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# VECTORS OF THE BIOPOLITICAL

*Man is by nature a political animal.*

Aristotle, *Politics*

**F**ROM ONE SENTENCE in Aristotle derive two arresting theoretical discourses of the twenty-first century: Michel Foucault's biopolitics, provocatively reformulated by Giorgio Agamben in terms of the relationship between sovereignty and the body, and the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum as a means of evaluating and promoting development, justice and freedom. Both are characterized by deep reflection on the sources of Western political thought, and by urgent engagement with contemporary social and legal problems. Both are in some sense biopolitical in that they are shaped by the interplay of the same Aristotelian categories—the human and the animal, politics and nature. But they are on opposite sides of the divide that has opened up in the human sciences since the 1960s, and there currently seems no optic through which they might simultaneously be viewed, no way of integrating or comparing their insights.

In part, this reflects a situation in which political debate appears to have fragmented into a multiplicity of single issues. The ancient 'Who will rule?' and the modern 'Who shall have what?' have been supplemented by an array of questions that deal with matters once exclusively cultural, personal or natural. For previous eras, the relative integrity and unmalleability of cultures, bodies and environments rendered such questions redundant. Now they frequently appear unanswerable from within established political traditions, and incommensurable in relation to each other.

Within this expanded field, biopolitics and the capabilities approach have unusual salience and potential, for both bundle together issues otherwise assumed to be distinct. If they, in turn, could be coordinated, perhaps we could begin to map the new territory.

### *Bare life*

In the introductory volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault remarked that whereas ‘for millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question’. Rather than being an ‘inaccessible substrate’ presupposed by political life, the biological life of man had now ‘passed into knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention’.<sup>1</sup>

According to Foucault, this occurred through the development of the disciplines of the body and the regulation of the population. The first of these focused on the individual human body, increasing its usefulness and economic integration through ‘the optimization of its capabilities’; the second on the collective body: ‘births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity’ and the environmental variables that controlled them.<sup>2</sup> The result was that the animal life of man, far from being irrelevant to politics, now became its subject, ‘a kind of bestialization of man achieved through the most sophisticated political techniques’.<sup>3</sup>

Taking his cue from Arendt, Agamben argues that political existence and bestialized life represent distinct types of being.<sup>4</sup> For the Greeks, he claims, *zōē* was the term for the natural life of nutrition and reproduction shared with other living creatures, while *bios* was used to describe ways of living a distinctively human life:

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley, Harmondsworth 1984, pp. 143, 142.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford 1998, p. 3; henceforth HS.

<sup>4</sup> ‘The chief characteristic of this specifically human life . . . is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography; it is of this life, *bios* as distinguished from mere *zōē*, that Aristotle said that it “somehow is a kind of *praxis*”’. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* [1958], Chicago 1998, p. 97; henceforth HC.

When Plato mentions three kinds of life in the *Philebus*, and when Aristotle distinguishes the contemplative life of the philosopher (*bios theōrētikos*) from the life of pleasure (*bios apolaustikos*) and the political life (*bios politikos*) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, neither philosopher would ever have used the term *zōē* . . . to speak of a *zōē politikē* of the citizens of Athens would have made no sense.<sup>5</sup>

The difference between political life and the ‘simple fact of living’ is therefore grounded in the underlying distinction between *bios* and *zōē*. It is in this light that we must read Aristotle’s assertion that although the *polis* ‘comes into existence for the sake of life, it exists for the good life’.<sup>6</sup> The *polis* may have originated in the need to secure ‘bare life’, mere human survival, but that is no longer what it is for. Simple natural life ‘is excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense, and remains confined—as merely reproductive life—to the sphere of the *oikos*, “home”’.<sup>7</sup>

From its inception, the fundamental binaries of Western political thought are those of ‘bare life/political existence, *zōē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion’. The transition described by Foucault is therefore an event of world historical importance, and ‘the entry of *zōē* into the sphere of the *polis* . . . the decisive event of modernity’. However, whereas Foucault understood the animal life of man to have become the subject/object of biopower primarily through the development of nineteenth-century discourses and disciplines of the body, Agamben posits an alternative source at the ‘hidden point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power’.<sup>8</sup>

Following Schmitt, Agamben argues that the sovereign is he who decides the exception, and reincludes within the law precisely what had been excluded from it, namely the state of nature. *Zōē*, not *bios*, is the form of life characteristic of the state of nature, so in the state of exception the sovereign effects the reinclusion of ‘bare life’ within the *polis*. Since sovereignty is exhaustively defined by its ability to decide the exception, it follows that ‘the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.*’<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> HS, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, tr. Harris Rackham, Cambridge, MA 1932, 1252b30.

