

Nation, Nature and Natality

New Dimensions of Political Action

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Abstract

The concepts of nature and nation are both rooted in the notion of birth. Thus both can be conceived anew if the underlying vision of natality is conceptualized, following Hannah Arendt, not as a set of inexorable biological processes, but as the fundamental human capacity for political action. This reconceptualization of natality allows proposing an alternative to the prevalent commonsensical ethno-nationalist definitions of nationhood, and also allows a view of the realm of nature itself as inherently political. Arendt's theory finds an interesting referential point in modern developments in biotechnology that threaten to undermine the 'naturalness' of existing notions of ethnically conceived nations. Similarly, nature might be revealed to have a polis working at the very heart of what seemed to be a set of inexorable processes, independent from human beings.

Key words

■ Hannah Arendt ■ natality ■ nation ■ nature ■ political action

The topic of this article was suggested by curious etymological parallels in English and Russian: the English words 'nation' and 'nature' are both related to the Latin word *nasci* (meaning 'to be born'); while their Russian equivalents, *narod* (or *rodina*) and *priroda* are both related to the Russian verb *rodit* (to give birth). If both languages suggest the relationship of concepts of nation and nature to the process of natality, what does this tell us about the contemporary linkage of these concepts? This question seems particularly salient, given the growth of ethno-nationalism in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union with its civic definition of nationhood, and the recent re-emergence of a commonsensical understanding of a nation as a group of common descent or community linked by blood ties. Understanding the complex interrelationships among the concepts of nature, nation and natality may offer some keys to the puzzle of the 'naturalness' with which the concept of nation was 're-natalized' recently, if not to suggest ways of challenging the currently predominant ethnic definition of nation in post-Soviet space.

I shall not, therefore, primarily study the direct links between concepts of

'nation' and 'nature,' contrary to what the title may imply. The role of natural imagery in constructing the idea of the nation, as well as the role of nations in fostering or destroying nature, are not my main concerns. Instead, I shall try to examine the common relationship of these concepts to the concept of natality, and its implications. Thus, I shall first describe the conceptual histories of each term, articulate their links to a currently predominant vision of natality, and then show how these links may be reconceptualized if – following the writings of Hannah Arendt – the underlying concept of natality is recast itself. Briefly, both nature and nation may be now conceived as realms of genuine political action in Arendt's sense of this term.

Nation

Conceptual histories of this term abound. Raymond Williams (1976, 213), in his succinct summary of the development of the English word 'nation,' states that it was used to designate 'a racial group rather than a politically organized grouping' since at least the thirteenth century, and that the new clearly political meaning emerged only in the sixteenth century, although terms like 'realm,' 'kingdom' and 'country' were more widespread in usage up until the seventeenth century. Only after that time did 'nation' begin to be used to designate all those living in a given country as opposed to some particular subgroup. Liah Greenfeld has recently offered a most detailed historical lexicography of the Latin term *natio* and its equivalents in major European languages, tracing a similar development. In Rome, *natio* indicated a group of foreigners united by a place of origin, non-citizens whose status was lower than that of the Romans. In the Middle Ages, the same meaning – a group of common descent – was applied to describe the famous 'nations' of students in medieval universities that were named after the alleged place of origin. Since students engaged in debates, the term came to designate a community of opinion. When similar communities of clerics clashed on ecclesiastical matters, also frequently representing an interest of some secular power at the Church Councils, 'nation' became equated to 'elite.' Even when in English the word 'nation' was already employed to describe the whole of the population, writes Greenfeld, Montesquieu, de Maistre, and Schopenhauer still used equivalents of the Latin term *natio* to refer to elites in their countries. Of course, with democratic revolutions, and a concomitant equal status of elite and plebs, 'nation' eventually expanded in all European languages to include all of the population of a given country. In the end, with the birth of ethnic and other particularistic nationalisms, the idea of 'a particular nation' as distinct from other nations was born (Greenfeld, 1993: 4–10).

Hobsbawm's brief *Begriffsgeschichte*, while based on different source material, does not differ much from Greenfeld's story. He, however, puts more emphasis on the French Revolution to demonstrate how particular groups traditionally called 'nations' – corporations of students, merchants, or inhabitants of the same region – were stripped of this designation following the introduction of the civic

definition of nationhood that applied to the 'whole French people,' distinguished from particular interests. Altogether, most commentaries on conceptual development stress the double medieval connotation of *natio* that a civic definition of nationhood sought to efface: either birth or descent group, or a 'small place of birth,' *pays natal* (Hobsbawm, 1992: 17). However, with the spread of modern ethno-nationalism that rejects civic nationhood and also equates nations with communities of descent rooted in common blood ties, these two old connotations re-emerged.

This re-emergence is particularly manifest after the recent collapse of those state-socialist countries that previously espoused a civic definition of nationhood (for example, Yugoslavia or the USSR): a natality-based vision of nationhood has returned in everyday interactions. Nowadays, at least in Russia, questions like 'what ethnic nationality are your parents?' and 'what ethnicity does your family name reveal?' have become the everyday means of defining one's nationhood, now predominantly understood in ethnic rather than in political terms. A usual interpretation of this unproblematic current usage of the 'natality test' in everyday interaction – a procedure to which all subscribe habitually and almost unconsciously when thinking on national matters in post-Soviet space – is that it is an indelible mark of the Soviet past, when ancillary categories of ethnic origins were started to be recorded in internal passports. As Rogers Brubaker nicely summed up (1996: 30–1):

An . . . elaborate and distinctive system of personal nationality . . . divided the population of the state into an exhaustive and mutually exclusive set of national groups, over a hundred in all, twenty-two with more than a million members . . . Ethnic nationality . . . was . . . an obligatory and mainly ascriptive legal category, a key element of an individual's legal status. As such, it was registered in internal passports and other personal documents, transmitted by descent, and recorded in almost all bureaucratic encounters and official transactions. (Brubaker 1996: 30–1)¹

Still, given the overarching identity of a Soviet citizen, many people before 1991 defined themselves as 'Soviet,' rather than 'Russian' or 'Ukrainian' and so on. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these secondary, ethnically defined but state-registered identities came into the foreground, states the usual argument.

