

## Philosophy of the City

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# Welcoming Newcomers and Becoming Native to a Place: Arendt's *Polis* and the City Beautiful of Detroit

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**Abstract:** My goal, in interpreting Arendt's analyses of the polis – both modern and ancient – is to conceptualize the role that 'healthy' public spaces can play in modern cities. What distinguishes my interpretation of her work is how I integrate her seminal conception of a philosophy of natality in the constellation of elemental concepts: labor, work, and action, as a way to understand the rise and fall of Detroit and to set the possible horizon for its reincarnation as a 'sustainable' and flourishing city beautiful. For me, it is precisely this conceptualization, as a philosophy of natality, that enables us to better identify the metaphysical and political foundations of her ideas about the polis and its possible pragmatic application for recreating public spaces in other modern, cosmopolitan cities. I end up considering what it means to become "native to a place" in the sense that was adopted in the rebirth of the River Rouge Complex and just what that has to do with the emergence of the barrio of Mexicantown in Detroit as a quintessential sign of successful city living and a sign of hope for a brighter, more beautiful future.

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In what follows, I explore Hannah Arendt's philosophy of the *polis* to comment on the modern city through exploring the rise of Detroit as a "world city," its decline, and its potential for reinventing itself. Detroit is my case study. However, Arendt's phenomenological–ethical approach is the critical tool that guides my critique. My larger concern, as a philosopher of the city, generally has to do with how cities could and should function as the primary locus not only for providing essential goods and social services for the nation-states in which they are situated but also for eudemonic opportunities for cultivation and employment not only for a populace but also *and just as importantly* for stateless non-nationalists. In an unpublished paper that I presented at a Philosophy of the City conference in Porto, Portugal, I make the case that we should be thinking about the essential interrelatedness of contemporary phenomena of immigration and 'the sanctuary city'.<sup>1</sup> The central claim in that paper is the following: "[...] for a city to be sustainable it must be able to support the inclusion of exiles and strangers, *vis a vis* the existing international political order that is structured on a system of nation-states that can and have committed genocide or been otherwise hostile to humans and other living beings." This is the phenomenon that would have been uppermost in Arendt's mind in the 1950s when she was writing *The Human Condition*, which was published in 1958, because of her own status as stateless for 18 years.<sup>2</sup> She was only naturalized

<sup>1</sup> Simon, "An Ethical Challenge of *Exile and the City* for a Philosophy of the City."

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

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as a US citizen in 1951 after arriving there as an exile in 1941 from Europe after fleeing Nazi persecution and genocide. How she philosophically dealt with her circumstance continues to be timely and perhaps even more relevant today because of how immigrants, exiles, and refugees, globally, seek not only welcome and hospitality but also the kinds of material support that cities best provide: available and affordable housing, ample employment opportunities, and reliable social services such as education, police and the judicial system, health facilities, and public spaces for cultural and artistic self-exploration and expression.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt proposed that the phenomenon of the *polis* deserves our attention because it is the arena of “public space” where humans afford themselves the opportunity to demonstrate their creative ability, their expressive cultivation, and their ethical character. According to my interpretation of her proposal, she uses the forms of public space that developed in ancient Greece and Rome in order to critically assess the modern forces of bureaucracy, conformism, and mob-forming totalitarian and populist politics that, post-World War II, were characteristic of genocidal, federal nation-states such as Germany, Italy, and Japan. In doing so, she provides us with a phenomenology of the politics of the city as opposed to focusing on the federal powers and centralized governments of the modern nation states and the ethical nature of their responses to the racial, genocidal, and socio-economic abuses of totalitarian governments such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Arendt takes the latter approach in two of her other seminal books: *The Origins of Totalitarianism*<sup>3</sup> and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.<sup>4</sup>

With her two-fold focus in mind, I take up Arendt's critical tools as a means to focus attention on how the citizens that constitute modern cities can and do engender the kind of city-state that is able to counteract the worst effects of what has become a crisis of the under-reaching economic and social policies of modern nation-states. Contemporary modern nation-states just do not do enough for the marginal members of their own nations and, especially, for those people of the world seeking refuge and relief from persecution in their own ‘home’ countries. I believe such critical assessments follow practically from Arendt's underlying metaphysics. I set aside the obvious difficulties of how cities relate to other cities within distinct states and within an overarching federal government. This relates not only to the issue of sanctuary cities but also to the conflicts, especially in the United States, between federal and state governments and cities that have been sparked by the coronavirus pandemic in the first half of 2020. I see two very different city responses: (1) that of my home city, El Paso, TX, which was at odds with state-mandated ‘return to normal’ prescriptions by the state governor, Greg Abbott,<sup>5</sup> and (2) that of the home city of my fellow philosopher of the city, Sanna Lehtinen – Helsinki, Finland – which exemplifies an ethically functional relationship.<sup>6</sup>