<sup>7</sup> HS, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> HS, pp. 8, 4, 6.

<sup>9</sup> HS, p. 6.

Agamben makes no distinction between the private and the political, on the one hand, and nature and culture on the other. For him, ‘the fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zōē* and *bios*.’ The implications of this are elaborated in terms of the Aristotelian distinction between voice (expressive forms of communication shared with animals) and language (the rational communication needed to establish justice in the *polis*). Arguing that ‘The question “In what way does the living being have language?” corresponds exactly to the question “In what way does bare life dwell in the *polis*?”’, Agamben suggests that the state of exception is characterized by the production of life-forms deprived of communication.<sup>10</sup>

A model is provided by the nineteenth-century biologist Ernst Haeckel, who postulated an ape-man without speech, *homo alalus*, as the evolutionary ancestor of *homo sapiens*. In what sense would the non-speaking man be a man rather than an ape? Is it not simply a matter of positing a creature already fully human and then depriving it of speech? In the same way, the state of exception ‘functions by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human’.<sup>11</sup>

This move clarifies and expands the range of life forms potentially created by sovereign power. Not just the *homo alalus*, or ape-man, but also the *Muselmann*, the hopeless victim of the camps, the neomort and the overcomatose person. Above all, sovereignty creates outlaws such as the *homo sacer*, the ‘sacred’ outlaw of ancient Rome, whom all were free to kill with impunity. The life of the outlaw ‘is pure *zōē*’,<sup>12</sup> and so the exclusion of a human from the *polis* is equivalent to the inclusion of bare life within it—a doubling represented in the archetypal figure of the werewolf:

a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city—the werewolf—is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city . . . The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to law and

<sup>10</sup> HS, pp. 181, 8.

<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, tr. Kevin Attell, Stanford 2004, pp. 34–8. In this respect, Agamben argues, modernity differs from antiquity, which tended to humanize the animal, treating the slave, the barbarian and the foreigner as ‘figures of an animal in human form.’

<sup>12</sup> HS, p. 183.

the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man.<sup>13</sup>

Where, as in contemporary politics, exception becomes increasingly the norm, ‘the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm’ and exclusion and inclusion, *bios* and *zōē* enter into ‘a zone of irreducible indistinction’. Then ‘all citizens can be said . . . to appear virtually as *homines sacri*’.<sup>14</sup>

### *Capabilities*

Amartya Sen first turned to Aristotle for a very different reason: to free himself from the utilitarian emphasis on a single aggregate measure of utility. Aristotle reminds us that pleasures may be as distinct as the activities involved, so even if we were to take pleasure as the only measure we would still be left with pleasures of incommensurable kinds. Nevertheless, Sen argued, the resulting plurality may be constitutive rather than competitive, provided we think of utility as a vector with several distinct components.<sup>15</sup>

On this basis, he began to recast his account of plural utility, arguing that individual circumstances and life-achievements might be considered as functionings that could be combined into a ‘functioning vector’. A person’s potential functioning vectors would then constitute a capability set, which could provide a context-sensitive basis for comparison of standards of living and interpersonal equality.<sup>16</sup> Only later did it dawn on Sen that his account of capabilities had ‘something in common’ with Aristotle’s analysis of human functions in which ‘the good of man resides in the function of man’.<sup>17</sup>

It was Martha Nussbaum who elaborated the Aristotelian basis of this project, and found the proof text needed to link Sen’s conception of plural utility with the Aristotelian conception of the role of the state:

<sup>13</sup> HS, p. 105

<sup>14</sup> HS, pp. 9 and III.

<sup>15</sup> Amartya Sen, ‘Plural Utility’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 81 (1980/1), pp. 193–215.

<sup>16</sup> Amartya Sen, ‘Well-Being, Agency and Freedom’, *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 82, no. 4 (1985), pp. 169–221.

<sup>17</sup> Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, Oxford 1987, p. 64 fn. and Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b28.