In addition to this usual institutional interpretation of the origins of a currently predominant ethnic definition of post-Soviet nationhood, I would like to suggest that it is also rooted in a more fundamental predisposition – in an adherence to an intuitively obvious myth of the nation as stemming from a common process of natality, as a community united by natural evolution and blood ties. Kate Soper, one of the most astute students of the interconnection of nation and nature, writes on this 'naturalness' of the ethnic definition of nationhood, so obvious for everyday consciousness:

. . . the deployment of the idea of the nation as tribe or family, whose members are linked by the blood-tie, is manifestly an attempt to create a piece of 'nature': to obscure the artificial, or 'fictional' (Ernest Gellner), or 'imaginary' (Benedict Anderson) or 'fantastical' (Slavoj Zizek) quality of the national entity . . . What is in reality a cultural

construction and a quite recent one at that, is massaged into existence by means of a myth of its immemorially archaic origins and 'natural' evolution. (Soper, 1995: 110)

Thus, it would seem that this myth of nation as a unity based on common descent and blood ties is rooted in an intuitive appreciation of the process of natality. A vision of an unending process of successive births – a continuous chain of birth labors, one might say – serves to warrant the 'self-evidence' of this ethnic mythology.

'Nation,' however, is not the only concept whose qualities, self-evident to common sense, derive from its rootedness in natality. The concept of nature is also grounded in a similar appreciation of the process of natality. In particular, the 'realist' sense of the term 'nature,' in Soper's classification,² that is, a view of nature as a unity of natural processes independent of man, seems to have been originally modeled on and to be still residually linked to the notion of natality.

Nature

Raymond Williams starts his exposition of the conceptual history of the term 'nature' by claiming that it is perhaps the most complicated word in English. However, he easily distinguishes its three primary meanings. Since the thirteenth century 'nature' is used to refer to the essential quality or feature of something, being most frequently used in conjunction with the word designating the object it defines, as in Latin *natura homini*, 'the nature of man.' Second, from the fourteenth century on the term designates the inherent force which directs either a world or a human being or both (as in examples supplied by the OED: 'nature impelled me to that deed' or 'a contrast between nature and grace'). Finally, starting from the seventeenth century it comes to designate 'the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings' (Williams, 1976: 219). This third sense will concern us primarily in the following exposition. Indeed, in theoretical constructions nations may be linked to a certain nature of things national (first meaning) or to particular visions of human nature (first meaning, once again), that is, of national character; they may be linked to 'natural' urges and forces driving nations to certain ends (the second meaning). Still, ethno-nationalism more often depends on the view of nature as a unity of natural things around us or including us, driven by an inexorable evolutionary process, of which the development of nations is just one example.

A study of historical Latin usage shows that this third meaning of *natura* appeared substantially later than its first meaning, which was directly linked to the etymological origin of the term. Being the past participle of *nasci*, *natura* means 'the born' of things, whatever is born with them, comes into being with them. *Natura*, of course, was used to translate the Greek word *physis*, which meant 'something born, engendered, begotten,' and which was therefore also frequently linked to the etymological meaning of the root verb, 'to give birth.'³ Thus, Sophocles speaks of the *physis* of the sea, meaning its animals as 'those born by the sea,' *pontou t'einalian physin*.⁴ This is an early usage, generally effaced by the later one, in which

the inborn qualities developed from being visible external features to be invisible internal characteristics. Thus, Homer implies external features in the single instance of his use of *physis*, in a scene where Hermes tears the herb moly out of the soil 'and shows [Odysseus] its nature (*physin*), that it was black at the root, and its flower was white like milk.'⁵ By contrast, Parmenides already talks about *physis* as an inner quality of a thing. Yet, etymological connotations of birth are still very much at work: 'You will know the nature (*physin*) of ether . . . you will know from where all intimate affairs of the sun are engendered (*exegenonto*) . . . and will know the embracing sky, from where it was born (*ephy*, the root verb for *physis*).'⁶

Eventually the Stoics dislodge this direct link of *physis* or *natura* to natality and birth and develop the second meaning of the term – an inherent driving force of a phenomenon, so that their famous dictum 'live according to nature' means living in accordance with the driving force of divine law that moves all things. Later, Lucretius becomes the first to introduce the third meaning of the term *natura*, in the sense of the unity of natural things around us – a usage still absent from the thought of his teacher, Epicurus, and his contemporary, Cicero. Indeed, *natura* is mentioned 234 times in *De Natura Rerum*, mostly in the sense of *natura rei*, a 'born' nature of a certain thing (almost two-thirds of the uses). Other uses reflect either the notion of *natura rerum*, a general essence of all existing things, or *natura* as an inherent driving force characteristic of the Stoics. A decisive innovation happens when Lucretius introduces the usage *natura rerum creatrix* ('creative') or *natura gubernans* ('directing'). This third meaning is still a cautious neologism that aims at capturing the role of the world as a unity of active natural forces in the Epicurean philosophy, restated by Lucretius, and is thus mentioned very rarely – *natura creatrix* appears only three times in the poem (Borovsky, 1952: 232–237). Still, this usage introduces a very important vision, so obvious to us nowadays, and reflected in the third meaning of the English word 'nature.'

