

# The Plural Planet: A Democratic Culture of Earthlings

*Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen*

**Abstract:** We are entering the age of planetary politics defined by consciousness of human impact on the Earth System, and the planetary ecosystem's responses to our activities. This poses a major challenge to democratic theory. How do we protect life without evoking a planetary sovereign? This article argues that the planetary condition requires imaginatively expanding existing democratic concepts to make room for new connections, realities, and beginnings. It demonstrates this by focusing on Hannah Arendt's notion of plurality as the law of the earth. Read through the Roman *lex*, which emerges from the conflict between the plebs and the patricians, this notion helps us imagine a planetary politics premised on the creation of new relationships between previously discrete entities. Building on this interpretation, I discuss scientific expertise and indigenous perspectives as modes of cultivating political imagination to expand our understanding of the democratic stage beyond the human species.

## Introduction

The political thought of Hannah Arendt is deeply attuned to the problem of extinction. “Main point: we live in a civilization that threatens life,” she wrote in her May 1969 *Denktagebuch* working notes for “On Violence.”<sup>1</sup> Though it was nuclear warfare that was foremost in her mind, Arendt captured something essential about the contemporary fearful anticipation of an ecological/civilizational collapse. She also offers, I suggest, provocative ideas for a pluralistic democratic culture for the age of planetary politics we are entering.

Our age is defined by the increasing recognition that everyday human activity is changing the key processes of the Earth System. Not just a handful of scientists and politicians responsible for nuclear weapons and subatomic experiments but humankind as a whole has become a planetary agent. And

Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen is a senior lecturer in political science at the University of Jyväskylä, 40014 Finland [ari-elmeri.hyvonen@juu.fi](mailto:ari-elmeri.hyvonen@juu.fi).

<sup>1</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch: 1950 bis 1973*, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich: Piper, 2003), 714.

yet, the Earth System is no passive victim of human action. Planetary politics also entails sensitivity to the reactions of the planet and its ecosystems to human activity. Climate change and other ecological challenges, including unsustainable use of natural resources, are rapidly undermining the political and economic presuppositions of contemporary industrial societies. The planet as a living ecosystem has entered political decision-making. As Bruno Latour observes, no human community before ours “has had to grapple with the reactions of the earth system to the actions of eight or nine billion humans.”<sup>2</sup>

The entrance of the planetary into politics poses a challenge to political thought and imagination.<sup>3</sup> Faced with shocking and threatening realities, old words can lose their ability to disclose realities. When the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen interrupted his colleagues in an academic meeting in 2000 by interjecting, “Stop talking about the Holocene, we are now in the Anthropocene!,” he was raising an issue familiar from the history of political science as well. Speaking as though we still lived in the relatively stable Holocene is as inadequate as traditional politico-juridical vocabulary was when faced with extermination camps.<sup>4</sup> For the shock of reality to become bearable, we must adjust our language to the new and unforeseen.<sup>5</sup> This process was initiated by Crutzen by coining the term “Anthropocene,” and other scholars, activists, and journalists soon followed suit.<sup>6</sup>

Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright argue that when the current capitalist societies adapt to worsening climate conditions, the most likely outcome is planetary sovereignty along the lines of Hobbes and Schmitt. This climate Leviathan would seize command in the name of protecting life on a planetary scale and be hell-bent on keeping the capitalist economy running.<sup>7</sup> Global

<sup>2</sup>Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 44. Latour’s point, as I understand it, is less about the absolute size of the global population and more about the awareness of our collective impact on the planet and its ecosystem(s).

<sup>3</sup>Dipesh Chakrabarty et al., “A Symposium on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*,” *Review of Politics* 84, no. 4 (April 2022): 592–612; Joel Wainwright and Geoff Mann, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future* (London: Verso, 2018).

<sup>4</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 414–19; Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 309–10.

<sup>5</sup>Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 48.

<sup>6</sup>T. Toivanen et al., “The Many Anthropocenes: A Transdisciplinary Challenge for the Anthropocene Research,” *Anthropocene Review* 4, no. 3 (2017): 183–98; John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering, *The Politics of the Anthropocene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 31.

<sup>7</sup>Wainwright and Mann, *Climate Leviathan*, 15, 28–29. They also discuss noncapitalist climate Mao and climate Behemoth, which opposes planetary sovereignty while sticking with capitalism.

sovereignty, however, would threaten freedom and equality, whereas capitalism's tendency to expand makes it unsustainable. Without radically altering the worldly, cultural, and economic institutions that mediate our relationship with the planet and its ecosystem, the earth will become inhospitable to many forms of life—including *bios politikos* as we know it. Hence "we must create something new"—something that Mann and Wainwright designate with "climate X."<sup>8</sup> In this article, I follow up on their insistence on creating something new, as well as their observation that this is a task of political imagination first and foremost.

The authors of *Climate Leviathan*, like many Marxist writers who have turned to ecological politics over the last decade, are mainly concerned about anticipating the emergence of a particular political-economic form. I worry that this anticipatory orientation, similarly to an exclusive focus on survival or truth, keeps us too much in the vicinity of will, and hence sovereignty. For Arendt, politics is a question not of the sovereign will, but of plurality. One of her key contributions to democratic theory revolves around her notion of *amor mundi*, care for the world, which often takes the form of agnostic contention over shared objects of concern.<sup>9</sup>

The gratitude-inspired *amor mundi* that Arendt conceived of as the root of our capacity for world-building is usually associated with the narrowly political activities of (human) democratic participation. For some democratic theorists addressing climate change, this would be sufficient also in the context of planetary politics. In Chantal Mouffe's *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution*, for example, environmentalism appears as a social movement among others, to be analyzed with essentially the same conceptual tools.<sup>10</sup> My aim in this article is to push democratic theory further. Delegating ecological issues to a particular domain of activism or a separate strand of environmental thought will not suffice. The rise of planetary politics necessitates an expansion of familiar concepts into new and surprising directions. I argue that we must translate the Arendtian lexicon of *amor mundi* and human plurality into a new vocabulary of *amor Tellus*—care for the planet, and the plurality of earthlings. Respinning the web of Arendt's political concepts to meet the demands of planetary politics, I take my cues, in particular, from her notion, expressed in the posthumous *The Life of the Mind*, that "plurality is

<sup>8</sup>Wainwright and Mann, *Climate Leviathan*, 173. I am not as convinced as they are that capitalism can be kept in existence, on a global scale, even if backed up with sovereign power.

<sup>9</sup>Ella Myers, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 16–25; Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4, 28–29, 50.