‘It is evident that the best *politeia* is that arrangement according to which anyone whatsoever might do best and live a flourishing life’.<sup>18</sup> Interpreting ‘arrangement’ (*taxis*) to mean a theory of distributive justice, ‘anyone whatsoever’ (*hostisoun*) to include ‘each and every member of the community’, and a ‘flourishing life’ (*zoiē makariōs*) to encompass both whatever functions are specific to a particular individual, and those generally needed for a full life, Nussbaum was able to gloss this as ‘an Aristotelian conception of the proper function of government, according to which its task is to make available to each and every member of the community the basic necessary conditions of the capability to choose and live a fully good human life, with respect to each of the major functions included in that fully good life’.<sup>19</sup>

But what is a good human life? Does the human being as such actually have a function or activity? According to Aristotle

The mere act of living appears to be shared even by plants, whereas we are looking to the function peculiar to man; we must therefore set aside the life of nutrition and growth. Next in the scale will come some form of sentient life; but this too seems to be shared by horses, oxen and animals generally. There remains therefore what may be called the practical life of that which has reason.<sup>20</sup>

Seen in this light, there are, Nussbaum argues, ‘two distinct thresholds: a threshold of capability to function beneath which a life will be so impoverished that it will not be human at all; and a somewhat higher

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<sup>18</sup> Martha Nussbaum, ‘Nature, Function and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution’, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 6 (1988) suppl. vol., p. 146 (citing Aristotle, *Politics*, 1324a23–5).

<sup>19</sup> Martha Nussbaum, ‘Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach’, in Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds, *The Quality of Life*, Oxford 1993, p. 265.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, *Nic. Ethics*, 1097b33–1098a4 (translation modified). Aristotle later explains that reason (*logos*) includes ‘activity of the soul in accordance with reason or not without reason’, a definition that might just include slaves and barbarians. It is interesting to note (in the light of Agamben’s claims to the contrary) that, although the word is not actually repeated, *zōē* is here used to describe each of the three kinds of life, including the *praktikē zōē*. Nussbaum notes that ‘if one comprehensively surveys the evidence, one discovers that *zōē* and *bios* function in exactly the same way: when they are used of a type or manner of life, they always designate a total mode or way of life, organized around the item named’. Martha Nussbaum, ‘Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics’, in James Altham and Ross Harrison, eds, *World, Mind and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, Cambridge 1995, p. 116; see pp. 128–9, fn. 50 for examples.

threshold, beneath which those characteristic functions are available in such a reduced way that, though we may judge the form of life a human one, we will not think it a *good* human life.<sup>21</sup> The task of the city is ‘to effect the transition from one level of capability to another’, from mere life to human life, and from human life to the good life. In the latter case, because ‘the human being is by nature a political being’, the city is more than instrumental, for Aristotle makes ‘the self-sufficiency involved in human *eudaimonia* a communal and not a solitary self-sufficiency’.<sup>22</sup>

In practice, therefore, achieving a threshold means making a social transition. In the case of women, with whom Nussbaum was concerned in a UN-sponsored project in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this might involve working outside the family house, a major issue in societies where women are traditionally prohibited from doing so, even when survival is at stake. In this case the transition is from the ‘private realm, or the home, in which people do things out of love and affection rather than mutual respect’ to the ‘public realm, characterized by reciprocity among rough equals’. But as women leave the family to enter the public realm, the public realm also means ‘acknowledging that the family is a political institution, not part of a “private sphere” immune from justice’.<sup>23</sup>

But if, for women, reaching a threshold means a transition from the private to the political, Nussbaum is also keen to shift the emphasis of ‘political animal’ back towards the animal. Emphasizing that for Sen, too, ‘the bodily capabilities and functionings are intrinsically good and not . . . *merely* instrumental means to other higher goods’, Nussbaum argues that the Aristotelian conception of the human being as a ‘political animal’ means viewing a human as someone ‘who has an animal body and whose human dignity, rather than being opposed to this animal nature, inheres in it, and in its temporal trajectory’.<sup>24</sup>

This applies not just to the animal life of humanity but to non-human animals as well. Kant might think ‘human dignity and our moral

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<sup>21</sup> Martha Nussbaum, ‘Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings’, in Nussbaum and Jonathan Glover, eds, *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities*, Oxford 1995, p. 81.

<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum, ‘Nature, Function’, p. 146; and ‘Human Nature’, p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, Cambridge, MA 2006, pp. 105, 1; henceforth FJ.

