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**Europe Between Athens and Rome
Phenomenological Discourses on Europe
in Hannah Arendt, Reiner Schürmann, and Jan Patočka**

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Abstract: This essay examines the Greek and Roman origins of Europe through Hannah Arendt's political phenomenology and its encounter with Reiner Schürmann's topology of hegemonic phantasms as well as Jan Patočka's phenomenology of history. I argue that the tension between the Greek polis and the Roman triad of foundation, authority, and law shaped Europe's political identity and determined the trajectory of political modernity. By tracing the translation of Greek conceptuality into Latin, the essay offers a phenomenological interpretation of Europe's historical formation and contemporary crisis.

Keywords: Greek *polis*; Roman law; authority; hegemonic phantasms; phenomenology of history; care of the soul.

**The Greek and the Roman Origins of Europe in
Hannah Arendt's Political Phenomenology**

The coexistence of "the Greek" and "the Roman" within the formative framework Europe's political identity was one of the contentious themes in Hannah Arendt's thought. Her discussions, both in *The Human Condition* and in later works such as *Between Past and Future* and *The Life of the Mind*, focus on the fragile balance between philosophy and politics, or between theory and practice, in the differentiated Greek and Roman conception of the political. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt seems to echo Martin Heidegger's theses as to the Roman misappropriation of primordial Greek conceptuality, such as the definition of the human being as a "political animal," through the forced identification of the political with the social—a misunderstanding which, through scholastic political thought, was bolstered up all the way into Modernity. Arendt points out:

Aristotle's definition of man as *zōon politikon* was not only unrelated and even opposed to the natural association experienced in household life; it can be fully understood only if one adds his second famous definition of man as a *zōon logon ekhon* ("a living being capable of speech"). The Latin translation of this term into *animal rationale* rests on no less a fundamental misunderstanding than the term "social animal."¹

The abusive romanization of Greek conceptuality concerning the political consolidated a changed relation between the public—the *res publica*—and the private—the *oikos*—a shift in designation that testifies to the new function of the economy—wealth as the driving force of society—as well as to the gradual degradation of contemplative life (*βίος θεωρητικός*). Arendt argues:

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1958, p. 27. [Henceforth cited as *HC*]

The full development of the life of hearth and family into an inner and private space we owe to the extraordinary political sense of the Roman people who, unlike the Greeks, never sacrificed the private to the public, but on the contrary understood that these two realms could exist only in a form of coexistence. [HC 59]

She notes that the crucial development, which led to the genesis, or in her words, the "rise of the social" (HC 68), by shaking the very foundations of the distinction between public and private, between *polis* and *oikos*, was exacerbated by Christianity and, in this Christianized version, dominated medieval political thought: the political was hastily identified with the social, thus, leading, for instance, Thomas Aquinas to conceive of political authority in terms of the authority of *pater familias*, the *dominus*, over his household. This late ancient and medieval misconception of the political, which eventually led to the modern confusion of the political with the social also determined, according to Arendt, the fate of political freedom within modern thought and the modern world in general. She elaborates:

The distinctive trait of the household sphere was that in it men lived together because they were driven by their wants and needs...The realm of the *polis*, on the contrary, was the sphere of freedom, and if there was a relationship between these two spheres, it was a matter of course that the mastering of the necessities of life in the household was the condition for freedom of the *polis*. Under no circumstances could politics be only a means to protect society. [HC 30-1]

Hence, both in the Middle Ages and, above all, in Modernity, one is dealing with a development the beginnings of which are already located in ancient Rome: Imperial Rome constitutes a decisive step toward the completion of *apoliteia*, which had been introduced through the glorification of the freedom of *theōria* and the gradual degradation of political freedom in the aftermath of classical Greek philosophy. Within the latter, the political human, within his distinctive character, was also the freest human being, since through his unique intellectual capacity for discernment, he enjoyed the greatest possible freedom, which has no equivalent to what was later identified as free will – the Roman *libertas* or the Christian *liberum arbitrium*. In any case, without the Roman political legacy, still alive in figures such as Tertullian or even more so in Augustine of Hippo, Christianity could not have proceeded

with this process—expressed in the terms of the later Arendt—of de-worlding and, consequently, of depoliticizing the Greek world.

Arendt thematizes in detail what she calls "The Greek Solution" (HC 192-9) to the problem of the political in a central section of *The Human Condition*, where she addresses action as the highest form of activity, following her discussion of labor and work, while focusing on crucial aspects, such as both the revelatory character of action and speech and the unpredictability of an action's outcome. It is within this framework that Arendt examines the agonistic spirit which the revelatory function of action and speech served.

In this context, Roy Tsao criticizes the conventional interpretation of Arendt's reception of Greek antiquity—especially of the Athenian *polis*—in the structure and overall treatment of *The Human Condition*, identifying ambiguities and even inconsistencies between its successive elaborations. Given that Arendt's main discussion on the *polis* occurs in two different chapters, first in Chapter II (sections 4–6) and then in Chapter V (sections 27–28), Tsao, contrary to most commentators, differentiates Arendt's stance toward the *polis* in each section. He argues that, in the latter chapter, she focuses on aspects of the Greek political life that cannot be integrated into a contemporary problematization of the political.²

It is because of their agonistic understanding of the political that the Greeks, unlike the Romans, did not regard the law as a constitutive element of the life of the *polis* and did not place it within the authentic sphere of human action, as it has occurred later in the Roman world. This is the meaning of Arendt's privileging of Aristotle over Plato regarding the former's diagnosis of action as *energeia*, in clear distinction to an accomplished deed. She comments:

Aristotle, in his political philosophy, is still well aware of what is at stake in politics, namely, no less than the *ergon tou anthrōpou* (the "work of man" *qua* man), and if he defined this "work" as "to live well" (*eu zēn*), he clearly meant that "work" here is no work product but exists only in sheer actuality. [HC 206-7]

² Roy T. Tsao, "Arendt against Athens. Rereading *The Human Condition*," *Political Theory* 30/1 (February 2002), 97-123, here p. 99. <https://roytsao.nyc/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/tsao-arendt-against-athens.pdf>.

