



## On Visibility and Power: An Arendtian Corrective of Foucault\*

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**Abstract.** Freedom, *conceived ontologically*, is power's condition of possibility. Yet, considering that the subject's interests and identity are constantly shaped, one still has to explain how – theoretically speaking – individuals can resist control. This is precisely the issue I address in the following pages. Following a brief overview of Foucault's contribution to our understanding of power, I turn to discuss the role of visibility *vis-à-vis* control, and show how the development of disciplinary techniques *reversed* the visibility of power. While Foucault illustrates that during different historical periods, distinct modes of visibility are produced by power in order to control society, I argue that the very same power that produces visibility is concomitantly dependent upon it. In addition, I maintain that visibility is a necessary component of resistance. But Foucault – perhaps due to his premature death – never adequately explains how individuals can resist the mechanisms of control in a world in which power is ubiquitous. To help clarify this enigma, I turn to Hannah Arendt's insights into power, freedom, plurality, and natality. These concepts, I claim, can serve as a corrective to Foucault because they make room for resistance without assuming that humans can exit power's web.

Michel Foucault's modification and expansion of mainstream political science's conceptions of power and control are linked to his rejection of liberalism's most basic underlying assumptions. In contrast to the liberal imaginary, he does not consider the subject to be a pre-existing entity who (freely) makes decisions following some kind of calculus informed by self-interests.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the subject's actions may follow a "rational" decisionmaking process, yet her or his consent to act in a certain way is not simply or necessarily a manifestation of free choice. Consent, Foucault says, can be manufactured through intricate controlling mechanisms that produce norms, constitute interests, and shape behavior. The deconstruction of "consent" and of pre-given autonomous interests suggests that even rationality is saturated with power. For instance, the "natural inferiority" Aristotle attributes to slaves and women enables him to *rationalize* justify their subordinate social position and to excuse the different forms of oppression to which they were subjected.<sup>2</sup> As Foucault reveals, the naturalization and normalization of social hierarchies both depoliticize and "rationalize" iniquitous social relations. Social control, accordingly, is no longer conceived merely in negative terms as a set of prohibitions upheld by the sword, but rather considered to be an array of mecha-

nisms that have the capacity to constitute the subject's very interests and identity.

Although I find Foucault's analysis of power and control to be much more compelling than the analyses proffered from within the liberal framework, Foucault's ideas are also not free of snags. Most of the difficulties arising from Foucault's writings involve his claim that power is ubiquitous. Insofar as everything can be reduced to the operations of power, all modes of thinking, critique, and action become effects of power.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, since the subject is "produced by power" (Foucault, 1979, p. 170, 1980, p. 74), it appears to lack agency; and a completely passive subject renders the very notion of control meaningless.

Elsewhere I have argued that in his later writings Foucault resolves some of the difficulties stemming from his notion of power by emphasizing an ontological conception of freedom whereby freedom precedes power (Gordon, 1999). I demonstrated that even within Foucault's imaginary, humans can never be fully reduced to the operation of power, since the very possibility of power relations is dependent upon freedom, upon the possibility "of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation" (Foucault, 1988c, p. 12). Indeed, I showed that freedom, *conceived ontologically*, is power's condition of possibility. Yet, considering that the subject's interests and identity are constantly shaped, one still has to explain how – theoretically speaking – individuals can resist control. This is precisely the issue I intend to address in the following pages.

Following a brief overview of Foucault's contribution to our understanding of power, I turn to discuss the role of visibility *vis-à-vis* control, and show how the development of disciplinary techniques *reversed* the visibility of power. While Foucault illustrates that during different historical periods, distinct modes of visibility are produced by power in order to control society, I argue that the very same power that produces visibility is concomitantly dependent upon it. In addition, I maintain that visibility is a necessary component of resistance. But Foucault – perhaps due to his premature death – never adequately explains how individuals can resist the mechanisms of control in a world in which power is ubiquitous. To help clarify this enigma, I turn to Hannah Arendt's insights into power, freedom, plurality, and natality. These concepts, I claim, can serve as a corrective to Foucault because they make room for resistance without assuming that humans can exit power's web.

### **Foucault on Power and Control**

The relevancy of Foucault's notion of power to the question of social control has been dealt with at length and surely cannot be captured in a few pages (Butler, 1990; Dallmayr, 1984; Dumm, 1996; Fraser 1981; Hindess, 1997;

Picket 1996). Therefore, I limit my discussion to a few cursory remarks about discursive practices, leaving out his discussion of disciplinary techniques, bio-power, governmentality, etc. Examining *Madness and Civilization* – where Foucault illustrates the evolution of madness from the 16th to the 19th century – through the lens of a later work, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* – where the notion of discursive formations is introduced – proves revealing (1988a, 1993). Although I cannot discuss *The Archaeology* at any length, it is important to note that, according to Foucault, every institution, political office, and field of research involves statements which manifest themselves in constitutions, regulations, mandates, memberships, contracts, etc. A group of statements is defined as a discursive formation, and discursive formations produce knowledge. In *The Archaeology*, Foucault asseverates that “there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice, and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms” (1993, pp. 87, 183). In other words, the knowledge that enables us to answer questions pertaining to a particular field, for instance, medicine, is informed by the discursive practice constituting and demarcating that field.<sup>4</sup>

In *Madness and Civilization* Foucault is not merely discussing the circumscription of objects – in this case, madness – that already exist in the world, but is rather describing a process by which madness is constituted. Foucault manages to illustrate the close relation between madness, the discourse that surrounds it, and the “enlightened” understanding of reason. His portrayal of the development of madness and the manner in which it is continuously reconstituted unsettles the boundaries between the sane and insane, and consequently their corollaries, reason and unreason.

