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Rereading Arendt in Current Political Contexts

SAYING "OKAY" TO THE WORLD: NATALITY, CAPTURED DISSENT, AND THE CASE FOR ARENDT NOW

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Abstract

Twenty years after Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's Why Arendt Matters *restated Arendt's relevance for the war on terror, this article argues that the vocabulary of anti-totalitarian resistance has itself become an instrument of authoritarian politics, and asks what in Arendt's thought explains the capture. It examines two cases: the migration of Giorgio Agamben's biopolitical vocabulary from the critique of the security state into far-right conspiracism, and the reactionary appropriation of Václav Havel's parable of the greengrocer to recast exclusion as dissent. Both, it argues, share a philosophical substrate — thrownness without natality — which Arendt's account of natality and speech alone can answer. The article turns to literature to read this substrate through David Szalay's (2025) Booker Prize-winning novel* Flesh *against Havel's greengrocer, showing that care with language is not an intellectual ornament over and above bare life, but a political capacity whose loss is central to an unravelling world order.*

Keywords: Hannah Arendt; Václav Havel; Giorgio Agamben; Elisabeth Young-Bruehl; natality; thoughtlessness; language; political capacity; authoritarian politics.

Introduction

2026 marks the 120th anniversary of Hannah Arendt's birth and what would have been Václav Havel's ninetieth. It also marks a third, quieter anniversary: two decades since Elisabeth Young-Bruehl published *Why Arendt Matters*, in which the author repurposed Arendt for the world of September 11, and the wars and regimes that followed (Young-Bruehl 2006).

Both Arendt and Havel built their politics on the conviction that a certain kind of speech — plural, truthful, spoken among people who might answer back — is what stands

between a person and domination. This article argues that both bodies of thought, indispensable for articulating and resisting totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, are now in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, supplying the vocabulary for the opposite of that project, through various routes. Havel's own parable of the quiet refusal of a greengrocer has been lifted, in many examples of public discourse directly into the service of causes it should never serve. In Arendt's case, the method she used to describe authoritarian oppression is now often mirrored by authoritarian-leaning critiques of anti-authoritarian causes, and a lineage running through Giorgio Agamben — who offered his own vocabulary as the fulfilment of an Arendtian project — can be traced in public discourse about biopolitical measures, including its more conspiratorial registers. What connects these two routes of capture, I will argue, is a shared philosophical mistake, a picture of the human being as thrown into a situation with no capacity to begin anything new. I will offer Arendt's account of natality and speech as the prescription.

Young-Bruehl argued that Arendt's account of thoughtlessness as the source of evil deeds remained correct. Thoughtlessness, Young-Bruehl demonstrated, was a feature of the public discourse in the post 9-11 world as in coming to terms with the attacks, public discussion, through media and political analysis, was full of historical analogies which made the ensuing violence a foregone conclusion. The World Trade Centre was the modern Pearl Harbor, Osama bin Laden was like Hitler, Saddam Hussein was a totalitarian, and with these analogies the only possible outcome was war (Young-Bruehl 2006, 12).

Young-Bruehl then sets out the case for Arendt, as a complex thinker who can help diagnose and treat the modern situation.

> [...] to the right and to the left of the political spectrum, among people who have dedicated their lives to preventing revolution and among those who have put their hopes in it, violence has become so habitual and easily rationalized that politicians, revolutionaries, and now terrorists no longer even wonder whether the violence they want to undertake might do more harm than good, especially in cases where there is no identified, or even identifiable, enemy. Violence is what it takes to "make history." Arendt drew distinctions (which we shall consider later) between acting and making and between violence and power, which were not well understood in 2001 and which still are not well understood, but which are, to my mind, distinctions without which we—the people—cannot understand our world. And we are in terrible peril because of our ignorance. (Young-Bruehl 2006, 13)

Young-Bruehl hence builds her case for Arendt on the simple lesson that making critical distinctions in our thinking matters. It is a lesson in letting things be complicated and nuanced, and in resisting the temptation to divide the world into an axis of good and evil.

Two decades on, the case for Arendt needs restating in different terms, because the failure of public discourse has, I contend, changed shape. The philosophical imaginaries of the war on terror have migrated. Polarization (the shift to those axis) is far more concentrated through social media and the rapid decline of civil society, and the need to reconsider what we do is more pressing than ever. Alarmingly, the language and the analogies of resistance to totalitarian power now serve, in some quarters, movements and regimes of a distinctly authoritarian character. In that sense, the tendency towards reductive analogies has continued and amplified. The widespread and accelerating erosion of democratic institutions is narrated among growing quarters, which celebrate that erosion, as a step toward freedom. Additionally environmental regulation from some circles is presented as a goose-step toward control. Also, regrettably, in a polarized public sphere, progressive causes for diversity and inclusion are presented by reactionaries who decry such political ideas, as a case-study in thoughtlessness opening the door to domination.

On Arendt's account a political order is an artefact of speech. The charters, treaties, and constitutions of the postwar settlement that she described were mutual promises, and the power they generate lasts only as long as people remain bound to one another through word and deed. Violence, for Arendt, is mute, and it moves in where speech has broken down. In this paper I will explore the reversing of the critique of authoritarian politics as an aspect of the degradation of public discourse that contributes to the proliferation of violence in the public sphere. A vocabulary of resistance is a set of tools for naming so that what is done to people can be made visible and said. When those words are captured, and spoken with their moral gravity by the powers they were forged to resist, then people lose the means of naming what is being done to them. A public that cannot trust its own political vocabulary is drifting toward the condition Arendt considered the ground of totalitarian rule, in which the distinction between fact and fiction had been ruined by ideological thinking (Arendt 1968b, 474). The faculty on which this capture operates is the one Young-Bruehl identified as the casualty of the early 2000s: the capacity of a public to critically reason by analogy.