## 1 Misreadings create misunderstandings

I begin with the common tendency to misread Arendt's ideas on the *polis* by interpreting her favorable comments about the *agora* of ancient Athens as an ideal, which we have to somehow romantically retrieve or reconstitute in order to experience the freedom of political expression and to test our character through public confrontations. Arendt does valorize the *agora* for the way in which it tests our political values and for how it enables lasting creations of art and culture, but, as I will show below, she ultimately rejects, on ethical grounds, the historical phenomenon of public space in Athens in order to reconceptualize modern public spaces – in the form of modern cosmopolitan cities – which not only would be more inclusive of

<sup>3</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

<sup>4</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*.

<sup>5</sup> Aguilar, “With COVID-19 cases rising, El Paso officials ask governor to exclude them from next phase of reopening.”

<sup>6</sup> Wahba, “A functional city's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.”

marginalized peoples but also could include the possibility for city dwellers to *check* the powers of state and nation-state governments.

The issue has to do with the function of local self-governance versus national political sovereignty and the relationship of the two. Singapore, Malta, Monaco, and the Vatican City exemplify what constitute contemporary ‘sovereign’ city-states. But a looser definition could include cities that historically exercise greater degrees of governing independence and which, by virtue of their histories and concentrations of population and economic, industrial, and cultural powers, count as city-states in the sense of being ‘world’ cities. A list of those would include Hong Kong, New York City, Paris, London, Berlin, Mexico City, Delhi, Mumbai, Beijing, and even a ‘failed city’ like Detroit. Why Detroit? Because at one time in its history, around 1950, Detroit was THE wealthiest city in the world and was a mecca for migration, architectural innovation, urban expansion, transportation, and cultural integration and segregation. Moreover, the issue of sovereignty and local control is especially important given the increasing rise in the preemption of the control of city governance at the local level by state and federal powers, noted with concern in a report by the National League of Cities.<sup>7</sup> And although I have never been a citizen of the city of Detroit and thus am an outsider looking in, from those limited perspectives, it is clear that even an outsider like me can understand how the recent loss of local governing control was a significant ethical problem for that city, as well as a contributing factor to the city’s serious metaphysical identity issues. Detroit emerged from state-mandated control after filing for bankruptcy in May 2018 and thereby assumed full governance for the first time in four decades.<sup>8</sup>

This takes me to the other two parts of my paper: Mexicantown, a thriving immigrant neighborhood in Detroit, and the Ford River Rouge Complex in Dearborn, Michigan. I contend that both of these places function interdependently as reconstructed Arendtian “public spaces” for how they provide essential existential developments for substantive flourishing of a new form of Detroit as the City Beautiful. I focus on Mexicantown to address the ongoing and current ethical issues surrounding local and global phenomena of immigration and for Detroit in particular, especially given the historically determinate role that immigration has had and continues to have for that city. I direct attention to the role of auto manufacturing, specifically the role of the Ford Motor company and its River Rouge Complex in the environs of Detroit, in order to address city sustainability and the interdependent issues of socio-economic justice and environmental responsibility, which is captured in the phrase, adopted by leaders in the Ford company, “becoming native to a place.”<sup>9</sup> Braungart, an architect, and McDonough, a chemist, lay out the practical steps for reversing the production of waste cycles of modern Western industrialism and envision what such a future would look like. As a global, multi-national company that served to thrust Detroit onto the socio-economic world stage, the Ford River Rouge Complex played an essential role in Detroit’s rise to international prominence as a ‘world city’ and, just as significantly, its subsequent and recent designation as a ‘failed city.’

My goal, in interpreting Arendt’s analyses of the *polis* – both modern and ancient – is to conceptualize the role that ‘healthy’ public spaces can play in modern cities. What distinguishes my interpretation of her work is how I integrate her seminal conception of a philosophy of natality in the constellation of elemental concepts: labor, work, and action, as a way to understand the rise and fall of Detroit and to set the possible horizon for its reincarnation as a ‘sustainable’ and flourishing city beautiful. For me, it is precisely this conceptualization, a philosophy of natality, that enables us to better identify the metaphysical and political foundations for her ideas about the *polis* and its possible pragmatic application for recreating public spaces in other modern, cosmopolitan cities. I end up considering what it means to become “native to a place” in the sense that was adopted in the rebirth of the River Rouge complex and just what that has to do with the emergence of the barrio of Mexicantown in Detroit as a quintessential sign of successful city living and a sign of hope for a brighter, more beautiful future.