Foucault’s historical analysis of madness is pertinent to the question of social control for several reasons, of which I will mention only a few. First, discourse produces and constitutes objects (madness), identities, and interests, thus influencing and shaping behavior (i.e., positive control). Second, by defining objects, spheres of inquiry, and fields of research, discourse sets limits, creating a system of exclusion, interdiction, and prohibition (i.e., negative control). This does not mean, as John Caputo (1993, p. 244) implies, that in *Madness and Civilization* Foucault still embraces the “repression hypothesis,” since repression gains new meaning within a framework devoid of a transhistorical essence or nature. It does suggest, however, that the normal is shaped and maintained through the constitution and definition of the abnormal.

Third, Foucault reveals that madness itself is *normalized* in the sense that it is portrayed and consequently conceived to be natural, rather than a contingent, historical construction. At least since Marx – who argued that poverty is not natural but caused by violation and exploitation – it has become acceptable to claim that one of the more effective ways to control a population is to convince people that certain phenomena are “normal” and/or “natural.” *Mad-*

*ness and Civilization*, similar to Foucault's later studies that uncover the human sciences' on-going production of normalcy, exposes the way in which we are always enveloped by background practices that appear transhistorical and beyond contingency, but are in fact constructed by power relations. In a sense, Foucault politicizes phenomena that had been previously considered to be natural, i.e., "beyond politics."

Fourth, and intimately tied to the politicization of quotidian phenomena, Foucault dispels the long-held belief in the neutrality of institutions. He uncovers, for example, the conversion of medicine into justice, or in his words, the penetration of the Hobbesian system of rights into the asylum. We read that the asylum "is not a free realm of observation, diagnosis, and therapeutics; it is a juridical space where one is accused, judged, and condemned, and from which one is never released except by the version of this trial in psychological depth – that is, by remorse. Madness will be punished in the asylum, even if it is innocent outside of it" (1988, p. 269). Thus, he shows that institutions frequently present themselves as impartial, while concealing an agenda that is used to advance specific programs. Moreover, institutions do not so much own, seize, acquire, or exchange power, as the liberal approach to power suggests, but rather reflect a relation among forces that already exist in society. Commenting on Foucault's understanding of institutions, Gilles Deleuze says, "Institutions are not sources or essences, and have neither essence nor interiority. They are practices or operating mechanisms which do not explain power, since they presuppose its relations and are content to 'fix' them, as part of a function that is not productive but reproductive" (1995, p. 75).<sup>5</sup>

Fifth, Foucault strives to escape the Hobbesian/liberal and orthodox Marxist imaginaries, both of which accentuate a visible site of power (e.g., sovereign, government, dominant class) situated in opposition to the individual. For Foucault, there is no identifiable site outside of language from which discursive practices are disseminated or controlled. This latter point is crucial, for it suggests that often the mechanisms of control cannot be traced back to any social agent, since they are nonsubjective.

Foucault's imaginary, one should note, is radically different from the orthodox Marxist understanding of ideology or from the views advanced by proponents of propaganda models. In contrast to the theoretical framework informing these two notions of control, according to Foucault discursive practices do not conceal a hidden reality; they are neither a facade for immoral practices nor do they produce false interests. Foucault's genealogical method, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow point out, suggests that the "very project of finding a deep meaning underlying appearances may itself be an illusion, to the extent that it thinks it is capturing what is really going on" (1983, p. 181). Thus, a Foucauldian would, for example, disagree with the orthodox Marxist who claims that "liberal democracy" is a facade employed by the bourgeoisie in order to create the impression that everyone is equal. Liberal

democracy does not conceal an authentic reality, but is a reflection of specific power relations. Since there are no constant or fixed essences, liberal democracy neither hides an objective reality nor manifests some true primordial existence. Foucault concludes that there is no pre-given true and natural object or reality behind the discursively constituted one.

This point becomes apparent in Foucault's first volume on *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault's genealogical examination of "sex" reveals that a variety of characteristics that pertain to totally different domains – "anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, and pleasures" – were artificially unified and attributed to the concept sex. This "fictitious unity" is a manifestation of power, Foucault avers, adding that it is "organized by power in its grip on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures"; it is put into use in order to create hierarchy, to facilitate domination, to check and control. Sex is understood to be a site of social control for it is a construct that both shapes and represses individuals. Each individual, Foucault points out, has to pass through sex "in order to have access to his own intelligibility . . . to his identity" (1990, pp. 154–156).<sup>6</sup> Foucault's inquiry into discourse, modes of behavior, mores, customs, and regulations – in sum, his effort to shift the level of analysis and to deepen it, as it were – adds considerably to the discussion of control. Not only are humans situated and limited by a social context, but they are also constituted by the context, while the context itself is an effect of power.

### Visibility and Control

Foucault's emphasis on surveillance as one of the most efficacious controlling techniques within disciplinary society has highlighted the central role of visibility in his understanding of power and control. We read that due "to the techniques of surveillance, the 'physics' of power, the hold over the body, operate according to the laws of optics and mechanics, according to a whole play of spaces, lines, screens, beams, degrees, and without recourse, in principle, at least, to excess, force or violence. It is a power that seems all the less 'corporeal' in that it is subtly 'physical'" (Foucault 1979, p. 177). Elsewhere he states, "There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself" (1980, p. 155). It is as if the "gaze" penetrates the individual, helping to shape the "soul" so that it conform to the existing rules, codes, and mores. The soul, Foucault concludes, becomes the prison of the body.