The failure has a further dimension. Thinking, for Arendt, is already a conversation, the two-in-one dialogue of me with myself, and judgment depends on making present in one's own mind the standpoints of those who are absent; however, the standpoints one can make present are those one has actually encountered. An analogy is tested against imagined objections, and in an increasingly polarized public sphere, those encounters are only undertaken from a position of disgust with the position of others. In a polarized public sphere that company narrows to the already persuaded, and the inner rehearsal of thought inherits the narrowing: the only objections one can imagine are those one's own side would raise.

Consider a recent Australian example. Asked in a television interview whether he supported boys learning about consent, the Leader of the Opposition, Angus Taylor, evaded the question by claiming that the curriculum was not "balanced"; there were "agendas being run by some teachers" (Staszewska 2026). The implied analogy, consent education as ideological indoctrination and therefore something that good critical thinking dissidents should resist, is emblematic of the kind of problematic reasoning that proliferates polarization. Dangerously, the analogy allows its extension, once something can be seen fitting under its growing umbrella. Taylor's language of resisting an imposed orthodoxy was actually defending an existing arrangement (one that proliferates gender-based violence) against the demand that it answer for itself. The rise of the manosphere in schools (and public) is a well understood problem (see for example, Wescott, Roberts, and Zhao 2024). However, the idea that we should do something about that must acknowledge the larger grounding of the issue in the wider patriarchy and structural sexism and misogyny that pervade. Analogies of this kind circulate without friction, gathering prestige instead of scrutiny, until they capture the arguments they were meant to serve. Consider the ambiguity around the term 'woke', at one point meaning someone who had awaken to see, like a platonic cave escapee, how social structures created and reinforced oppression, came to be an insult, for someone still clearly beholden to shadows. What has been lost is the plural space, public and internal at once, in which an analogy can be held to account.

This article examines two exemplary instances of this capture of critical resistance language and offers an account of what makes them possible and what defeats them. The first is the reception of Giorgio Agamben, whose vocabulary of bare life, the camp, and

the state of exception, offered at the outset of *Homo Sacer* as the completion of a project Arendt had begun, passed between 2004 and 2020 from the critique of the security state to the denunciation of all public health measures, and thence into the folk conspiracism of the far right, without alteration in reasoning. The second is the conscription of Vaclav Havel's 'The Power of the Powerless,' whose famous greengrocer, the man who refuses to place the regime's placard with a political slogan among his onions and carrots, is now enlisted to defend religious discrimination, to resist acknowledgements of Indigenous sovereignty, and to recast the expression of prejudice as an act of dissent. I argue that the two examples share a philosophical substrate, which I will call thrownness without natality, and that Arendt's thought is prescient now precisely because her account of natality, plurality, and above all speech (the medium in which a beginning becomes political rather than merely private) is what that substrate cannot absorb.

Agamben's Thoughtlessness

Thoughtlessness, in Arendt's usage, is not stupidity and not the absence of intelligence. It is the failure of an inner life to appear. Thinking, on her account, is invisible and worldless, a dialogue between me and myself conducted nowhere; what returns it to the world of appearances is language, specifically the metaphorical operation at the root of language. Arendt writes, in the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*:

> Analogies, metaphors, and emblems are the threads by which the mind holds on to the world even when, absentmindedly, it has lost direct contact with it, and they guarantee the unity of human experience. (Arendt 1978a, 109)

Thought cannot appear without metaphor; analogies are the indispensable bridge between private reflection and the shared world of appearances. Yet they are also uniquely vulnerable to decay. When an analogy hardens into a slogan, it ceases to reveal a situation and instead forecloses it. Eichmann exemplifies this terminal state: his speech was entirely made of prefabricated formulas designed precisely to prevent the world from reaching him—an incapacity to speak that Arendt identified as an incapacity to think and judge (Arendt 2006a, 49; see Young-Bruehl 2006, 3).

Between 2006 and the present, the nature of this analogical failure underwent a fundamental shift. The thoughtlessness Young-Bruehl diagnosed in the wake of September 11 was an error of application: analogies like Pearl Harbor did not fit their targets, yet they foreclosed debate by delivering unearned conclusions. The contemporary captures examined below take this mechanic a step further. Analogies of immense moral gravity are uncoupled from the conditions of their making, allowing their prestige to circulate entirely divorced from the labor of judgment. Thoughtlessness is no longer an accidental misstep of the mind trying to reach the world, but a self-sealing rhetoric that predetermines how that world must be felt. Nowhere was this uncoupling swifter than in the political migration from left to right of Giorgio Agamben's vocabulary.

Adam Kirsch, reviewing Agamben's *Self-Portrait in the Studio* in *The New York Review of Books*, sets two of the philosopher's actions side by side (Kirsch 2025). In 2004, Agamben cancelled a visiting professorship at New York University rather than submit to the post–September 11 biometric fingerprinting required by the Department of Homeland Security, denouncing the procedure as "biopolitical tattooing" analogous to the branding of prisoners at Auschwitz (Kirsch 2025). At the time, his progressive admirers celebrated the boycott as theory put into practice; his categories of bare life, the camp, and the state of exception mapped cleanly onto the critique of the global war on terror. In 2020, however, Agamben turned the same conceptual apparatus against Italy's pandemic lockdowns, warning that emergency measures were reducing citizens to pure biological survival and turning public-health apparatuses into modern Leviathans (Kirsch 2025). This time, his erstwhile admirers reacted with bewilderment and dismay.