<sup>7</sup> Wagner, “Restoring City Rights in an Era of Preemption: A Municipal Action Guide.”

<sup>8</sup> Terry, “Detroit in control for the 1st time in decades.”

<sup>9</sup> Braungart and McDonough, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*.

## 2 Hannah Arendt and the Polis

Generally, Arendt's work in *The Human Condition* has been interpreted as an uncritical adoration of the ancient Greek city-state *polis* that was Athens, which she used to launch her views on political action, freedom, and the public realm. The general critique focuses on what she left out, namely, issues such as totalitarianism, slavery, and oppression, which so passionately inform her other works such as *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which she wrote earlier, and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which she wrote later. Her detractors claim that she uncritically adored Pericles' Athens by conveying a moral nostalgia for Greek polis life and the role the public space of the *agora* played in that society. But her actual position is much more complex in that she mounts a subtle but clear critique of the modern society, particularly the modern polis, through her similarly sharp and nuanced critique of the Greek polis. In other words, she does not commit to any kind of romantic vision of somehow recreating the Greek city-state and the *agora* in a modern context.

Her comments about the polis occur mainly in two widely separate sections of the *The Human Condition*, in chapter 2, "The Public and the Private Realm"<sup>10</sup> and in chapter 5, "Action."<sup>11</sup> In the first, Arendt draws explicitly on Greek ideas to explicate what constitutes a 'true' political public realm, while the second includes her comments that the polis is the place where one can achieve "immortal fame" and which serves as a "kind of organized remembrance" of its citizens' deeds.<sup>12</sup> But Arendt's intentions are different in both sections because, with a closer reading, it's clear that she does not endorse the second position, that is, she rejects the Greek beliefs about the polis.

The second departure comes from the argument that she proposes throughout the entirety of the text about what conditions make human action comprehensible, which has to do precisely with ideas about freedom that she got from Kant. An important corollary to that is found in her German translation of the text that was originally written in English and published two years later in 1960.<sup>13</sup> That text provides significant amplifications of her thought train from the English version. In that text she uses the term *vita activa* to cover all three of what she calls the "fundamental elements" of humanity – labor, work, and action – and not just "speech and action" as in the English version, because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions to which life has been given to humans on earth. Those conditions are that we are living beings, that we inhabit a world of our own making, and that the world we inhabit is shared with others.

Labor is what we do or is done for us by others to sustain our biological condition, our recurring natural needs that we share with other living beings – consumption, sexual reproduction, and basic physical subsistence that have to do with all metabolic life. Labor conforms to the cycle and rhythms of growth and decay and is simply a common and unavoidable, that is, ineliminable part of being human.

Work has to do with the production of durable things such as tools, shelter, modes of transportation such as cars, and all those things that help our laboring activities – what she refers to as "the human artifice." Work conforms to "fabrication" and thus lends some stability to the ebb and flow of our laboring life with its rootedness in the vagaries of the natural world.

Action is what goes on directly between humans without intervention of things or matter. It does not sustain our bodies or add things to the world but affects and intangibly 'conditions' the "web of human relationships" that exists "wherever men live together" and is that, and only that, which bestows meaning on our lives and our world.<sup>14</sup>

What is important to note is that Arendt's intent is not to provide an exclusive taxonomy, as if humans could be reductively identified just with one or the other fundamental dimension – we lead diverse and

<sup>10</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Arendt, *Vita Activa: oder Vom tätigen Leben*.

<sup>14</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 236.

complex lives – but rather to provide three categorical abstractions, each having their own internal logic and dynamics of change over time, in order to provide a preliminary means to initially identify ourselves (and others) with one of the categories. Doing so does not entail, however, that I am ontologically determined to be fixed in one of these categories.

Let's take the case of an autoworker to exemplify the way that these categorical abstractions work. Insofar as an assembly line worker relies on her *labor* at the Ford assembly plant in the neighboring Rouge River Plant in Dearborn, she provides for the daily needs of food and drink for her body and the money needed to shelter her from inclement weather. In this way, the assembly-line worker relies on her job because she continues to need to meet her physiological needs day after day and does so as one among many other anonymous *laborers*. To the extent to which the assembly line worker considers what she does is part of the work to fabricate a product that will last far beyond her daily work, and perhaps will endure for multiple generations, she engages in the role of *worker* but also anonymously since upon which she works does not have to be associated with her name or be attributed to her. But to the extent to which the assembly line worker signs a contract or lends someone her tools or creates something originally is when that *worker* becomes distinctly individualized and assumes responsibility for the things she makes or owns or exchanges. It is then when we need a system to keep track of relations between persons. This is the realm of interpersonal relations and of *action*.