<sup>10</sup>Chantal Mouffe, *Towards a Green Democratic Revolution: Left Populism and the Power of Affects* (London: Verso, 2022).

the law of the Earth.”<sup>11</sup> Enacting this law is, I argue, first and foremost a question of forging and cultivating relationships between humans and nonhumans to protect the diversity and plurality of both.

I start elaborating on this positive vision by examining Arendt’s account of gratitude for things “given to us,” such as the planet and life on it. Drawing from the Romans, “perhaps the most political people we have known,”<sup>12</sup> I develop this plural, planetary orientation by creatively reading Arendt’s musings on the notions of law (*lex*) and culture (*colere*). The former highlight the politics of building new relationships between “altogether different entities,”<sup>13</sup> which in the Anthropocene can be extended not only to the relationships between different groups of humans (such as indigenous and nonindigenous), but between humans and other earthlings. The latter, accentuating the character of culture as cultivated nature, informs the ecological implications of the politics of gratitude.

The last section of the article seeks to provide a speculative Arendtian answer to the question recently posed by Hans Asenbaum and Amanda Machin: Is (radical) democracy “only for humans”?<sup>14</sup> Here, I deviate from Mann and Wainwright, whose imaginative exercises are largely human centered. But neither do I follow new materialist thinkers in highlighting more-than-human agency as such. In the context of Arendt’s thought, it is often pointless to pose the “what counts as action” question in the abstract, outside the context of the responses invoked by a deed.<sup>15</sup> The question who or what counts as an actor, I suggest, can be equally fruitless. In democratic projects of world-building, cultivation, and judging, it is the “stage” that various beings have in common that matters, not the agential qualities of said beings. I thus seek to avoid a position that, in Linda Zerilli’s words, “makes agency the condition of any political existence whatsoever.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the role of more-than-human nature in politics is often indirect and mediated, a point I underscore by emphasizing the role of Indigenous perspectives and the political use of expertise as critical aspects of the democratic culture of earthlings. The point is to imaginatively expand democratic concepts to make room for new connections, new realities, new beginnings. Understanding the world requires seeing it from a plurality of perspectives.

<sup>11</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, *Thinking* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1978), 19–20. I touch on some of these themes in “Amor Tellus? For a Material Culture of Care,” *HannahArendt.net* 11, no. 1, 96–114.

<sup>12</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 7.

<sup>13</sup>Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 179.

<sup>14</sup>Hans Asenbaum and Amanda Machin, “The Nonhuman Condition: Radical Democracy through New Materialist Lenses,” *Contemporary Political Theory* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-023-00635-3>.

<sup>15</sup>Patchen Markell, “The Rule of the People: Arendt, *Archê*, and Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 1 (February 2006): 4, 11.

<sup>16</sup>Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss*, 12.

Today we need to account for a plurality of perspectives beyond the realm of human affairs. We must imagine a plural space of the earthlings.

### Visions of the Planet: From Dreams of Escape to Gratitude

Contemporary popular culture is saturated with defeatist, antipolitical imageries of escaping an uninhabitable Earth. They rehearse, in a tragic key, the curious sense of relief Arendt identifies with the launch of Sputnik I in 1957, which was considered “the first ‘step toward escape from men’s imprisonment to the earth’.”<sup>17</sup> The task of democratic theory is to offer alternatives to these visions of escape, political visions of continuing to live on Earth.

From the first sentences of the prologue, it is clear that Earth features prominently in *The Human Condition*. One of the worries animating the book is a “fateful repudiation” of the earth and earthly nature, the “very quintessence of the human condition.”<sup>18</sup> We are earth-bound creatures. And while it is conceivable that humans could leave the earth, this would render thought, labor, work, and action, as we know them, meaningless.<sup>19</sup> Our alienation from the earth is not merely a question of hypothetical space colonialism. It concerns our way of living on the planet as though we were not earthlings. Long before the first satellite entered Earth’s orbit, modern science understood that “our power over things grows in proportion to our distance from them” and hence started approaching Earth from an Archimedean position, even when looking at nature through the microscope.<sup>20</sup> One expression of this is the gradual subsumption of all natural appearances to all-embracing functional processes—a tendency that, for Arendt, unites modern sciences of economy, biology, geology, and history.<sup>21</sup> Most ecological thought follows the same pattern, representing humans as “micro-ecological processes embedded within . . . larger ecological earth processes.”<sup>22</sup> Seen from a sufficient distance, all human achievements are reduced to “large scale biological processes.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>17</sup>Arendt, *Human Condition*, 1.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 3, 10.

<sup>20</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953–1975* (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 407; See also Arendt, *Human Condition*, 257–60, 291–94.

<sup>21</sup>Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 1:26–27.

<sup>22</sup>Adrian Parr, *Earthlings: Imaginative Encounters with the Natural World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 154; Latour, *Down to Earth*, 71–75. See also Oliver Belcher and Jeremy J. Schmidt, “Being Earthbound: Arendt, Process and Alienation in the Anthropocene,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 39, no. 1 (2021): 103–20.

<sup>23</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 274.

For Arendt, this modern framing of nature is abstract, alienating us from the spectacle of appearances the world and earthly nature offer us. It is also aligned with the manipulative attitude towards nonhuman nature, characterized by the distrust of “everything merely given,” ushering the human species to conduct itself “as lord and master of the whole earth” as she observed as early as in the “Concluding Remarks” of the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.<sup>24</sup> The declaration of Francis Bacon at the dawn of modernity, in *The Masculine Birth of Time*, is representative: “I am come in very truth leading to you Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave.”<sup>25</sup> Modern technoscience seeks a “Promethean sovereignty over the materials worked with.”<sup>26</sup>

It is along these lines that many today propose to solve climate change—by directly intervening in the atmospheric processes of the planet to artificially turn the tides on its warming trajectory. But no matter how formidable creators we imagine ourselves to be, the Anthropocene is not an experience of Archimedean/Promethean sovereignty. We are entangled victims and sufferers as much as we are distant and powerful. We are distant because it is, in part, our alienation from the Earth that is giving us the extreme power/force to become shapers of the planet. We know this, further, because we are capable of seeing the Earth system from an “Archimedean position.” The science that tells us that the planet is in trouble, as Chakrabarty notes, “does not belong to an earthbound imagination” and is not specific to our planet.<sup>27</sup> But we are not only powerful; we are also suffering the unintended consequences of our own deeds.

