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Technology, Modernity, and the Possibility of Historical Understanding

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Abstract

This paper traces the meaning of technology in Arendt and Foucault's work, their historical analyses of technology, and the way that their notions of technology's role in modernity influence their historical methods. I argue that whilst the two political thinkers approach the idea of technology from different perspectives, there is also substantial overlap in the way that they conceive of technology – often critically – as a wide-ranging set of practices of power interlocked with particular modes of knowledge. This helps to properly situate some aspects of their work that converge, for instance their analyses of what Foucault calls 'biopolitics'. But their different conceptions of the historical character of technology, and its relationship to modernity, also create divergence: their concepts of 'technology' suggest different ways of thinking through the nature of historical continuity and discontinuity and the degree of access that we have to meaningful histories.

Keywords

Arendt – Foucault – technology – history – modernity – biopolitics – discontinuity

1 Introduction

Arendt and Foucault both think through technological themes extensively in their work. Arendt positioned her work as a response to technological change and innovation, both in everyday and extraordinary forms, while ideas about “technologies of power” and “technologies of the self” as principles of action are central to Foucault’s work. Understanding how these two thinkers conceptualised technology reveals similarities in how they conceived of technology and its historical influence, as well as some significant differences between the two on the character of technological modernity and the possibilities for historical understanding in that context.

This paper thus traces the meaning of technology in Arendt and Foucault’s work, their historical narratives about technology, and the way that their ideas of technology’s status in modernity influence their historical methods. I argue that, although Arendt and Foucault’s ‘technologies’ initially appear to describe different phenomena, there is in fact substantial overlap in the way that they conceive of technology as a wide-ranging set of practices of power interlocked with particular modes of knowledge. On this basis, the paper offers an exposition of the relationship between history and technology in their work, exploring the substantial similarities in their critique of biopolitics and concepts of ‘self’ and ‘mankind’, as these underpin their critical approaches to modernity, as well as some important distinctions between the two thinkers. In particular, it shows how their ideas of technology suggest different ways of thinking through the nature of historical continuity and discontinuity, depending on whether technology constitutes a definitive ‘break’ with the past or not, and thus the degree of access that we have to meaningful histories.

Thinking about their perspectives on technology – as modes of understanding the world – in the work of Arendt and Foucault, helps to inform and extend our understanding of their historical methodology via defining the character and limitations of ‘modernity’ in their thinking, and the very possibilities for thinking historically in a modern context. A comparative analysis of Arendt and Foucault’s thinking on technology also shows the importance of concepts of technology in political theory in the mid-twentieth century, the way in which conceptualisations of technology have much wider implications than we might immediately recognise, and the scope for thinking in different ways about the nature and implications of modern technology.

2 Arendt, Technology, and the Experience of Our Age

2.1 *Technology's Role in the Break between Past and Future*

The significance of technology in the contemporary world appears throughout Arendt's work. In *The Human Condition*, her insistence that we “think what we are doing” is rooted in the context of a perceived technological revolution.¹ She speaks of the “earth alienation” that modern science and technology have brought about, reaching its most visible realisation in man-made satellites, as well as the wholly unprecedented sentiment that the Earth is now seen as a prison to escape from.² Nuclear technology brings novel forms of action into the world, she argues; we are now “acting into nature” in increasingly alarming ways.³ Some scholarship has recognised the significance of technology for Arendt: Brian Simbirski has highlighted the importance of the concept of automation for Arendt's thinking, whilst Waseem Yaqoob has written on the ways that alienation is seen by Arendt to derive from modern scientific thinking, that is, the perspective taken from the ‘Archimedean point’ *outside* the human world (and the Earth), rather than a perspective from the ground of human, worldly experience.⁴ Yet, analyses of science and technology still constitute a relatively minor part of the literature on Arendt's work.

Arendt claims that “totalitarianism and the atomic bomb ... are the fundamental experiences of our age”.⁵ And although a theoretical retreat from totalitarianism *might* be possible, “the distressing thing about the emergence within politics of the possibility of absolute physical annihilation is that it renders such a retreat totally impossible. For here politics threatens the very thing that, according to modern opinion, provides its ultimate justification – that is,

1 H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.

2 *Ibid.*, 1.

3 H. Arendt, “The Concept of History” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 59.

4 B. Simbirski, “Cybernetic Muse: Hannah Arendt on Automation, 1951–1958”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 77:4 (2017); W. Yaqoob, “The Archimedean point: Science and technology in the thought of Hannah Arendt, 1951–1963”, *Journal of European Studies*, 44:3 (2014). For more on readings of technology in Arendt, see M. Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); P. Tijmes, “The Archimedean point and eccentricity: Hannah Arendt's philosophy of science and technology”, *Inquiry* 35:3 (1992); D. Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); R. Wolin, *Heidegger's Children: Hannah Arendt, Karl Löwith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

5 H. Arendt, “Introduction into Politics” in *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), 109.

the basic possibility of life for all of humanity".⁶ While totalitarianism *might* conceivably be reversed, the possibility of nuclear annihilation cannot be, and represents an even greater threat to political life.

Arendt's claim that we live in a "gap" between past and future is well known.⁷ This is connected to her claim that the tradition of political thought, which for Arendt represented a continuous thread throughout Western history, has collapsed in modernity, reaching its conclusion in Marx's thought.⁸ Most importantly, she argues, hereby the association of politics with freedom has been broken. The collapse of historical continuity, however, concerns not only our intellectual tradition but was ultimately realised in the emergence of wholly novel political *practices* embodied in twentieth-century totalitarianism.