It is noteworthy to mention that secondary literature on Arendt's political thought often oscillates between an agonistic model of politics, which echoes the Greek conception of the political and is represented by the Homeric heroic ideal, tragedy, and the flourishing of Athenian democracy under Pericles, and a more relational or associational model of politics, which echoes the Roman political conception. For example, Lisa Jane Disch refers to a passage in which Arendt addresses Achilles' pursuit of glory and posthumous fame, defining action through a criterion of greatness. Disch writes:

Scholars who take this passage to justify reading Arendt's action as narcissism interpret "greatness" as the expression of a Homeric preference for the short and glorious life together with a Nietzschean disdain for "herd" morality. They read greatness...as a synonym for glory...The gloss on "greatness"...is not the performance itself but the meaning that it "discloses," Arendt displaces the actor from the center of an act and, so, *redefines* glory.³

According to Jeffrey Barash, this criterion enables Arendt to redefine the relationship between truth and glory as well as the significance of judgment in the opening of the public space. He explains:

The public world as a political framework represents for Arendt not only a theoretical problem of philosophy, but lies at the very foundation of the primordial, i.e. eminently political, question of truth. If Hannah Arendt continuously returns to this theme by referring it to the Greek *polis*, it is not out of nostalgia for classical antiquity but in order to unearth what she calls the deep discrepancy between the traditional idea of truth and opinion (*doxa*) nourished by common sense (*sensus communis*) within the framework of the public world.⁴

Both Disch and Barash, thus, oppose those who accuse Arendt of appealing to an archaic ideal in the name of elitist political particularism.

However, in reality, Arendt's interpretation of the Greek—agonistic and pre-philosophical—conception of speech and action, as embodied in the polis as the quintessentially fragile community of

actors and site of disclosure, incorporates the activity of the lawgiver into the political only insofar as he continues to act; in other words, only insofar as law, as the byproduct of this acting is not codified, that is, it is not consolidated into a completed product. Arendt repeatedly emphasizes the continuity between the Homeric agora and the classical polis, something that confirms the agonistic spirit of the latter. Lambros Couloubaritsis argues that the figure of Achilles, who constantly struggles to distinguish himself, to become the best of all men and to attain immortal glory, is decisive for the formation of the typology of the Greek human being within the polis. The classical *polis* remains absolutely connected to the Homeric *agora*, yet with the difference that this meeting place henceforth becomes permanent.⁵ The Romans, on the other hand, insofar as they regarded themselves as descendants of the Trojans and of the Trojan War, consciously attributed their political existence to a defeat, which was accompanied by a new foundation on foreign soil. This origin—initially transmitted through legend and subsequently becoming ever more conscious and excessively stylized—of Roman political existence from Troy and the war that broke out for the conquest of the city constitutes one of the most remarkable and moving facts of Western history.

Apart from the differentiated stance of Greeks and Romans toward legislation, a second critical point of divergence concerns the very institution of the political realm. Arendt argues that unlike the Roman *patria*, the Athenian polis was not defined as a delimited territory or homeland, since the Greeks did not define themselves as patriots, that is, as belonging to a land or a fatherland. She puts this point across thus:

the Greeks, in distinction from all later developments, did not count legislating among the political activities... To them, the laws, like the wall around the city, were not results of action but products of making...But these tangible entities themselves were not the content of politics (not Athens, but the Athenians, were the *polis*), and they did not command the same loyalty we know from the Roman type of patriotism. [HC 194-5]

Hence, suspicion toward fabrication constituted a constant trait of the Greek attitude and, in Arendt's

³ Lisa Jane Disch, *Hannah Arendt and the Limits of Philosophy*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1994, pp. 76–7.

⁴ Jeffrey Andrew Barash, *Heidegger et son siècle. Temps de l'Être, temps de l'histoire*, Paris, FR: Presses Universitaires de France 1995, p. 67. My translation.

⁵ Lambros Couloubaritsis, "Le monde commun chez les philosophes grecs," in *Phénoménologie et politique: Mélanges offerts à Jacques Taminiaux*, eds. Bernard Stevens and Danièle Lories, Brussels, BE: Ousia 1989, pp. 159–197, here pp. 176–7, 182–3.

reading, was decisive for their political life. She observes:

The Greeks, though not the Romans, had a word for philistinism, and this word, curiously enough, derives from a word for artists and artisans, *βάναντος*; to be a philistine, a man of banausic spirit, indicated, then as today, an exclusively utilitarian mentality, an inability to think and to judge a thing apart from its function or utility.⁶

Plato is the one who, by separating knowledge from action, introduces a rupture into Greek political life by introducing into it the model of fabrication into it and thereby reinforcing the authoritarian character of the political. In the *Republic*, the philosopher-king uses ideas as the craftsman uses rules and models; he construes his city as the sculptor constructs a statue; and in Plato's final work these same ideas have even become laws that need only be executed. Consequently, for the Greeks, the activity of the lawgiver can constitute the content of action only when it is no longer possible or desirable to continue acting, while action can be solidified into a work only by losing its authentic meaning—a meaning that is not always tangible and is indeed highly fragile. It is precisely this peculiar fragility of acting that in Roman and Christian political thought is degraded and lost in favor of a more fabricating legislative model. Moreover, the Roman *lex* has nothing to do with the Greek *νόμος*, since the former is the product of war experiences and an agreement (*pactum*) that seals its termination; in other words, it possesses an inherently contractual nature, something unknown in the Greek world.