Furthermore, an extension of meaning of *natura* that Lucretius offers – envisaging nature as an active creator that gives birth to things without the interference of gods – is very interesting to us in that it stresses the natality inherent in nature. Thus, *rerum natura creatrix* is often used interchangeably with *materia genitrix* (engendering substance, with *materia* related to 'mother' in Latin), an expression the etymology of which immediately suggests the motherly quality of nature that gives birth to all existing things.⁷ Conventional representation of Nature as a female goddess or motherly figure is undoubtedly linked to this imagery. Therefore, an initial extension of the meaning of *natura* by Lucretius – developing from the original Greek 'born quality of the thing' and the Stoics' 'inherent force that drives it' to 'everything that exists around us' – is still very much dependent on the concept of natality, on the capacity of Nature to give birth to and create all existing phenomena. Later writers will pick up the three meanings of the Latin term without necessarily reflecting on the initial link of the concept of nature to natality. They will employ these meanings to their own aims, or remold them to create other derivative meanings, seemingly obliterating the links of the concept to natality. Still, even in contemporary thinking, which frequently conceives of nature in a realist sense – as a set of processes independent of human will – there

is a residual reminder of the origin of the concept in the image of natality. There is a striking affinity between the contemporary vision of natality as an orderly process of natural gestation – a process that two human beings may set into motion, but can scarcely affect thereafter – and the realist vision of nature.

In many cases, natality even serves as the model for processes carried out in the 'natural way.' As Soper notes, one of the main distinctions that structure contemporary thinking on nature opposes what is naturally given to what is artificially contrived, being a product of culture or convention (Soper, 1995: 37). Natality may easily be the best example of naturalness in this sense: gestation and birth long seemed to be least prone to human intervention or convention. What is important in this perception of the naturalness of natality is the stress on the inexorable process that progresses in an orderly way through certain stages independent of the human will. Thus, a conception of natality is still intimately linked to a vision of nature conceived as a set of deep inexorable processes, independent of humans.

Nature Denaturalized: Implications for the Understanding of a Nation

However, this very independence of natural processes has been recently put into question by the philosophical and sociological studies of science. It seems that a nice, clear-cut separation between natural and cultural phenomena, to be studied by radically different types of sciences, is of a recent origin. Before modernity, it would seem, both 'nature' and 'culture' coexisted together in an undifferentiated unity. Thus, according to Stephen Toulmin, the breakage of a single cosmopolis into its constituent natural and political parts was a result of applying the Cartesian mind-body dualism to this initial unity. This application and subsequent segregation of the natural from the cultural had clear political underpinnings, since the resulting picture of the world, what he calls the 'Modern Framework,' helped stabilize Europe after the turmoils of the religious wars of the first half of the seventeenth century, by conferring legitimacy on the system of the newly formed nation-states (Toulmin, 1990: 128).

Bruno Latour has offered another version of a critique of the origins of the nature/culture divide. Following a well-known argument of Shapin and Schaffer (1985) on the centrality of the debate on vacuum and air-pumps between Thomas Hobbes and Robert Boyle for understanding the character of modernity, Latour picks these scientists as representing the two respective sides of the same modern project. If Hobbes opts for constructing politics without nature, then Boyle constructs nature without politics. Of course, both Boyle and Hobbes paid attention to both natural and political phenomena: Hobbes wrote a lot on the politics of nature, while Boyle had his strong ideas on the nature of politics. These aspects of their works are now conventionally overlooked by contemporary studies, since the followers of Hobbes and Boyle disregarded the discordant elements in their intellectual heritage that did not fit into the clean-cut separation of a career of a political philosopher from that of a natural scientist.

Latour suggests that this separation of nature from politics or culture becomes more and more questionable nowadays. Current multiplication of what he calls 'hybrids' – networks of human-technical interaction – make distinguishing their natural from their cultural elements more and more difficult. For example, the problems of ozone layer or AIDS research bring together large collectivities of people and technical artifacts in interdependent networks or chains of interaction, in which a change of one molecule in the formula of an AIDS treatment or aerosol spray may result in the reconfiguration of whole cities affected by layoffs. Maintaining sperm banks, enforcing rights of humans kept in a state of brain death but whose life is artificially supported by elaborate machinery, sales of organs and fetal tissue: are these activities dealing with humans or non-humans? Latour suggests that there is hardly an answer to this question, and that similar questions may indicate our growing awareness that we have always existed as and in networks of cultural and natural elements. Many cultures have experienced the totem as an undifferentiated unity of human and natural qualities; this 'network experience' could apply to modern civilizations as well. Furthermore, theoretical problems appear when we try to conceptually cut the network into two distinct parts, into humans and non-humans: 'It is only when we remove the nonhumans churned up by the collective that the residue, which we call society, becomes incomprehensible, because its size, its durability and its solidity no longer have a cause' (Latour, 1994: 111). If each society is just a result of convention, it is hard to understand what gives this convention durability and longevity. By contrast, socio-technical networks possess size, durability and solidity as their obvious qualities: 'No one has ever heard of a collective that did not mobilize heaven and earth in its composition, along with bodies and souls, property and law, gods and ancestors, powers and beliefs, beasts and fictional beings.'⁸

But if 'nature' understood as a result of our habitual subtraction of humans from natural-cultural networks is a dubious construct, then why should 'nation' be viewed as a 'natural' phenomenon of this kind? Applying Latour's principle of networks or hybrids to nations, one can suggest that 'nation' is also just a name of a network of natural-cultural elements, of almost a Heideggerian 'fourfold' that unites earth and sky, mortals and gods in one common world.⁹ It would seem that this exercise in conceiving a nation as a network may be useful since it challenges the myth of the nation as a unity of people connected by blood ties. Hybrid networks include diverse elements of the natural and cultural kind, and blood ties are not essential to this unity of connections. They are one among possible elements that constitute the network called nation, but are far from being the principal one.