Neither the twentieth-century aftermath nor the nineteenth century rebellion against tradition actually caused the break in our history. This sprang from a chaos of mass-perplexities on the political scene and of mass-opinions in the spiritual sphere which the totalitarian movements, through terror and ideology, crystallized into a new form of government and domination. Totalitarian domination ... cannot be comprehended through the usual categories of political thought [thus] ... has broken the continuity of Occidental history.⁹

Totalitarianism appears to be the event that finally 'broke' politics: a form of action inexplicable in traditional political terms. But that other fundamental experience of our age, the atom bomb, the paradigmatic form of modern technology, *also* bears some responsibility for this break, Arendt suggests. Through technology, we have become alienated from the Earth, literally escaping the confines of the physical world through space travel.¹⁰ In placing nuclear power, or "universal" processes in human hands, technology has changed the nature of human action, because it enables humans to step beyond traditional, or natural, hard limits of possibility.¹¹ Likewise, medical science and technology seek to defeat mortality by creating life in the test tube or extending human lifespans, while biological or species 'life' has become the ultimate good, thanks

6 Ibid.

7 H. Arendt, "Preface" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 3.

8 H. Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age" in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 17.

9 Arendt, "Tradition and the Modern Age", 26.

10 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 269.

11 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 264–265; "The Concept of History", 58.

largely to modern scientific influence.¹² These practices have *also* broken the continuity of human history by destroying the traditional relationship between humans and the Earth, or humans and nature.

In her reply to Eric Voegelin's review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt observed that "historically we know of man's nature only insofar as it has existence, and no realm of eternal essences will ever console us if man loses his essential capabilities".¹³ Sceptical of the idea of human 'nature', Arendt argues that we must instead observe reality, and the way in which the world conditions humans. Both totalitarianism and technology are seen by Arendt to be transforming and destroying the human world, and therefore the way that humans are conditioned by that world.

2.2 *Science, Technology, and History in the Modern Age: the Emergence of 'Process'*

In "The Concept of History" Arendt details the relationship between science, technology, and historical understanding, including the character of an apparent break in history. Arendt's critique of modern (i.e., Marxist-Hegelian) historical understanding as 'process' oriented is closely connected by her with the development of scientific understanding and, latterly, technological action. "Our modern concept of history is ... intimately connected with our modern concept of nature", Arendt writes. The full significance of both can be seen "only if their common root is discovered".¹⁴ Fundamental to "the modern concept of history is that it arose in the same sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which ushered in the gigantic development of the natural sciences".¹⁵ What characterised this age was the "world-alienation of man" expressed in Cartesian doubt, for which the fundamental experience underlying Descartes' claims was "the discovery that the earth, contrary to all direct sense experience, revolves around the sun".¹⁶ Once the senses could no longer be trusted, the basis of knowledge was unseated. A new historical attitude emerged from this, writes Arendt, that even if man "is unable to recognize the given world which he has not made himself, he nevertheless must be capable of knowing at least what he made himself".¹⁷ History can be known because, unlike nature, it is made by men (as, she wrote, Vico so clearly showed).¹⁸ From this new

12 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2.

13 H. Arendt, "[The Origins of Totalitarianism]: A Reply", *The Review of Politics*, 15:1 (1953), 84.

14 Arendt, "The Concept of History", 48.

15 *Ibid.*, 53.

16 *Ibid.*, 53, 54.

17 *Ibid.*, 56–57.

18 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 298fn.

historical attitude Arendt traces an equivalent transformation of the sciences, which changed from the “search after the ‘what’ to the investigation of the ‘how’”, a shift that is “matter of course, if one assumes that man can know only what he has made himself ... [which] implies that I ‘know’ a thing whenever I understand how it has come into being”.¹⁹ The emphasis in scientific study shifted “from interest in things to interest in processes, of which things were soon to become almost accidental byproducts”.²⁰ Although Arendt ties the modern age’s process-oriented view of history to the development of modern natural sciences, it is already evident that in the shift of emphasis to what “man ... has made himself”, technology becomes increasingly significant in historical and scientific understanding.

By contrast, she describes the ancient Greeks’ understanding of history as “single instances, deeds or events, [that] interrupt the circular movement of everyday life in the sense that the rectilinear *bios* of the mortals interrupts the circular movement of biological life”.²¹ Her approval of this mode of historical understanding is clear: the “impartiality” of pre-modern history is exemplified for Arendt by Homer’s equal glorification of conquerors *and* conquered, his “singing the deeds of the Trojans no less than those of the Achaeans”. This represents, she claims, “the highest type of objectivity we know”, and was of central significance to the Greeks; the very “subject matter of [premodern] history is these interruptions – the extraordinary, in other words”.²² This preserves the authentic plurality of history, instead of reducing it to a victor’s narrative, and it preserves the extraordinary and unprecedented acts of beginning so vital to her conception of political meaning. The modern mode of understanding the historical in terms of a process not only reduces history to a single narrative, but virtually eliminates the possibility of the extraordinary in history, making historical events peripheral to the historical process. Arendt simply could not accept the contemporary historicist “veil of objectivity ... as a scholarly ideal”, argues Liisi Keedus.²³

2.3 *Technology at the Centre of Modernity*

Arendt thus ties the early development of science and history as process-thinking together. But in the twentieth century, it was not science but technology

19 Arendt, *The Concept of History*, 57.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 42.

22 Ibid., 51, 42.

23 L. Keedus, “Hannah Arendt’s ‘Histories’: A Contextual Perspective”, *Philosophical Topics*, 39:2 (2011), 65.

that more closely corresponded to this ideal of knowledge.²⁴ Technology is “the ground on which the two realms of history and nature have interpenetrated each other in our time ... their common denominator lies indeed in the concept of process”.²⁵ History has become a process, driven increasingly by technology, which began with “substituting mechanical processes for human activities – laboring and working – and ended with starting new natural processes”.²⁶ In the twentieth century, technology became “the meeting ground of the natural and historical sciences”.²⁷ Arendt, however, emphasises the originally technological character of modern science: the way that the telescope led Galileo to new forms of knowledge, or the necessity of instruments for the experimental form that became central to scientific practice.²⁸ Out of the world-alienation that began with Galileo, “did arise the tremendous structure of the human artifice we inhabit today, in whose framework we have even discovered the means of destroying it together with all non man-made things on earth”.²⁹ Thus, a direct line of influence is drawn by Arendt between the original impulses of modern science and the technologies realised in the twentieth century, albeit via distinct stages. Most significantly, Arendt argues, while the mechanised technology of the Industrial Revolution radically changed the world, in the era of atomic power, we no longer simply ‘fabricate’ but “act into nature, creating natural processes and directing them into the human artifice and the realm of human affairs”.³⁰ When we act into nature, Arendt argues, “we have manifestly begun to carry our own unpredictability into that realm which we used to think of as ruled by inexorable laws”.³¹