In support of my thesis, Roy Tsao, in "Arendt Against Athens, Rereading the Human Condition," argues that instead of aligning with Aristotle's metaphysical project of accounting for change through dividing the human psyche into the categories of nutritive, sensitive, and rational, Arendt follows Kant in developing a modified transcendental account to arrive at universal truths about being human, based entirely on our experiences of the world without saying what the world is 'in itself'.<sup>15</sup> Tsao notes that "In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had sought to derive a priori principles valid for any possible experience solely from the way our cognitive faculties must organize all such experience."<sup>16</sup> The point Tsao makes is that what Kant meant by 'possible' has to do with 'possible to understand' in the sense that any perceptible object of our experience is necessarily structured by pre-existing constraints on our understanding, namely our space/time intuitions. Similarly, Arendt's labor–work–action attributions of the human condition are likewise constraints on the *fundamental* ways that we are able to perceive and then comprehend how to effect continuity and change in the world.

And this is where taking up an alternative narrative on Arendt becomes interesting for my thesis. Renouncing one's birth status of foreignness, of just 'progressing' through life as a cause and effect link in the chain of genus maintenance, is done by 'making a name' for oneself through taking responsibility for one's spontaneous actions as part of one's life story in the web of relations of many others' life stories. "To make an appearance as 'someone' among others can only be taken (or done) by someone who is ready to move among others, to give out who one is [...]."<sup>17</sup> I come back to this point later to account for the way that Mexicans and Hispanics of Mexicantown have taken and continue to take responsibility for their actions by uniquely inserting their own life stories into the web of relations that is Detroit and the auto industry, exemplified by the Ford motor company.

In order to get to that responsibility-taking action, however, it's important to note that for Arendt, without being ready to make herself known by "announcing what [s]he does, has done, and intends to do," any action by an 'agent' would be impossible. However, an agent being ready to move among others is necessary but insufficient since others must be in a position to recognize and acknowledge the uniqueness of her actions – that she is not an animal, not a replaceable cog in a machine, and not a black or brown slave. Only when both conditions are met can there be what Arendt calls the space of "in-between" or the "space of appearances" where someone has to be ready to "come into appearance" (*in Erscheinung zu treten*) anew, that is, by meeting the expectations of others who, in their place, are ready to

<sup>15</sup> Tsao, "Arendt Against Athens, Rereading the Human Condition," 97–123.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 104.

recognize the initiative of that assembly line worker. Again, this illuminates the relationships of the River Rouge complex with Mexicantown and Detroit; the relationship of the owners of the means of production with laborers and workers, with the United Auto Workers union; and the relationship of governing a city with the co-creation of the 'appearance' of its citizens. The Ford River Rouge Complex and Detroit had to – and still have to – be able to recognize and acknowledge the uniqueness of the 'newcomers' who happen to be Mexicans and/or Hispanics. These newcomers, immigrants seeking work and incorporation and acceptance in the city of Detroit and the work environment of the Ford River Rouge Plant, continue to seek recognition and acknowledgement for their unique efforts in laboring, working, and acting.

What their efforts mean for my thesis is that Arendt's cosmopolitan position on the modern *polis* presupposes the potential for actualizing an anti-racist, anti-exploitative *situation* where foreigners' or immigrants' contributions are recognized and valuable in this or that city-state – in Detroit, in this case – and 'original' to them, to Mexicans and Hispanics in Mexicantown. What I mean by that claim has to do not only with my interpretation of Arendt's "philosophy of natality" but also with its application, which "focuses on the distinctly human capacity to bring forth the new, the radical, and the unprecedented into the world."<sup>18</sup> This is the relevance and salience of Mexicantown.