Responding to the crisis of the planetary ecosystem demands a radical reorganization of labor, production, and consumption processes, as an extensive Marxist literature has argued.<sup>28</sup> However, the economy is only one element in our public lives. The question of coming politics thus requires addressing a broader set of problems together with the economic ones. We are lacking a coherent vision of a democratic culture of ecological reconstruction.

What is needed is a way of imagining the planetary that is neither Archimedean nor processual. Imagining a different relationship with

<sup>24</sup>Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 437.

<sup>25</sup>Francis Bacon, *The Masculine Birth of Time*, in *The Philosophy of Francis Bacon: An Essay on Its Development from 1603 to 1609*, by Benjamin Farrington (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1964), 62.

<sup>26</sup>Arendt, *Human Condition*, 139–40.

<sup>27</sup>Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, 67.

<sup>28</sup>Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015); Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016); John Bellamy Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene: Ecological Ruin or Ecological Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2022); I have made a related argument from an Arendtian perspective elsewhere, see Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen, “Labor as Action: The Human Condition in the Anthropocene,” *Research in Phenomenology* 50, no. 2 (2020): 240–60.



earthly nature is a matter of cultivating cultures of gratitude and reciprocity.<sup>29</sup> “Out of gratitude, I want to call my book on political theories ‘Amor Mundi,’” Arendt wrote to Karl Jaspers in 1955.<sup>30</sup> This sense of connectedness and gratitude must be at the center of our attention in the age of planetary politics, made actual in practices of care for each other and the planet. Starting with the abovementioned “Concluding Remarks” of the first edition of *Origins*, Arendt emphasized an orientation of “a fundamental gratitude for the few elementary things that indeed are invariably given to us” and an affirmation of the “tremendous bliss” of plurality.<sup>31</sup> Earth and “life itself” are foremost among things given to us.<sup>32</sup> Later, she would limit the political potential of this gratitude to “exceptional circumstances.”<sup>33</sup> Today, surely, we are in exceptional circumstances—perhaps more exceptional than anything humans have previously encountered. Gratitude for the earth and its inhabitants, then, can become a potent force in the age of planetary politics. In what follows, I seek to capture this political momentum by highlighting *plurality of earthlings* as the “law of the earth.” For Arendt, as we have seen, humans are terrestrial, earth-bound beings, or *Erdbewohnern*—a German equivalent occasionally used by Arendt that probably comes closest to the English “earthlings.”<sup>34</sup> Following Adrian Parr, I use “earthlings” to refer to all biotic systems on earth, which share a unique, water-saturated, lively planet.<sup>35</sup> This expansion is not a radical departure from Arendt’s position, which links life, earth, and plurality to each other via gratitude. The earthling lens adds a heightened sensitivity to the planet and its inhabitants as political issues that must be attended to, cared for, and debated from many viewpoints. It is a matter of moving away from the Archimedean distance and moving closer to nonhuman forms of life by establishing new relationships.

### The Law of the Earth

As long as we inhabit this earth, we are as much in need of each other as we shall be in the need of God at the hour of our death.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>29</sup>My argument is inspired by Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanical scientist and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, who notes that her students are well aware of the negative interactions between humans and nature, but strikingly unable to “even imagine what beneficial relations between their species and others might look like.” *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), 6.

<sup>30</sup>Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence, 1926–1969* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 264.

<sup>31</sup>Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 438.

<sup>32</sup>Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 130.

<sup>33</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 466.

<sup>34</sup>Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 564.

<sup>35</sup>Parr, *Earthlings*, 4–5.

<sup>36</sup>Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 216.

Plurality as the law of the earth and earthlings is a metaphor, but linking it to the concrete meaning of law helps to unpack its meaning. The political function of law, for Arendt, always needs to be understood from a dual perspective of *nomos* and *lex*. The Greek *nomos* was primarily understood as a prepolitical structure that created an artificial space of equality among naturally dissimilar beings. *Nomos* made action possible by limiting it and carving a space for it.<sup>37</sup> The Roman *lex*, in contrast, designates lasting ties woven between conflicting parties and is essentially political. Before becoming an instrument of Roman imperialism, the idea emerged from the plebeian uprising and the promulgation of the Twelve Tables. The point was not the unification of the two quarreling parties, but the establishment of new relationships between them. In the language of contemporary agonistic democratic theory, *lex* was an instrument that turned enemies into democratic adversaries.<sup>38</sup> It was concerned with the transformation of destructive forces “into something different and enduring,” giving rise—through the conflict—to something new that the “two altogether different entities,” brought together by external circumstances, have in common.<sup>39</sup>

Reading these two notions of law from the perspective of plurality as the law of the earth, there is undeniable merit in the notion of the artificial quality of equality emphasized by *nomos*, which helps us to move away from futile debates about whether other species are “naturally” equal to humans. There is also value in the Greek idea of respecting the limits of human action, and the centrality of pluralistic judgment exercised in the courts of law for their democratic culture.<sup>40</sup> The Roman *lex*, however, offers an even richer web of ideas that help articulate plurality as a planetary principle of action and judgment. *Lex* revolves around the forging of new relations that preserve rather than assimilate dissimilar parties while creating something new between them. It is exactly this type of creation of new relationships between dissimilar entities that the enactment of plurality as the earth’s law demands. Contemporary planetary politics calls for radically democratic action in the style of the plebeian secession, which led to the agonistic reconciliation of the two orders and gave birth to the idea of *lex*. Indigenous activists and groups like Extinction Rebellion and Wretched of the Earth are leading the way to similar political rebellion today. If the ensuing political and economic conflicts can be transformed into enduring arrangements, into something new that the altogether different entities—a plurality of earthlings—have in common, perhaps then we can justifiably talk about plurality as the law of the earth.

<sup>37</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 185–86.

<sup>38</sup>Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>39</sup>Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 177–80; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 179–80.

<sup>40</sup>Ella Street, “Judgment in the Fourth-Century BCE Athenian Courts as Anti-Tragedy: Demosthenes’s *On the Crown*,” *Review of Politics* 84, no. 4 (2022): 497–519.



Rethinking the circumstances and relationships the human species has in common with other beings on the planet often requires an extension of the familiar concepts of law and politics. In the contemporary ecological movement, we are seeing examples of establishing new relations, something new the altogether different entities have in common, via an expansion of legal concepts. Environmental activists and Indigenous groups have successfully demanded political and legal rights for natural entities like rivers. The Magpie River in Quebec was granted legal personhood in 2021, and given nine rights, including the right to flow, the right to be safe from pollution—and the right to sue. In 2017 an act of parliament in New Zealand recognized the Whanganui River as an independent, rights-bearing entity. This was part of the treaty settlement between the government and the Māori people. Guardians were appointed to act and speak on behalf of the river and enforce its rights. In India, the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers have also been granted legal rights. The 2008 constitution of Ecuador recognizes the rights of the earth or Pacha Mama.