Modern technology is distinctive, writes Arendt, because it represents a kind of “acting into nature”, that is, in contrast to the mechanised technologies of the industrial era, which still sought to fabricate a world from the materials provided by nature, using modern technology we seek to create new ‘natural’ processes, which are directed into the human world.³² She explicitly associates acting into nature with atomic power, and the introduction of “universal” processes into the earthly environment. But her critique of technology goes beyond her criticism of nuclear power or its immediate political repercussions;

24 Ibid., 57.

25 Ibid., 61–62.

26 Ibid., 57.

27 Ibid., 58.

28 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 248–252, 257–268.

29 Arendt, “The Concept of History”, 53–54.

30 Ibid., 59.

31 Ibid., 61.

32 Arendt, “The Concept of History”, 59.

in “acting into nature” in a broader sense, technology is seen to shape our self-understanding in a foundational sense, prioritising biological ‘life’ *as such* above distinctively human action.

Seen from a sufficient distance, the cars in which we travel and which we know we built ourselves will look as though they were, as Heisenberg once put it, ‘as inescapable a part of ourselves as the snail’s shell is to its occupant.’ All our pride in what we can do will disappear into some kind of mutation of the human race; the whole of technology, seen from this point, in fact no longer appears ‘as the result of a conscious human effort to extend man’s material powers, but rather as a large-scale biological process.’³³

As our point of reference moves further from the human – both metaphorically and literally, as astronauts look down upon the Earth from space – the specifically human characteristics of individuality or natality and plurality are decentred in favour of an increasingly unified or singular vision of a dominant technological ‘process’ of continuous development.

To summarise: the break between past and future is thus influenced by the breakdown of tradition, and initiated by the event of totalitarianism. But the idea that “separated the modern age from the past more profoundly than any other single idea”, insists Arendt, is “the modern concept of process”.³⁴ Technology forms the new ground upon which process, in both a natural *and* a historical form, flourishes, problematically. Technology, in its specifically modern form, thus constitutes both a form of action and understanding that divides the contemporary world from the past; if totalitarianism first opened the gap between past and future, technology, we might surmise, extends the gap, in the face of an even more uncertain future.

3 Foucault, Technologies, and the Mechanisms of Power

3.1 *The Evolution of Foucault’s Use of ‘Technology’*

Foucault referred extensively to “technologies of the body”, “technologies of power”, “political technologies”, and “technologies of the self” in his work. These referred, generally, not to material technologies like rockets or atom

33 H. Arendt, “The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 274.

34 Arendt, “The Concept of History”, 63–64.

bombs, but to practices of power, often with a critical eye on the subjection that results from such technologies. ‘Technology’ draws together knowledge, power, and practice, operating as a useful shorthand by which to indicate the inseparability and fluidity of these components of political or social practice, even whilst the specific content of these technologies differs.

Foucault’s use of the term evolved over his lifetime, as Michael Behrent has detailed. In the 1950s, he expressed the “prevailing skepticism towards modern technological society” that existed in France at that time, in, e.g., Jacques Ellul or Georges Friedmann’s work.³⁵ During the 1960s, Foucault spoke of technology relatively infrequently, preferring, for instance in his works on madness or the clinic, to use the term, ‘technique’, to describe the way in which knowledge and methods of governing people intersected.³⁶ The period of 1973–1979 was the “most decisive for Foucault’s evolving understanding of ‘technology’”, and when he began to speak “frequently of ‘technologies of power’ and the ‘political technology of the body’”.³⁷ At the same time, significantly, he developed his genealogical methodology: “his most developed critique of modern forms of domination” and his “Nietzschean conception of power (based on the idea that power creates and stimulates rather than simply forbids and represses).”³⁸

Technology, therefore, becomes Foucault’s preferred term just as his work becomes distinctly more politically engaged, exploring modern power in broad social and political contexts. He uses the term to describe the way that power operates through everyday practices and the way in which social practices of power, originating in one place or time, are utilised across different contexts. Technologies of power, or technologies of the body also appear in a pejorative sense: Foucault analyses these technologies in order to question how power operates insidiously through the creation and control of norms.

In the last few years of his life, Foucault shifted to exploring ‘technologies of the self’: the production of the self and care of the self. Perhaps, he mused, in one 1982 seminar, “I’ve insisted too much on the technology of domination and power.” Instead, he explained, “I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of self.”³⁹ Here, Foucault turned to the ancients, particularly the ancient

35 M. Behrent, “Foucault and Technology”, *History and Technology*, 29:1 (2013), 57.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 M. Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” in L.H. Martin, H. Gutman and P.H. Hutton (eds.) *Technologies of the Self* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 19.

Greeks, to recover their notions of care for the self, and *technê* as a creative act of self-production.