In "The Disclosure of the Agent in Speech and Action," Arendt claims that such entering into appearances, through a philosophy of natality that embraces the ongoing potential of ever-new innovative initiatives of humans in their mortal condition of being ever-born-anew with the capacity to begin anew, finds its actualization in the realm of public space, of an actualizing *polis* such as Athens but even more so with Detroit. What I mean by that has to do with the distinction that Arendt makes between a public realm being genuinely political, and which thus provides the context for genuinely free acts, or if it is just social. What she intends by referring to being 'just social' has to do with "the public organization of the life process itself [...]. The form [of living together] in which the fact of mutual dependences for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance."<sup>19</sup> In such an organization, humans are driven by just the needs of their bodies and nothing else, for mere survival or for just laboring in order to consume. Such an existence, like those living through the Holocaust, necessarily reduces humans to lives of coercive determinacy and an ethics of banality, an ethical conceptualization that could be easily reconstructed for an Arendtian-guided analysis, especially given her works on totalitarianism and of the ethics of Eichmann. It is characterized by the demands of society, by the demands of the *polis* as the city where we live out our laboring and working lives and which also then constitutes a regime of uniformity and homogeneity represented by the Greek City-state of Athens with its normative demands that would align with those of a *federally determined* nation-state which encompasses the modern *polis*, the modern cosmopolitan city or metropolis. This is how we find the *polis* then as a realm of unfreedom.

Regarding social justice in particular, Arendt notes that the space for freedom is possible in any situation. Accordingly, a 'genuine' polis or public space is "where I appear to others, as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly."<sup>20</sup> What this means is that Arendt rejects the Greek idea that the singularity of deeds could be preserved through a wall-like barrier of laws, which entails the subsequent repudiation that the public realm should be reserved for the monumental, awe-inspiring deeds of a few elite, aristocratic men.

"The polis, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be."<sup>21</sup> It is "the space of appearances in the widest sense of the word" and the polis is the "public realm."<sup>22</sup> This goes against the grain of the Greek idea of the *polis* as a fixed structure "physically secured by a wall around the city and physiognomically

<sup>18</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 198–99.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 22–78.

guaranteed by its laws.” Rather, those physical structures and those laws need to be able to change dynamically and be open to human initiatives and innovations that are able to infuse new forms of life into the city, along the lines of a philosophy of natality. For Arendt, action is essentially rooted in our capacity as humans to begin, to have been born; indeed, action is synonymous with beginning and our ability to break with the past.<sup>23</sup> But the capacity to begin anew is just as likely on the level of neighborhood, *barrio*, city, or university. Stopping to help someone who is being beaten by another person exemplifies this and leads to inspiring others to act likewise. Our capacity to begin, to act, is ontologically and ethically rooted in natality: “we are capable of [action] by virtue of being born,”<sup>24</sup> that is, by virtue of our very mortality. The source of freedom for a human is by being born and thus having the capacity for making a new beginning. The essential point, for Arendt, is that “As newcomers and beginnings, we are able to start something new.”<sup>25</sup> Only as such mortal newcomers, including immigrants-as-newcomers, are we able to make distinctly *human* beginnings, not simply contributions to the ongoing cycle of life. Rather, as newcomers we are the kind of beings who make various forms of stability possible, of coming into appearance and disappearing. What this insight entails, which is important for my larger thesis, is that with each new birth, a ‘unique’ human being is born:

Nature and the cyclical movement into which she forces all living things know neither birth nor death as we understand them. The birth and death of human beings are not simple natural occurrences but are related to a world into which single individuals, unique, unexchangeable, and unrepeatable entities, appear and from which they depart.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to establish the quality of uniqueness because it provides the ground for Arendt’s conceptualization of plurality. As she states at the very beginning of *The Human Condition*: “men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”<sup>27</sup> And what she means by that phrase is that plurality is more than mere multiplicity, it is the plurality of *unique* beings.<sup>28</sup>

Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness [of human beings]. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men. This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human.<sup>29</sup>

We don’t merely reproduce, or labor, or work, but we make ourselves unique through acting on our potential for action and novel initiations and our departures from the mere repetition of fixed patterns and categories. This latter way of thinking could also be referred to as assembly line thinking. We all have our unique life stories that we insert into the world of existing appearances.

In “On Violence,” Arendt refers to the term “natality” by saying that “we come into the world by virtue of birth, as newcomers and beginnings.”<sup>30</sup> And it is precisely this notion of natality that Arendt refers to as “the arrival of newcomers in the web of human relationships” that I want to draw upon for my thesis.<sup>31</sup> For Arendt, “the web of human relationships” is a term that she employs in *The Human Condition* to stand for the manifold network of interpersonal relationships.<sup>32</sup> Newcomers constantly induce changes in this web, new threads are woven and new connections tied. For every child born, the parents must relate to the child and also change their relationship with each other, their extended families, their friends, and work

<sup>23</sup> Arendt, “On the Concept of History,” 61.

<sup>24</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247. See also Arendt, *On Revolution*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Arendt, *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics, Civil Disobedience on Violence, Thoughts on Politics and Revolution*, 179.