As Kirsch observes, the underlying logic had not altered; what had shifted was the political valence of refusal (Kirsch 2025). Resistance to state surveillance had been coded as leftwing, while resistance to vaccination protocols had migrated right—a symmetry illustrated by the fact that right-wing conspiracy theories regarding microchips and biometric tracking were simply a folk version of the tale Agamben had told about fingerprints (Kirsch 2025). For Kirsch, this political inconsistency reveals that treating Agamben as an empirical political philosopher was always a category mistake (Kirsch 2025). Drawing on Agamben's late autobiographical reflections, Kirsch argues that Agamben understands philosophy as a "poetic practice" rather than a diagnostic science, pursuing symbolic resonance over political reality (Kirsch 2025). His political endpoint for Kirsh is the concept

of "inoperativity," wherein the functions of power are idled rather than contested. This is an aesthetic inheritance of Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*, a mystical posture of releasement and passive detachment rather than an agenda for political life (Kirsch 2025).

What Kirsch misses is that declaring a body of thought "poetic" does not render it politically inert. Concepts travel through speech, and as Arendt understood, metaphors are the threads by which a public grasps its reality. Agamben's concepts have certainly travelled: the vocabulary of bare life, the camp, and the state of exception now furnish the ideological architecture of movements any defender of constitutional government would oppose. Within this captured discourse, the vaccination needle is a biopolitical tattoo, a public-health register is a camp in waiting, and every emergency an exception declared by a hidden sovereign. The question is therefore not whether Agamben is genuinely a political philosopher, but how a philosophy whose terminal counsel is inoperativity came to find so wide an audience at the exact moment action was called for.
Answering that question requires taking seriously the claim Agamben makes upon Arendt. At the outset of *Homo Sacer* he credits her with priority over Foucault in bringing biopolitics into view:

> Almost twenty years before *The History of Sexuality*, Hannah Arendt had already analyzed the process that brings *homo laborans* — and, with it, biological life as such — gradually to occupy the very center of the political scene of modernity. (Agamben 1998, 3)

Agamben then laments that Arendt established no connection between the ideas of *The Human Condition* and her earlier analyses of totalitarian power, claiming that a properly biopolitical perspective is altogether absent from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Of course, Agamben will supply the missing link, and in so doing will fix the terms on which political thought must henceforth proceed:

> the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the *polis* — the politicization of bare life as such — constitutes the decisive event of modernity. (Agamben 1998, 4)

My argument is that while this omission in her earlier work is real, Agamben's account of it is fundamentally wrong. This disagreement is not a mere quibble about the architecture of Arendt's work; it is a clash over the nature of politics itself. Arendt did, in fact, reckon deeply with the entry of biological necessity into the political realm. She explored it at length in *On Revolution* through her analysis of the social question. When

the sheer necessity of biological survival, the cry of the poor and the boundlessness of bodily suffering, enters the public sphere, it inevitably mutates. Compassion is transmuted into pity, and pity hardens into ideology, a dynamic that, for Arendt, explains why the French Revolution ended in terror while the American Revolution succeeded in founding a constitution. Consequently, she reached the exact opposite conclusion from Agamben. For him, the politicization of bare life is the inescapable horizon within which all inherited categories of politics must be adjudicated. For her, it is the catastrophe that dissolves the political realm entirely. The task is therefore to found and defend a space in which something other than necessity can appear. The difference between a horizon one must think within and a disaster one must think against is the whole of the difference between them. There are excellent recent attempts to bring Arendt to bear on biopolitical theory. Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Płonowska Ziarek refigure natality in biopolitical and feminist terms, showing that Arendt's account is broader than Agamben's fixation on sovereign power and that she supplies conceptual resources in plurality, responsibility, hospitality, storytelling, which Agamben's framework does not register (Diprose and Ziarek 2018; see also Blencowe 2010). Similarly, Florian Pistrol and Melanie Mayerhofer, responding directly to Agamben's pandemic writings and their proximity to right-wing conspiracism, argue for an Arendtian biopolitics centered on agency rather than fatalism, emphasizing our capacity to join together and make a new beginning (Pistrol and Mayerhofer 2022). I am in sympathy with both approaches, but wish to press further than either. Their strategy is to reoccupy the biopolitical horizon with better content. Mine is to ask whether the horizon should be conceded at all. Arendt, I argue, had already refused it, and her concept of natality is what makes that refusal possible. By grounding politics in our capacity to act, speak, and appear as distinct individuals, natality insists that we are more than biological subjects waiting to be managed. It does not offer a better way to govern bare life; it demands a political realm in which bare life is no longer the centre of the story.

The Greengrocer Conscripted

The industrialized thoughtlessness that colonizes Agamben's biopolitical vocabulary has a non-biopolitical soulmate in the corruption of Václav Havel's legacy. If the first capture

repurposes the critique of the security state to evade social responsibility, the one analyzed in this section conscripts the language of anti-communist dissent to recast contemporary prejudice as heroism. Havel's dissidents face real organized oppression within what he called a post-totalitarian system. Unlike the totalitarian regimes Arendt describes, with their charismatic leaders, post-totalitarianism has no such figure and is indifferent to who holds power (Havel 1992). Rather than issuing direct commands, it influences and coerces behavior within a self-motivating system sustained by those very behaviors. It is able, unlike a mere dictatorship, to draw on real historical roots, so that the sanctioned understanding of the world carries an air of natural selection; and it has an answer for everything. Havel takes this ideological malleability to be part of its hypnotic charm, a promise of certainty in a world of diminishing certainties. It offers comfort, and he describes it as a kind of home in which anxiety and loneliness disappear:

> Of course, one pays dearly for this low-rent home: the price is abdication of one's own reason, conscience and responsibility, for an essential aspect of this ideology is the consignment of reason and conscience to a higher authority. (Havel 1992, 29)

Two further features matter for what follows, precisely because they expose the hypocrisy of this appropriation. First, the post-totalitarian system employs all of its citizens, directly or indirectly, intertwining daily life with mechanisms of control. This feature intersects conveniently with libertarian reactionary discourse, which eagerly reads the 'big state' as socialist domination. However, this reading deliberately ignores a second, crucial feature: for Havel, the Soviet and Western systems are two faces of the same technological coin. The dissident in 'The Power of the Powerless' is not attempting to Westernize Prague or import free-market capitalism; he is after an existential revolution that rejects the geopolitical binary entirely (Havel 1992).