Nataliy as a Human Condition

This attempt to represent the nation as a network of diverse natural and cultural elements, and thus not primarily depending on descent or blood ties, may follow in the steps of other ineffective attempts to criticize ethno-nationalism. Perhaps,

what does not allow us to debunk decisively the mythic notion of nation as a community of descent that common sense espouses is that we concentrate on criticizing its unnaturalness, its irreality, its contrived quality. Many social scientists would like to challenge the notion that the nation was a 'natural' outgrowth of a community of common descent, evolving from the same 'natural' origin in archaic time. Thus, Gellner, Anderson and Zizek all concentrate on the fictional, imaginary, fantastic quality of national communities, insisting that they were contrived by specific human efforts. To no avail. They do not effect any tangible change in popular understanding, and people still believe in the naturalness of ethnic nations.

Perhaps this type of theoretical assault on the myth of the nation is doomed to failure for two reasons. First, the concept of nation is rooted in the vision of natality. It is so evidently linked in its etymological origins and its conceptual history to the process of birth – and thus to something immutably 'natural' – that it may withstand any criticism of the unnaturalness of the nation. Second, 'natality tests' of one's ethnicity in everyday life are simple and efficient. Checking the recorded ethnic nationality of one's parents and the ethnic origins of the family name is what people habitually do to define ethnic identity, and the academic criticism of the nation as an unnatural entity is easily subverted by this widespread habit of testing seemingly natural qualities supplied by birth.

Perhaps, instead of criticizing the unnaturalness of the nation, one should criticize the notion of natality that lies at the foundation of modern ethnic definitions of nationhood and that gives rise to habitual tests of nationhood. If natality could be shown to be not 'natural' at all, if it could be revealed as a quality which is either unnatural or is neither natural nor unnatural – a strange hybrid operation – then, perhaps, an intuitive feeling that nations are linked to the processes of successive births could be questioned more effectively.

Indeed, natality should not necessarily be seen as a quality of a biological process, and a different view of natality may help us redefine the concepts of nation and nature in a new way. A view of birth as a culmination of an inexorable process that follows scientifically describable stages of gestation, or is just a link in the inexorable life process of a nation or the whole of mankind, is not the only possible one. Nor is it inescapable. Birth may designate something other than the completion of the natural process of gestation. As the word suggests, it may simply designate the moment of appearance of something new in the world.

Hannah Arendt allows us such a reconceptualization of natality.¹⁰ Arendt has provided us with a critique of what, following her, we may call the 'process attitude' towards nature and of natality viewed as something less fundamental than a basic human condition of existence. In Arendt's opinion, this process attitude to nature is a sign of modern times that forgot genuine natality inherent in political action, and treats giving birth as part of a purely biological process of sustaining the life of the species mankind. On the contrary, natality as a human condition is the capacity to bring something profoundly new into the world rather than a simple capacity to procreate in an orderly fashion. For example, the glad tidings mentioned in the Gospels – 'a child has been born unto us' – signified not only a

biological process of birth successfully completed (even if started by supernatural force) but the appearance of a unique person, a newcomer who will eventually reveal his extraordinary 'who' in unforgettable deeds that will affect the life stories of many humans (Arendt, 1958: 247). Nation and nature reconceptualized on the basis of this notion of natality would look profoundly different from what we have been discussing so far. But before drawing the implications, let us first dwell more on Arendt's discussion of her highly original notion of action, directly connected to her notions of natality and process attitude.

Natality and the Process Character of Action

Arendt starts her exposition in *The Human Condition* by distinguishing among three basic human activities – labor, work, and action. Labor is an activity sustaining the daily existence of a human being, his or her metabolism with nature. It is an activity whose products are for immediate consumption. By contrast, work is an activity that makes durable products that constitute the world of objects inhabited by humans. Action in Arendt's sense of the word – following Greek usage, Arendt relies on the term *praxis* – may be defined as acting in concert with others without the mediation of things at all. *Praxis* is political action par excellence.

Most of this political action, of course, concerns the world of things that exists between men, the world of durable goods created by work. As Arendt writes, this world so understood simultaneously unites and separates humans as a table unites and separates a group of people sitting around it: the world saves them, so to speak, from 'falling over each other' (Arendt, 1958: 52). However, there exists also 'the second, subjective in-between' that is not tangible and consists – as opposed to the objective world of things – of deeds and words that cannot solidify into things. Arendt calls it the 'web of human relationships' and writes: 'for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common.'¹¹ Thus political action is *about* the world, but it acts *into* the web of human relationships, changing them as a result of its appearance. The three human activities – labor, work, action – are rooted in three corresponding human conditions – life, worldliness, plurality – but all these activities and their corresponding conditions are tied to 'the most general condition' of human existence – birth and death, natality and mortality. Out of the three activities, action is most closely related to natality because 'the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity for beginning something anew, that is, of acting.' Arendt uses the term 'action' to designate political activity, and natality may be, in her opinion, the central category of political thought (Arendt, 1958: 9).

Political action is linked so intimately to natality because genuine politics – although always directed to worldly concerns – also always discloses a unique 'who' worthy of remembrance, the story of a great deed. Natality, thus, is conceived here as a fundamental capacity to bring new phenomena into

existence. It is important to stress, however, that to act in Arendt's sense is not only to begin something new; rather, action is also the beginning of 'disclosure of who somebody is,' that is, action is a disclosure of the 'who' rather than of the 'what.' Another curious detail of action is that it may not disclose the 'who' of the actor immediately. It only starts 'a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life-story of the newcomer' that affects life-stories of all others with whom s/he comes into contact. However, in certain cases 'the process of a single deed can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end' (Arendt, 1958: 178, 184, 233).