The Roman Triad of Authority, Religion, and Tradition in The Light of the Genesis of Political Modernity

The account of *The Human Condition* is significantly deepened in Arendt's later writings, such as in the collection of essays *Between Past and Future*. Here she returns to the importance of the Roman experience of foundation, as well as to the belief in its sacredness by being the one and only political experience bequeathed by Rome to modern Europe. She writes:

Not the Greeks, but the Romans, were really rooted in the soil, and the word *patria* derives its full meaning from Roman history. The foundation of a new body politic—to the Greeks an almost commonplace experience—became to the Romans the central, decisive, unrepeatable beginning of their whole history, a unique event.⁷

For Arendt, this founding act and the entire conceptual nexus surrounding foundation, with the founding of Rome itself as the supreme point of reference, acquires foundational significance for the European political tradition. In contrast, however, to the spontaneity of Greek action, Roman foundation possesses the character of repetition, imitation, and ultimately restoration through re-foundation.⁸ With this natal act of foundation, the concept of authority simultaneously enters the history of the West, although the course of its emergence within European history ultimately coincided with its non-recognition and gradual oblivion. Arendt points out that

while all the models, prototypes, and examples for authoritarian relationships...all Greek in origin, have been faithfully preserved and further articulated until they became empty platitudes, the one political experience which brought authority as word, concept, and reality into our history—the Roman experience of foundation—seems to have been entirely lost and forgotten. [WA 136]

Arendt interprets this crucial fact as being a consequence of the circumstance that the Greek concepts, once sanctified by the Romans through tradition and authority, erased from historical consciousness all political experiences that could not be adapted to their environment (WA 136). Hence, what interests Arendt here in particular is not the treatment of the Greek *polis*, as in *The Human Condition*, but rather the recognition of a failure—largely that of Greek philosophy in Plato and Aristotle—having to do with the antagonistic relationship between philosophy and politics. The political life of modern Europe is grounded in the Roman conception of authority as well as in its complex relation to power, thereby serving the authority of the Christian Church

⁶ Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, NY: The Viking Press 1961, pp. 197-226, here p. 215.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, NY: The Viking Press 1961, pp. 91-142, here pp. 120-1. [Henceforth cited as WA]

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York, NY: The Viking Press 1963, pp. 207-8. [Henceforth cited as OR]

as an intermediary link. What becomes clear through Arendt's critical elaboration is that the concept of authority does not belong to the Greek political paradigm. Its structural analog within the Greek world would instead be the household (*oikos*), as well as the critical insights of Plato and Aristotle concerning the profound crisis of the Greek *polis*. Arendt explains:

it is essential to remember that the element of rule, as reflected in our present concept of authority so tremendously influenced by Platonic thinking, can be traced to a conflict between philosophy and politics, but not to specifically political experiences, that is, experiences immediately derived from the realm of human affairs. [WA 113]

This direct correlation of rule with political experience is a Roman legacy, and here two further concepts complete the network of Roman political conceptuality—the concept of religion (*religio*) and the concept of tradition (*traditio*). Arendt continues:

The notion of a spiritual tradition and of authority in matters of thought and ideas is here derived from the political realm and therefore essentially derivative—just as Plato's conception of the role of reason and ideas in politics was derived from the philosophical realm and became derivative in the realm of human affairs. [WA 124]

This thorough analysis of the Roman trinity—in other words, the amalgam of authority, religion, and tradition—through the Christian Middle Ages and into modern times testifies to the continuity of the Roman spirit and to its formative power for the political life of Europe and of the West in general. In the history of modern Europe, pivotal moments such as Protestantism and the philosophy of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment opposed the unity of this Roman trinity under the illusion that continuity with the past could nevertheless be secured. In a sense, the revolutionary processes of the eighteenth century, which Montesquieu diagnosed as the loss of authority, have to do with the collapse of this trinity, which suffered the blows of the rupture of the modern spirit with tradition (OR 117).

Next follows the third moment within the field, as outlined by Arendt's interpretation of the distinction between Athens and Rome, for the genealogy of the modern political in Europe. In the second part of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt adopts a more complex stance toward what she had already called in *The Human*

Condition "the Greek solution" (section 27). What she understands as the pre-philosophical presuppositions of Greek philosophy corresponds to archaic thought, and even more so to archaic poetry. The latter contains an intact political core condensed in the characteristic term *athanatizein* (to immortalize). She elaborates:

what was involved, prior to the rise of philosophy, in the notion of a position outside the realm of human affairs, can be best clarified if we briefly examine the Greek notion of the function of poetry and the position of the bard...To state this in conceptual language: The meaning of what actually happens and appears while it is happening is revealed when it has disappeared; remembrance, by which you make present to your mind what actually is absent and past, reveals the meaning in the form of a story.⁹

For this reason, in pre-Socratic philosophers, such as Parmenides, "being" became another term for *athanatizein*, something that brought philosophy itself into emergence, together with the philosophical conceptuality structured around the concepts of *logos*, *nous*, and *alētheuein*. Yet if pre-Socratic Greece had structured its conceptual universe around *athanatizein*, thereby projecting political claims into the public sphere, the agora, classical Athens—especially in philosophers such as Plato—condensed its spirituality in the cultivation of new givens such as *theōrein* (contemplation) and the attitude of wonder, *thaumazein*.