It is precisely Havel's focus on the mundane, self-reproducing nature of ideology that the reactionary reading exploits. Once a person is primed to identify any expected social etiquette as a hostile ideological mandate, the analogy writes itself. A pronoun declaration on a form, an acknowledgment of country before a meeting, or a workplace policy on inclusive language can suddenly be presented as the regime's placard, and the person declining to participate as the heroic greengrocer.

This specific analogical capture has become remarkably widespread. In 2017, M. A. Casey, writing for an Australian Catholic University audience, connected 'The Power of the Powerless' to the defense of religious freedom. Casey conceded that no post-totalitarian power structure actively opposes religious liberty, but argued that modern ideological manipulation simply takes different cultural forms: the acceptance of abortion, shifting norms of gender and sexuality, and the enforcement of 'political correctness' and safe spaces (Casey 2017). In a similar vein, the Australian commentator John Roskam has explicitly linked the acknowledgment of country—the recognition of Indigenous custodianship with which public gatherings in Australia increasingly open—to the greengrocer's placards, thereby aligning the grievances of contemporary conservatives with the existential struggles of Havel and Solzhenitsyn, (Roskam 2023). Furthermore, in a widely shared series for the American journal *Providence*, Lubomir Martin Ondrasek presented Havel as a "prophet for America" who, as a leading anti-communist dissident, would surely stand against the intensifying attacks on freedom mounted by identity politics and "woke culture" (Ondrasek 2022).

This phenomenon is not particular to Australia. Nasi argues that the wider symbolic authority to appear as history's underdog — what he calls the political imaginary of rebellion — has itself been substantially colonized by the populist right, operating through the same mechanisms visible here: the performance of transgression, the performance of victimhood, and the recasting of institutions themselves as the enemy (Nasi 2026). Additionally, Wendy Brown's rereading of Weber's account of vocation, demonstrates the nihilistic tendencies underpinning such political arguments. For Brown it is a nihilism in which the capacity to hold any value (including the value of truth) has been hollowed out, leaving political speech available for anyone with sufficient conviction and no obligation to sincerity (Brown 2023). Interestingly for Brown as well, the solution is in revaluing critical thinking. The captures examined in this paper are local instances of a pattern now well documented at a much larger scale.

What also unites the specific appropriations I explained is a fundamental inversion of Havel's premise. In each instance, what is being demanded is not the freedom to hold a private belief, but the right to impose that belief on those who do not share it. The grievance centres on the permissions extended to other people, not on what the speaker is coerced into doing. This sleight of hand relies on lifting a single parable out of a complex

essay. Havel's greengrocer receives a political slogan with his morning delivery and is expected to place it in the window among the potatoes and carrots. The power of the powerless is simply his capacity to leave it out—to refuse to "live within a lie" (Havel 1992, 27–28). Crucially, this power is a defensive refusal of a state mandate, not an offensive demand that others conform to his worldview. Havel is completely explicit about what the placard is designed to suppress:

Between the aims of the post-totalitarian system and the aims of life there is a yawning abyss: while life, in its essence, moves towards plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self-organization, in short, towards the fulfilment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline. (Havel 1992, 29)

For Havel, plurality is the authentic aim of life, and it is here that his thought most powerfully aligns with Arendt's. For Arendt, plurality is the absolute condition of all political existence—the reality that men, not Man, inhabit the earth, and that genuine action is only possible in a shared space of distinct, differing individuals. For both thinkers, the placard is the metaphorical mechanism the system uses to suppress this diversity and enforce a sterile uniformity.

The contemporary appropriations fundamentally invert this logic. Where the greengrocer refuses a ritual of uniformity to carve out space for authentic, diverse relations, the modern invocations of his struggle are deployed to demand new rituals of exclusion. They claim to defend truth, but by seeking to silence diverse identities or historical reckonings, they enforce exactly what Havel diagnosed as living within a lie (Havel 1992, 31). Consider the acknowledgment of country: rather than a state-mandated placard designed to enforce a single narrative, it functions as an invitation to plurality. It is a piece of truth-telling meant to dismantle older, unstated ideological placards, asking a settler society to confront its history and recognize those it has systematically refused to see. The reactionary appropriation is therefore philosophically incoherent in casting the emergence of plurality as a totalitarian threat. This maneuver belongs to a wider reactionary project which is visible in the defense of civilizational superiority that seeks to secure ideological dominance without having to argue for it (for example see Huntington 1996).

The depth of this misreading becomes obvious when we look at what the greengrocer's refusal was actually intended to create in Havel's essay. The refusal is not a self-

certifying, heroic endpoint; it is the opening move toward institutional change. Václav Benda's *parallel polis*, formulated during Charter 77's second crisis in 1978, provides a crucial context. Benda argued that 'parallel' was the necessary term because it stressed variety without absolute independence, demanding mutual respect and consideration (Benda et al. 1988, 217). As Jiří Dienstbier noted, these structures were intended as a model of a democratic society where disparate views could coexist without fragmenting (Benda et al. 1988, 228). Arendt offers her own version of this figure in *Men in Dark Times*, praising the talk of friends in quasi-private spaces—when public action is impossible—as the practice that keeps the possibility of speech and deed alive (Arendt 1968a, 3–31). What is decisive in Havel, Benda, and Arendt alike is that the spaces they describe are precisely the spaces authoritarian regimes work to ban. The reactionary invocation wants the greengrocer's posture without the *parallel polis*—claiming the prestige of refusal without undertaking the labor of constituting a shared world. In that sense it is undertaken from isolation and recreates that isolation. Ultimately, this desire for unearned moral prestige exemplifies the specific kind of bad faith Jean-Paul Sartre diagnosed in his portrait of the antisemite. As Sartre observes, such a speaker often knows that what they say is semantically incorrect; yet they are so absolutely certain of the rightness of their cause and therefore this sense of righteousness makes their words 'true' to them in the act of uttering them (Sartre 1948, 20). They enact a deliberate insulation from reality.