3.2 *Technology at the Intersection of Power and Knowledge*

In *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault first extensively brings the terminology of technology into use, he explains that “this book is intended as a correlative history of the modern soul and of a new power to judge; a genealogy of the present scientificolegal complex from which the power to punish derives its bases, justifications and rules, from which it extends its effects and by which it masks its exorbitant singularity”. Both the penal system and the history of the human sciences, he suggests, “derive from a single process of ‘epistemologico-juridical’ formation” with “technology of power the very principle both of the humanization of the penal system and of the knowledge of man”.⁴⁰ “Technology of power” here forms the focal point for Foucault’s analysis – the axis tying together the notion of “the modern soul”, the “new power to judge”, and the entire “scientificolegal complex”. Technology describes forms of knowledge together with political practices, often as these act upon the human body in what Foucault terms biopolitics or “the political technology of the body”.⁴¹

In *Discipline and Punish*, he associates technology with rationalised modes of thinking. Through his analysis of Bentham’s Panopticon, Foucault brings together technology as material apparatus and as coercive methodology, with the development of modern sciences. “The exercise of discipline”, he wrote, “presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible”. Alongside the modern development of the technologies of the telescope, lens, and light beam in physics and cosmology, “there were the minor techniques of multiple and intersecting observations, of eyes that must see without being seen; using techniques of subjection and methods of exploitation, an obscure art of light and the visible was secretly preparing a new knowledge of man”.⁴² In Foucault’s characterisation of modern power in terms of biopower, understanding rooted in biological sciences is also shown to be foundational in his discussion of “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words,

40 M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 23.

41 Ibid., 26.

42 Ibid., 170–171.

how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species".⁴³ The methodology of 'technology' thus seems to derive from Foucault's understanding of the character of modern power, as we see it in the modern world, including our own.

3.3 *Technology as a Factor of Historical Analysis*

Through the terminology of technology across various writings, Foucault is able to effectively redescribe power relations without resorting to what he considers to be a false "unity of the subject".⁴⁴ It thus serves an essential role in his method of historical analysis. In his genealogical writings, Foucault uses technologies to track continuity and identify discontinuity over time, especially via the body. "The body is the inscribed surface of events", he writes, "the locus of a disassociated Self ... and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body".⁴⁵ This passage highlights the critical edge to Foucault's analysis of technologies of power, or technologies of the body: his attempt to reveal what has previously been invisible, and thus to critique the unseen influences of power over modern life. "Criticism", he wrote, in one of his last essays, "is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but, rather, as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves ... It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom".⁴⁶

4 A Shared Concept of Technology?

It might be argued that, despite some areas of overlap in their respective notions of technology, Arendt and Foucault are basically thinking about different things. Arendt is concerned with material technologies like atom bombs or

43 M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France, 1977–78*, ed. M. Senellart (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 16.

44 M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002), 60.

45 M. Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in D.F. Bouchard (ed) *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 148.

46 M. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in P. Rabinow (ed) *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 315–316.

space travel technology, while Foucault's 'technology' relates to relationships of power and methods of subjection that are less obviously material. Arendt's overarching theory of modern technology is premised on the principle of process, while Foucault's philosophy of technology, as Jana Sawicki writes, "is particularistic ... not ... a general account of the practices that compose the 'essence' of modern technology, but rather specific histories of technological practices".⁴⁷ Indeed, Foucault's whole conceptualisation of technologies as power is arguably at odds with Arendt's claim that authentic power is found only amongst people acting (freely) in concert with one another. Both associate technology with the modern age and the development of modern scientific modes of understanding. But Arendt distinguishes a radical break between pre-modern 'tools', and the process-oriented machine technology first realised in the mechanised technologies of the Industrial Revolution, and then the increasingly automated and uncontrollable technologies of the twentieth century.⁴⁸ Foucault, on the other hand, whilst connecting modern technologies of power with scientific discourse and understanding, finds no difficulty in using the term in pre-modern contexts. Arendt is openly critical of what she sees as technology's likely catastrophic character; Foucault's critique of technology is subtler, and does not carry the same catastrophic overtones.

However, whilst Arendt and Foucault's uses of the idea of technology are not identical, there are substantial continuities. Both tend to use the concept of technology to describe typically modern practices of power, with two important caveats. First, for Arendt, such practices do not correspond to authentic political 'power' as she defines that term, but rather to forms of influence or strength. Second, this characterisation becomes more questionable in relation to Foucault's notion of 'technologies of the self' – a subject which I will return to later.

Foucault's concept of technology primarily refers to the ways in which forms of knowledge and practices of material subjection come together within particular places and times. "Instead of an instrumental understanding of technology, Foucault used 'technology' ... as a way of revealing truth", writes Tina Besley.⁴⁹ Yet, it is also thereby a description of a form of material power – it is not purely abstract. It is notable that as Foucault switches to the terminology of

47 J. Sawicki, "Heidegger and Foucault: Escaping Technological Nihilism", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 13:2 (1987), 168.

48 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 146.

49 T. Besley, "Foucault, Truth-Telling and Technologies of the Self: Confessional Practices of the Self and Schools" in *Counterpoints Vol. 292, Why Foucault? New Directions in Educational Research* (Lausanne: Peter Lang AG, 2007), 58.

'technology' over the previously favoured 'technique', from the 1970s onwards, he moves into a period of work in which he is much more interested in the question of political power, as he sees that to be materialised via the body.

4.1 *Foucault: Material Conceptions of Technology*

In 1982, Foucault wrote that there are four major types of technology, "each a matrix of practical reason"; these are:

technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things ... technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification ... technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject ... technologies of the self, which permit individuals to ... transform themselves in order to attain a certain state.⁵⁰

It is imperative to understand, that for Foucault, "these four types of technologies hardly ever function separately, although each one of them is associated with a certain type of domination". His work seeks "to show both their specific nature and their constant interaction".⁵¹ Although his work rarely deals with particular instances of technologies in the more usual sense, it is quite clear from this statement that Foucault positions material realisations of technology within the matrix of practical reason that he sets out to understand. "Foucault lays the basis for a materialist history of knowledge", argues Mark Poster, "since he conceives of ideas in such close proximity to practice".⁵²

Two comments illustrate how Foucault collapses the distinction between technology understood as forms of power, and technology as 'things', both from the period of his major writings on technology in the 1970s and early 1980s. He wrote in 1980 of how in *Discipline and Punish*, he had focused on the "theme of the machine" in his exploration of contemporary surveillance systems, because he wanted to "to study the development of a technological theme that I believe is important in the history of the great reevaluation of power mechanisms during the eighteenth century [and] in the broader history of techniques of power".⁵³ The Panopticon is *both* material technology as well

⁵⁰ Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", 18.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² M. Poster, "Foucault and History", *Social Research*, 49:1 (1982), 132.