This pursuit of contemplation, however, endangered the pre-philosophical, purely political dimension of the search for *athanatizein* and forced the latter to be subordinated to eternity—in other words, to the philosophical ideal of eternal truth. Arendt explains:

It is the saying of Plato...that the origin of philosophy is Wonder, an answer that in my opinion has lost nothing of its plausibility. For this wonder is in no way connected with the quest for immortality; even in Aristotle's famous interpretation of wonder as *aporein* (being puzzled on account of ignorance, which can be dispelled by knowledge), there is no mention of *athanatizein*, the immortalizing activity we know from the *Nicomachean Ethics* and which indeed is entirely Platonic. [LM 141]

Elsewhere, Arendt writes:

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc. 1978, pp. 131–2, 133. [Henceforth cited as LM]

For Greeks and Romans alike, all differences notwithstanding, the foundation of a body politic was brought about by man's need to overcome the mortality of human life and the futility of human deeds.¹⁰

Similarly, in his discussion of the distinction between immortality and eternity in Arendt, Barash notes that, according to Arendt, immortality in archaic Greece is essentially political and pre-philosophical, whereas eternity corresponds to the ideal of theoretical truth advanced by classical philosophy.¹¹

Arendt comprehends *thaumazein* as the affective disposition of perplexity, "admiring wonder," while at the same time connecting it with *physis*, which hides itself "behind the appearances" (LM 142-3). Based on this phenomenologically formulated definition of wonder, Arendt establishes a continuity between the Platonic beginning of philosophy and its revival in Heidegger's *What Is Metaphysics*, with the focal point being his interrogation of metaphysics. The late Arendt opposes the Platonic search for eternal truth, which has traced an unbroken line of continuity throughout the history of metaphysics, to the Socratic insistence on *doxa* as the articulation in speech of what appears or reveals itself to me (*dokei moi*). Unlike the philosopher's concern, this is an intrinsically political insistence, since it respects plurality as the quintessential human condition. To live in a worldly reality and to converse about it with others are one and the same thing, and if private life appeared unsatisfactory to the Greeks, this is precisely because it was deprived of this plurality of discussion about something.¹²

Against this belonging-together of *doxa* and the common world—on the basis of which everything can be discussed and questioned by taking into account all its aspects and all possible perspectives—stands the degradation of the political beginning

with Plato. In Plato's Academy, the political in general was degraded in an evident way to such an extent that the politics of the *polis* corresponded to the maintenance of life, becoming a necessity that, on the one hand, stood opposed to freedom while, on the other hand, constituted its prerequisite. Of critical importance are the political connotations Arendt attributes to the truth of philosophers, which, from Plato onward, is, in political terms, predominant insofar as it takes no account of the opinions of other human beings—in other words, of plurality, which constitutes a fundamental condition of political coexistence. The absolute predominance of the ideal of philosophical truth also constitutes the clearest reason for the downgrading of the ideal of political freedom. The symbol of this new stance of philosophy toward politics continues the turn taken by the theory of Ideas in the *Republic*, specifically in Book VII, whose expression is the well-known allegory of the cave:

The allegory of the cave is thus designed to depict not so much how philosophy looks from the viewpoint of politics but how politics, the realm of human affairs, looks from the viewpoint of philosophy. And the purpose is to discover in the realm of philosophy those standards which are appropriate for a city of cave dwellers, to be sure, but still for inhabitants who, albeit darkly and ignorantly, have formed their opinions concerning the same matters as the philosopher. [PP 96]

Yet the philosophical devaluation of the political, which begins with Plato and establishes, through Christianity and its modern secularizations, a tradition of *apoliteia*, forgets not only the common human world but also the innermost silent dialogue that each human being is, and which makes thinking possible.¹³ In his commentary on Arendt, Dana Villa quotes from *Philosophy and Politics* (PP 80) as he notes:

In Arendt's view, it is the nature of opinion to express perspective. Every opinion is relative to one's position in the world, and as such it formulates in speech what *dokei moi*, what appears to me. Opinion in this sense is hardly the expression of subjective bias or arbitrariness; rather, it signifies the politically essential fact that "the world opens up differently to every man, according to his position in it." ...Moreover, through

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, "The Concept of History: Ancient and Modern," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, NY: The Viking Press 1961, pp. 41-90, here p. 71.

¹¹ Jeffrey Andrew Barash, "The Political Dimension of the Public World: On Hannah Arendt's Interpretation of Martin Heidegger," in *Hannah Arendt. Twenty Years Later*, eds. Larry May and Jerome Kohn, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1996, pp. 251-68, here p. 262.

¹² Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57/1 (Spring 1990), 73-103, here pp. 80-1. [Henceforth cited as PP]

¹³ Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn, New York, NY: Schocken Books 2003, pp. 49-146, here p. 98.

the expression of opinion one enters the public realm, revealing oneself in the process.¹⁴

Villa proposes a bold interpretation of Arendt's positions and of her critique of philosophical orthodoxy, drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics. The question of the positive valuation of *doxa* could thus be viewed through the prism of Nietzsche's critique of Plato. Villa even goes so far as to argue that

Arendt's politics of opinion...can be seen as a specifically political version of Nietzschean perspectivism. [AH 97]

The transition from Greek to Latin conceptuality – and here Arendt seems to echo a Heideggerian theme, although with an entirely different focus – caused philosophical language to lose part of its revelatory power, as testified by the new use of the term *theōrein*, for example, when she comments on Lucretius' joyful reception of spectatorship:

The philosophical relevance of spectatorship is entirely lost – a loss that befell so many Greek notions when they fell into Roman hands. [LM 140]

It is in this same light that Arendt perceives the relation between the aforementioned Greek and Roman solution as a relation of opposition:

On the one hand, admiring wonder at the spectacle into which man is born and for whose appreciation he is so well equipped in mind and body; on the other, the awful extremity of having been thrown into a world whose hostility is overwhelming, where fear is predominant and from which man tries his utmost to escape. [LM 162]

In reality, if the Greek solution should be understood as thinking concerned with invisible things that are nevertheless indicated to humans by appearances, the Roman answer has an entirely different point of departure, namely, one that is intrinsically non-philosophical, or at least indifferent to philosophy, and is summed up in the emblematic phrase coined by Horaz *nihil admirari* (wonder at or marvel at nothing). Arendt concludes:

Thinking then arises out of the disintegration of reality and the resulting disunity of man and world, from which springs the need for another world, more harmonious and more meaningful. [LM 153]

Consequently, the deeply transformed understanding of *theōrein* arises from the radical displacement of the Greek conceptuality into something altogether different. This is a transformation with enormous repercussions for the fragile balance between reason and will, resulting in the elevation of the will and simultaneously in the transformation of philosophy into an art – more precisely, into the highest possible art – which, as such, becomes absolutely separated from politics understood as the quintessential field of human action. It is also within this framework that Arendt interprets Augustine of Hippo as a Roman philosopher whose thought belongs to the long series of transformations leading from Paul the Apostle to Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus:

That the Roman Catholic Church, despite the decisive influx of Greek philosophy, remained so profoundly Roman was due in no small measure to the strange coincidence that her first and most influential philosopher should also have been the first man of thought to draw his deepest inspiration from Latin sources and experiences. In Augustine, the striving for eternal life as the *summum bonum* and the interpretation of eternal death as the *summum malum* reached the highest level of articulation because he combined them with the new era's discovery of an *inward* life. [LM 85]

It is at this very moment of transition from the Greek to the Roman and, ultimately, to the Christian world that Arendt associates a decisive turn, one that marked the worsening disconnection between thought and action and, correspondingly, between philosophy and politics, in a direction that subsequently came to dominate European life: the denial of the distinct nature of the political and of the public sphere in general, through its subordination to the private realm, understood either as the sphere of life – production, economy, the market – or as the sphere of private morality (WA 217). Regarding the latter, Arendt proceeds to a bold juxtaposition between a political thinker from the beginnings of modernity, such as Niccolò Machiavelli, in his self-definition as being a good citizen and Socrates as a virtuous man, noting the following:

I would say that in the notion of wanting to be good, I actually am concerned with my own self. The moment I act politically, I'm not concerned with me, but with the world. And that is the *main* distinction... The decisive thing is whether your own motivation is clear – for the world – or, for yourself, by which I mean

¹⁴ Dana R. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1996, p. 94. [Henceforth cited as AH]

for your soul.¹⁵

Arendt's severe critique of the moralization of politics in modern times is directed against the unconditional dominance of bourgeois morality, which overemphasizes the private, individual sphere at the expense of the public one, something in which Arendt even discerns the roots of the moral perversion of Nazism. Meanwhile, Arendt frequently recalls the examples of Machiavelli and Maximilien Robespierre, in whom she recognizes the continuators of the Roman conception of the political in terms of foundation or institution. However, she concludes that although Machiavelli sought to emulate the Roman experience of foundation as a paradigmatically political act, he was not so much Roman as Greek – and indeed Platonic – in his ambitions and in his despotic conception of power (WA 218). This myth of foundation, of Roman origin, conceives politics as a form of constructing, a making that takes the form of founding – for example, a state or a living space – and finds its disastrous culmination in Nazism and the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century. The conclusion Arendt reaches during the 1950s concerns the crisis of Europe and the West with regard to their spiritual roots:

the crisis of the present world is primarily political, and...the famous "decline of the West" consists primarily in the decline of the Roman trinity of religion, tradition, and authority, with the concomitant undermining of the specifically Roman foundations of the political realm. [WA 140]

However, this appeal to the Roman past does not justify the frequent accusation of nostalgia against Arendt's political thought. Indeed, Arendt's invocation of authority here serves to counterbalance the modern preoccupation with the idea that politics is the State, and the State is a relation of domination. Paul Ricoeur contrasts this Arendtian notion of democracy with Jan Patočka's view when he writes:

Yet when they reach the strange, frankly shocking passages about the dominance of war, of darkness and the demonic at the very heart of the most rational projects of the promotion of peace, likened in this occasion to the power of the day, readers

feel transported into a sphere alien to the still very Aristotelian plea of Arendt for a free democracy. They find themselves suddenly placed in another horizon of thought, brought about by Patočka's bold reading of contemporary political reality.¹⁶

Greek and Latin "Hegemonic Phantasms" in Reiner Schürmann's *Broken Hegemonies*

A distinctive reading of the correlation established by Arendt between the Greek solution and the Roman answer to the problem of the political, and of its impact upon European modernity, is offered by Reiner Schürmann in his *Broken Hegemonies*. His elaboration of the issue takes into account both Heidegger's and Arendt's hermeneutic confrontation between Athens and Rome. Schürmann derives the structure of the double bind of the epochal principles that determine the history of Western metaphysics from the antithetical coexistence between the Heideggerian being-toward-death and the Arendtian concept of natality. Arendt's inquiry into the "principle of beginnings" is present in his analysis alongside the dual principle of mortality and natality when she explains:

the most obvious and the least thetic beginnings are marked when one natural language yields to another in our history. Everything begins differently as we change language. The *topoi* of which the topology takes inventory are then the Greek, the Latin, and the modern vernacular sites from out of which philosophy has spoken.¹⁷

Although Schürmann recognizes the importance of the middle Heidegger's elaboration of the theme of institution and de-institution of metaphysical epochs – a scheme possessing a topological character with both a synoptic and simultaneously critical function and serving as a phenomenological ultimate foundation – Schürmann, nevertheless, incorporates to a great extent into his work Arendt's insights concerning the genesis of the political within the *polis*:

¹⁶ Jan Patočka, *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, transl. Erazim Kohák, Chicago, IL: Open Court 1996, pp. viii–ix. [Henceforth cited as *HE*]

¹⁷ Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, transl. Reginald Lilly, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 2003, p. 348. [Henceforth cited as *BH*]

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, "On Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill, New York, NY: St. Martin's Press 1979, pp. 301–39, here p. 311.