While the specific instances of capture examined here originate on the reactionary right, the underlying structural failure is not inherently partisan. Mark Fisher's 2013 essay 'Exiting the Vampire Castle' mounted a left-internal critique of an almost identical phenomenon. Fisher diagnosed a style of online left politics that had collapsed into the personal vilification of individuals, producing what he called "the stench of bad conscience and witch-hunting moralism." Rather than undertaking the durable, collective work of building solidarity, this "moralizing left," he argued, specialized in making people feel bad, converting political energy into a hunt for the next ideologically compromised target rather than a critique of impersonal structures. Translated into Arendtian terms, this is thrownness without natality: a mode of refusal that requires no institution, admits no plural correction, and constitutes nothing that survives the moment of denunciation. That the contemporary captures pursued in this article lean right reflects a historical contingency rather than a partisan asymmetry. Following the redistribution of the political imaginary

of rebellion that Nasi (2026) describes, the rhetoric of resistance currently sits more strategically available to the right. Yet, as Fisher's article suggests, the structural error travels wherever this imaginary is housed, untethered from any natural political home.

These examples of misappropriation are emblematic of a larger trend of corrupted political critique. They are clearly failures of public discourse. The vocabulary of resistance holds immense value for movements genuinely challenging oppression, and allowing that memory to become clouded by reactionary bad faith only plays into the sustenance of things as they are. At a larger level however, the ability to decry critique, and the presentation of pluralistic voices to public sphere as totalitarian efforts, is crucial to understanding the challenges of polarization.

Thrownness without Natality

What unites these disparate examples is a shared mechanics of ungrounded refusal: an analogy of immense moral prestige is transferred to an ill-fitting situation, requiring no foundation and answering to no one. This posture relies on a common philosophical substrate. It requires, I argue, an ontology of thrownness without the intervention of natality.

Arendt never denied the reality of thrownness. For Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, *Dasein* is always already delivered over to an unchosen world, thrust into circumstances and histories that precede it (Heidegger 1962, §§29, 38). But while Arendt works within this basic premise, she repudiated what her teacher did with it. In *Heidegger in Ruins*, Richard Wolin illustrates how Heidegger's thought ultimately renders *Dasein* the passive subject of a destiny it cannot contest, reducing human agency to a receptive waiting (Wolin 2022). The political culmination of this posture is the fatalism of his posthumously published *Der Spiegel* interview, in which he suggests that only a god can still save us (Heidegger 1993). Here, thrownness functions not merely as an account of the human condition, but as a political alibi. If we are simply delivered over to history, then 1933 happened to Heidegger just as it happened to everyone else, and the sole remaining function of thought is to wait for a rescue it is powerless to initiate.

This suffocating condition of being reduced to a helpless recipient of systemic forces generates two distinct but equally sterile responses in our contemporary captures.

For the reactionary reader of Havel, it sparks a furious rebellion against a cultural machine demanding their compliance. For the Agambenian, conversely, the horror of being reduced to 'bare life' culminates in a radical acceptance of passivity: the embrace of 'inoperativity' and withdrawal as the only escape from the biopolitical state. Yet, while one responds with reactive anger and the other with mystical detachment, both remain entirely trapped within thrownness. Because neither possesses a concept of Arendtian natality—the capacity to act in concert and begin something genuinely new—both forms of refusal ultimately leave the political world exactly as they found it.

Arendt's critique of her teacher anticipates this endpoint and cuts much deeper. Looking at his later writings, she saw that Heidegger had redefined thinking itself: rather than the active, internal dialogue of me with myself, it had become a passive listening to Being. In the process, the will was discarded entirely, conflated with the desire to dominate. For Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, this theoretical shift was Heidegger's way of disavowing his own disastrous political entanglement; the resulting philosophy implies that entering the political realm inherently corrupts the purity of the thinker (Young-Bruehl 2006, 194–95). Arendt's objection exposes the fatal cost of this retreat: by mistaking willing for willing-to-dominate, Heidegger discards the exact faculty by which a person acts, begins, and becomes anyone in particular at all.

The lineage does not stop with Heidegger, and it runs to both of my previous examples. On one side, the *Gelassenheit* of the late work (the releasement, letting-be, the readiness for a god) is the acknowledged ancestor of Agamben's inoperativity (Kirsch 2025). What is transmitted is the conviction that the situation is a destiny, that action within it is complicity, and that what remains is to wait and bear witness. On the other side stands the persistent tendency of the secondary literature to read Havel through a Heideggerian lens, a tendency I have elsewhere called a red herring (Brennan 2016). Confronted with an *oeuvre* that lacks a systematic philosophy but uses phenomenological vocabulary—being, horizons, authenticity, living in truth—Havel's prose employs the terms of the sources he was reading, passing through Patočka to Heidegger. The gap is largely invented by philosophers who as contemporaries of Havel required that philosophy be conducted in a certain style (see, for instance, Tucker 2000). Where Havel's concepts are grounded in rational self-interrogation and responsibility to others, the

Heideggerian framework privileges spiritual authenticity over universal reason and rootedness over ethical responsibility. Wolin has shown that Heidegger's 'spiritual' National Socialism did not oppose biological racism so much as fortify it, objecting to 'scientific race' thinking only in the name of a competing strand of Nazi doctrine, and lending racial ideology a mystical dimension that distinguished it from nineteenth-century scientism (Wolin 2022, 102). A philosophy in which authentic particularism stands against universal reason is a philosophy in which any sufficiently sincere refusal is self-certifying. That is exactly the instrument the appropriators require.