These examples highlight that recognizing the Indigenous rights to the land and making their voices heard alongside scientists in climate governance is key to actualizing earthly plurality and reconciling humans with the living planet.<sup>41</sup> They also underscore the importance of considering ecological politics as a long-term process of building new relationships and making connections. Legal rights for rivers or nature remain meaningless unless they are ceaselessly followed up and become the building blocks of a consistent world-building project instead of remaining isolated acts.

There is a persistent tendency in Arendt studies to overidentify the whole realm of politics with the revolutionary beginnings so that even the celebrated care for the world is conceived as a prepolitical condition of action/politics proper.<sup>42</sup> Political freedom, which gains its highest expression in unpredictable, disruptive beginnings, nevertheless requires a broader space of appearances in which it can become a reality. Democratic politics, for Arendt, has to do with world-building that brings into existence and maintains the common space in which objects of judgment, of democratic disagreement, too, can make their appearance, as Zerilli has shown.<sup>43</sup> And “whatever occurs in this space of appearances,” Arendt wrote of the Greeks, “is political by definition, *even if it has nothing directly to do with action.*”<sup>44</sup> In the context of

<sup>41</sup>James Tully, “Reconciliation Here on Earth,” in *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous-Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, ed. Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 83.

<sup>42</sup>Lucien Ferguson, “From Love to Care: Arendt’s *Amor Mundi* in the Ethical Turn,” *Political Theory* 50, no. 6 (2022): 939–63; Judith Butler, *Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 44–45.

<sup>43</sup>Linda M. G. Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), xiii.

<sup>44</sup>Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister*, 226, emphasis added.

planetary politics, focusing on the broader world of appearances as a political question of the first order has the additional benefit of enabling a more comprehensive mapping of action's relationships with the other, more directly material, human activities. The economy, after all, as "the organized attempt of men living together at handling and securing the necessities and luxuries of life," has "always belonged to the public concern."<sup>45</sup> Action and the intangible web of relationships it creates are crucial but inescapably mixed with the organization of labor, work, energy consumption, and resource management.

The temporal implications of *lex* resonate powerfully with this broader, endurance-and-space-of-appearance-oriented vision of planetary politics. Roman thought revolves around "conservative care," a kind of fidelity to the foundation of the polity. It thus highlights the long-term projects of reconstruction that any ecological "new beginning" must initiate. It reminds us that while our action is inspired by the past, the world-building capacities exemplified by the establishment of relationships "concern always not so much ourselves and our own time on earth as our 'successor' and 'posterities.'"<sup>46</sup> Further, conservation through augmentation and relationship building is another way of approaching the principle of gratitude discussed above. As Kimmerer writes, the "gifts of the earth . . . establish a particular relationship, an obligation of sorts to give, to receive, to reciprocate."<sup>47</sup> The link between the political and the "gifts of the earth" was hardly missed by the Romans, who derived their word for founding from *Conditor*, a Latin field god, "whose main function was to preside over growth and harvest; he obviously was a founder and preserver at the same time."<sup>48</sup> Both politically and materially, we are called to preserve the gifts handed to us, so that they can also be enjoyed by our posterities.

### Culture as Cultivated Nature

The Greek *nomos* was conceived as the opposite of *phusis*, or nature. This, too, tilts the scales in favor of the Roman perspective that highlights the web of relationships, including relationships between humans and nature. As I have suggested elsewhere,<sup>49</sup> in the Anthropocene, the idea of earthly nature independent of human beings is not conceivable: as Jedediah Purdy points out, "the contrast between what is nature and what is not no longer makes sense."<sup>50</sup> Similar

<sup>45</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Complete Works: Critical Edition*, vol. 6, *The Modern Challenge to Tradition: Fragmente eines Buchs* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018), 253.

<sup>46</sup>Arendt, *On Revolution*, 166–67.

<sup>47</sup>Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 25.

<sup>48</sup>Arendt, *On Revolution*, 194–95.

<sup>49</sup>Hyvönen, "Amor Tellus?," 99.

<sup>50</sup>Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 3, 15; Paul Wapner, "The Changing Nature of

views were surfacing at the time Arendt was writing. "Nature is dead, *mein Kind*" declares Immanuel Kant to the protagonist of Mary McCarthy's 1971 novel *Birds of America*.<sup>51</sup> Dedicated to Arendt, the novel was one of her favorites among McCarthy's works and its reception sparked a fascinating conversation between them. In a letter to McCarthy around the time *Birds of America* was published, Arendt comments: "I want to quarrel with your opposition of culture and nature. Culture is always cultivated nature—nature being tended and being taken care of by one of nature's products called man. If nature is dead culture will die too, together with all the artifacts of our civilization."<sup>52</sup>

Recent Arendt scholarship has highlighted the democratic importance of attending to worldly or public things, bringing action down to earth from the nonmaterial aloofness where previous scholarship, and occasionally Arendt herself, had seemed to elevate it.<sup>53</sup> Arendtian care for the world, for these readers, is a materially attuned activity. Yet it is still common to delegate the "natural" and "animal" parts of the human condition exclusively to Arendt's purportedly unflattering description of *animal laborans*. Thus, for Ella Myers, by making nonhuman nature part and parcel of human metabolism with nature in labor and consumption, Arendt seriously undercuts her own ability to say anything politically relevant about it.<sup>54</sup> This interpretation is understandable, given Arendt's suggestion that action goes on directly between human beings, and that the work that builds the cultural artifacts that enliven the public world is premised on an Archimedean, violent distance from the gifts of Earth. "*Homo faber*, the creator of the human artifice," she argues, "has always been a destroyer of nature."<sup>55</sup>

As the above passage from the letter to McCarthy indicates, however, human life is comprehensively intertwined with its material surroundings. It is not merely in the domain of labor that we attend to and care for nature. We are interdependent members of earthly nature through and through, particularly as cultural beings. For Arendt, culture—which plays a key role in shaping the public space of appearance in which political action

---

Nature: Environmental Politics in the Anthropocene," *Global Environmental Politics* 14, no. 4 (2014): 36, 39.

<sup>51</sup>Mary McCarthy, *Birds of America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 307.

<sup>52</sup>Mary McCarthy and Hannah Arendt, *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy 1949–1975* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1995), 293; see also 276–77. Possibly this was McCarthy's point too, as her biographer Carole Brightman points out, in *Writing Dangerously* (San Diego: Harvest, 1994), 530. However, the idea of reestablishing "Nature in her natural place" clearly seems to hold sway over McCarthy, even though she recognizes the impossibility of the thought.