<sup>26</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 96–97.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>30</sup> Arendt, *Crises of the Republic: Lying in Politics, Civil Disobedience on Violence, Thoughts on Politics and Revolution*, 179; and Totschnig, “Arendt’s Notion of Natality: An Attempt at Clarification,” 327–46.

<sup>31</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

relationships. The child continues to change other relationships as she grows and relates to siblings, other children, teachers, etc. Every birth is a source of action that cannot be foreseen by those who are already in the world. As she articulates in “The Concept of History,” “through [the fact of natality] the human world is constantly invaded by strangers, newcomers whose actions and reactions cannot be foreseen by those who are already there.”<sup>33</sup> Totshnig likewise notes that for Arendt, every birth introduces a new being with the capacity to act who, by virtue of being born with such a capacity, must necessarily act and insert herself into the web of human relationships and thereby forces others to act in order to respond to her initiative. But because Arendt is so reticent about the concept, Totshnig elaborates for her:

And so, to the extent that a capacity is brought about – and kept alive – by that which makes the capacity necessary, the condition of birth can be said to be the source of the capacity for action. In other words, this capacity depends on that condition in the sense that, without the constant arrival of newcomers, it would probably atrophy and eventually disappear.<sup>34</sup>

To be as clear as possible, Arendt is critical of the entire approach of the political economy of the Athenian polis as she notes in her rejection of the Greek attempt to emancipate action from work:

Contempt for laboring, originally arising out of a passionate striving for freedom from and no less passionate impatience with every effort that left no trace, no monument, no great work worthy of remembrance, spread with the increasing demands of polis life upon the time of its citizens and its insistence on their abstention (*skhole*) from all but political activities, until it covered everything that demanded an effort.<sup>35</sup>

Her intent is to highlight the contempt of the Greeks who, in their construction of the *polis* that led precisely to the erection of monuments and great works, revealed the extent to which the citizens were too busy in their fevered attempts to achieve fame and momentary recognition to put in the effort to create good, painstaking, and *labor-taking* works that could have allowed for genuinely free actions, art, and speech. For a related analysis of monumentality, see my article, “The Socially Transformative Aesthetics of Street Culture: From Walter Benjamin’s *One-Way Street* to *The Arcades Project*.”<sup>36</sup> However, such *genuine* works would have consisted of establishing the city-state on principles and practices that were foreign to their embedded philosophies of race, ethnicity, language differences, and gender.

Arendt was clear about how distressingly deep the ways in which the ethical injustices of the Greeks and then the Romans led to the citizens of the ancient *polis* forcing labor on others, especially on slaves and on women:

The price for the elimination of labor from the shoulders of all citizens [i.e. the ‘citizens of the ancient Greek city-state, the landowners] was enormous and by no means consisted only in the violent injustice of forcing one part of humanity into the darkness of pain and necessity. Since this darkness is natural, inherent in the human condition [...] the price for absolute freedom from necessity is life itself, or rather the substitution of vicarious life for real life.<sup>37</sup>

Returning to Arendt’s original thesis, a genuinely ‘political’ public realm consists in the ability of a citizen to leave her home, as the place of necessary labor for meeting the ongoing biological and physical needs of every bodily human. By freely exercising their capacity to start something new, that is, by exercising their ability to freely come and go or to freely stay or leave, they are able to comport with each other *as if* they were freed from the constraints of necessity. What this all comes down to is that Arendt’s critique of the modern *polis* is not based on the normative condition of the Greek’s contempt for labor but rather it is based on the ways in which the modern society is *organized* around labor, which takes most of our time

<sup>33</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, 61.

<sup>34</sup> Totshnig, “Arendt’s Notion of Natality: An Attempt at Clarification,” 18.

<sup>35</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

<sup>36</sup> Simon, “The Socially Transformative Aesthetics of Street Culture: From Walter Benjamin’s *One-Way Street* to *The Arcades Project*.”

<sup>37</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 119–20.

and attention in the form of a normativized exploitation. It takes little effort to see in her critique a condemnation of those kinds of city places as the Ford River Rouge Complex, prior to its reconstruction, around which so many hundreds and thousands of humans made their living and struggled to establish working conditions that allowed for regulated working days, regular holidays, and reliable health benefits.

The huge expansion of economic activity and the rise of Detroit to become the wealthiest city in the world in 1950 resulted, according to an Arendtian analysis, from the emancipation of labor from its traditional place in the private household, an emancipation which began with the expropriation of the peasantry in the early modern period. This division of labor into specialties happened, for Arendt, not out of labor itself but because of the new-found capacities to organize human relations. Historically, the organization also then resulted in distortion of the role of action, that is, in the modern society, putting action in the service of labor and consumption. It was in this way that, according to Arendt, labor ‘invaded’ the public realm.