This process character of genuine political action is most obviously seen in its difference from sovereign rule, an activity usually taken to be 'politics.' Following Arendt, one sees that rule and governance, since they are modeled on making, *poiesis*, should not be called 'politics' at all – they are hardly related to what the early Greeks called *praxis*, genuine political action. Indeed, acting in Arendt's sense is different from making in that it does not result in a finished product (for example, a table or a vessel), it is the performance of the word and deed *par excellence*. Even more important is the fact that an actor cannot control the processes s/he unleashes in the way a maker can control the making of a product, strictly following the plan of creation, and beating recalcitrant matter into shape if it resists the planned fabrication. Since an individual acts in the presence of the plurality of equals, and genuine political action always has an aspect of disclosing a 'who' of the actor to equal others, s/he has no control over the process of disclosure: an actor can only initiate political action, whose greatness or failure will be judged by the *polis*. That is why a political actor is the originator and sufferer of the consequences, but never an 'author' of his or her action. The story of a deed will emerge as a result of the complex interaction with others, with the help of storytellers, who will record the deed as they see fit, and so on. Action, therefore, is irreversible and unpredictable: once set into motion, its consequences will persist through time; and the final story of the deed that will emerge eventually is beyond the actor's personal control.

Also, genuine political actors emerge by acting against 'the overwhelming odds of statistical laws.' When it happens, action actualizes the human condition of natality, by bringing a radically new life-story into the world, and affecting all other connected life-stories. Natality, thus, is a fundamental capacity to give birth to the new: a new deed and a new 'who' of the actor and the change in the 'whos' of all other actors. Action, 'an infinite improbability that occurs regularly' intercepts the inexorable procession from life to death, and almost seems like a miracle to those who are bound by the sight of this inexorability. 'The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, "natural" ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted' (Arendt, 1958: 184, 246–7).

This 'process character of action,' rooted in natality – its ability to unleash the unpredictable processes of the emergence of the new 'who' – should be distinguished from what, following Arendt, one may call the process attitude of modern man. The process attitude is a phenomenon of modern times and is

concomitant to the forgetting of the true character of political action. This amnesia is brought about by the modern substitution of making for acting. The essential 'frailty' of political action, its unpredictability and irreversibility – the fact that we can never control the 'who' that emerges as the result of our action – makes humans seek solution in conceiving of politics on the model of making, fabrication, and in attempting to control the consequences of political action. The substitution of making for acting ushers in the vision of politics as rule, as mastery or household governance, when constant control and use of violence are employed to achieve the pre-set goals of a politician.

However, this transformation also has another corollary – people forget about the process character of human action and develop a process attitude instead. The process character and the process attitude are linked: an attempt to substitute making for acting, writes Arendt, leads to 'the channeling of human capacity for action . . . into an attitude toward nature,' when nature, rather than only action, is conceived as a process. Heretofore humans observed what nature offered to their eyes and manufactured things out of natural materials according to observed laws of nature. Now, following a 'process attitude' people 'act *into* nature,' 'unchaining elemental processes': they provoke processes within nature, so that products appear or reactions happen that would have never existed without human intervention (Arendt, 1958: 231).

It is not always clear whether Arendt considers the triumph of the process attitude to nature a wholly negative development. On the one hand, her text is filled with indictments of the process attitude. For example, she suggests that the spread of the process attitude made life itself being viewed as a set of biological processes. 'And since this biological life, accessible in self-observation, is at the same time a metabolic process between man and nature,' men forget about their distinct political qualities and start treating themselves as only one living organism among others.¹² That is, remembrance of the great qualities of genuine political action dissipates and human beings are viewed as mere living creatures, primarily concerned with sustaining their life rather than with producing great deeds. Correspondingly, labor that supports metabolism between nature and a human is taken to be the highest human activity, while 'an everlasting life process of the species mankind' becomes the only remaining constant in the modern world. Action is barred from this world of natural processes where, following Marx, even thought is seen as natural process, and individual life is considered as just an element of a generic life process itself. The process attitude has extended so far and wide that what humans are doing on earth now appears 'not as activities of any kind but as processes, so that, as a scientist recently put it, modern motorization would appear like a process of biological imitation in which human bodies gradually begin to be covered by shells of steel' (Arendt, 1958: 320–3).

On the other hand, the process attitude, since it was originally linked to the process character of action, may have some positive features as well. For example, the residues of a genuine understanding of action that unleashes processes it cannot control are still manifest in the fact that natural sciences have also become the 'sciences of process.' They thus preserve some aspects of political action that

was initially alone capable of starting 'new unprecedented processes whose outcome remains uncertain and unpredictable whether they are let loose in the human or the natural realm' (Arendt, 1958: 231). Modern humankind has generally forgotten what genuine political actions are, but this memory may be eventually restored, given the fact that modern science still retains residual process-initiating elements of action.

Arendt does not specifically say anything on how the spread of the process attitude affects natality. However, one may suggest – developing her argument – that natality too becomes conceived in accordance with the process attitude. People forget that natality is the most general human condition of existence, in which a capacity for action is rooted. Instead, natality becomes viewed now as an inexorable biological process, as a recurrent link in the everlasting life process of mankind. The consequences for this forgetting of the deep existential significance of natality as the birth of the new are dire. Concepts of nation and nature, subject to process attitude and linked to what one might call the 'process view of natality,' now present themselves as inexorable processes as well. Nature is seen in the 'realist' sense, as a set of deep structural processes that humans cannot influence. A nation almost obviously seems to be a community tied by a continuous chain of biological births.

Could this conceptualization be put aside, and another one suggested, based on Arendt's understanding of natality as the most general human condition? Perhaps the process attitude may be repelled and the action-related vision of natality be restored? Indeed, nation then could be understood differently from the currently predominant vision of an unending chain of births, a continuous sequence of constant birth labors, or a community linked by this process of inexorable descent. Furthermore, a link between nation and nature may be re-established on a different ground, making a habitual justification of nation through its 'naturalness' seem out of place from the start. A critique of the process attitude to nation may thus be more successful in changing commonsense perceptions of the nation than a scholarly exposition of its 'unnaturalness.'