⁵³ M. Foucault, "La poussière et le nuage" in *Dits et écrits*, Vol. IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 18, cited in M. Behrent, "Foucault and Technology", 59.

as a set of practices described as technologies of power. Another connection is highlighted in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* when he writes on the transformation of war as an existential question in relation to the rise of biopolitics. “The existence in question is no longer the juridical existence of sovereignty; at stake is the biological existence of a population”, he argues, and “power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomena of population”.

Through a turn that closes the circle, as the technology of wars has caused them to tend increasingly toward all-out destruction, the decision that initiates them and the one that terminates them are in fact increasingly informed by the naked question of survival. The atomic situation is now at the end point of this process: the power to expose a whole population to death is the underside of the power to guarantee an individual's continued existence.⁵⁴

The development of atomic weapons is here directly linked to the conceptual transformation that Foucault traces in modern warfare, and modern politics: the development of particular material technologies is informed by the emergence of the biopolitical and its demands.

4.2 *Arendt: Technology as a Set of Practices*

Arendt, unlike Foucault, tends to refer to technology in what we might consider a more typical usage: in her critiques of atomic bombs, space rockets, communications technologies, or automated production, she discusses material things. But in the way in which she traces the transformation of technology through history, particularly in relation to modern, process-oriented ideas of history, her idea of ‘technology’ must also be seen as a practice that defines how we think about and do politics. Technology, in other words, is not just material artefacts (or indeed, the entirety of technological materiality) but rather reflects and realises a kind of force or influence as a combination of knowledge and practice.

Modern technology is thus characterised as a specific, albeit problematic, set of practices within the natural sciences, historical sciences and, latterly, social sciences, and a set of practices which is far more ideological in character than (purely) instrumental. “Since the beginning of the twentieth century, technology has emerged as the meeting ground of the natural and historical sciences,

54 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 37.

and ... this final outcome is in perfect accord with the innermost intentions of modern science.”⁵⁵ This underlying character of techno-science can be seen in her critique of social sciences, which “became to history what technology had been to physics”. These use “the experiment in a much cruder and less reliable way than do the natural sciences, but the method is the same: they too prescribe conditions, conditions to human behavior, as modern physics prescribes conditions to natural processes”. The frightening attempt to “close the alleged gap between our scientific mastery of nature and our deplored impotence to ‘manage’ human affairs through an engineering science of human relations ... [is] because they have decided to treat man as an entirely natural being whose life process can be handled the same way as all other processes”.⁵⁶ Technology thus appears as the quasi-inevitable outcome of modern scientific knowledge, oriented around the concept of process.

Thus, the fear which Arendt expresses about nuclear weapons is not only their potential world-destructiveness, even though this new reality is almost impossible to grapple with in traditional political terms. She is also interested in describing the way in which atomic weapons further develop the idea of process and realise it in a material sense: the new possibility for humans to act into nature to create new, uncontrollable, and uniquely dangerous processes. The same is true in her characterisation of what Foucault would describe as biopolitics and the rise of the significance of bios itself, species-life.

The key words of modern historiography – ‘development’ and ‘progress’ – were, in the nineteenth century, also the words of the then new branches of natural science, particularly biology and geology, one dealing with animal life and the other even with non-organic matter in terms of historical process. Technology, in the modern sense, was preceded by the various sciences of natural history, the history of biological life, of the earth, of the universe.⁵⁷

Arendt, despite her concern with the influence of material technologies on the world around us, does not consider technology purely or even primarily in this sense, and rather connects technology with a particular contemporary form of knowledge based upon the principle of process, as that connects both natural and historical sciences.

55 Arendt, “The Concept of History”, 58–59.

56 *Ibid.*, 59.

57 *Ibid.*, 61.

In summary, Foucault and Arendt's ideas of technology are – although not the same – much closer than they originally appear, and agree to a certain extent. That is, both consider technology as forms of practice *and also* types of material entities, albeit that the emphasis in Foucault's work tends to be on the former, whilst in Arendt's work, the latter is more clearly evident. Based on this claim, that we can, reasonably, bring Arendt and Foucault's concepts of technology into dialogue with one another, the rest of this paper will attempt to do so, with the view that technology reveals a way of thinking about world-making – including the making of history – that is of fundamental importance for both Arendt and Foucault. Their approaches, I argue, also highlight the different ways in which we can read the concept of technology in the context of understanding 'modernity' and its relationship to history and historicity.

5 Technology and Historical Understanding in Arendt and Foucault

5.1 *Biopolitics and Technology*

Arendt and Foucault would both agree that technologies in the modern era are never neutral, but always forms of power. In Arendt, this is conveyed in her clear critique that modern technology is catastrophically dangerous to human existence in almost every way. For Foucault, technology is somewhat more ambiguous, but more often than not, his analyses of technology offer an inherent critique of the practices which he discusses, and the worlds they enact. One important similarity relates to their historical narratives of the development of what Foucault refers to as biopower or biopolitics, and what Arendt describes as the dominance of labour, 'life', or species-life in modernity: orienting political practice around mass, biological human life, and the body. For both Arendt and Foucault, technology – in the sense common to both, where technology is seen as the conjunction of particular modes of knowledge and practice – appears frequently in this specific guise, which is specific to and characteristic of, modernity.