<sup>53</sup>Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 86; Honig, *Public Things*.

<sup>54</sup>Myers, *Worldly Ethics*, 90; see also William E. Connolly, *Climate Machines, Fascist Drives, and Truth* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 3–5, 42.

<sup>55</sup>Arendt, *Human Condition*, 139.

and judgment are exercised—is a “natureculture” or “bioculture.”<sup>56</sup> We cannot take nature away from culture without destroying it. Democracy, particularly in the age of planetary politics, is embedded in a material culture of care for the earth and nonhuman earthlings.

Arendt traces the meaning of culture back to Rome, and the verb *colere*—“to cultivate, to dwell, to take care, to tend and preserve.” Though it is easy to focus on the tending and preserving of cultural artifacts exclusively, the Roman notion of culture “relates primarily to the intercourse of man with nature in the sense of cultivating and tending nature until it becomes fit for human habitation. As such, it indicates an attitude of loving care and stands in sharp contrast to all efforts to subject nature to the domination of man.”<sup>57</sup> There is a strong, rarely noted resonance between the Roman notions of law and culture, *lex* and *colere*. In both, a kind of caring retention and relationship building occupies center stage. As we have seen, in *lex* new relationships emerged between conflicting parties and created something new they have in common. *Colere*, in turn, directs attention to relationship building between human beings and earthly nature: “as far as Roman usage is concerned, the chief point always was the connection of culture and nature.”<sup>58</sup> Conditor presided over growth and harvest, being a founder and a preserver at the same time. Similarly, the primary meaning of culture emerges from the tending, caring, and cultivating that we allocate to the natural world. It is from the tilling and development of land and soil that the more metaphorical meanings of cultivating the mind are derived.

The Roman-inspired account of culture differs strikingly from the Greek perspective. Just as their notion of *nomos* emphasized an extrapolitical activity of crafting, so the Greek idea of art put more weight on the activity of making cultural artifacts. The craftsman’s (*tektōn*) way of seeing the world, the Greeks understood, was saturated with instrumentalism which is a potent threat to freedom. Where the Romans emphasized art’s continuity with the natural world, the Greeks considered even agriculture as violence towards the earth. This also led them to a much narrower understanding of politics. Such “essentially political activities” as urban planning and legislation were conceived as prepolitical conditions of politics by the Greeks because of their instrumental character.<sup>59</sup>

It is not always easy to figure out where exactly Arendt stands on the notion of culture and its conflicting origins in the two classical periods. Traditionally, she has been read as a Grecophile. This reading would be supported by the fact that her essay “Crisis in Culture” concludes with the Greeks

<sup>56</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Samantha Frost, *Biocultural Creatures: Toward a New Theory of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>57</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 208.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister*, 166–174; Hyvönen, “Amor Tellus?,” 103.

and posits that “it is hardly the mentality of gardeners which produces art.”<sup>60</sup> However, her emphasis on the cultivation of nature in the letter to McCarthy, written years later, suggests that things are not so simple. Indeed, Arendt scholarship has generally moved away from the “Greek reading” of her thought.<sup>61</sup> We should take a step back when reading the essays on culture too. Taking stock of the strengths and weaknesses of the two ancient notions of culture allows us to form a clearer picture of Arendt’s own, twentieth-century understanding of culture and its value for our twenty-first-century, planetary condition. The strongest suit of the Greeks, in my reading of Arendt, was their alertness to the snares of the instrumental mindset required for producing cultural artifacts. Like the crafting of *nomos*, the crafting of these artifacts must remain outside of the political sphere proper. The Romans, in turn, were more attuned to the care required for achieving permanence in the world. The biggest shortcoming of the Greeks was that their distrust of *homo faber* made them blind to the activities involved in the retention of deeds and objects, that is, caring and cultivating.

For Arendt, probably the most important political role of culture had to do with the fact that it invites judgment, and judging can only be exercised by taking plurality into consideration. Without an audience capable of using the faculty of judgment or exercising their “cultured” or “cultivated” spirit, the human artificial world is hollow and short-lived. The judgment exercised by a cultured, democratic audience is a highly political capacity that testifies to the links between culture and politics. Arendt finds expressions of this in Pericles’s praise—related to us by Thucydides—of the Athenian love of beauty (*philokaloumen*) moderated by judgment (*euteleias*). When Cicero spoke of *cultura animi*, he was alluding to a closely related reflective faculty that “makes man fit to take care of the things of the world.”<sup>62</sup> Here, too, culture and nature are on the same continuum. Arendt’s main interlocutor on judgment, Kant, argued that the fact that we are affected by beauty in nature “proves that [the human being] is made for and fits into this world”—a quote McCarthy invokes before having Kant declare the death of nature.<sup>63</sup> And fitting into the world, as Arendt’s account of *colere* suggests, is enacted through carefully tending to what has been given to us by nature.

There is more to nature than beauty, but the politically moderated appreciation of life’s appearances has important repercussions in a context where

<sup>60</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 209.

<sup>61</sup> Roy T. Tsao, “Arendt against Athens: Rereading *The Human Condition*,” *Political Theory* 30, no. 1 (2002): 97–123. See Tsao’s commentary on Arendt’s rejection of the Periclean aspiration to achieve greatness without resorting to poetry (113).

<sup>62</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 210–11, 221–22.

<sup>63</sup> Quote from “Reflexionen zur Logik” (1820), cited in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 30 and alluded to in McCarthy, *The Birds*, 306. Cf. Hyvönen, “Amor Tellus?,” 104.

“endless forms most beautiful”<sup>64</sup> are dying at a disquieting rate. “Nothing perhaps is more surprising in the world of ours,” Arendt wrote in *The Life of the Mind*, “than the almost infinite diversity of its appearances, the sheer entertainment value of its views, sounds, and smells, something that is hardly ever mentioned by the thinkers and philosophers.”<sup>65</sup> Today, the “almost infinite amount” appears much more finite than before. The variety of animal and plant life is diminishing fast, owing to degradation of living conditions especially in the so-called biodiversity hotspots like coral reefs and rainforests. With each species vanishes a unique collection of genes, appearances, and behaviors.<sup>66</sup> The Anthropocene extinction event amounts to an irreversible loss of the diversity of appearances and hence constitutes a direct violation of plurality as the earth’s law.