<sup>24</sup> FJ, pp. 176 and 87, see also p. 158.

capacity . . . radically separate from the natural world', but Aristotle saw 'considerable continuity between human capacity and the capacities of other animals'. For Nussbaum, human need has to include 'our animal neediness and animal capacities', and we have to acknowledge that 'our dignity just is the dignity of a certain sort of animal'.<sup>25</sup>

To achieve a threshold of animal capacity or dignity may imply a different type of transition. For many of the cases discussed in *Frontiers of Justice*, in which Nussbaum extends the scope of the capabilities approach to those of differing abilities, nationality or species, the transition does not involve entering the public realm. Some of those with impairments and disabilities 'could not be included in the group of political choosers, however generously we assess their potential', but if their capabilities link them 'to the human community rather than some other', they may nevertheless reach a threshold of human life.<sup>26</sup>

Although, for other species, political functionings fall outside the species norm, that does not mean that the capabilities of other species can be sustained within nature. Species sovereignty is one ideal, but for most animals it is simply not a possibility; for dogs, for example, there is usually 'no option to flourish in an all-dog community; their community is always one that includes intimate human members'. In any case, 'we cannot just leave nature alone and expect it to manage itself', for 'nature is not just, and species are not all nice'. The capabilities approach cannot be realized in the wild or without human intervention. It requires wheelchairs to be made for disabled Alsatians, and 'the intelligent and careful use of zoos and animal parks', for only in such places can non-human animals realize their capabilities without mutual harm.<sup>27</sup>

### *Vectors*

For both Nussbaum and Agamben, the essential dichotomy is between the good life, or the political life, and the life that is, for whatever reason, lacking in those qualities. Like Aristotle, both emphasize that this amounts to the difference between what is distinctively human and what is less than fully human. Aristotle had argued that anyone who lives a life of pleasure is, in effect, 'choosing the life of dumb grazing animals', and that anyone who is perpetually asleep, or comatose, is living

<sup>25</sup> FJ, pp. 130–2.

<sup>26</sup> FJ, p. 188.

<sup>27</sup> FJ, pp. 366, 388, 390, 370–1.

the life of a vegetable.<sup>28</sup> Nussbaum suggests that failure to allow a basic capability to develop is to condemn whoever possesses it to ‘a kind of premature death, the death of a form of flourishing’, while Agamben offers an entire bestiary of bare life extending all the way to a tick that lived in a laboratory for many years without movement or nutrition.<sup>29</sup>

But if, for Agamben, bare life is the hopeless destination toward which the logic of modernity points, for Nussbaum it is the base from which capabilities are expanded and joyfully transformed into functionings. The polarities appear to be the same, but the directions different. If so, is there some point at which human flourishing and bestialization meet, some limbo in which the half-dead pass those whose capabilities have been brought to life?

One way to establish this is to take coordinates from Aristotle. The passage that is central to both Nussbaum and Agamben reads as follows:

It is clear that the city-state is a natural growth, and that man is by nature a political animal, and a man that is by nature and not merely by fortune citiless is either low in the scale of humanity [an inferior being] or above it (like the ‘clanless, lawless, hearthless’ man reviled by Homer . . .) inasmuch as he resembles an isolated piece at draughts. And why man is a political animal in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, doth nothing without purpose; and man alone of all the animals possesses speech [*logos*]. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain or pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and signify these sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city state.<sup>30</sup>

In this famous, and much debated passage, which follows an account of the evolution of ever larger aggregations of humanity, from the couple to the city-state, Aristotle implicitly defines the *zōon politikon* in terms of two variables that are at least conceptually distinguishable. On the one hand there is natural gregariousness, which is opposed to natural solitude, and on the other, there is *logos*, which is opposed to voice.

<sup>28</sup> Aristotle, *Nic. Ethics*, 1095b20.

<sup>29</sup> FJ, p. 347; Agamben, *The Open*, p. 47.

<sup>30</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a.

Gregariousness, as Aristotle explains elsewhere, is just a matter of flocking together, and as such is common to land, air and sea creatures of many species. Solitary animals may include man himself, people like the outlaw described by Homer. In contrast, the distinction between voice and *logos* is a measure of what distinguishes the human from the animal. So, not all gregarious animals have rational speech, and not everyone that has speech is gregarious.

The implied relationship between Aristotle's taxonomic categories is often unclear, but the *logos*–voice axis is perhaps better thought of as intersecting with the gregarious–solitary axis than as a subdivision or extension of it. When Aristotle says that humans are more political than bees, he does not mean that they are more gregarious, but rather that they have some other quality as well. Political animals are distinguished from the merely gregarious by having a common activity. Examples include 'man, bees, wasps, ants, cranes', some of which live under a ruler and some of which do not.<sup>31</sup> What makes gregarious animals political is a shared way of life to which all contribute, and what makes humans even more political is having *logos*, for rational communication permits common activity of greater social and moral complexity.

Within the terrain mapped by Aristotle's definition of the political animal, there would therefore appear to be two axes: one that extends from solitude to gregariousness, and from the private to the public, and another that extends from voice to *logos*, or nature to culture. Using these axes, it becomes possible to plot with more precision the vectors described by Agamben and Nussbaum, both in relation to Aristotle and to each other.