Nation as a Community of Action

Nation, linked to natality conceived in Arendt's terms, is a community of people living together to give birth to novel deeds. This redefinition of the nation radically unsettles its currently dominant ethnic definition. Nation becomes a community of people that remember as a genuine political action, people tied by shared natality of the new rather than by a common parental origin. Furthermore, the standard modern civic definition of nation, which is currently on the retreat under the assault of ethno-nationalism, may be redefined to give new strength to the civic impulse. Indeed, the standard civic definition of nation – all citizens inhabiting a given state and consenting to its laws are a nation – is not enough to be considered a civic nation understood as the one united by the human condition of natality. As Arendt (1958: 28) claims, modern nation-states

emerge when common affairs are started to be run as a household: 'We see the body of peoples and political communities in the image of a family whose everyday affairs have to be taken care of by a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping.' Therefore even in a civic nation, understood in a standard way, people may merely work or labor together without any resort to action.

By contrast to ethnic and standard civic definitions, nation as a community of action – nation as *polis* or *civitas*, one could say – brings together neither a community of procreation, nor a national household, but all those humans who remember that their stories may reveal their unique 'who' and affect the life-stories of others, redrawing the web of human relationships. Of course, not all should necessarily do novel deeds or excel in 'infinitely improbable' actions: this nation is not a community of compulsory and endless experimentation with each citizen striving to be unique. Rather, it is a community of people who remember genuine political action, are capable of recognizing novelty once it appears, and who would thus generate a story about it as 'naturally' as fabrication generates tools.

Thus conceived, the nation is gathered around a common world of humanly made objects and shares a web of human relationships – a common subjective in-between, in which stories are generated. In a sense, this nation may be closer to what are now called subcultures tied by shared objects and a common web of recognition and distinction. Perhaps contemporary state borders seem obsolete for this nation because, as one rock musician has put it, motherland 'is . . . where my friends are' (Cushman, 1995: 171). Ethnicity, language, religion, territory – all these bases for exclusive self-definition become irrelevant for a civic nation conceived as a stage for the recognition of the novel deed, as a set of shared practices to create objects that 'gather' people around them and protect people from falling over each other, and to recognize the newcomer born into this world when s/he appears. The Greek *polis* was created as a solution to the problem of frailty of human action, according to Arendt, so that deeds deserving fame would not be forgotten, and everyone would have an opportunity to excel and distinguish oneself. Nation can now be seen as a Greek *polis* in this sense: as an arena for the natality of the new that should allow each exceptional deed to be registered and recognized. *Natio qua novatio*: this is a vision of a community united by natality conceived as giving birth to new deeds, rather than as a process of the endless reproduction of bodies.

Nature as a Community of Action

This vision of nation based on the human condition of natality may seem highly idealistic in its practical implications. Arendt's original concept of natality does not have much support in everyday life still guided by the mundane conception of natality as a process of physical birth. In order for our criticism and alternative proposal to be effective, one has to challenge the idea of 'natural' natality in the minds of the millions. How could the link between the nation and the process

of physical birth, a link so intuitively obvious that it resists any criticism of its naturalness coming from social science, be broken? How could this most 'obvious' link become most obviously problematic?

Here, perhaps, a corollary redefinition of nature – also based on Arendt's concept of natality – could help. Indeed, nature viewed in connection to natality (conceived as giving birth to novel actions) might become a curious realm, where 'birth' does not have 'natural' qualities as opposed to those humanly contrived. Two consequences follow. First, birth of novel actions becomes central to nature thus redefined, and nature is freed from the process attitude imposed on it by modernity: it is not seen anymore as a set of inexorable processes. Second, biological birth stops being 'natural' in that nature has human action at its core, and the intuitive notion of nation as a 'natural' community of birth cannot be entertained even on an everyday level since birth most obviously becomes 'unnatural', contrived, artificial. Consequently, all seeming naturalness of linking people by birth or descent becomes suspect: descent is achieved by unnatural means, what was before an inexorable biological process is now a humanly controlled fabrication, or – a wilder possibility – political action in its own right.

This view of nature as *polis* is a possibility as never before. Paul Rabinow, reviewing recent developments in microbiology, repeats the opinion of François Dagognet, an intriguing French philosopher of science: if for the last two centuries culture was modeled on nature, with positivism and behavioral sciences being the latest reincarnation of this yearning for mimicry, now nature can be modeled on culture (Rabinow, 1996: 107–8). Creation of biological organisms with pre-set qualities gives an opportunity to set cultural mechanisms working directly in the very creation of nature, rather than through the mediation of the cultural construction of scientific facts and theories. Nature may become a human practice, blurring the hallowed distinction between human and non-human. But if one extends Rabinow's argument and recognizes in some aspects of cultural practices – working now at the heart of the production of new natural organisms – aspects of action in Arendt's sense, then one suddenly finds a *polis* working at the very heart of nature.

Arendt's writings themselves hint at a possibility that political action might one day become central to natural processes. Indeed, in her opinion, scientists constitute the only extensive contemporary group of people residually capable of action in the Greek sense of the word:

The capacity for action, at least in the sense of the releasing of the processes, is still with us, although it has become the exclusive prerogative of the scientists, who have enlarged the realm of the human affairs to the point of extinguishing the time-honored protective dividing line between nature and the human world. (Arendt, 1958: 323–4)

That scientists are residually capable of action may mean two things. First, they perform such great deeds that affect everybody living on earth (discovering nuclear reaction, for example), that these deeds, although not strictly political in Arendt's sense of the word, still merit the title of action more than the base

competition for power of the so-called politicians. Second, scientists still release processes as human action is supposed to do when it releases into the web of human relationships deeds that will eventually emerge as life-stories. This second possibility makes scientists particularly close to practicing action in the Greek sense.