The importance of visibility is frequently mentioned *vis-à-vis* Foucault's discussion of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. The invariable visibility of the

prisoner enforces isolation, which is, according to the prison authorities, a boon. From the point of view of the guard, the inmate population is “replaced by a multiplicity that can be numbered and supervised; from the point of view of the inmates, by a sequestered and observed solitude” (1979, p. 201). One notices that Foucault draws a line between visibility and isolation, arguing that above all other techniques, the isolation created by permanent visibility enables the exercise of a maximum intensity of power over prisoners. Indeed, “solitude is the primary condition of total submission. . .” (1979, p. 237).<sup>7</sup> No other influence can overthrow this power because no viable alternative can be organized in isolation, and when no alternative can be organized then submission becomes the only tenable course of action.<sup>8</sup>

The flaw of the panoptic model, as C. Colwell points out, is that the gaze is centralized, while power, according to Foucault, is not located in one identifiable site (Colwell, 1994). I would argue that the cubicle, a more recent disciplinary artifact, might serve as a more “exact” model of Foucauldian power. “Budgetary constraints” have led corporations to shunt employees, who previously worked in individual offices, into a central space divided by cubicles.<sup>9</sup> The cheaper materials from which the cubicle is made and the diminished space it occupies are not the only reasons cubicles have become permanent fixtures in the corporate landscape. In many respects, the latent power of their ingenious design is a perfect example of a structure created to ensure invariable control over its occupier – the white-collar corporate worker. Cubicles have no doors, and the desk is often situated across from the opening so that the worker’s back is facing the public maze. The thin “walls” never reach the ceiling, even though they are at times too high for someone to look over. The worker is never sure who might pass by the open entrance or whether someone is listening-in on a phone conversation. Similar to the panopticon, the perpetual visibility of the employee is sufficient to render most workers docile.

With cubicles, there is no identifiable site of control: no boss stands at the door to secure compliance; no executive continually inspects one’s work. No monitor is needed. The mere *possibility* that a person from a higher echelon or even a co-worker will overhear a discussion or notice an employee resting is sufficient to ensure that the corporation’s standards, customs, restrictions, and prohibitions are observed. This novel arrangement of the workplace is designed to guarantee the compliant diligence of employees. Furthermore, there is often no common space in which a group of workers can meet spontaneously or private space where co-workers can have confidential discussions. The cubicle phenomenon signifies that the white collar worker too has been colonized by Taylorism, confirming Foucault’s claim that a “cleverly” designed edifice has the capacity to increase the productivity of a worker in terms of economic utility, while diminishing the political astuteness and individuality of that worker (Foucault, 1979, p. 138).<sup>10</sup>

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault stresses that visibility is not only attained through architectural devices. He also mentions the process of examination, another form of control that has proliferated in the past century. The use of examination is pervasive, and one encounters it in a variety of forms throughout life.<sup>11</sup> Its capacity to facilitate social control is twofold, in both cases, though, it makes the subject visible in order to control him or her. On the one hand, it constantly sifts the members of society through a strainer, making them visible in order to evaluate and categorize them according to established criteria. Those who deviate can be sent to prisons or psychiatric institutions, while the rest are further categorized and compartmentalized according to their particular “abilities.” In this way, the examination distinguishes, divides, and ultimately isolates the different members of society. On the other hand, in order to succeed in passing the examination, individuals are required to appropriate an already determined field of knowledge and behavior. If one wishes, for example, to be a teller in a bank, there are a whole range of conditions one needs to satisfy. One has to demonstrate – that is, make visible – one’s ability to calculate and be mindful of money; one has to show that one can comply with a dress code, adopt certain mannerisms, and appropriate the accepted business proprieties.

Foucault mentions the use of exams in educational institutions. Students are constantly requested to take tests or hand in papers, which the teacher uses in order to evaluate their progress and accomplishments. The examination, Foucault explains, enables the teacher to establish a “visibility through which one differentiates [the students] and judges them” (1979, p. 184); each individual “receives as his status his own individuality,” thus marking the pupil as a case (1979, p. 192). Insofar as the examination is a reflection of the student, the student is also conceived of as an object. While the examination, like other forms of surveillance, is a mechanism that differentiates and insulates, it also homogenizes since it allows the teacher to transmit specific information and “to transform his pupils into a whole field of knowledge” (1979, p. 186).

Foucault argues that the employment of visibility has changed over time. Indeed, the individuation and isolation of the subject occurred only with the introduction of disciplinary techniques, because these techniques *reversed the visibility of power*. Traditionally, power – which was embodied in the sovereign – was visible whereas the subject remained hidden. It was only the occasional reflection of sovereign power on the subject – e.g., when a subject was accused of some kind of offence and tortured in the town square – that positioned the individual under the limelight. Disciplinary power inverted this strategy. As opposed to sovereign power and judiciary power, which operate by virtue of their visibility, disciplinary power is exercised through its invisibility. The disciplinary techniques impose “on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility” (Foucault, 1979, p. 187). Thus, in contrast to sovereign power, the introduction of discipline forced the subjects to come

into view, since their visibility assures the hold of the power exercised over them. More generally, Foucault shows how the mode of visibility changes over time according to the operation of power. As stressed through the examples of the panoptic tower and the cubicle, it is the potential of being constantly seen that “maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection” (Foucault, 1979, p. 187).