Foucault was primarily concerned with the axis that leads from the private to the public, and with a double imbrication brought about through the regulation of bodies and populations—simultaneously an encroachment of the private upon the public and the public upon the private. Agamben turns Foucault's vector of privatization toward naturalization by interpreting the private–public axis in terms of the *zōē/bios* distinction; and (through the equation of *zōē* with speechlessness) by enhancing the literalness of Foucault's 'bestialization of man'. The reorientation is completed when Agamben shifts the emphasis to sovereign power.

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<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, 1488a10.

Hobbes, he argues, does not think of the state of nature as a prehistoric epoch, but as a ‘principle internal to the State revealed in the moment in which the State is considered “as if it were dissolved”’. In the state of nature, man is wolf to man, so ‘this lupization of man and humanization of the wolf is at every moment possible in the *dissolutio civitatis* inaugurated by the state of exception’.<sup>32</sup>

A *dissolutio civitatis* might be expected to effect a return to the private realm, for Agamben claims to be working with ‘the classical distinction between *zōē* and *bios*, between private life and political existence, between man as a simple living being at home in the house and man’s political existence in the city’.<sup>33</sup> But although he places bare life ‘in the no-man’s land between the home and the city’ it is apparent that in his examples of men exiled from the city, the outlaw does not retire to enjoy a private life with his family.<sup>34</sup> The werewolf is to be found between ‘the forest and the city’, not half-way between the *polis* and the *oikos*.

Nussbaum takes as her starting point Rousseau’s memorable picture of bare life (‘All are born naked and poor. All are subject to the miseries of life . . .’), and argues that ‘people are entitled not only to mere life, but to a life compatible with human dignity’.<sup>35</sup> Because man is political, acquiring human dignity involves projecting the alienated, the private and the ungregarious into the public realm, and because man is an animal this means that his animal needs and animal dignity find their satisfaction in the public realm as well. Initially at least, Nussbaum is working primarily with the private–public axis, where she describes a vector which (like Foucault’s ‘optimization of the capabilities of the body’) travels from bare life towards the public sphere.

However, because animal dignity is of a kind shared by non-human animals as well, the optimization of non-human capabilities also inscribes a trajectory that leads not so much from private to public as from nature to culture. And in *Frontiers of Justice* she switches her attention to the other axis. Rather as the *homo sacer* does not go home but ends up becoming part of nature instead, the animal whose capabilities are developed participates in culture rather than politics. Although each takes something like a ninety-degree turn, the trajectories described by Nussbaum

<sup>32</sup> HS, p. 106.

<sup>33</sup> HS, p. 187.

<sup>34</sup> HS, p. 90.

<sup>35</sup> Rousseau, *Emile*, book 4; epigraph for Nussbaum, ‘Human Capabilities, Female Human Beings’, p. 63.

and Agamben continue to be opposing vectors: Agamben's equation of the *dissolutio civitatis* with the state of nature allows bare life to take on animal form, while Nussbaum, translating animal dignity into the dignity of animals, brings nature into the sphere of culture.

There is, it seems, no one route to the biopolitical, only converging vectors of privatization, naturalization, acculturation and socialization. But what is the unknown region into which political exiles, werewolves, Alsatians in wheelchairs and working women all now wearily make their way?

### *The absent centre*

In Aristotle, both the solitary–gregarious and the voice–*logos* axes are continuous and have a discernible, if poorly defined middle ground. Between solitude and the gregariousness of the city, there are first couples, then households, then villages. Those who inhabit the middle of the range are to a greater or lesser degree scattered, a condition shared by Cyclopes and ground larks, amongst other creatures.<sup>36</sup> Between voice and *logos* there are the intermediate states as well. The slave 'participates in reason so far as to apprehend it but not to possess it' and lacks the deliberative part of the soul; women have the deliberative part but without full authority; children possess it in undeveloped form.<sup>37</sup>

These two axes meet in the household, which is about half-way between solitude and gregariousness, and potentially incorporates all the states between *logos* and voice—the master, the wife, the slave, the ox.<sup>38</sup> Aristotle admitted that 'man is not only a political but also a domestic animal [*oikonomikon zōon*]', and at the intersection of the axes this is what all would appear to become.<sup>39</sup> Yet Aristotle could not conceive of a household without a master, or a situation in which households alone could occupy anything other than a discontinuous social space. The middle ground is there, but sparsely populated.

