: the Homeric *agorē* is a closely bounded space of face-to-face interaction, whereas reception is an open-ended field characterized by historical distance and difference. We should, however, note that Arendt does not think of the material conditions of the classical polis or the Homeric *agorē* (the specific forms of their “worldliness”) as determining the possibility of “action.” The polis “is not the city-state in its physical location” but rather “the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be” (1998, 198).⁷ Moreover, Arendt emphasizes one aspect of the political realm that aligns it specifically with the concerns of reception. This is her insistence on the *polis* as an “in-between” that links and separates human beings *across time*. Throughout her work, Arendt contests all notions of historical *process* in favor of a

spatial conception of history as a realm within which action is recalled and recreated.⁸ For that very “web of human relationships” to which action is exposed is the very same web of “enacted stories” through which it is preserved across the generations (175–81). One of Arendt’s key terms for this temporally extended form of interaction is “remembrance,” but this does not imply passive repetition or imitation. It is rather a kind of localized, perspectival re-telling and re-acting that bestows new reality and meaning on deeds through their transformation in narration by others (1998, 55, 190, 206–7; 1961b, 84).⁹

We might say that “remembrance” is simply the *agorē* extended into history: the *polis* considered as open ended rather than bounded in time and space. Arendt reveals that she understands “remembrance” as a political activity in her identification of Homer, storyteller of the Trojan war, as “a shining example of the poet’s political function” (1998, 197). Yet remembrance is not necessarily celebratory. It may also be condemnatory, as in Arendt’s own experience in telling the story of totalitarianism (see Disch). In fact, the enlarged arena of “remembrance” only intensifies those conditions of uncertainty and likely contestation that, as we saw, attended acting in the *agorē*. Those who act into the space of history can anticipate responses to their words and deeds even less than actors in the Homeric *agorē*; the multiplication of perspectives provided by reception-as-remembrance is correspondingly greater than that experienced in any ancient community of equals (see 1961b, 84).

Arendt’s conception of action/remembrance, therefore, offers a model of politics that emphasizes interactivity—the mutual dependence of actor and audience in determining the significance of words and deeds—without resolving that interaction into a peaceful process in which both are “of one mind,” or one is able to dominate the other. Moreover, her understanding of politics involves an explicitly *trans*-historical dimension, where “*trans*” marks out the historical arena not as a medium *through* which stable meanings are communicated to appropriately receptive legates, but as a space *across* which the meaning of words and deeds is continually contested and made anew. Her picture of human interaction, therefore, avoids the pitfalls of “tradition” while refusing to reduce one party to the status of instrument for the other’s intentions and projects. If students of reception continue

to feel the need to characterize their studies in political terms, Arendt's notion of politics will merit further examination.

Notes

1. See for example Jauss, 31; Iser 1974, 274–75; Eco, 16–23. Iser addresses some of the questions surrounding the analogy in his discussion of “Asymmetry between text and reader” (1978, 164–70).

2. Martindale drew on the well-known criticisms of Derrida and Fish. See Holub, 101–6.

3. Admittedly, this has been one of the most-criticized aspects of Weber's discussion of domination. Lukes emphasizes the ability of social power to manufacture consensus by altering the dominated's perception of her own interests. Foucault sketches a more sophisticated analysis of power as “a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions” (789), which may preclude conflict; although see his closing remarks on the possibility of freedom as both constitutive of and antagonistic to power (790, 793–95).

4. See for example Lukes, 28–30. Although her work shows a far deeper engagement with Arendt, Pitkin has also expressed frustration at what she sees as “the curious emptiness of content characterizing Arendt's vision of the public sphere” (337). On the distinctive character of Arendt's critique of instrumental reason, see Canovan, 94–98.

5. I therefore believe that Pitkin is wrong to characterize the relationship between actors in the Arendtian *agorē* as merely instrumental. For Arendt, publicity is a *constitutive* element of excellence—indeed, of action itself.

6. The debate between proponents of “associative” and “agonistic” interpretations of Arendt finds interesting parallels in recently revived arguments about the cooperative versus competitive potentials of Homeric society. For examples of the former debate see Benhabib and Honig; for the latter see Adkins and Cairns.

7. Likewise, “To have a society of laborers, it is of course not necessary that every member actually be a laborer” (Arendt 1998, 46).

8. See Arendt 1961d, 103, and especially Arendt 1961b.

9. Kristeva summarizes well: “The fate of the narrative depends on an ‘in between’ where we eventually see the resolving logic of memorization as detachment from the lived *ex post facto*. On these conditions alone, the ‘fact’ can be revealed in ‘shareable thought’ through the verbalizing of a ‘plot’” (16–17).

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