At its Greek apogee, philosophy was astonished by what the hands could accomplish. Since Aristotle, fabrication had remained the key phenomenon, the observation of which furnished the schemes for all branches of knowledge. Beginning with Latin philosophy, the great beginners were astonished by another making – by the cosmopolitical republic, unique in history and so obviously crowned with success. [BH 261]

In reality, the transition from the Greek to the Latin "hegemonic fantasm" regarding the political is the result of a translation. Schürmann advances the thesis in this respect that

As soon as the expressions *lex natura*, *lex naturalis*, etc., are coined, nature will fulfill the needs of consolation and consolidation. [BH 198]

The transcription or translation of *φύσις* into *natura* became evident in the transformation of the Greek *polis* into the one and only City created by nature itself, namely, Rome. Cicero proclaimed Rome a natural city, since law springs from nature – it is *ius naturae* – just as Augustine afterward proclaimed Jerusalem to be the heavenly polity exiled upon earth.

For the Greeks, viewing an empirical city as a natural entity would, in these terms, have been sheer absurdity. Whether they considered the human being by nature a political animal or not, the Greek *polis* could exist only as something posited through a legislative act. The ideal polity, of which Plato's political utopia is the paradigmatic example, could not be empirically realized, since this would constitute an *α-τοπία* or a categorical error: For Plato, the paradigmatic city cannot be visitable, because its being exists only within speech. And if, for Aristotle, the prudent man were to unite the ideal and the singular exclusively within a single paradigm visible to all, such a condition would remain impossible to bring about for the *polis*. It would be as if one were to infer truth from something false.

If that which exists is *φύσει*, that is, for the Greeks, what possesses the principle of its generation within itself, then it is evident that the city, Rome, cannot belong to the order of nature, since it does not possess within itself the principle of its own generation; rather, it is the product of a founding act. Precisely because, for the Greeks, the city is posited, it never constitutes a paradigm and therefore cannot, as such, be idealized, unlike the ideal singularity represented by the city of Rome as the locus of the Roman political. In other

words, nature represents law in a specific *τόδε τι*, namely the City of Rome. Consequently, what for the Greeks – for instance, for Aristotle – were predicates of the heavenly order – order, permanence, unity, finality – outside time and place, are shifted into the worldly order, which mirrors natural law. The ancestral Roman Republic, defined in Cicero by the act of its foundation – just as Augustine's City of God is defined by what is yet to come after generations of exile – is a field within which the political is inscribed as the imprint of *natura* in the form of *lex*. Addressing Cicero and Augustine, Schürmann writes:

If the Rome of old and the Jerusalem to come were there as is the night sky – in motion, made of singular bodies, and nevertheless eternal – then the exhortations to which these two Fathers of Latinism devoted themselves would lose their nominative-normative referent and, thus, their sense...Inserting the paradigmatic into the represented contingent – this is the specifically Latin theticism. [BH 199]

Thus, both Cicero's Rome and Augustine's Jerusalem are born from a founding act belonging to the order of the *natura* and constitute as such paradigms for imitation within time. Schürmann words it thus:

Whether they are Christians or not, the founders of Latin philosophy historicize nature. They subvert nature, and not fortuitously, by retracing an errancy: Visible Rome just as much as invisible Jerusalem has gone astray in datable deeds and gestures. Consequently, it will be necessary to analyze nature, erring in her paradigms, and nevertheless sanctioning action under a singular which was – republican Rome – and then under a singular which will be – the heavenly Jerusalem. [BH 201-2]

If, within Greek conceptuality, *φύσις* served already as a measure and, in a certain sense, as a law, its domain was nevertheless delimited by another region, namely that of *τέχνη*, whereas the political belonged to the region of artifice and construction, as Schürmann repeatedly emphasizes:

Kinetic *phusis* therefore has nothing by which it may lay claim to hegemony. It covers only one of the two movements that the *Physics* analyzes: growth, not fabrication. [BH 203]

By contrast, in Latin conceptuality, nature is the "law of laws," the law beyond and above every law, which articulates, in a new way, a singular being – for example, the ego – with a nature now understood as

universal. It is in this sense that the Roman political experience, passing through Stoic philosophy, first brings forth simultaneously the ideal of *patria*, the reality of individuality, and the claim of universalism. Schürmann argues:

The differend opens up between the singular givens, between the nature of someone in particular, the birth of some city, and the fantasm of a continuity that ties its ends together. This is an *erratic differend* since, according to Cicero, there would have been no need for the teleocratic maximization if the singular serving as the point of departure (Rome) had not strayed. [BH 229]

It is likewise from this perspective that Cicero, together with Augustine, as said by Schürmann, are to embody the Latin "hegemonic fantasm," such that a continuity is established between the Roman and Christian epochs. But what is the specific character of Augustine's "Christian Latinity"? Regarding this point, Schürmann acknowledges his debt to Arendt's reading of Augustine while at the same time criticizing it, insofar as it fails to place into perspective the double bind inherent in every epochal principle. Schürmann explains his criticism thus:

As Hannah Arendt analyzed so well, the heavenly city in gestation on earth *does not meet up with* existing societies constituted by a body of consensual laws intended to moderate and compensate for the multiplicity of differences...Arendt nevertheless does not allow herself the institutional gesture through which Augustine attributes normative predicates to nature-as-law; this is a focus that largely delimits the parallel polity, the only polity compatible with that law. [BH 256]