So what happens when man becomes, biopolitically, a domestic animal? Agamben points to 'a zone of indifference . . . within which—like a "missing link" which is always lacking because it is already virtually

<sup>36</sup> See David Depew, 'Humans and Other Political Animals in Aristotle's *History of Animals*', *Phronesis*, vol. 40, no. 2 (1995), pp. 156–81.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b22–3, 1260a10–14.

<sup>38</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1252b12.

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1242a23.

present—the articulation between human and animal, man and non-man, speaking being and living being, must take place. Like every space of exception, this zone is, in truth, perfectly empty'.<sup>40</sup>

But the void has a name. Hannah Arendt, whose argument in *The Human Condition* Agamben otherwise follows quite closely, calls it society, or 'the social'. In antiquity, the household 'was the sphere where the necessities of life . . . were taken care of', and in the modern world society is a sort of 'national household', in which 'mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public'.<sup>41</sup>

This 'national household' or 'society' is also conceived in Aristotelian terms, though Arendt reinterprets both axes in her own way. The axis which leads from solitude to gregariousness, the private to the public, is defined by the polarities of labour and action. Labour includes and supports the biological processes of the human body, and does not need the presence of others; action, as 'the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter', is 'entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others'.<sup>42</sup>

Action alone constitutes the *bios politikos*, and a life without it 'has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men', like the life of the *animal laborans* who is 'imprisoned in the privacy of his own body'.<sup>43</sup> But modernity has seen the triumph of the *animal laborans*, as economic and technological advance has freed mankind from necessity, and brought the private activities of production and consumption into the public realm, replacing it with a 'consumers' society'.

Alongside this, Arendt develops a distinctive account of the other axis in which the opposites are represented by 'the world', which is 'the human artefact, the fabrication of human hands', and 'the earth or nature'. The earth 'provides human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe', but through work, as opposed to labour, is formed 'an "artificial" world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings'. Work is therefore the activity 'which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence'; it separates man from his environment, even though

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<sup>40</sup> HS, pp. 37–8.

<sup>41</sup> HC, p. 46.

<sup>42</sup> HC, pp. 97, 22.

<sup>43</sup> HC, pp. 176, 118.

'life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms'.<sup>44</sup>

Human life, in so far as it is world-building, is engaged in reification, but scientific doubt and secularization undermine the perceived permanence and value of culture, and so humans become separated from the world that they have created. In 'world alienation' it is 'as though we had forced open the distinguishing boundaries which protected the world, the human artifice, from nature' and all that is left are 'appetites and desires, the senseless urges of [man's] body'. In this state, whatever was 'not necessitated by life's metabolism with nature, was either superfluous or could be justified only in terms of a peculiarity of human as distinguished from other animal life—so that Milton was considered to have written his *Paradise Lost* for the same reasons and out of similar urges that compel the silkworm to produce silk'.<sup>45</sup> Here, language becomes voice, and culture returns to nature.

On both axes there is a double movement. Modernity has been both world-alienating and earth-alienating, as the abstractions of science and technology have distanced man from the earth. At the same time, 'the final stage in the disappearance of the public realm' has been accompanied by the 'liquidation of the private realm', the two realms 'constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life-process itself' until 'the submersion of both in the sphere of the social'.<sup>46</sup>

### *Into the maelstrom*

For Arendt, the vectors of the biopolitical form the vortex of the social. But as she recoiled from the maelstrom, she watched others behold it with equanimity. In particular, Marx, who, she claimed, transformed the vortex of modernity into a political programme. The 'withering away of the public realm' in which the state gives way to pure administration was the prelude to Marx's 'withering away of the state'. Marx did not, indeed, could not have known that 'the germs of communistic society were present in the reality of a national household', but 'a complete victory of society will always produce some sort of "communistic fiction", whose outstanding political characteristic is that it is indeed ruled by an invisible hand'.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> HC, pp. 52, 7, 2.

<sup>46</sup> HC, pp. 67, 330, 69.

<sup>45</sup> HC, pp. 126, 320–1.

<sup>47</sup> HC, pp. 44–5.