While visibility has usually been discussed in relation to surveillance and, more broadly, disciplinary techniques, it is important to point out that visibility – *in the sense of being seen and heard* – is also a crucial component of all other forms of power discussed by Foucault. Visibility is essential to power not only because it is put to use by power in order to control people, but perhaps more importantly because it is power’s condition of possibility. Discursive practices, for instance, are meaningless and powerless if they are not visible. Judith Butler makes this point clear in her discussion of gender performativity. She shows how the process of signification occurs through the constant performative reiteration of norms, and this reiteration actually materializes a set of effects on the matter of bodies (Butler, 1990, 1993). Visibility, accordingly, precedes the process of internalization. Put differently, discursive practices are actually created, reproduced, and upheld through visible citation and repetition of their normative fiats. Conversely, if a discursive practice ceases to be articulated by constant repetition, it loses its power and may eventually disappear. Thus, the practice maintains its power only insofar as it is visible.

One notices that visibility functions as a form of control in two distinct ways. On the one hand, the *actual* visibility of normative fiats is necessary for them to maintain their power over the subject. While on the other hand, the invariable *potential* visibility of the subject is sufficient to render him/her docile. These modes of visibility are only methodologically distinct, since the subject’s potential visibility is intricately tied to the actual visibility of normative fiats. In other words, the subject’s potential visibility facilitates control only because a set of normative fiats is already visibly circulating in society and the subject must, in some way, relate to these fiats. Along the same lines, the visibility of normative fiats necessarily affects the subject only because she/he is always potentially visible.

The idea that visibility is not only an effect of power but also its condition of possibility can help mitigate the difficulties concerning human agency, and more specifically, resistance in Foucault’s thought. At the very least, it offers a direction for further inquiry, since it underscores the dependency of power on visibility and raises the question concerning the condition of possibility of visibility itself. Because Foucault did not discuss this issue, I turn to Hannah Arendt, whose insights into plurality and natality expose the conditions of possibility of visibility and the human capacity to create something new. These insights, I argue, can be used to alleviate what appear to be untenable premises

in Foucault's work. But first, I briefly examine Arendt's conception of power and freedom.

### **Arendt on Power and Freedom**

Foucault and Arendt share a number of ontological assumptions (Kaplan, 1995; Thiele, 1994; Villa, 1992, 1999). Both consider humans to be situated in-the-world, thus rejecting the Cartesian view of the self as, in the words of one commentator, "an egological structure that lives and thrives prior to language and cultural life" (Butler, 1986, p. 129). They claim that the conception of the subject as a pre-existing entity who ontologically precedes society is nothing but a chimera.<sup>12</sup> Their presupposition that the world "conditions" humans also rules out the idea of a self-constituting subject. The two authors abjure the view that human beings have a nature or essence; theirs is a non-essentialist ontology.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, they maintain that humans are more than malleable bodies: humans, they claim, *are* free.<sup>14</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that Foucault's work can be reduced to Arendt's – or vice versa – but only that there is a strong basis from which a comparison can be made.

Ironically, perhaps, one of the most conspicuous differences between Foucault and Arendt in the context of social control has to do with the way they conceive power. Although both thinkers consider power to be relational – not a property that can be possessed or employed – Arendt defines it as the capacity of people to act in concert, whereas Foucault defines it as a relation among multiple forces. For Arendt, power is a manifestation of freedom; for Foucault, it operates via mechanisms that shape and constitute individuals. Their distinct perspectives concerning power not only encapsulate one of the central differences between them, but also elucidate their respective contributions to the question of social control.

Foucault's notion of power is based on three notable insights that are unaccounted for within Arendt's imaginary. First, Foucault realizes that power can be nonsubjective, which enables him, in turn, to suggest that discursive practices, physical apparatuses, and disciplinary techniques should be considered in terms of power. "Power relations," he argues, "are both intentional and nonsubjective" (1990a, p. 94). They are a consequence of a series of aims, objectives, and calculations, but these cannot be traced to the decision of a free agent, particularly if the latter is identified with free consciousness. "Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application," he says (1980, p. 101). The individual is both an effect of power and the medium of its articulation. Second, Foucault recognizes that power operates primarily in a positive way by fabricating, manufacturing, and shaping interests and identities. The notion that power has a constitutive capacity is based on Foucault's genealogical approach, which assumes that there are "no fixed essences, no

underlying laws, no metaphysical finalities” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, p. 106). Accordingly, the meaning of the term repression changes dramatically in Foucault’s writings, since there is no ahistorical essence that can be either repressed or liberated (Foucault, 1990). Finally, and as we have seen, Foucault claims that power is ubiquitous.

By contrast, Arendt remains faithful, albeit to a limited degree, to the traditional idea of sovereign power. That is, she rejects the power-is-property formula underlying the standard notion of sovereign power, but accepts the idea that power is associated with the subject. This, I believe, does not point to a failure in Arendt’s thought; on the contrary, it is precisely the subject’s capacity to act in concert in order to create something new that discloses the potentiality of human agency. Once the subject is considered to be an effect of power, as implied in Foucault’s early work, then the subject loses its capacity to act and becomes, in a sense, passive.