Greek *polis* and Modern Europe in Jan Patočka's Phenomenology of History

For the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka the diagnosis of the state of European modernity is centered on a phenomenological program of European history and culture that differs both from Heidegger's hermeneutic-deconstructive critique of Western metaphysics and Arendt's phenomenology of political action. It is clear that Patočka's diagnosis of the crisis of Europe is nevertheless inspired both by Edmund Husserl's conception of Europe as a transcendental idea and by Arendt's treatment of the political in European modernity. Just as Arendt subjects the tradition of political philosophy to severe criticism due to its unquestioned metaphysical assumptions,

such as the distinction between theory and praxis, so too Patočka rejects the theoretical constructions of modern philosophies of history in their principal forms developed by G. F. W. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Auguste Comte, foregrounding instead the need for a phenomenologically conceived—and therefore heretical—philosophy of history. The latter can only take the form of a philosophy of European history, since only Europe possesses historicity as an inherent possibility. Yet a phenomenologically conceived philosophy of European history is possible only within the framework of the methodological distinction, frequently drawn in Patočka's later work, between phenomenology and phenomenological philosophy, a distinction that justifies for the latter the breadth of such a problematic.¹⁸

Patočka's thought challenging positions on Europe's present and future came to the forefront of phenomenological investigations either independently or in the wake of the hermeneutic reception of the *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* and Patočka's Euro-analysis by Jacques Derrida in the 1990s, as it is, for instance, referred to by Rodolphe Gasché.¹⁹ Derrida raised the question of how Europe ought to be interpreted, making direct reference to the Czech phenomenologist's "cryptogenealogy" of Europe.²⁰ At the same time, however, he pointed to the limits of his Euro-analysis which, in his view, remained bound to the Christianity foregrounded by Patočka which was, nonetheless, in Gasché's reading of Derrida, a hyperbolic Christianity that differentiates him from other phenomenological accounts of Europe, especially the one provided by Heidegger (EM 9, 13). Nevertheless, since my undertaking does not aim to address all aspects of this Euro-analysis—which is formed within the broader field of Patočka's phenomenology of history—I shall focus here on the contentious issue of Europe's

¹⁸ Jan Patočka, *Plato and Europe*, transl. Petr Lom, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2002, pp. 32–3. [Henceforth cited as *PE*]

¹⁹ Rodolphe Gasché, "European Memories: Jan Patočka and Jacques Derrida on Responsibility," *Critical Inquiry* 33/2 (Winter 2007), 291–311. [Henceforth cited as *EM*]

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Donner la mort," in *L'éthique du don. Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don: Colloque de Royaumont, décembre 1990*, eds. Jean-Michel Rabaté and Michael Wetzell, Paris, FR: Métailié-Transition 1992, pp. 11–108, here pp. 27–8.

origins, Greek and Roman alike, a theme in which Patočka converges with the analyses of Europe that were developed by Heidegger and Arendt despite their significant divergences.

It is worthwhile to make at this point certain preliminary remarks that concern Patočka's identity both as a phenomenologist of Europe and as a Central European intellectual. Patočka himself repeatedly acknowledged the influence exerted upon him by the philosopher and statesman Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, to whom he devoted an important series of essays.²¹ Masaryk had studied phenomenology in Germany and was a friend of Husserl, to whom Alexandre Kojève introduced Patočka in Paris in 1929. Patočka's experience as a historian of ideas and phenomenological intellectual amid the historical upheavals of twentieth-century Europe is encapsulated most vividly in a brief sentence from one of his final interviews:

In order for philosophical thought, whatever it may be, to be relevant, it must take a stand on the front line.²²

But what exactly is the Czech phenomenologist's distinctive understanding of Europe's heritage, and what place does the Greek *polis* occupy within it?

In the seminar series entitled *Plato and Europe*, which largely constitutes his intellectual testament, Patočka offers a remarkable example of his later philosophical thought in the dual capacity of phenomenologist and humanist. It is by no means accidental that, in the introductory part of the lectures, Patočka asks what it ultimately means to speak of the condition of contemporary Europe as a condition of crisis, one that has in fact reached its end. He writes:

Europe, that two-thousand-year-old construction, which managed to lift up mankind to an altogether new degree of self-reflection and consciousness, and strength and power as well...is definitively at an end. [PE 9]

Referring to Husserl, Masaryk, Arendt, and Max Scheler, Patočka speaks of two successive waves of

creation—the Greek and the Roman one—that gave life to Europe not as a geographical but as a spiritual entity. It is at this crucial point in the introduction to *Plato and Europe* that the phenomenological theme of the lifeworld as historical lifeworld clarifies Patočka's inquiry into what alienation from that world might mean, an interpretive motif that comes close to Arendt's diagnosis in terms of desertification and de-worldliness:

Europe came into existence upon the wreckage, first of the Greek polis, and then of the Roman Empire. And like the Greek polis, so the Roman Empire became extinct, because within them took place a development that alienated their own inhabitants, their own public, from the life form in which they lived. The Greek polis killed itself with the decline of the Greek world...But the Roman Empire likewise estranged itself from its own public. [PE 10-1]

For Patočka, however, what emerged as the decisive factor in the birth of medieval and modern Europe alike was none other than the "spirit of Greece," condensed in the Platonic injunction of *της ψυχής επιμελείσθαι* (to care for the soul), since it was around this imperative that Europe's "plan for political life" (PE xvi), to use Peter Lom's phrase, has crystallized. Devoting an extensive introductory analysis to the role and significance of phenomenological philosophy for interpreting the European becoming, Patočka makes clear that if Europe's plan for political life is to be understood and preserved for the future, this is possible only within the limits of a phenomenological philosophy. But why, however, is this so? It is because the investigation of phenomena, of manifestation as such, and of its relation to existence constitutes the primary task of phenomenological philosophy. The Platonic imperative must therefore be interpreted through the phenomenological exercise of phenomenality and manifestation:

Care of the soul is fundamentally care that follows from the proximity of man to manifesting, to the phenomenon as such, to the manifesting of the world in its whole, that occurs within man, with man. [PE 27]

Following the thread of development in *Plato and Europe*, one arrives at one of the most important findings of Patočka's phenomenology of European culture, already present in the *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. This concerns the presence and role of myth within the Greek world, particularly in

²¹ Jan Patočka, *La crise du sens*, Volume 1: Comte, Masaryk, Husserl; Volume 2: Masaryk et l'action, Brussels, BE: Edité par Ousia, 1985.