Conversely, Marx's 'socialization of man' embodied the opposing vector. It could be achieved by revolutionary expropriation, but 'a slower and no less certain "withering away" of the private realm in general and of private property in particular' was already underway, as the private became increasingly political. For example, 'the fact that the modern age emancipated the working classes and the women at nearly the same historical moment must certainly be counted among the characteristics of an age which no longer believes that bodily functions and material functions should be hidden'.<sup>48</sup>

Arendt's identification of Marxism with modernity was intended as a critique of both. Yet Sen and Nussbaum make what amounts to the same claim when they insist that the capabilities approach 'takes its start from the Aristotelian/Marxian conception of the human being as a social and political being, who finds fulfilment in relations with others'.<sup>49</sup> Nussbaum argues that 'the basic intuitive idea of my version of the capabilities approach is . . . a life that has available in it "truly human functioning" in the sense described by Marx',<sup>50</sup> and she repeatedly uses a quotation from Marx as an epigraph:

It will be seen how in place of the *wealth* and *poverty* of political economy come the *rich human being* and the rich human need. The *rich* human being is simultaneously the human being *in need* of a totality of human-life activities—the man in whom his own realization exists as an inner necessity, as *need*.<sup>51</sup>

The passage in question describes the transformed life of man under communism, and Nussbaum explicitly equates 'truly human functioning' with this condition. Acknowledging that 'the *sense* caught up in crude practical need has only a *restricted* sense', Marx had argued in the 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' that 'it is obvious that the *human* eye gratifies itself in a way different from the crude non-human eye; the human *ear* from the crude ear'. It is precisely this transformation that is involved in the transition from basic capabilities to full functioning. According to Nussbaum, the central task of the city is not to take

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<sup>48</sup> HC, pp. 72–3.

<sup>49</sup> FJ, p. 85. Before Nussbaum turned his attention to Aristotle, Marx was Sen's chief point of reference; see Sen, 'Plural Utility', p. 198; 'Well-being', p. 202 fn.; *On Ethics*, p. 46 fn.

<sup>50</sup> FJ, pp. 74–5.

<sup>51</sup> Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', quoted in Nussbaum, 'Nature, Function', p. 145.

care of people's 'perceptual needs in a mechanical way, producing a seeing eye, a hearing ear, etc'; it is rather to 'make it possible for people to use their bodies and their senses in a truly human way'.<sup>52</sup>

Similar alignments between Marxist thought and the vectors of the biopolitical are to be found on the nature–culture axis. According to Arendt, 'world alienation' is the equivalent of Marx's dealienation, in which man reappropriates cultural production as a species being. It was Marx who likened Milton to a silkworm, and in the Marxist utopia, where all may write poetry on this basis, 'world alienation is even more present than it was before'.<sup>53</sup> Agamben makes the same point, quoting Kojève's version of the 'Hegelo-Marxist end of history', where 'men would construct their edifices and works of art as birds build their nests and spiders spin their webs, and would perform musical concerts after the fashion of frogs and cicadas'.<sup>54</sup> And it is, of course, Marx's claim that 'communism as completed naturalism is humanism and as completed humanism is naturalism'<sup>55</sup> that is knowingly echoed in Agamben's statement that the 'lupinization of man and humanization of the wolf is at every moment possible in the *dissolutio civitatis*'.

### *Valences of the social*

Although the vectors of the biopolitical are plotted in Aristotelian terms, their trajectories are derived not so much from Aristotle as from Marx's reading of him. It is as though Marx's early vision of communism had been bisected, with Agamben taking up his account of depoliticization and naturalization, and Nussbaum his vision of socialization and humanization. But if biopolitics and capabilities represent two halves of Marx's totalizing theory, can they also be reunited to describe a single movement?

Not necessarily, for the fragments have acquired widely differing valences: Sen and Nussbaum present the capabilities approach as being equivalent to (and perhaps a substitute for) the projected path of human development envisioned by communism; while for Arendt and Agamben, the

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<sup>52</sup> Nussbaum, 'Nature, Function', p. 183.

<sup>53</sup> HC, p. 254.

<sup>54</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', *Early Texts*, tr. David McLellan, Oxford 1971, p. 148.

logic of modernity is identical with that which leads to totalitarianism and the camps. At one point, Agamben comes close to describing the convergence of all the vectors: ‘for a humanity that has become animal again, there is nothing left but the depoliticization of human societies by means of the unconditioned unfolding of the *oikonomia*, or the taking on of biological life itself as the supreme political (or rather impolitical) task.’ He acknowledges its imaginative location in Kojève’s end of history, but finds its historical realization in ‘the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century’.<sup>56</sup>

Something of this duality is already present in Marx. When read in the light of Aristotle’s definition of the political animal, it becomes apparent that states of alienation and communism are created in a similar way. Marx himself acknowledges that the alienated man of civil society is the closest approximation to the socialized political animal of Aristotle:

Only in the eighteenth century, in ‘civil society’, do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is also precisely that of the hitherto most developed social (from this standpoint, general) relations. The human being is in the most literal sense a *zōon politikon* [political animal], not merely a gregarious animal, but an animal which can individuate itself only in the midst of society.<sup>57</sup>

The parallel is unsurprising, for both alienation and communism are defined within the same matrix, one axis of which locates man’s simultaneous alienation from nature and from his own cultural production, the other his alienation from both public and private life. Marx’s early references to alienation allude to one or another of these forms of estrangement: ‘alienated labour tears man from the object of his production . . . his own body, nature exterior to him, and his intellectual being, his human essence’.<sup>58</sup> Together they constitute alienation from species-being, the life that man would have if he were fully socialized, and society was not merely the means but also the end.