However, mentions Arendt, even if they unleash processes, scientists do not practice genuine political action since they unleash natural processes rather than processes for an emergence of a unique 'who', a process of formation of a memorable or lamentable life-story. In other words, scientists do not act into the web of human relationships, they act into nature; they do not possess the revelatory quality of action since they do not necessarily produce stories about the 'who' of actors, which will supply meaningfulness to human existence.

This judgment seems somewhat unjustified. Of course, Arendt primarily speaks here about processes released in the material world, but in a preceding passage she also speaks of the 'code of honor' of scientific organizations and scientists acting in concert (Arendt, 1958: 323), and must be aware that scientific reputation is the 'who' that is disclosed with each great work of a scientist. 'Invisible colleges' of scientists of a given branch of knowledge, to use the term of Derek De Solla Price, supply the most demanding arena for recognition of both the professional and the moral qualities of a scientist. Furthermore, a brilliant innovation frequently threatens reputations already established in the field, and thus a novel deed of an experimenter or researcher affects the life-stories of those linked by the web of relationships within a given invisible college, eliciting multiple counter-reactions, which sets up a frequently unpredictable and irreversible process of the eventual emergence of the 'who' of the newcomer.¹³ Still, Arendt could object, unleashed processes that lead to the emergence of the life-story of great scientists are limited in scope: frequently they rest within a given invisible college and do not penetrate the wider public. The 'who' revealed is relevant for only those who are 'in,' who can understand the discovery and appreciate the greatness of an achievement.

Therefore, acts of scientists, in order to become political actions in Arendt's sense, would seem to need to have boundless, rather than bounded, implications: a process of establishing a great life-story should spill over the borders of the invisible college and be recognized as such by the whole public. For example, in a recent case in Russia, the brilliant life-story of a geneticist Timofeev-Resovsky has emerged into the public realm with the help of a renowned writer who made a story worthy of remembrance, although Resovsky's reputation among the scientists was already established for ages.¹⁴ Therefore, in order for scientists to perform a genuinely political action, their acting into nature should be also an action that directly affects every life-story in the web of human relationships. This seemed to Arendt to be an exception rather than a rule; the same conclusion seems to apply to the contemporary situation as well: very few scientists are capable of action in the Greek sense of the word.

Contemporary Science and Politics

There is one difference between Arendt's time of writing and ours: she wrote her book while witnessing the launching of the sputnik, which signified that radically changing the human condition by leaving earth became first possible. Now another change in the human condition is almost as manifest: natality and mortality have lost their 'naturalness.' Both are administered by huge technical networks, while the problems of euthanasia, cloning, rights of embryos or use of fetal tissue and the like are the problems brought about by this technologization of birth and death. Leaving aside death, let us concentrate on the changes in natality. One looks with simultaneous interest and apprehension at the new possibilities offered by the latest birth techniques. This apprehensive curiosity is based not so much on a realization that a technical possibility to reproduce humans has appeared, but on the prospective changes in the human condition that this change may possibly offer.

Scientists are now becoming capable of aspects of action in Arendt's sense in three respects. First, their scientific discoveries, 'extinguishing the time-honored dividing line between nature and the human world,' have such broad repercussions that it would seem that life-stories of great biotechnologists or of the developers of the cloning technique threaten to eventually touch every life-story on earth. Second, the processes they unleash in nature may now also directly unleash the unpredictable and irreversible processes in society. The uproar caused by the statement of doctors that they would clone people notwithstanding the ban on such activities manifests an understanding that acting into nature may bring consequences of a radically new kind: human beings may not ever be the same; the human condition itself may be altered irreversibly and unpredictably.

Third, scientists now seem to be able to affect the web of human relationships by unleashing processes for the creation of life-stories 'second-hand', so to speak – by means of produced others. Since scientists are becoming able to produce new people on a mass scale, they might contribute to releasing new 'whos' potentially capable of unique deeds. What work of a scientist may affect the web of human relationships more than unleashing a 'natural' process that will bring a human being into existence? Thus, a cloning scientist directly acts into nature but also indirectly acts into the web of human relationships by a powerful mediation, by contributing to a birth of a new human being who may eventually act and affect this web directly. Producing bodies here implies more than just assisting the physical process of birth, it also means mediation in eliciting future actions. Nature becomes a site of political natality: it is conceived less as a site for physical birth, than as a site for the birth of potential new great deeds.

However, it seems that all these new aspects of scientists' activities still cannot ensure that these activities will almost automatically generate meaning that illuminates human existence. A follower of Arendt should still look for actions that act into the intangible web of human relationships, rather than for creation of tangible works, of which scientists are capable. The problem is of decisive importance: how can making, formation, become action immediately, without

the mediation of human products who would then act?¹⁵ To put it a bit differently: how can action become an integral part of fabrication? How can action, squeezed out from human existence by the spread of making, be now found at the very heart of making? This problem seems insoluble within Arendt's conception.