Power, Arendt writes, “corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert.” A group of people joining together in order to advance a certain issue or a whole spectrum of issues is a manifestation of power. Power, therefore, “is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together” (Arendt, 1970, p. 44). Arendt mentions the student riots in the late 1960s, stating that such events illustrate how a relatively small group of people acting together can change an institution’s policies. Once the group disperses, however, power vanishes, which explains the sagacity of the old adage “divide and conquer.” Arendt accordingly agrees that the reduction of the population’s political force is, to a large extent, due to the individual’s isolation. She maintains that with the amplification of the life process and the infiltration of “the social” into the public domain, the latter disintegrates, leading directly to the individual’s isolation.<sup>15</sup>

Power – in its Arendtian sense of acting in concert – is both a manifestation of freedom, and simultaneously crucial for *securing* political freedom. Acting in concert “is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence” (Arendt, 1958, p. 200). The relation between public space and power is complex in Arendt’s thought, for while power can only appear in public, its appearance creates the public domain. If Foucault’s nonsubjective power controls by constituting, naturalizing, and essentializing relations, and by creating a visibility that separates and homogenizes human beings, then Arendt’s power is the potential that enables humans to break away, or more precisely, to disrupt the hold of Foucauldian power. In one of her recent books Judith Butler suggests that the subject is a site of ambivalence in which it “emerges both as the *effect* of a prior power and as the *condition of possibility* for a radically conditioned form of agency. A theory of the subject,” she continues, “should take into account the full ambivalence of the conditions of its operation” (Butler, 1997, pp. 14, 15).

From within Arendt's imaginary one would have no difficulty explaining how a group of students can decide to resist the powers that be, yet a Foucauldian would have difficulty, if only because power produces the subject and shapes its interests and identity. The first and crucial step towards mitigating this difficulty is by showing that Arendtian power can coexist with Foucauldian power. Similar to Foucault, who claims that one cannot exit power's web, Arendt maintains that one cannot conceive of an action outside the human condition. Arendt, as Jeffrey Isaac cogently asserts, "cannot accept the idea, associated with Kant and other liberal idealists, that humans are intrinsically autonomous, self legislating beings" (1993, p. 537). Yet, it is important to quickly add that, according to Arendt, "the conditions of human existence. . . can never 'explain' what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely" (1958, p. 11). Arendt can make such a claim, because, unlike Foucault, she begins with human agency. Underlying all three types of human activity—labor, work, and action—is an ontological understanding of humans as both free and having the propensity to act. Without freedom, without the possibility of disrupting, shaking, and creating ruptures, and without the capacity to generate breaches within the structures, "political life as such would be meaningless" (Arendt, 1993, p. 146).<sup>16</sup>

It is important to pause for a moment and examine what exactly Arendt means by freedom, since, as we have seen, freedom underlies her notion of power. Arendt's understanding of freedom is informed by Heidegger's ontology (Gordon, 2001; Thiele, 1994; Villa, 1996). In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger says that the "essence of freedom is *originally* not connected with the will or even with the causality of human willing" (1993, p. 330). Elsewhere he writes, "Freedom is not mere absence of constraint with respect to what we can or cannot do. Nor is it on the other hand mere readiness for what is required and necessary (and so somehow a being). Prior to all this ('negative' and 'positive' freedom), freedom is engagement in the disclosure of beings as such" (Heidegger, 1993a, p. 126). So, according to Heidegger, freedom is the possibility of engaging in the disclosure of being, and this ontological sense precedes the liberal notion of negative and positive freedom.<sup>17</sup>

Heidegger's notions of Being and freedom are intimately connected. While I cannot discuss their precise meaning at any length in this context, it is important to note that in contrast to the ontic conception of being-as-presence, from an ontological perspective, Being can never be fully defined or captured, since it always withdraws, remaining partially concealed. It always preserves a hidden character and therefore any attempt to essentialize it, reduce or negate it, or conceive it as permanent is a distortion of Being, because Being is always more than one can make of it. It is overdetermined; indeed *it always maintains a difference*.<sup>18</sup> Being, however, also reveals itself, or more precisely,

Being is in itself a clearing (*Lichtung*). Humans are able to engage in the disclosure of Being due to this clearing, indicating that the clearing is, according to Heidegger, freedom. But one should keep in mind that humans are “*the site which being requires in order to disclose itself.*” It is the particular being of humans, the being which wonders and questions that “is the site of openness, the there” (Heidegger, 1987, p. 205). The “essence of the being-in-itself of all beings is freedom,” Heidegger says, and that freedom is actualized through the engagement in the disclosure of beings (1985, p. 93).

Both Arendt and Foucault (in his later work) subscribe to this notion of freedom (Villa, 1992, 1999; Gordon, 1999).<sup>19</sup> Arendt, to be sure, refers to it in more concrete and political terms. As a state of being, freedom enables humans to transcend life’s necessities – the biological process that sustains life and attends to its needs – in order to act. This notion of freedom also underlies her discussion of plurality and natality, which underpin, in turn, her idea of action, and as such are crucial for a philosophical understanding of resistance. “Because he *is* a beginning, man can begin,” Arendt says; “to be human and to be free are one and the same” (1993, p. 167).

### **Plurality and Natality**

Plurality and natality are the conditions of possibility of Arendtian power. We read that power, as that which “springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse” is dependent on the human condition of plurality (Arendt, 1958, p. 200). Seyla Benhabib traces Arendt’s notion of plurality to Heidegger’s being-with-others, whereby “the world is never just the world around one, it is always also the world we share with others” (as quoted in Benhabib, 1996, p. 53). Whereas for Heidegger, being-with-others has negative connotations of fallenness into the chatter of everyday life, for Arendt “human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction.” Arendt adds, “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live” (1958, pp. 107, 108). Plurality accordingly describes two interrelated conditions. First, it signifies the human condition of being-with-others-in-the-world. Second, it underscores the duality of human existence whereby all individuals, as humans, are the same, and yet simultaneously each one is a unique being. Plurality, one should note, is an ontological category that constitutes human existence in its most primordial sense. Put differently, insofar as one is human, plurality is an integral part of one’s existence.