Care is needed with Patočka, whom the same literature offers as the authentic mediator. His phenomenological work carries at times a Husserlian and at times a Heideggerian inflection, which is unsurprising given his formation; but the *Heretical Essays* cite Ernst Jünger and reproduce the language of being-toward-death in a register close to desperation, written as they were after he had been denied teaching (Patočka 1996). The solidarity of the shaken, whose members are shaken by their understanding of history and whose emblem is the soldier going over the top, could hardly be further from the greengrocer, for whom history—were he to consider it—is more complex than any single narrative could weave without admitting that the narrative has an agenda. Havel has no philosophy of history; his nearest concept, the 'memory of being' of *Letters to Olga*, in which all actions bear upon one another, is closer, I have argued, to Levinas's 'trace' due to its deeply ethical inflection than to the Heideggerian concept (Havel 1988; Brennan 2016).

Neither genealogy settles the matter it is meant to settle. To see why the appropriation fails on its own terms, one need only look to Jean Bethke Elshtain's comparative reading of Havel alongside Arendt. Elshtain, in the course of her essay on Havel, draws a suggestive parallel with Arendt: both thinkers explicitly refused to allow their thought to be conscripted by partisan tribunals, famously offering the exact same response when pressed to align with Left or Right: "I couldn't care less" (Arendt to Hans Morgenthau; Havel in Elshtain 1995, 469–70). For Elshtain, Havel is fundamentally a performer of political thought whose concept of 'living in truth' is the antithesis of an abstract or self-certifying posture. Grounded in what Havel termed "interexistentiality," responsibility in his writing is never a private posture of moral superiority or cultural grievance; it is an active, relational commitment to neighborliness, solidarity, and concrete responsibility

for those close to one within a shared, plural world (Elshtain 1995, 475–476). By tethering dissent to concrete, worldly responsibility rather than an insular, self-certifying posture, Elshtain's Arendtian reading ensures that the greengrocer's refusal cannot be severed from the plural human community it was performed to defend.

There is one further inheritance to name. Agamben's framework descends from Carl Schmitt and the ideas of the exception, the decision, sovereignty as power over the threshold (Schmitt 2005). I claim that the reactionary appropriation of dissident language and critique is somewhat Schmittian in structure, since it converts every political question into a question of who we are against. This is precisely the question that Havel's tradition refuses. Following Tomáš Masaryk, for whom the emergence of Czech democracy was a humanist project of a nation enriched by educating and improving its members — the Czech question is not *what are we*, which invites friend and enemy into politics, but *how should we be*, which connects ethics to politics and holds the nation to a standard rather than a boundary (Hroch 2023, 24; see also Havel 1997). Arendt refuses the same question from the other side, with plurality: politics exists between people who are not the same, and the moment it becomes the expression of a substance held in common it has ceased to be politics and recreates isolation (paving the way to terror).

Ultimately, what this substrate lacks is natality. It equips a subject to reject a situation, but not to begin one. These modes of refusal are structurally self-enclosed: they demand no political foundation, engage in no plural exchange, and constitute nothing that survives the moment of negation. It is this absence of positive political content that makes the posture so fungible, allowing the aesthetics of dissent to be adopted by any movement whatsoever.

Arendt had, in fact, already diagnosed this condition. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she calls it isolation: a state in which a person is cut off from concerted action with others. Power, on her account, arises only between people acting together and vanishes the moment they disperse; the isolated person is hence disconnected from the world, and therefore powerless by definition, whatever the sincerity or intensity of what they refuse (Arendt 1968b, 474). It is not simply that the gesture can be worn by anyone; it is that, cut off from the plural exchange in which power alone arises, the gesture accomplishes nothing regardless of who performs it.

To understand what is missing from these hollow gestures of refusal, we must turn to Arendt thoughts on natality. She states the importance of the concept to her thinking economically in the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*, *Willing*:

> if Augustine had drawn the consequences of these speculations, he would have defined men, not, like the Greeks, as mortals, but as "natals." (Arendt 1978b, 109)

The speculations she refers to are Augustine's account of individuality. Human beings, unlike other creatures, are created in the singular; what distinguishes one person from another is the capacity of the will. A human being is put into a world of change as a new beginning. Crucially, this does not deny our thrownness, nor does it deny our mortality (Arendt readily quotes Augustine's remark that our whole life is a race toward death). Natality is simply what she *adds* to that condition. It provides the foundation for the connection to action she had already drawn in *The Human Condition*: the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the shared world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity to begin something anew—which is to say, the capacity to act (Arendt 1998, 9).

This addition fundamentally changes what can be said about a political situation. If we are thrown and nothing more, our available vocabulary is limited to exposure, endurance, witness, and finally, the suspension of an order that has us in its grip. Consider Havel's greengrocer under this diminished picture: he could still say no, but he would have nothing to affirm, and the existential revolution at the root of Havel's dissent would collapse into a bare recognition of one's own oppression, with no capacity to respond — which is to say, not dissent at all. But if we are also natals, a new beginning remains possible (though of course never guaranteed, since action is inherently unpredictable, irreversible, and takes place among a plurality of others). What carries this beginning from the privacy of an intention into the shared world is speech. In action and speech, for Arendt, people disclose *who* they are, as distinct from *what* they are. Without language, there remains only the *what*—the physical body, its qualities, and its functions (Arendt 1998, 175–81). This is why she insists that violence is mute, and why she distinguishes it so sharply from power. Power arises only between people who act in concert, and it vanishes the moment they disperse. Violence, by contrast, is instrumental; it can destroy power but

never create it, belonging ultimately to fabrication rather than to action (Arendt 1970, 44–56).

Because action is inherently unpredictable and irreversible, it would consume itself without remedies. Arendt offers two: the promise, which binds an unknowable future, and forgiveness, which releases an unalterable past. Both remedies are profoundly relational, requiring the presence of others. Institutions, built on her Roman model of law as relationship and authority as augmentation, serve as the durable, structural form of these same remedies (Arendt 1998, 236–47; 1990; 2006b, 91–141). Defending these institutions, therefore, is not a matter of political nostalgia. It is the vital recognition that every newcomer requires a world stable enough to begin in.