Reading this praise of judgment and spectatorship today in the shadow of extinction allows us to circle back to the notion of gratitude. For Kimmerer, we *choose* to see the world from the perspective that opens it up as a gift.<sup>67</sup> It is a matter of perception moderated by political judgment. Seeing the world from this vista creates new relationships between things, political judgment curating *amor tellus*, a gratitude for earthly nature. Judgment, like *lex*, is about forging new connections, “creating new relations between things that have none.”<sup>68</sup> The human world and nature obviously are already connected. What our planetary situation calls for is creating relationships between our timeworn political principles—freedom, equality, justice—and other-than-human earthlings; between political plurality and the diversity of life’s appearances.

Here, democratic theory has much to learn from Indigenous perspectives on human relationship with the natural world. Given the resonance of these insights with the notions of *amor mundi*,<sup>69</sup> *colere*, and *lex*, it is possible to use the Roman lexicon (and the Arendtian interpretation thereof) as a translation tool between them and the tradition of political thought. Practices like honorable harvest, maintenance of salmon beds, and taking care of the growth environment of plants are all modes of loving care and building relationships with and tending to natural environments. All over the planet, Indigenous groups are at the forefront of battles for protecting the diversity of earthlings, and a significant percentage of remaining biodiversity is found in Indigenous lands.<sup>70</sup> Outside of them, our relationship to the

<sup>64</sup>Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (London: HarperCollins, 2011), 564.

<sup>65</sup>Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 20.

<sup>66</sup>Gerardo Ceballos, Anne H. Ehrlich, and Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Annihilation of Nature: Human Extinction of Birds and Mammals* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 22.

<sup>67</sup>Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 28–30.

<sup>68</sup>Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss*, 162.

<sup>69</sup>Justin Pack, “Amor Mundi: Reading Arendt alongside Native American Philosophy,” *Sophia* 60, no. 2 (2021): 277–86.

<sup>70</sup>Wapner, “Changing Nature of Nature,” 45; Edwin Ogar, Gretta Pecl, and Tero Mustonen, “Science Must Embrace Traditional and Indigenous Knowledge to Solve



changing earthly nature is better characterized as a conflict between two parties before their reconciliation via *lex*.

## Imagining a Democratic Community beyond the Human Species

I have mentioned a few concrete ways in which the categories of political thought can be expanded to make room for more-than-human earthlings within their remit. The acknowledgment of rivers as legal persons, for example, represents the aspiration to build new relationships between human beings and nonhuman nature in the spirit of the Roman *lex*. In this section I extrapolate from these reflections on *lex*, gratitude, cultivation, and politically moderated love of beauty to offer an account, with and beyond Arendt, of the role of nonhumans in democratic self-governance. I suggest that plurality as the law of a radically altered earth requires imagining a political community in terms of earthlings—making room for animal, plant, and fungal life alongside human beings. Politics is not a humans-only phenomenon, though it is largely a human effort. The political stage, the space of appearances, is shared with other sense-endowed beings, although political communication with these beings, and with the earth itself, is often mediated by science or indigenous politics, as the example of rivers and their legal rights indicated.

Earlier scholarship on Arendt and ecology has demonstrated the inherent value of nature for Arendt and her understanding of the human condition, particularly by highlighting the “worldly” qualities of nature.<sup>71</sup> The political visions of these interpretations have mostly been limited to constrained consumption, noninterference in natural systems, and engaging in politics of “unconstrained deliberation.”<sup>72</sup> While worthy, these ideas only take us so far in understanding the full-blown political implications of reading Arendt in the context of the Anthropocene and the loss of biodiversity. In extending the political stage beyond humans, I follow recent articles by Laura Ephraim<sup>73</sup>

---

Our Biodiversity Crisis,” *One Earth* 3, no. 2 (August 2020): 162–65; Stephen T. Garnett et al., “A Spatial Overview of the Global Importance of Indigenous Lands for Conservation,” *Nature Sustainability* 1, no. 7 (July 2018): 369–74.

<sup>71</sup>Paul Voice, “Consuming the World: Hannah Arendt on Politics and the Environment,” *Journal of International Political Theory* 9, no. 2 (2013); Anne Chapman, “The Ways That Nature Matters: The World and the Earth in the Thought of Hannah Arendt,” *Environmental Values* 16, no. 4 (2007): 433–45; Paul Ott, “World and Earth: Hannah Arendt and the Human Relationship to Nature,” *Ethics, Place & Environment* 12, no. 1 (March 2009): 1–16.

<sup>72</sup>Paul Voice, “Consuming the World,” 179.

<sup>73</sup>Laura Ephraim, “Save the Appearances! Toward an Arendtian Environmental Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 3 (2022): 985–97.

and Diego Rosello.<sup>74</sup> Although they phrase their arguments slightly differently, Rosello preferring the lexicon of animal agency while Ephraim speaks of animals as “animating” (human) action, they argue that there is spontaneity and irregularity in nature that, rather than approximating the world’s stabilizing qualities, function as direct impetuses for action. Nonhuman animals can be seen as parts of the “web of relationships” that action constitutes and from which it surges. Building on these works, I seek, tentatively at least, to expand Arendtian notions of plurality, the public space, and judgment beyond the human species.

Ephraim and Rosello mostly focus on the alterity of natural appearances as stimuli for political action. My focus is on the ailing planet as the fundamental milieu in which democratic politics gains its meaningfulness today. In addition to responding to nature’s displays of alterity we are faced with the planet as an ominous, gluey presence that testifies—if we are willing to listen—to the harm imposed on it. This does not mean conceiving the earth as a political agent per se. The most fundamental question Arendt poses of democratic political activity relates to the erosion or prospering of “contexts in which action makes sense.”<sup>75</sup> On a rapidly changing planet, action only makes sense if it maintains a relationship to ecosystem-level questions. Sometimes this requires not only taking distance from the idea of a pristine nature but also taking the entertainment value of life’s appearances with a grain of salt. When monarch butterflies appear in Appalachian Tennessee, as in Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behavior*, this is at once a beautiful appearance and an indication of things gone terribly wrong, a symptom of a whole new earth.

The easiest way to start focusing on the entanglement and interlinking of human plurality and the diversity of earthly nature is at the human end. In an early manuscript, Arendt argues that the annihilation of a particular group of people deprives the world of a unique perspective, making the world poorer.<sup>76</sup> Their specific world, the human reality they have cultivated, is unique in the same way as the individuals constituting the community. This uniqueness is intertwined with natural conditions: “what we call real is already a web which is woven of earthly, organic, and human realities.”<sup>77</sup> Hence, if a group loses the earthly conditions from which their culture emerges (as is currently happening to many peoples as a result of changing climatic conditions and land erosion), the loss of uniqueness and plurality

<sup>74</sup>Diego Rosello, “The Animal Condition in the Human Condition: Rethinking Arendt’s Political Action beyond the Human Species,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (June 2022): 219–39.