Moreover, plurality is essential to visibility. In Arendt’s view, the world gains meaning as a result of the human condition of plurality. As Bhikhu Parekh puts it, one’s experience of the world is dependent “upon the recognition and

confirmation of others” (Parekh, 1981, p. 87). Even one’s own identity, not only in the sense of what one is, but also who one is, is contingent upon how others interpret one’s words and deeds. Arendt goes so far as to suggest that even “the great forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thought of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance” (1958, p. 50). A sense of reality, even the most intimate and private reality, is, according to Arendt, intersubjectively derived, while intersubjectivity is dependent on the twofold character of plurality.

Arendt’s discussion of plurality and her claim that meaning is dependent on intersubjective experience have far reaching implications for Foucault’s notion of nonsubjective power. While Foucault discloses forms of control that Arendt did not notice, both thinkers would agree that the diverse attributes that are ascribed, for example, to sex – which are, in effect, forms of positive and negative control – become meaningful and remain so only insofar as they are corroborated in public, insofar as they are visible. Devoid of visibility, power becomes powerless. Thus, visibility is, as mentioned before, both an effect of power and its condition of possibility. Arendt’s writings demonstrate that visibility is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is the visibility of “the social” that make it into a form of control (Gordon, 2001). Writing about Arendt, Melissa Orlie – echoing Butler – underscores this point, describing how the on-going reiteration of social norms engenders a so-called “rule of necessity, as well as the violations and exclusions it abets” (1995, p. 340). On the other hand, any form of resistance is also dependent on visibility, on the ability of people to see and hear defiant acts. Without visibility, all confrontations are meaningless. Foucault, I believe, would have agreed that visibility is resistance’s condition of possibility, yet, to the best of my knowledge, he never says so explicitly.

Accordingly, the crucial difference between Arendt and Foucault in this context – one that most scholars have failed to discuss when comparing the two thinkers (Kaplan, 1995; Orlie, 1995; Thiele, 1994; Villa, 1992, 1999) – has less to do with how they conceive visibility’s function within society than with the way in which they describe its source. Foucault shows that the different modes of visibility are an effect of power, while an analysis of his writings suggests that power is dependent on visibility. Thus, he posits a circular or dialectical relationship between power and visibility. Arendt, by contrast, claims that plurality itself is visibility’s condition of possibility.

Hence, an Arendtian analysis suggests that Foucault’s nonsubjective power, which cannot be traced to an identifiable site and cannot be possessed by a subject, is ultimately dependent on the human condition of plurality: “on the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear” and thus assure us of the world’s reality (Arendt, 1977, p. 183). So even if one concurs

with Foucault that “subjects are produced by power,” one may still conceive power as dependent on plurality, in the dual sense of being-with-others and of the human condition of sameness/uniqueness. While power might create a certain kind of visibility in order to control and shape the subject, visibility itself is a product of plurality.

The possibility of resisting controlling mechanisms – by changing, for instance, the connotations that have been ascribed to sex and race – is accordingly dependent on plurality, on the fact that meaning is intersubjectively derived. Yet, resistance cannot rely solely on plurality, because before people can change the existing connotations they first have to be able to create new words and new meanings. Judith Butler, who adopts many of Foucault’s insights, argues that while one cannot exit power’s web, resistance to or subversion of the hegemonic order remains a possibility due to the human capacity to “perform differently” (1990, 1993). Butler, nonetheless, sidesteps the crucial question, because she fails to provide a persuasive explanation regarding what enables people to perform differently.

Arendt illustrates this ability by introducing the notion of “natality.” “The new beginning inherent in birth,” Arendt writes, “can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting” (1958, p. 9). The idea of natality can be traced back to Arendt’s dissertation on Augustine (1996), where she first emphasizes the claim made in *The City of God* (XII, p. 20), “that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody.” Arendt interprets this statement, suggesting that with the “creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before” (1958, p. 178). As Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark point out (1996), Arendt develops Augustine’s idea in several important essays in the course of her life (e.g., Arendt, 1958, 1979, 1993, 1994).

The notion of natality is linked to birth, which is, according to Arendt, both a singular event that individuates each person but also one that ties humans together, for all humans are the same insofar as they are born. In this way, natality parallels and perhaps, more precisely underlies, the duality of sameness/uniqueness that characterizes the human condition of plurality. But natality also refers to the human capacity to create something new, a capacity that enables humans to sustain their uniqueness throughout their lives. In her essay, “Understanding and Politics,” Arendt writes that the “birth of individual men, being new beginnings, re-affirms the *original* character of man in such a way that origin can never become entirely a thing of the past; the very fact of the memorable continuity of these beginnings in the sequence of generations guarantees a history which can never end because it is the history of beings whose essence is beginning” (1994, p. 321). In other words, human essence is beginning or natality, which in Arendt’s parlance also means free-

dom. To be human and to be free are one and the same, she says (1993, p. 167).<sup>20</sup> In a different context, she adds that all human actions are ontologically rooted in natality (1958, p. 247).