Calculations about fixing ‘labor’ relations and ‘freeing’ humans from exploitative labor then became the dominant mode of ‘free’ discussion in the *polis*, in the public space. For Arendt, however, the *polis* should be more like a ‘portable’ entity that has to endure without stabilizing protections such as ‘fixed’ city walls or laws embedded in fixed socio-political identities.<sup>38</sup> Hence, Arendt recalls the phrase “wherever you go, there will be a polis” masqueraded as the parole for Greek colonization that extended through the misadventures of conquest and brutal domination by war-ready peoples for thousands of years and across the face of the entire earth. Many of our cities across the face of this earth, especially those “world cities” that developed in this conquest model, are part of that long and troubled lineage. However, from an Arendtian revised post-colonial perspective, I maintain that this parole can be transformed when we remember her interpretive intent, namely, that “action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost anytime and anywhere.” Such words can create public spaces for the exercise of free expression, critically construed, because such expression is challenged for its ethical intent, social aims and purposes, and the ability to contribute to the flourishing growth of a polis, of a city like Detroit. What was forgotten along way – but can be intentionally recalled – is the Arendtian insight that every birth introduces a new human with the capacity for a new beginning.

### 3 Mexicantown and the River Rouge Ford Complex

This leads to my concluding remarks as I return to the ideas with which I began, namely, enabling the potential for action and speech of foreigners – like current Mexicans and other Hispanics in Detroit – by welcoming them and their Arendtian-style *natality* initiatives. Concretely, such initiatives consist of their own, mostly action-based, work practices within the city of Detroit, inspired by the spirit of earlier migrants to this community. Like the current immigrants and exiles, they were drawn by the promise of employment in the transportation and service industries. Most importantly, now as then, the immigrants and exiles are drawn by the horizon of possibilities that beckons them to “become native to a place.”<sup>39</sup>

As I noted earlier, the phrase “becoming native to a place” is from the design philosophy of McDonough and Braungart, which was adopted by McDonough and Ford’s owners when the former was

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>39</sup> “Michigan State University (with Dr. Clayton Rugh among others) partnered with Ford on this project—believed to be the first such experiment on this scale with the challenging soil conditions on the site. It was thought that if the pilot were successful, it would be used elsewhere on the site and potentially could become an ecologically friendly alternative to hauling contaminated soil to landfills in the future.” <https://www.greenroofs.com/projects/ford-motor-companys-river-rouge-truck-plant/>, accessed 1 August 2020.

hired to help transform and re-design the Ford River Rouge Complex manufacturing plant. That was an integral part of Ford's attempt to re-invent itself, in the context of global warming, and creatively meet the demands of manufacturing worldwide in a harshly competitive, global, capitalist environment. Their "new beginning" occurred in the context of an emerging awareness of the responsibility of automobile manufacturers and owners as fossil-fuel burning vehicles were, and still are, one of the primary causes for global warming. Ford hired McDonough, almost 20 years ago, to rebirth a failed factory at River Rouge. Ford made the momentous decision that instead of abandoning the River Rouge plant to become just another brown site in need of another federally assisted, tax-supported cleanup, they would take another path and recommit to Detroit, to the place which they helped to become both globally successful as a center of capitalist production and globally notorious as a failed city. They decided to recommit to the people and the place and, in the process, to help recreate the *polis* of Detroit. I learned of their efforts when I taught McDonough's and Braungart's book, *Cradle to Cradle*, in my Environmental Ethics class during the Spring 2019 semester. Quoting from them, "The company's overarching decision is to become native to each place. From that decision, local solutions follow, are adopted and adapted elsewhere as appropriate, and are continually revised and refined, effecting a profound process of change that may ultimately embrace every aspect of what a company makes and how it is produced, marketed, sold, and cycled on."<sup>40</sup>



**Figure 1:** The Green Roof of the River Rouge Ford Complex. Aerial photo, November 2007. Photo Courtesy of Xero Flor America.

Mexicantown and the River Rouge Complex grew up together, both commencing around the 1920s and, on parallel tracks, suffering setbacks in their historical progressions. The auto industry failed because of its miscalculation about globalization and sustainability, and the Mexicantown community suffered because of racial reactions of the privileged and embedded European immigrant communities to the failed economy and their inability to welcome 'other' newcomers. As is common knowledge, by the 1950s, the River Rouge plant had become one of the most important integrated manufacturing plants in the entire nation, indeed in the entire world. Mexicans and Hispanics began migrating to Detroit, along with other, mainly European, immigrant communities. All of them were attracted by the "American Dream" of a new life and of progressive wages being offered by Ford – \$5.00 per day, which would be about \$60.00 per day today.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 164

<sup>41</sup> Vargas, "City Spirit – MexicanTown – Detroit, Michigan."