<sup>75</sup>Markell, “Rule of the People,” 12.

<sup>76</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Was Ist Politik? Fragmente aus dem Nachlass* (Munich: Piper, 2003), 105–6. Regrettably, the passage concludes with one of the most blatantly Eurocentric statements in Arendt’s corpus on the “worldlessness” of Native Americans.

<sup>77</sup>Arendt, *Promise of Politics*, 112.

is irreversible even if, instead of being annihilated, the members of the group become refugees or, in the lucky case, are integrated into the global capitalist monoculture in some new function. One could argue that the death of animal populations, habitats, and species extinction, too, makes the world objectively more vacuous. In addition to aesthetic and survival-related concerns that extinction raises, it also reflects on politics, not only because the Anthropocene extinction is a result of political (in)decisions. Extinction also rarefies the diverse spectacle of appearances the biosphere offers.

Arendt's praise of life's diversity notwithstanding, readers might assume that she draws a strict line between plurality and diversity. Especially in *The Human Condition*, plurality is an exclusively human condition, while distinctness applies to all living things and otherness to everything that is.<sup>78</sup> Her late work, however, places much less emphasis on the specificity of human plurality. Though she still appends the declaration of plurality as the law of the earth with the familiar "not Man but men inhabit this planet,"<sup>79</sup> the surrounding discussion is strikingly free of human exceptionalism. Human beings may still be unique in their capacity for deliberative self-presentation and their ability to build a complex world—though not in isolation from natural materials, as we have seen.<sup>80</sup> Still, the appearing world is shared by "all sense-endowed creatures." The world of appearances, "the stage" on which acting and spectating take place, "is common to all who are alive." Nonhuman animals, too, are approached as actors and spectators who "make their appearance like actors on a stage set for them."<sup>81</sup> These are terms Arendt had previously reserved for the world of human affairs. Here, and even more so for us, human plurality and biological diversity form a spectrum, not a dualism.

The ultimate challenge for politics in a failing ecosystem is to imagine the common stage from nonhuman perspectives because it is only by being capable of thinking from the viewpoint of other species, their needs, interests, and characteristics, that we are capable of enacting anything resembling an effective response to the ecological crisis. In distinction from many new materialist thinkers, the Arendtian point is less that animals have political agency or qualities that make them members of the common world ("political animals").<sup>82</sup> The key point is that in the planetary condition, political judgment should involve consideration of issues from the viewpoint of the ecosystem and other species. It is for this reason that planetary politics is a question of political imagination.

<sup>78</sup>Arendt, *Human Condition*, 176; Ephraim, "Save the Appearances!," 992.

<sup>79</sup>Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 19.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, 21–36.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>82</sup>For a strong argument for seeing animals as actors in the political space, see Sue Donaldson, "Animal Agora: Animal Citizens and the Democratic Challenge," *Social Theory and Practice* 46, no. 4 (2020): 709–35.

Imagination, for Arendt, “enables us to see things in their proper perspective . . . to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us as though it were our own affair.”<sup>83</sup> Engaging in imaginative thinking and judging “expands our sense of community; not because it tells us . . . what we should do, but because it expands our sense of what is real or communicable.”<sup>84</sup> Since the “stage” is shared with other living, sense-endowed things, “what is real” is not a human issue exclusively. In fact, one of three elements of commonness from which the sensation of reality emerges, Arendt suggests in *The Life of the Mind*, is the agreement of all sense-endowed beings on the identity of an object.<sup>85</sup> The implications of this are difficult to discern, but at the very least it entails a radical expansion of our ideas of what counts as “communicable”<sup>86</sup> and who belongs to the “community” in which our judgments and actions are anchored. For Kant and Arendt, “one is supposed to take one’s bearings from *the idea, not the actuality*, of being a world citizen and, therefore, also a *Weltbetrachter*, a world spectator.”<sup>87</sup> Today we must judge as earthlings, taking our bearings from the idea of being an *Erdbetrachter*, an earth spectator. Our enlarged mentality ought not stop at the boundary of our own species. Just as our view of the human world becomes more objective, more “valid,” the more different perspectives we are capable of imagining, so too the stage we share with all living things becomes more real when we become capable of imagining it from new viewpoints.

The task of extending our political imagination beyond the traditional limits of the human community can be approached from several different angles. Though the planet and the plurality of earthlings are politically meaningful “on their own” because of their self-display on the common stage, sometimes it is also justified to talk about mediated plurality. Often, nonhuman presence in the public sphere is dependent on political articulation by humans. In the example of rivers above, environmental activists, Indigenous groups, and scientists all played a role in making the claim for extending legal rights to the Whanganui and other rivers. Kimmerer suggests that to imagine a “democracy of species,”<sup>88</sup> we must become “bilingual between the lexicon of science and the grammar of animacy.”<sup>89</sup> Grammar

<sup>83</sup> Arendt, *Modern Challenge to Tradition*, 187.

<sup>84</sup> Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss*, 152.

<sup>85</sup> Arendt, *Life of the Mind*, 50–53.

<sup>86</sup> For a fascinating argument building on biosemantics to expand the political notion of communication, see Javier Romero and John S. Dryzek, “Grounding Ecological Democracy: Semiotics and the Communicative Networks of Nature,” *Environmental Values* 30, no. 4 (August 2021): 407–29.

<sup>87</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 75–76.

<sup>88</sup> Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 58.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

and law are both ways of mapping relationships between things (words, entities). The more complex syntax and pragmatics of politics amend these relationships. These alterations are of critical importance for changing the way we perceive—or fail to perceive—relationships between things. Kimmerer's grammar of animacy alerts us to the action-inducing alterity of natural things.