Biopower, Foucault writes, means "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species".⁵⁸ Among the main objects of concern, he notes, were populations, and the necessary

⁵⁸ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 16.

health policies, living conditions, and medical facilities necessary to maintain populations. The emergence of public hygiene and social medicine in the late eighteenth century “should be re-inserted in the general framework of a ‘biopolitics’; the latter aims to treat the ‘population’ as a set of coexisting living beings with particular biological and pathological features, and which as such falls under specific forms of knowledge and technique”. Biopolitics itself, he continues, is rooted in a “theme developed since the seventeenth century: the management of state forces”.⁵⁹

In an analysis that “anticipates Foucault’s notion of biopower”, Arendt traces a similar historical trajectory of the concept of ‘life’, and correspondingly, the activity which she terms ‘labor’.⁶⁰ The modern age, whilst rejecting faith in eternal life, retained its (originally Christian, Arendt claims) belief in the sanctity of life itself, whereby today “life, and not the world, is the highest good of man”.⁶¹ In this secular world, the only thing that could now be immortal, writes Arendt, “was life itself, that is, the possibly everlasting life process of the species mankind”.⁶² Thus, in the concepts of development and process that dominate the natural and historical sciences in the modern era, the significance of life as species, as bios, has emerged. Man becomes “an entirely natural being” whose “life process” is viewed in the same way as any other process.⁶³

This transformation of the idea of man has deep political consequences. “Connected with this inner conviction of the sacredness of life as such”, Arendt states, “is the stress on the all-importance of self-interest ... since we have made life our supreme and foremost concern, we have no room left for activity based on contempt for one’s own life-interest. Selflessness may still be a religious or a moral virtue, but it cannot be a political one”.⁶⁴ In the political sphere, ‘labor’ – those activities biologically necessary for bodily survival – thus becomes increasingly dominant, and human action follows the cyclical, and for Arendt, *unpolitical* patterns of nature.⁶⁵ This is embedded in Arendt’s concept of technology, which accelerates these transformations. “Machines have forced us into an infinitely quicker rhythm of repetition than the cycle of natural processes prescribed”, she writes, and “the repetition and the endlessness

59 Ibid., 367.

60 P. Birmingham, “Worldly Immortality in an Age of Superfluity”, *Arendt Studies* 2 (2018), 34–35.

61 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 321.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., 59.

64 Arendt, “The Concept of History”, 53.

65 On the rise of ‘labor’ see, e.g., Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 4; 124–126.

of the process itself put the unmistakable mark of laboring upon it”.⁶⁶ The rise of labor, life, and the life process in the political sphere, the centrality of the body as a purely biological object, and the way that this leads to the ordering of human populations – particularly through economic management – corresponds in significant ways with Foucault’s conceptualisation of biopolitics.

5.2 *The Rejection of ‘Man’*

Behrent writes that while Foucault, “voiced an almost generic skepticism towards technology, he categorically rejected the philosophy that, in the late 1940s and 1950s, had underpinned it: ‘humanism,’ understood both as a diffuse cultural attitude and as the positions associated with the philosophical schools of existentialism and phenomenology”.⁶⁷ The “Self”, wrote Foucault, describes the “illusion of a substantial unity”, where the body is the “inscribed surface of events” and the “locus” of the self.⁶⁸ “History becomes ‘effective’”, he argued, describing the relationship between his own historical project and this concept of the disunified self, to “the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being – as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself. ‘Effective’ history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature”.⁶⁹ By using the language of technology, Foucault avoided tracing power through the ‘self’.

Although Arendt expressed more typical concerns about technology on the character of ‘man’ in modernity and technologically induced alienation, there are also parallels with Foucault’s approach. In one letter from 1951, she argued that “totalitarianism’s power to destroy humans and the world lies not only in the delusion that everything is possible, but also in the delusion that there is such a thing as *man* ... It does not help me, as the humanists would have it, that I see *man* in every human being, as this by no means necessarily leads to respect or recognition for human dignity, but can equally well mislead us into believing in a surplus and in superfluity”.⁷⁰ Arendt rejected the idea of human essence, claiming instead that humans were defined by their conditions, not least plurality (that “men, not Man, live on this earth and inhabit the world”), but also their environment in a broader sense.⁷¹ While Arendt insists that free

66 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 125.

67 Behrent, “Foucault and Technology”, 58.

68 Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, 148.

69 *Ibid.*, 154.

70 H. Arendt, unsent letter to Eric Voegelin, April 8, 1951, in P. Baehr and G.C. Wells, “Debating Totalitarianism: An Exchange of Letters Between Hannah Arendt and Eric Voegelin”, *History and Theory*, 51:3 (2012), 376–377.

71 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

human *action* is essential for authentic politics, the potential to exercise this capacity – and thus the character of ‘man’ – depends upon the world in which they live. Modern technology ‘alienates’ man from the earthly or worldly conditions that have surrounded him throughout human history.

Foucault and Arendt’s analysis of the idea of technology in modern history both use the term critically to describe processes by which the concept of ‘man’, the ‘self’, ‘humanity’, or ‘mankind’ – the unitary individual alone and en masse – have been historically constructed in the modern age, *masking* what for Arendt and Foucault constitutes the actual conditions of existence and human interaction. Understanding technology’s relation to biopolitics is, for both, particularly important in their critical projects of decentring the subject from historical and political analysis. The concept of mankind, observed Arendt, “owes its existence not to the dreams of the humanists nor to the reasoning of philosophers ... [nor even] to political events, but almost exclusively to the technical development of the Western world”.⁷²

The way that Arendt and Foucault use the idea of technology is thus wrapped up with their mutual concern with deconstructing concepts of the Self or Man. Both are concerned to show that the unity or ‘essence’ of the individual self is a product of the conditions or context in which they are located – and particularly the discursive processes that an individual is engaged in – and thus changeable on a fundamental level. In the conditions of modernity, both suggest, this opens us up to extraordinary threats. Yet, although there are parallels between what they are doing with the idea of technology, modern technology also describes somewhat different patterns of historical continuity and discontinuity in their work.

5.3 *Technology and Two Conceptions of Historical Discontinuity*

Arendt and Foucault both deal with history in terms of discontinuity: for Arendt, the gap between past and future that characterises the contemporary world; for Foucault through the methodological choices he makes in his historical work. Technology evidently represents a kind of historical discontinuity for both, between the pre-modern and the modern era. Both associate technology with the scientific rationalisation that emerged in modernity. But Arendt offers a more discrete periodisation of technology, distinguishing between a premodern, minimally technological era, where technology has a much more limited nature as ‘tools’ and a modern technological era where technologies become kinds of ‘processes’, comprising the era of *homo faber* from the

72 H. Arendt “Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World” in *Men in Dark Times* (London: Cape, 1970), 82.

seventeenth to the nineteenth century, represented in its fullest form in the Industrial Revolution, when technology became understood as machines, and then the technologies of the twentieth century which introduced novel forms of action into the world. For Foucault, meanwhile, technology is more loosely associated with modernity, and he thinks about technology in various parallel modes of analysis: technologies of the body, technologies of power, and technologies of the self.