A politics that dissolves this shared world destroys the very space in which anyone could act at all. Today, this dissolution manifests acutely in what communication theorists diagnose as a systemic crisis of factuality and a rapid decline in institutional trust, where platformized information flows and disinformation distort the basic conditions of public deliberation (Webb, Esau, and Curato 2026, 1–2). As pernicious polarization aligns societal life into rigid us versus them antagonisms, it hollows out the shared political center, transforming public institutions from durable anchors of relational trust into captured sites of partisan warfare (Štětka and Mihelj 2024, 8–9, 62–63, 241). When the normative foundations of institutional trust collapse, the shared factual reality required for mutual promising disintegrates, leaving a fragmented public sphere incapable of sustaining durable political beginnings (Štětka and Mihelj 2024, 87–90; Webb, Esau, and Curato 2026, 2). The bearing of this insight on an unravelling world order needs no elaboration.

A Beginning That Cannot Speak: Szalay's *Flesh*

When the institutional spaces of appearance collapse, we are left with the exact condition Young-Bruehl placed at the center of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*'s continuing relevance: superfluousness. This is the production of people caught in the movements of capital and the export of labor, who are not so much deprived of standing as never granted it (Young-Bruehl 2006, 33-76). How does one respond to such an unravelling order when political speech seems impossible? For Arendt, the answer begins with story-

telling. Storytelling is itself a mode of thoughtfulness; it reveals the meaning of an otherwise unbearable sequence of events without committing the error of rigidly defining it (Arendt 1968a, 105).

In their biopolitical re-reading of Arendt, Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Płonowska Ziarek observe that political life is fundamentally a *narratable bios*—a life whose events establish a biography, resisting reduction to mere biological survival or superfluous existence (Diprose and Ziarek 2018, 338). When individuals are stripped of this capacity for speech, they suffer what Cavarero and Somers term 'narrative dispossession,' a state where the injury of political marginalisation is compounded because a life remains completely without narration (Diprose and Ziarek 2018, 341–42).

A novel can therefore function as a political act in Arendt's precise sense: a durable thought-thing brought into the common world to counter this biopolitical erasure, where others can meet it, take it up, and contest it (Diprose and Ziarek 2018, 328–30). I want to read David Szalay's *Flesh* as exactly that. The novel delivers its protagonist, István, directly into Arendt's landscape of loneliness. István embodies narrative dispossession at its most acute: his speech is reduced to minimalist acquiescence ("okay"), leaving him as an exchangeable body—a *what* abused, used, deployed, injured, and discarded—without ever disclosing a unique *who* (Arendt 1998, 175–81; Szalay 2025).

The novel follows a Hungarian man from a provincial housing estate through a sexual relationship, at fifteen, with a neighbor in her forties; the death of her husband in a confrontation and a term in juvenile detention; military service in Iraq; and then an immigrant's London, where he works nightclub security and drives for the wealthy before marrying into great wealth and losing it again (Szalay 2025). What is remarkable in it, and what makes it useful here, is that throughout the novel, nothing István says ever alters the course of anything that happens to him. His speech is almost entirely apathetic assent, seemingly untouched by comprehension. His statements seldom go beyond a flat "yeah," "no," "I don't know," and above all an empty "okay." Roddy Doyle, chairing the Booker judges, called the narrative style "singular" and suggested that its sparseness invites the reader to engage with the character — which is to say that the reader is conscripted to supply the interiority the character cannot voice (The Booker Prizes 2025). Szalay himself has said that a through-line of the book is "the limitations of what language can achieve" (Szalay 2026). Discussing a conversation in the novel about these limitations, Szalay has

explained that, "[the characters] are talking about whether it matters what words we use to describe our physical experiences, whether the experience itself takes precedence over the words" (Szalay 2026). To read this exchange with Arendt is to recognize the trap: when mute physical experience is conceded absolute precedence over language, the human being is reduced entirely to bare life. 'Living in truth', as Havel understood it, is never merely a biological condition to be endured; it is a political reality that must be articulated. Without the words to tether physical existence to a shared, plural world, the subject remains completely captive to their thrownness.

Read through an Arendtian lens, Flesh is much more than a study of masculine inarticulacy: we are shown the *what* at full length—a body desired, imprisoned, deployed, purchased, injured, discarded—and never once the *who*. Szalay withholds interiority as a matter of technique, placing the reader in the position of watching a life in which the invisible never crosses over into appearance. The events that carry István perfectly illustrate Agamben's framework: he is delivered over, and his body serves as the sole medium of his fortunes—from the neighbor's attentions and the killing's aftermath, to the accident of proximity that begins his London ascent and the collapse that ends it (Szalay 2025). He is, in the strict sense, superfluous throughout: his labor is fungible, his presence contingent, and the institutions that absorb him remain indifferent to which particular person occupies his place. Nobody ever hands him a placard, because the system that carries him does not require assent. It requires only availability. His "okay" is the placard he sets in the window every morning without ever having been asked. What he suffers, in Arendt's more exact vocabulary, is not solitude but loneliness — a condition, she insists, that "shows itself most sharply in company with others" (Arendt 1968b, 476). István is barely ever alone, but always lonely. He is deserted by everyone while surrounded by all of them.