At the same time, whether we like it or not, politics in the Anthropocene is embedded in the scientific representation of more-than-human entities. It thus becomes paramount for democratic theorists to move away from the reflex-like equation of scientific expertise with technocracy. Whether we understand them as "representatives"<sup>90</sup> or as architects of the common stage, the role of experts is to cultivate a factual basis for democratic debate. No simplified conclusions can be derived from science, but it plays a major role in building the common stage on which conflicts, disagreements, and opinions can be articulated, enriching our grasp of the immense plurality of the human and nonhuman world. From the viewpoint of Arendtian politics, one of the many important roles of scientific expertise is relaying information about phenomena that play a critical role in the flourishing of public life but do not appear, either because they are too small (microbes or fungi) or too abstract and big to be directly perceivable (the loss of biodiversity or climate change). By telling "what is," preferably in the form of a story of some kind, expertise exhibits and reminds us about the relationships between things we see and the dynamics that lurk behind them. When the Po River—one of the majestic natural entities that played a key role in Roman politics—dried up in the summer of 2022, causing the Adriatic Sea to flow inland, scientific expertise played an important role in articulating why this event can act as a prism to the ecological catastrophes brought about by climate change.

The ability of the contemporary publics to either incite or hinder political action is intimately linked to their ability to establish relationships with nonhuman nature. Democratic action can only emerge within a context in which things, issues, and events are cultivated as meaningful objects of response. In the present situation, conceiving the context of action and judgment in human-exclusive terms diminishes it to an impoverished and uprooted state. By responding to signals from the planet and other earthlings, expertise can help us cultivate an attunement to nonhuman and planetary perspectives. At best, it is a mode of rearticulating the common stage that "altogether different entities"—we and other earthlings—share and from which our action emerges. And if democracy is about intensifying issues that are already there, then the cultivation of a grateful relationship to nonhuman nature and the "common stage" become highly political activities.

<sup>90</sup>Lisa Disch, "Representation as 'Spokespersonship': Bruno Latour's Political Theory," *Parallax* 14, no. 3 (2008): 88–100.

## Conclusion

Archimedes thought he needed a long lever and a place to stand to move the planet. This turns out to be false. The quick melting of the glaciers and polar ice sheets, together with the overuse of groundwater, has changed the mass distribution on the surface of Earth so much that the rotational axis around which the planet is spinning has tilted.<sup>91</sup> We have literally moved the planet, simply by warming its atmosphere and overusing its resources—a perfect synecdoche for the Anthropocene.

I have engaged with Arendt's political thought to uncover a planetary framework of thinking that would steer clear of the Archimedean tendencies of modern science and sovereigntist temptations of modern politics. I started by quoting Arendt's worries about the life-threatening quality of our civilization. The future, for those attuned to this threat, appears as "a time-bomb buried, but ticking away, in the present."<sup>92</sup> The political division line, then as well as now, manifests itself as the difference between "those who hear the ticking" and "those who utterly deny them" and "refuse to face things as they really are."<sup>93</sup> But as I have been arguing, facing things as they are should not mean focusing on mere survival. Concerns of survival bias matters in the direction of security, and hence sovereignty.<sup>94</sup> More is at stake than "matters of life and death."<sup>95</sup> Acknowledging that we live in a civilization that threatens life is paramount, but if we wish to conceive the coming planetary politics not in terms of sovereignty, of rulers and ruled, but democratically, we must become attentive to the ways in which care for the earthly nature can function as a context, medium, or impetus for politics. The Roman law was born when the plebs revolted against the patricians. Perhaps the purulent wound that we have created between ourselves and the earth(lings) can be turned into a new kind of relationship, an enduring arrangement that bolsters democratic culture.

Arendt predicted a return to a geocentric worldview could emerge, paradoxically enough, as a result of the "conquest of space." Not "in the old sense of the earth being the center of the universe and of man being the highest being in it. It would be geocentric in the sense that the earth and not the universe is the center and the home of mortal man."<sup>96</sup> Intriguingly, the

<sup>91</sup>Raymond Zhong, "Something Was Messing With Earth's Axis. The Answer Has to Do With Us," *New York Times*, June 28, 2023.

<sup>92</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1972), 120.

<sup>93</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>94</sup>Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister*, 220–22.

<sup>95</sup>Cf. Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2005), 6. For a related Arendtian argument, see Ephraim, "Save the Appearances!," 985–86, 989.

<sup>96</sup>Arendt, *Thinking without a Banister*, 418.



testimony of people who have had the privilege of looking at Earth from space, have experienced what is known as the “overview effect,” seems to affirm Arendt’s hypothesis. The experience is generally associated with what the Greeks called *thaumazein*—admiring wonder. They report an overwhelming sense of beauty that incites a sense of responsibility for the planet and a commonality with its inhabitants. As the NASA astronaut Kathryn D. Sullivan describes it: “It’s hard to explain how amazing and magical this experience is. First of all, there’s the astounding beauty and diversity of the planet itself, scrolling across your view at what appears to be a smooth, stately pace. . . . I’m happy to report that no amount of prior study or training can fully prepare anybody for the awe and wonder this inspires.”<sup>97</sup> Seeing the planet from a distance, it seems, can lead either to subsumption of everything particular to grand cosmological processes or imbue us with a “sense of connectedness . . . care and responsibility toward all life.”<sup>98</sup>

The overview effect is a rare experience, but Arendt often highlighted the value of vicarious experience mediated by imagination. And responding to the condition of planetary politics, as I have been arguing, is a question of political imagination. Perhaps, despite its rarity, this experience can serve as a beacon in the search for a sustainable geocentric orientation. Imagination as a way of creatively expanding the logical content of existing concepts, judging without inherited concepts, or renegotiating our relationship to these concepts, is a political skill par excellence.<sup>99</sup> The planetary condition, seen from this angle, invites us to reckon with the plurality of earthlings creatively, seeing the world from multiple points of view—including the points of view of different living beings. This task, as suggested in the last section, requires a combination of scientific, Indigenous, and radically democratic perspectives. Only when taken together are these various voices capable of illuminating the common stage, the reality to which democratic politics responds. It is against this “common” that our divergent perspectives and differing opinions can be articulated.

There is no sufficient response to the Anthropocene that is not political and does not at the same time remold our understanding of the political. It is up to us to decide how we relate, in our judging and acting, to the world of appearances we have in common with all sentient creatures. Avoiding the summons of planetary sovereignty requires, in any case, that we are guided by the political principle of plurality. As Zerilli puts it, “equality is a political relation that we create and sustain in and through taking account of plurality, daily.”<sup>100</sup> This is an ongoing task of a democratic, material culture of care.

<sup>97</sup>Cited in David B. Yaden et al., “The Overview Effect: Awe and Self-Transcendent Experience in Space Flight,” *Psychology of Consciousness: Theory, Research, and Practice* 3, no. 1 (March 2016): 3, accessed June 28, 2023.

<sup>98</sup>Parr, *Earthlings*, 76.

<sup>99</sup>Arendt, *Was Ist Politik?*, 96; Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss*, 129.

<sup>100</sup>Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss*, 146.