²² Josef Zmr, "Entretien de Jan Patočka sur la philosophie et les philosophes," transl. Erika Abrams, in *Jan Patočka: philosophie, phénoménologie, politique*, eds. Étienne Tassin and Marc Richir, Grenoble, FR: Jérôme Millon 1993, p. 31. My translation.

its relation to Presocratic philosophy, combined with the affinity the Czech phenomenologist discerns between Democritus and Plato, although the two mark distinct genealogical lines within the European spirit throughout its history:

The soul that I am – it is for the first time in Democritus and in Plato. This is the soul that lives in contact with the eternal...For this peculiarity, there is created something in European life that has never been created anywhere else in the world. [PE 69]

Hence, if Rome introduces a form of generality surpassing the Greek experience, and if medieval and modern Europe in turn represent an even broader generality, then Europe indeed has not two but one essential foundation. Patočka explains:

Usually it is said that European civilization rests on two pillars: one, the Judeo-Christian tradition, the other, antiquity. On my understanding, as I have tried to depict it, Europe stands on *one* pillar – and that is because *Europe is a looking-in* [nahlédnutí], Europe is life founded upon seeing what is. [PE 89-90]

In contrast to the way Arendt approaches the Christian political worldview through its Roman precedent, Patočka invokes Nietzsche's notorious condemnation of Christianity as being Platonism for the people, in order to establish continuity between Platonism and Christianity, thereby downgrading what, for Arendt in *The Life of the Mind*, constituted the political specificity of her Roman solution. Unlike the primarily political significance Arendt attributes to the founding of the city of Rome – which is the natal act of the Roman experience of the political – for Patočka the Roman act of foundation emphasizes the immutability of human affairs and thus stands opposed to the Greek experience of truth and justice as exemplarily presented in Plato's *Republic* (PE 89).

Even though Patočka accepts, as I noted on another occasion, the analysis of Athenian political life in *The Human Condition*, he emphasizes the agonistic dimension of the political (πόλεμος) as unity within conflict, for which the emblematic figure would be less Aristotle and more Heraclitus. Patočka goes one step further by generalizing these observations to the European spirit in its entirety, when he writes:

Therewith the question of the origins of history seems decided. History arises and can arise only insofar as there is *aretē*, the excellence of humans who no longer simply live to live but who make room for their

justification by looking into the nature of things and acting in harmony with what they see – by building a *polis* on the basis of the law of the world which is *polemos*, by speaking that which they see as revealing itself to a free, exposed yet undaunted human (philosophy). [HE 43]

Patočka largely recognizes his debt to Arendt's account of free life within the Greek *polis*, as well to her hermeneutic retrieval of the triad of *apolausis*, *bios politikos*, and *bios theōritikos* in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (HE 37, 40). It is upon it that Patočka builds his own account of historicity when he argues:

We can speak of history where life becomes free and whole, where it consciously builds room for an equally free life, not exhausted by mere acceptance, where after the shaking of life's "small" meaning bestowed by acceptance, humans dare undertake new attempts at bestowing meaning on themselves in the light of the way the being of the world into which they have been set manifests itself to them. [HE 40-1]

Patočka goes so far as to identify Greece with philosophy and Rome with non-philosophy, or with whatever rejects philosophy – in other words,

with such an enormous and hard reality as is the only great power created by antiquity, that is the reality of Rome. [PE 108]

In Plato, as for instance in Plato's *Socrates*, there is attempted a first interrogation of political life founded upon the imperative of care for the soul, which shaped Europe:

The surviving of the heritage is obviously also its change, but this metaphysical foundation still endures. And surprisingly, upon it the domain of European life is spread out, is generalized. [PE 129]

Regarding this point Walter Biemel aptly remarks:

Without the fundamental questioning of the previous form of life by philosophy and its intuition of the essence of freedom, there is no politics...Patočka takes up, while transforming it, the Heideggerian thesis according to which philosophy developed exclusively in the West. It is within this context that the play of interdependence of philosophy and politics must also be understood.²³

²³ Walter Biemel, "Jan Patočka: Le philosophe en tant que conscience de son peuple," in *Phénoménologie et politique: Mélanges offerts à Jacques Taminiaux*, eds. Bernard Stevens and Danielle Lories, Brussels, BE: Edité par Ousia 1989, pp. 115-136, here p. 119. My translation.

For Patočka, the dialogue between Athens and Rome—and other historical realities yet to come—amounts to the confrontation of philosophy with non-philosophy, with brute reality as something fundamentally non-philosophical. One element, however, that can rightly be attributed to the Roman experience is the possibility of generalization—a possibility that could be linked with Arendt's writings on Roman authority (*auctoritas*, *augere*). Patočka elaborates:

What is characteristic of Europe as Europe is that its distinctive principle is: generality...Everyone understands European civilization, because the principle of European civilization is, roughly spoken—two times two is four. From that arises a singular continuity and the possibility of generalization. [PE 221]

Thus, generality, abstraction, and universality were not born in Greece, although the content of Europe's progressive generalization up to the contemporary globalized age is essentially Greek. The historical becoming responsible for Europe's double face is none other than the imperative of the care of the soul, from which arises, on the one hand, the simultaneous emergence of history and politics and, on the other hand, the gap between ideal and reality, philosophy and non-philosophy. This second aspect of European civilization, corresponding to the genealogical line of objectivity beginning with Democritus, crystallizes in imperial Rome, and gives birth to hegemonic Europe.