To act, Arendt explains, means to take an initiative, to begin, to set something into motion. Action and speech allow people to insert themselves into the world, according to Arendt, who characterizes this insertion as a “second birth” (1958, p. 177). “It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before” she writes (1958, pp. 177, 178). Thus, underlying the notion of natality are both a biological and social features. Seyla Benhabib explains:

The human infant becomes a self by learning speech and action in the human community into which it is born. Through this process, the infant also becomes an individual, that is the unique initiator of these words and deeds, the carrier of this life story. This condition is a social universal. . . The crucial point here is that in learning speech and action, every child also becomes the initiator of new deeds and of new words. To learn a language is to master the capacity for formulating an infinite number of well-formed sentences in that language. . . [and it enables one] to initiate both what is expected of one by the community and what is new, distinctive to this individual. Socialization and individuation are two sides of the same coin (1996, pp. 110, 111).

Benhabib’s linkage between natality and speech is insightful, since Arendt suggests that without speech, action, which is ontologically rooted in natality, “would not only lose its revelatory character, but. . . would *lose its subject*. . . . Speechless action would no longer be action, because there would *no longer be an actor*, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible if he is at the same time the speaker of words” (1958, pp. 178, 179 italics added). Arendt, accordingly, goes beyond the existentialist claim that human’s gain meaning through the deed, that they are nothing else but the sum of their actions (Sartre, 1973, p. 41), since action devoid of speech is meaningless, but more importantly, in our context, a speechless world is, in Arendt’s opinion, devoid of subjects. Speech, accordingly, enables humans to both “reveal” and create their unique personal identities – to “disclose” “who” they are; it is the condition of possibility of both action and identity. So while, on the one hand, there is no prediscursive actor, according to Arendt, no subject who has “a stable existence prior to the cultural field that it negotiates” (Butler, 1990, p. 142), on the other hand, the condition of possibility of discourse is the human condition of natality and plurality. This, latter point, surely does not entail a prediscursive “I” but at the same time it enables us to explain how it is that subjects are not determined by the power relations circulating in society.

We have come full circle. While the human condition of plurality does not explain how people can initiate new words, natality, which is the ontological root of the human capacity to create something new through words and deeds,

is also dependent on plurality, on the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear. “If action as beginning,” Arendt writes, “corresponds to the fact of birth, if it is the actualization of the human condition of natality, then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique human being among equals” (1958, p. 178). So, if Foucault’s analysis suggests that power creates fields of knowledge and objects of inquiry, and in this manner also shapes subjectivity, then Arendt’s notions of natality and plurality suggest that humans can transcend these structures and create something new. This is not to say that a new beginning occurs by exiting the existing power relations, but rather that a new word or act can emerge from within the structure itself due to the human capacity of natality. Yet, natality is based on an even deeper observation, namely, Heidegger’s conception that being always maintains a difference – that individuals cannot be reduced to the human condition or to the power structures in which they reside. Natality is, in a sense, this difference.

In sum, a conception of human agency can be sustained within an imaginary of ubiquitous power because Foucauldian power can coincide with the idea that the human condition is characterized by natality and plurality. Moreover, Foucault would have probably agreed with Arendt that power can never “explain” what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that it can never condition us absolutely. Humans, to say it again, always maintain a difference.

Despite her efforts to accentuate the human capacity to create something new, Arendt’s assessment of the world’s situation is bleak. She refers to the creation of something new as a “miracle,” adding that it “would be sheer superstition to hope for miracles, for the ‘infinitely improbable,’ in the context of automatic historical or political processes, although even this can never be excluded” (1993, p. 170). Nonetheless, such miracles can never be written off in advance, because what usually “remains intact in the epochs of petrification and foreordained doom is the faculty of freedom itself, the sheer capacity to begin, which animates and inspires all human activities and is the hidden source of production of all great and beautiful things” (1993, p. 169). Experience teaches that although history is characterized by petrification, automatic processes are occasionally interrupted by new beginnings. The human condition of natality and plurality enable us, I believe, to make sense of such interruptions. Arendt concludes *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, by reiterating this point:

But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only “message” which the end can produce. Beginning before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identified with man’s free-

dom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est* – “that a beginning be made man was created,” said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth, it is indeed every man.

## Notes

- \* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference “New Challenges to Democracy: Perspectives from the Periphery,” Ben-Gurion University, May 21–23, 2000. I would like to thank the conference’s participants for their comments, particularly Rebecca Kook. Catherine Rottenberg, Jacinda Swanson, Fred Dallmayr, and Joseph Buttigieg read the paper and offered helpful suggestions, as did the anonymous reviewers of this journal.
1. This is more or less the view advanced by contemporary political theorists like John Rawls (1971) and Robert Dahl (1988). For a recent critique of the voluntaristic position and, more precisely, the conceptualization of the individual as unencumbered, consult Sandel (1996).
  2. “And all possess the various parts of the soul,” Aristotle says, “but possess them in different ways; for the slave has not got the deliberative part at all, and the female has it, but without full authority, while the child has it, but in an undeveloped form” (1990, p. 63).
  3. This criticism has been voiced by several scholars including Fraser (1981); Said (1986); Taylor (1986); Waltzer (1983).
  4. Within a particular historical period, medicine, for example, has a specific mandate that isolates the objects of observation (who is considered a patient and what is considered a disease); it has particular regulations governing acceptable practices (is “cupping” still within the boundaries of medicine?); and a defined membership that determines who should be considered a physician, nurse, etc. In other words, medicine, like all other institutions, is discursively constituted. Foucault, however, qualifies this claim when he suggests, for example, that statements constituting a specific mandate cannot be considered autonomous units. Rather statements gain meaning as they cut “across a domain of structures and possible unities, and which reveals them, with concrete contents in time and space.” So while an institution is constituted by statements (that determine its mandate, membership, etc.), a statement is dependent on the institution for its meaning (the statement “cupping is not permitted” gains meaning within the context of medicine).
  5. While I agree with Deleuze’s point, I think the productive/reproductive distinction is problematic and, accordingly, institutions are also productive.
  6. One should note, though, that even Foucault’s analysis of sexuality is skewed, most noticeably because he does not take-up the issue of women in the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*.
  7. In *Discipline and Punish*, we read that with respect to prisoners, “isolation guarantees that there is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape, the planning of new crimes for the future, bad reciprocal influences; if they are patients, there is no danger of contagion; if they are madmen, there is no risk of their committing violence upon one another; if they are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time; if they are workers, there are no disorders, no theft, no coalitions, none of those distractions that slow down the rate of work, make it less perfect or cause accidents” (1979, pp. 200, 201).
  8. Sheldon Wolin adds that it is not only that individuals are controlled through isolation from each other, but that the isolating devices fractionate the individual’s selfhood. He