**Figure 2:** The mural “City Spirit” by George Vargas and Martin Moreno in Mexicantown, symbolizing the deep, rich integration of Latinos in Detroit with an image of the tree of life uniting the ancient roots of Latino culture with modern industrial Detroit. Jules Simon (pointing to the tree) and his student, Edgar Llamas.

At this point, I want to conclude by making two related points: one having to do with the changes of Ford’s River Rouge Complex and the other with the amazing development of Mexicantown as one of the brightest success stories of present-day Detroit. Both phenomena are related to what I have been developing in my thesis on Arendt’s ideas about our need to reconceptualize our modern cities as cosmopolitan and her ideas about what engenders vibrant regions of public spaces that not only allow for the expression of new forms of human initiative but also encourage and sustain those regions. This seems to be happening in Detroit, as far as I can judge from my place in another US city deeply affected by immigration: El Paso, Texas. My personal experience of how El Paso has dealt with the socio-economic conditions of immigration directly motivated my interest in similar issues in Detroit. What is going on at the River Rouge Complex and with Mexicantown, however, is dramatically different than what is happening at the border of the United States and Mexico and the sister cities of El Paso and Juarez, which are divided by the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo. Whereas the politics of manufacturing dictate that industrial production, which mostly occurs in Juarez, Mexico, continues along traditional “cradle to grave” dynamics and workers are exploited and deemed expendable, at the River Rouge Complex, new forms of manufacturing have taken hold, growing on Ford’s previous commitment to integrated and flexible manufacturing processes but now transformed into globally sustainable manufacturing processes, on display with their ‘green roof’ and sustainable, environmentally cognizant designs that reflect their ongoing commitment to become “native to a place.” What I mean by that latter phrase has to do with not only their rebirth to embrace manufacturing in environmentally sustainable ways but also with their commitment to a twenty-first century work force of this place, not only of Dearborn but also of Detroit. This means that they practice the virtues of an Arendtian public space by continuing to welcome and support immigrants and exiles, specifically Mexicans and Hispanics who have settled and continue to settle in Mexicantown, not only through maintaining their ‘healthy’ manufacturing plant in the Detroit metropolitan area but also by remaining open to other ‘newcomers’.

For an indication of the enthusiasm surrounding the investment by the Detroit municipal government in the Mexicantown neighborhood, see Neil Rubin’s article “Detroit’s Mexicantown, Avenue of Fashion

endure construction pains.”<sup>42</sup> It is extraordinary that Mexicantown and the Avenue of Fashion are profiled in relatively equivalent ways in this article because of the ethnic, economic, and geographical distances between the two neighborhoods. It has been said about the Avenue of Fashion that before malls existed, this was a top regional destination for luxury shopping and, “True to its name, The Avenue of Fashion was once the place to shop for Motor City executives and Motown legends alike – filling the streets with glamour and glitz, which was reflected in the boutiques, restaurants and saloons that occupied the avenue.”<sup>43</sup> It also has a rich American jazz legacy and an African-American cultural heritage that has shaped the arts and business on Livernois. Detroit played a significant role in the complex history of the City Beautiful Movement,<sup>44</sup> which, however, led to its ultimate demise because of the imbalanced overemphasis on that city exemplifying the worst, instrumental aspects of consumer commodification combined with deeply dividing issues of socio-economic practices of racial injustice. These are the issues that led to Detroit’s decline that I hope to have clarified, with Arendt’s help, in this article. But what I hope to have also achieved is the current, hopeful remaking of Detroit – as I have also played out with the help of Arendt’s critique of the modern *polis*. Thus, it is fitting that, in closing, I bring attention to and honor the Mexican and Hispanic community of Mexicantown itself, to those ‘newcomers’ who – in their own unique and inimitable human ways are content to recreate public spaces – and in the authenticating spirit of Arendt’s concept of natality, continue to become native to the greater public place that is becoming the ‘reborn’ city beautiful of Detroit.

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<sup>42</sup> Rubin, “Detroit’s Mexicantown, Avenue of Fashion endure construction pains.”

<sup>43</sup> Seymour, “Back in Style: Detroit’s Avenue of Fashion Shines Again.”

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