Three features of the novel formally dramatize the theoretical arguments outlined above. First, István's decisive physical acts change nothing about who he is or could become. The violence that determines his early life arrives without warning and leaves without comment, originating nothing other than the destruction of relationships. This is Arendt's thesis on violence rendered as narrative form: it is mute, it destroys, and it cannot create. Second, his one sustained ascent—the marriage and the position it confers—is not an action but an acquisition; it happens to him (he is at first the chauffeur, invited by his employer's wife into the back seat, to which he replies only "okay") and is undone in the exact same manner. Because he makes no promises that bind him to others and has no

forgiveness available to him, nothing in his life can be stabilized or repaired. Third is the novel's bleak comedy of institutionalized speech. Set in pandemic-era London, a late chapter features István struggling to log on to a video call with a therapist: the talking cure administered, through a failing connection, to a man who has never learned that talking does anything (Szalay 2025). Even when the world provides him a formal space of appearance, he possesses no threads with which to hold on to it.

There is, however, a late flicker of interiority that proves decisive. The novel's inner voice thickens only near its end, prompted significantly by the approaching adolescence of his son, forcing István back toward his own childhood and the experiences that formed him (Szalay 2025). As the son tells the mother (not István) that he wants to change schools because he is being bullied, István is almost reflective despite rejecting his son's request. It is the newcomer, the sheer fact of another beginning, that almost teaches him to think. Natality is the single force that could reach him, yet there isn't time for it to become speech as the son's life is cruelly cut short.

It would be easy to read the novel as a vindication of Agamben. Here is bare life; here is the human being reduced to the *flesh* of the title; here is a structure that was always in place and merely becomes visible in this man's ruin, demanding the recognition that nothing was ever to be done. While this reading is available, the novel is ultimately designed to tempt and then refuse it. Read with Arendt, István represents a more terminal stage of thoughtlessness than the one Young-Bruehl diagnosed. He suffers not from corrupted political metaphors, but from the complete atrophy of the metaphorical faculty itself. Without the language required to anchor a self in the shared public realm, his thrownness remains a purely biological condition—he survives his circumstances, but he never actually inhabits a world. Yet, as Arendt insisted, "nobody is the author or producer of his own life story" (Arendt 1998, 184). Because a biography must ultimately be completed by others, Szalay's novel performs the narrative act on his protagonist's behalf. By translating an unvoiced life into a public text, *Flesh* executes the very capacity István lacks, transforming a private tragedy of inarticulate thrownness into a shared, political object of judgment.

To see why István's condition is a failure of natality rather than a mere confirmation of Agamben's 'bare life,' we must set him against the figure who successfully navigated a similar systemic erasure: Havel's greengrocer. Despite occupying vastly different cultural imaginaries, the structural alignment between the two men is exact, which makes their divergence analytically crucial. Both are delivered over to systems utterly indifferent to who they are; both are employed as fungible units; both could conceivably pass an

entire life without ever being asked to formulate a public opinion. They represent two distinct modalities of Arendtian thrownness—the subject of post-totalitarian ideological control, and the superfluous subject of globalized capital.

Set side by side, István and the greengrocer demonstrate two different thresholds of political erasure. At their baseline, their positions are identical: both are fungible workers absorbed by massive, self-sustaining systems that are entirely indifferent to their particularity. Both are subjected to a condition where their survival depends on their functioning as a *what* rather than appearing as a *who*.

Where they diverge is in the structural mechanisms of their compliance. The greengrocer is forced to interact with the regime's ideology through the daily ritual of the placard. Because this ritual requires a symbolic action, it inadvertently provides the greengrocer with the exact negative space required to act: he can simply decline to place it. István's system operates below the level of ideology, operating directly on his physical availability. He is never handed a placard, and so his compliance takes the form of an ambient, linguistic void—a perpetual "okay" that originates nothing and leaves no trace.

The danger in the reactionary appropriation of Havel is the assumption that the greengrocer's refusal is a self-sustaining moral posture. In Arendtian terms, a refusal is only politically legible if it is anchored in a shared world. The greengrocer's action matters because he possesses the linguistic and conceptual capacity to orient that refusal toward plurality. The absolute devastation of István is that even if he wished to refuse his condition, he suffers from a total narrative dispossession. He inhabits a worldlessness so complete that he has no words with which to make a refusal appear, and no institutional memory of a public realm to catch it if he did.

Care with Language as a Political Capacity

The danger Young-Bruehl diagnosed in 2006 has not receded; it has inverted. The vocabulary of resistance to totalitarian power is now among the most reliable instruments for advancing a politics of exclusion, achieved through a direct operation on the faculty of analogy—the very threads by which the mind holds on to the world. This capture succeeds because an ungrounded refusal can be performed by anyone, and because a philosophy of thrownness without natality has taught two generations that the situation is a destiny, that action is complicity, and that the only remaining task is to wait well. Between waiting for the god and saying "okay," there is far less distance than either party would like.

This operation, moreover, is now industrialized in the strict sense. The algorithmic amplification shaping contemporary public speech rewards the transfer of prestige without the friction of reasoning: the detached analogy circulates as a commodity, optimized for the feeling of recognition rather than the labor of thought. The newest of these technologies produce fluency itself on demand—speech in which, by mathematical design, no one appears. Arendt's categories cut here with uncomfortable precision. A public realm increasingly furnished with words that disclose no *who* is one where thoughtlessness is no longer a personal failing, but an ambient condition. In such a space, the deliberate care of language becomes a political value in the strongest axiological sense, requiring the same rigorous defense as our physical institutions.

Arendt's alternative offers neither optimism nor a guaranteed program. It offers only the claim that we are natals as well as mortals: that the world we did not choose is nevertheless one in which something new can be begun, provided we possess institutions durable enough to anchor us, and speech adequate to make that beginning appear to others who may take it up, contest it, or refuse it. The labor this requires is decidedly unglamorous. It consists in finding words for what is difficult and saying them where they can be heard; in holding analogies to account rather than being carried by them; and in defending the unremarkable institutional furniture—courts, schools, constitutions, the *parallel polis*—within which anyone at all can appear as someone. That is what thoughtfulness means when treated as a political capacity rather than an intellectual ornament. It is also, on the evidence of the two figures set beside one another here, the entire difference between a life and a body.

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