Foucault's turn to "technologies of the self" saw two significant shifts in the way in which he used the idea of technology. First, "technologies of the self" – "how an individual acts upon himself" – appears as an emancipatory form of technology, in contrast with the emphasis on domination and subjection in his analyses of technologies of power.⁷³ Second, he turns to the ancient world's idea of "care for the self" to illuminate this facet of technology. He sought to "correct his one-sided analysis of the modern subject ... by going back to the 'origins' of modernity, to the study of Greco-Roman culture, and turning his attention to the ancient, ethical notion of the 'care of the self'".⁷⁴ In commentary on Plato's *Alcibiades*, Foucault writes that Socrates counselled his student that, "to help him gain the upper hand – to acquire *technê* – Alcibiades must apply himself, he must take care of himself".⁷⁵ *Technê* appears as an art of self-care. Technologies of the self are "techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power".⁷⁶

While the distinction of technologies of the self from technologies of power, and Foucault's decision to look for technologies of the self in the ancient world reinforce the distinctiveness of technology as power as a feature of modernity, this use of 'technology' reveals a significant difference between Arendt and Foucault. Although, for Arendt, ancient *technê* and modern technology are quite different, she argues that even *technê* was recognised as a politically dangerous concept by the Greeks. They rejected *technê*, argues Arendt, because they considered its inherent instrumentalism to be *banaisic*, a philistine activity; even "the great masters of Greek sculpture and architecture were by no

73 Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", 19.

74 Z. Zalloua, "Foucault as educator: the question of technology and learning how to read differently", *symplekē*, 12:1/2 (2004), 233.

75 Foucault, "Technologies of the Self", 14.

76 *Ibid.*, 18.

means excepted from the verdict".⁷⁷ *Technê*, to the Greeks, was considered resolutely instrumental, Arendt argues, and thus essentially non-political, in a world where politics was, above all, speech.⁷⁸ A view of technology as problematically instrumental pervades Arendt's reading of technology, ancient and modern. For Foucault, *technê* as care of the self describes "the aesthetic dimension of self-formation ... self-knowledge not based on a hermeneutic process but on the creative activity of self-fashioning," as Zahi Zalloua describes.⁷⁹ There is thus a fundamental difference between Arendt and Foucault in the emancipatory potential of technology.

Another division appears between Foucault and Arendt in their readings of technology's influence on discontinuities between the contemporary world and the past. Arendt argues that technology is today in the process of constituting a break with the past which is even more insurmountable than the transformations realised by twentieth-century politics. Technology is constituting a new division between past and future. Just as traditional political categories are insufficient to comprehend totalitarianism, so too are traditional categories of human action insufficient to understand modern technology, and its 'acting into nature'. These transformations dissolve traditional understandings of the world. This alienation from the political world and the physical Earth, whilst traced back by Arendt to Galileo and the beginning of the modern scientific – technological age, is only realised in its fullest form in the twentieth century. "Modern natural science owes its great triumphs to having looked upon and treated earth-bound nature from a truly universal viewpoint, that is, from an Archimedean standpoint taken, wilfully and explicitly, outside the earth", she argues.⁸⁰ This is directly linked by Arendt to the harnessing – or unleashing – of nuclear energy, when she claims that although "still bound to the earth through the human condition, we have found a way to act on the earth and within terrestrial nature as though we dispose of it from outside, from the Archimedean point. And even at the risk of endangering the natural life process we expose the earth to universal, cosmic forces alien to nature's

77 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 157.

78 This thoroughgoing rejection of instrumentalism by the Greeks was not without its problems for political durability, as Arendt highlights when she explains why the Roman *Res Publica* outlasted the Athenian *polis*. See, e.g., C. Ashcroft, "The Polis and the Res Publica: Two Arendtian Models of Political Violence", *History of European Ideas*, 44:1 (2018), 128–142.

79 Zalloua, "Foucault as educator", 234. Krzysztof Ziarek also writes on this theme in "Powers to Be: Art and Technology in Heidegger and Foucault", *Research in Phenomenology*, 28 (1998).

80 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 11.

household”.⁸¹ In breaking away from the ‘world’, technology creates an absolute break in history, through the creation of a new human condition.

Benhabib has highlighted “two strains” of thought in Arendt, one emphasizing rupture, the other highlighting continuity with origins.⁸² It is the presence of these two strains *together* that makes the idea of a comprehensive break possible. While Arendt does not believe in human nature, she does believe that for much of human history, a set of conditions have existed – not least our rootedness in the world itself – that shapes humans in certain ways. This sense of continuity also explains her claim that *technê* retains at least part of its meaning from its Greek origin; despite the profound transformations that have taken place in Western history since then, the basic forms of human action have remained the same, and stand in a particular relationship to one another. Thus, politics, understood by Arendt as discourse, or ‘action’, the emergence of the new, and thereby the possibility of freedom, stands in an irrevocably antagonistic relationship with the instrumentalism of *technê*.

For Foucault, discontinuity *is* history. “Discontinuity ... has now become one of the basic elements of historical analysis”.⁸³ This was foundational to his “archaeology”, and also important to the genealogical project that succeeded it. Even as Foucault sought to provide historical genealogies of contemporary political power structures – histories of the present – he argued that the effectiveness of history could be assessed by the degree of discontinuity which it introduced, and this can be considered as an important part of his critical project.⁸⁴ Continuous history, by contrast, (as described in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) “is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject”; it promises the certainty of an existential unity that for Foucault, simply does not exist.⁸⁵ Because, for Foucault, the world is *always* formed by human practices, technology creates discontinuities, as all human practices do, but it is at the same time world-forming. Technology cannot alienate us from the world for Foucault as it does for Arendt because its discontinuity is constitutive at the same time. Only in the context of the atom bomb, as

81 Ibid., 262.

82 S. Benhabib, “Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative” *Social Research*, 57:1 (1990), 191.

83 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 9.