If alienation has at least a fourfold form—from culture and from nature, and from the private and the political—so too does dealienation.

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<sup>56</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, p. 76.

<sup>57</sup> Marx, Introduction, *Grundrisse*, tr. Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth 1973, p. 84.

<sup>58</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, *Early Texts*, p. 140.

Communism involves ‘the positive abolition of all alienation, thus the return of man out of religion, family, state, etc [he might have added, nature], into his human, i.e. social being’.<sup>59</sup> It takes place both on the public–private axis, where ‘human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a *species-being*’; and on that of nature and culture: ‘society completes the essential unity of man and nature . . . the accomplished naturalism of man and the accomplished humanism of nature’.<sup>60</sup>

What then constitutes the difference between communism and alienation? Are they, as Arendt implied, just alternative ways of describing the same thing? Marx presents the vectors of the biopolitical as part of an ambiguous totality. Alienation and communism happen in the same place, in that both are the product of the same vectors. However, in the former, only man has been transformed, as he moves away from static polarities; in the latter, the world itself is changed as those polarities draw together. The alienated human beings of civil society are prematurely social, living in society before the socialization of the world.

Within this context, communism is an act of restoration, ‘a *restoration* of the human world and of human relationships to *man himself*.’ For example, in civil society man is on the one hand ‘a member of civil society . . . and on the other a citizen’, and there is a gap between the two that is closed when ‘individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen’.<sup>61</sup> This involves not so much the transformation of the individual as the transformation of the world through the withering away of the state. Similarly, whereas for Nussbaum, the transition from animal seeing to human sight is effected through the transformation of the individual, and the social functions only as the means to that transformation, Marx envisaged something different. For him, ‘the human character of the senses . . . can only come into being through the existence of *its* object, through humanized nature’; the eye becomes ‘a *human* eye when its *object* has become a *human*, social object’ and this occurs only when ‘he himself becomes a social being and society becomes a being for him in

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<sup>59</sup> Marx, ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, *Early Texts*, p. 149.

<sup>60</sup> Marx, ‘On the Jewish Question’, *Early Writings*, tr. Thomas Bottomore, London 1963, p. 31; and ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts’, *Early Texts*, p. 150.

<sup>61</sup> Marx, ‘On the Jewish Question’, *Early Writings*, p. 31.

this object'.<sup>62</sup> The difference between the capabilities approach and the Marxist project it seeks to realize here becomes apparent, for moving from bare capability to fully human functioning is alienating just in so far as it is not universal.

The same applies to other vectors of the biopolitical. One man excluded from the public realm is disenfranchised, when all are excluded the public realm has disappeared; the zoo animal is alienated from nature in a way that the domestic animal is not; one woman who escapes the confines of the family is distanced from private life, a large voluntary female labour force is not; we cannot all be *homines sacri*: the solitary werewolf may be alienated from his culture, but when we all become werewolves there is no more wolf and no more man. Vehicles of both alienation and of dealienation, the vectors of the biopolitical also provide the measure of each in terms of their differential distribution of a population.

Not everyone is likely to welcome equally the dissolution of politics, the acculturation of nature, the politicization of private life and the naturalization of culture, though most will recognize the relevant vectors within their environment. Less obvious, perhaps, is the extent to which such vectors are enacting a single movement that defines the social space of modernity—the degree of their convergence the index of society. And yet there is no vanishing point—a disenfranchised man does not become a simian citizen, nor a working woman a werewolf—only a diminishing space of contestation, where all try to live the good life, together.

Reuniting the vectors potentially provides a means of articulating the politics of this conceptually expanded but biopolitically contracting field. In particular, it allows us to distinguish, in ways that Marx did not, the state of being equally social from that of being socially equal: the first is measured by convergence between vectors, the second by distributions effected by them. For an egalitarian at least, it may be useful to differentiate non-social equalities—of citizens, members of a family, of animals in nature—from the specifically social equalities that are a function of distances travelled and numbers left behind. To be equally social and socially equal may be utopian, but seeking to measure progress in that direction is not.

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<sup>62</sup> Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', *Early Writings*, pp. 160–1.