- points out that the poor, unemployed, and members of racial minorities “are ‘targeted’ by specialized programs that, in effect, fragment their lives. One agency handles medical assistance, another job training, a third food stamps, and so on *ad infinitum*.” Wolin concludes, “If a person’s life is first flensed by bureaucrats whose questionnaires probe every detail of it, and that life is reorganized into categories corresponding to public programs that are the means of one’s existence, the person becomes totally disabled as a political being, unable to grasp the meaning of common concerns of even so small a totality as a neighborhood. This is because he or she has been deprived of the most elemental totality of all, the self” (1992, p. 247).
9. An estimated 6 out of 10 white-collar employees now work in cubicles. According to Andrew Herrmann of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, “by the 1970s, cubicles took off, helped in no small measure by a tax code that allowed them to be depreciated quicker than new construction. By the 1980s, cubicles were as common as paper clips.” *Chicago Sun-Times*, March 3, 1998.
  10. Marxists have claimed that the introduction of the machine led to the reorganization of work, also in the sense that it reduces worker’s resistance. “Skilled workers,” Douglas Lummis points out, “can demand high wages, are hard to fire, and when they go on strike are hard to replace. The machine enabled the industrialists to replace the skilled workers with unskilled machine tenders. The machine tenders – often children, before child labor laws were enacted – were cheaper and easier to manage” (1996, p. 82).
  11. Those who are not part of “disciplinary society,” who do not pass through the standardized education system or participate in the economic – even welfare – system, are characterized as “delinquents” and often must be controlled by means of force. For a celebration of the delinquent, consult Dumm (1996).
  12. Similarly, Iris Marion Young has criticized the aggregate model of social groups, which conceives the individual as prior to the collective. This model, she argues, reduces the social group to a mere set of attributes attached to individuals. She rejects the notion of the individual as ontologically prior to the collective, as making up or constituting groups, and argues that the group helps shape the individual’s interests and identities (1990, chapter two).
  13. Arendt states unequivocally that “nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things. In other words, if we have a nature or essence, then surely only god could know and define it, and the first prerequisite would be that he be able to speak about a ‘who’ as though it were a ‘what’” (1958, p. 10).
  14. Power, Foucault claims, “is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free” (1983, p. 221). Also pertinent is Foucault (1988b).
  15. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin’s recent book, *The Attack of the Blob, Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social*, is surely the most elaborate and compelling study on “the social.” Although Pitkin discusses how “the social” affects the population’s comportment, claiming that it ultimately denies human agency, she does not suggest that the social is a form of social control (Pitkin, 1998, pp. 2, 114, 192, 224).
  16. Arendt’s argument about human agency is just as relevant to the issue of social control as it is to the possibility of politics, given that the concept of control gains meaning only if one assumes freedom.
  17. For a discussion of Heidegger’s notion of freedom *vis-à-vis* Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1969) consult Leslie Thiele, who argues that Heidegger’s “disclosive freedom” is “radically distinct from its modern, metaphysical forerunners and their post modern derivations; for it offers dignity in a freedom that celebrates guardianship rather than mastery” (1994, p. 282).
  18. By difference, I do not mean the difference between two objects which are present-at-hand, but as Fred Dallmayr suggests, “the central point is to see being itself as difference

- (*Unterscheidung*): as the play of absence and presence, concealment and disclosure, and particularly as the generative potency letting the difference happen (*Ereignis*)” (1993, p. 101). In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt suggests that the self always maintains a difference. The ego, she writes, “experiences difference in identity precisely when it is not related to the things that appear but only to itself” (Arendt, 1977, p. 187).
19. My argument diverges here from political theorists like Leslie Thiele, who distinguish Foucault’s notion of freedom from Heidegger’s and Arendt’s. Thiele (1994, p. 287) mistakenly claims that Foucault espouses a limited “self-creative” freedom, whereas I argue (Gordon, 1999) that Foucault identifies freedom with resistance to power and therefore it is not merely about self-creation. Along the same lines, I cannot embrace his claim that Arendt dismisses the “possibility of a freedom exercised in caretaking” (1994, p. 287). I think that Arendt and Foucault, following Heidegger, adopt an ontological notion of freedom, whereby to be human is to be free. While freedom, according to Arendt, manifests itself only in the public realm, it can surely involve “caretaking.”
  20. This freedom has nothing to do with the liberal notion of a free floating agent, but rather echoes Heidegger’s non-essentialist ontological notion of freedom (consult Gordon, 2001; Thiele, 1994; Villa, 1996).

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