84 Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, 154; D. Garland, “What is a ‘history of the present’? On Foucault’s genealogies and their critical preconditions”, *Punishment & Society* 16:4 (2014), 371; A. Allen, “‘Psychoanalysis and Ethnology’ revisited: Foucault’s Historicization of History”, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 55:1 (2017); M.S. Roth, “Foucault’s ‘History of the Present’”, *History and Theory*, 20: 1 (1981), 39.

85 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 12.

Foucault hints at in *The History of Sexuality*, does this discontinuity threaten worldlessness.

6 Conclusion

In Arendt and Foucault's work, technology is implicated in a breakdown of tradition that occurs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: seen in the emergence of biopolitics, of thinking about humans as species, and the political implications of this shift. Arendt also evidently places great significance on the twentieth-century emergence of nuclear technology as the further realisation of a transformed relationship between humans and nature occurring through technology, while for Foucault, the mid-century revolution in technology (and accompanying scepticism towards this) occupies a background role in his analysis of technology which is nonetheless significant. The character of modernity is distinctly technological, therefore, but this means different things for Arendt and Foucault's conceptualisations of history and their historical methodologies. For Arendt, modern technology is the culmination of a historical transformation that created the conditions for the 'break' in history caused by totalitarianism, but is also itself now creating radical discontinuities. This framing is possible only because Arendt identifies a basic continuity across history, which she believes technological change is now collapsing. The technological character of modernity is thus essentially problematic. Because Foucault does *not* recognise the essential continuity of the worldly characteristics which Arendt's analysis relies upon, the discontinuities that technology causes are seen as part of history, and its continuously shifting practices. Thinking about technology illuminates the complex similarities and divisions between Arendt and Foucault's historical understanding, and the different possibilities for thinking about the influence of technology on conceptions of modernity, and its relationship to history.

Both offer critiques of modern technology: technology appears as a dominating presence over human societies and human action. For Arendt, modern technology has become excessively autonomous – it has created a new form of action, new processes, which act to further, and perhaps irrevocably, alienate humans from the world in which they live, or to make them "superfluous".⁸⁶ Yet, for Foucault, while technology is problematic as a form of domination, the concept of technological autonomy and thus world alienation is

86 Birmingham, "Worldly Immortality in an Age of Superfluity", 25.

impossible: technology is always a description of human practices, and his turn to “technologies of the self” highlights the possibilities of these practices for self-empowerment. For both, technology represents ways of ordering – and thus understanding – social and political worlds, yet on the question of the extent to which technology can or is alienating us from the world, the two are quite different, and this translates into their thoughts on the possibility of historical understanding.

Finally, both Foucault and Arendt find, in the process of their thinking through technology, and the character of the break with history that technology is bound up with, methods of reviving pre-modern history, albeit in distinctive ways. Arendt asked how, in the context of a broken world, we might rebuild a meaningful political world, a project wrapped up, for her, in the recovery of history. In the context of a ‘break’ in history – in tradition, or the categories of political thought and action that have ordered the human world – she proposed the Benjaminian-influenced concept of “pearl-diving”, a “meta-historical” category “intended to perspectivize this rupture in tradition and simultaneously bridge it”.⁸⁷

This thinking, fed by the present, works with the ‘thought fragments’ it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like the pearl-diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange ... this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was ... [but rather] as ‘thought fragments,’ as something ‘rich and strange,’ and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene*.⁸⁸

That our tradition now looks like “a field of ruins” may be considered “deplorable”, writes Arendt. Yet “implicit in it is the great chance to look upon the past with eyes undistracted from any tradition, with a directness which has disappeared from Occidental reading and hearing ever since Roman civilization submitted to the authority of Greek thought”.⁸⁹ The ‘fragments’ which we might recover are not “examples to imitate”, argues Liesbeth Schoonheim, but rather “alienate us from what appears self-evident”.⁹⁰ In some ways, the

87 S.-L. Hoffmann and T. Lampert, “Koselleck, Arendt, and the Anthropology of Historical Experience”, *History and Theory*, 49:2 (2010), 225.

88 H. Arendt, “Introduction” in W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2019), lxiii.

89 Arendt, “Tradition and the Modern Age”, 28.

90 L. Schoonheim, “The ‘rightful place in man’s enduring chronicle’: Arendt’s Benjaminian historiography”, *History of European Ideas*, 46:6 (2020), 854.

break in history enables a return to the 'extraordinary' histories of the ancient world that Arendt wrote of, which understood events on their own terms, as an "interruption" in the cycle of events.

This reading evokes Foucauldian themes, whilst Foucault's critique of technologies of power also highlights the pessimism in his characterisation of the modern world. But Foucault's historical approach is premised upon the idea that history – while riven by multiple discontinuities – is also, in a meaningful sense, accessible to us. The genealogical project, in particular, emphasises continuity; the idea of a 'history of the present' is at odds with Arendt's claims to a fundamental historical fissure. Even in his archaeological methodology, Foucault connects past to present through seeking to discover the "rifts ... stirring under our feet".⁹¹ The distinctiveness of their concepts of technology, specifically the role of technology in modernity in terms of the degree of discontinuity with history, or the alienation of humans from their history, is intrinsic to their concepts of what is historically possible. In the context of their critiques of modernity, Arendt turns to the 'miracle' of human beginning and the possibility of natality that is ever present, as long as humans exist in the world, while Foucault seeks the recovery of care of the self, the technology of the self. For Arendt, this action realises a rejection of the modern technological world, while for Foucault, it represents a redefinition of technology.

91 M. Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 386.