A solution to this problem may be unexpectedly suggested by the blurring of boundaries between human and non-human that contemporary science is rediscovering day after day. Perhaps, Arendt's distinction between an objective world of durable things and the intangible web of human relationships is itself a product of modern yearning for separating the natural elements from the human ones. If Latour's hypothesis holds, Arendt's two entities, the 'world' of tangible things and the 'web' of intangible human relations, together constitute one network of technical and cultural elements, which we would like to break into opposed parts according to a neat distinction – an objective hardly achievable nowadays, particularly in the world of biotechnology. Perhaps, a world of objects that unites people now contributes as much to providing meaning as the story that is woven around it, so that the two form a whole, a web-work.¹⁶

The prospects opened by the vision of nature as *polis* are intriguing, if hard to ponder, and we stop here in our exploration of this topic which merits another article of its own. What is undoubtedly important for the present article, however, is that concomitantly to the emergence of this new vision of nature as *polis* – nature as based on the natality of the new deed – the 'naturalistic' prejudice of the blood ties that allegedly lie at the foundation of the nation may be effectively dispelled. Most simply put, new biotechnologies give ample grounds to question the naturalness of the birth link. Of course, cloning also offers to ethno-nationalism the possibilities it had never dreamt of, and thus new biotechnologies are potentially very dangerous and ominous. For example, current levels of cloning techniques that allow a clear choice of the genotype to be cloned imply the 'blood tie' most obviously establishing congruence between the object and subject of cloning. This could contribute to the wildest fantasies of the purest 'cloned' nations linked by the most evident descent and to the projects of most radical eugenics. But new biotechnologies also visibly upset the conception of birth as a natural process. For example, when the cloned ovum is put into the body of an ethnically unrelated and unknown person, or certain undesirable parts of the genotype (for instance, those making people susceptible to tuberculosis) are kicked out in the process of cloning, to what extent may a nation linked by this process intermingled with 'traditional' birth techniques claim common descent or blood ties?

Let me stress once again this argument, which is a spin-off from our general consideration of nature and nation based on political natality. The standard civic definition of nationhood is under threat everywhere in the world. It kept many human communities together for the last two centuries, and is a feature one would be happy to keep in the future. Unfortunately, nowadays this is frequently impossible. The civic definition of nationhood seems to be losing ground because of the unstoppable spread of ethnic nationalism. Battling this resurgence of

ethno-nationalism on the basis of the 'irreality' or 'unnaturalness' of a vision of descent-linked nation it espouses does not bear much fruit. However, a subversion of the currently predominant view of natality, in which the ethnic vision of nation is rooted, and a concomitant redefinition of the civic nation, may be more effective. Modern biotechnologies – whose development one should not always mindlessly support since they bring many as yet unknown and profound dangers – are at least interesting in one respect: they seem to put the old definition of natality in question for the most mundane of observers. One should not misunderstand the last sentence. Cloning is no solution to ethno-nationalism. But the questions that new technologies of life pose to us more and more insistently may help us, finally, decisively challenge the self-evidence of rooting nations in biological natality.

Notes

First presented as a plenary talk at the conference 'The Crossroads in Cultural Studies' (Tampere, Finland, June 1998). I would like to thank conference participants together with Hanna Pitkin and David Woodruff for their comments on previous versions of this article. They should not be blamed, however, for my obstinacy in exploring some risky arguments.

- 1 In late Soviet society, only children of mixed marriages could choose their ethnic nationality (between recorded nationalities of both parents) when they were issued internal passports at the age of 16. Originally, when internal Soviet passports were introduced in the 1930s, ascription of ethnic nationality to each citizen relied on self-designation and existing family names (Zaslavsky, 1982: 92). A memory of these two institutional practices seems to define the corresponding constituent parts of the contemporary 'natality test.'
- 2 She distinguishes between three currently dominant conceptions of nature: these include metaphysical, realist and lay ones (Soper, 1995: 155–6).
- 3 There are two standard overviews in English of the development of terms *physis* and *natura*: by Lovejoy and Boas (1935: 103–16, 447–56); and Collingwood (1945: 43–8). I follow their exposition, but also draw heavily from Borovsky (1952), since he pays more attention to etymological connections.
- 4 Sophocles, *Antigone*, st. 345, as quoted in Borovsky (1952: 229).
- 5 *Odyssey*, X: 303, quoted in Borovsky (1952: 225), who cites the Greek term. English translation according to Lovejoy and Boas (1935: 104).
- 6 Parmenides fragments from Diels 5, 28 B 16; quoted in Borovsky (1952: 226).
- 7 See e.g. Lucretius, I: 628–33. He also distinguishes between human 'semen' and 'seminal' elements that nature mixes in order to produce existing things, but etymological connections are obvious. Of course, there is a long Greek tradition to conceive of natural generation as mixing the 'seeds' of things. See Sobol's commentary in a Russian edition of *De Natura Rerum* (1947).
- 8 Latour (1994: 107). He does not call for the re-establishment of the initial innocence of the world of unseparated natural-cultural compounds since the successes of science are often indisputable. Rather, he calls for the open acknowledgment that this separation is constantly at work in modern societies, hoping that this appreciation may restore dignity not only to humans, but to things as well.

- 9 The term 'fourfold' comes from Heidegger's essay *The Thing*. Latour frequently explicitly uses Heideggerian allusions.
- 10 Patricia Bowen-Moore was first to stress this particular concept of Arendt and to articulate links with existential analytics of Heidegger that explain the centrality of this category to her thinking. Heidegger concentrated on being-unto-death and the finality of human existence, thus a phenomenon of birth enters his writing only in discussion of an existential structure of thrownness into the world in *Sein und Zeit*. Arendt, on the contrary, provided an extensive phenomenological description of an existential beginning available in every human birth, according to this argument (Bowen-Moore, 1989: 5). Bhikhu Parekh claims that Arendt had even coined the term (1981: xi).
- 11 Also: 'we call this reality the "web" of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality' (Arendt, 1958: 183).
- 12 Arendt (1958: 308). Here, as in some other places, Arendt seems to blur the distinction that she herself suggests – between a term 'process' being strictly a feature of political action, and a word 'process' as used in contemporary common parlance to describe whatever proceeds. For example, it is not clear whether the 'metabolic process' in question really has a quality of unpredictability and irreversibility, whether Arendt implies an extension of the 'process attitude' on the sciences of life, or whether she just uses it incautiously, in the ordinary meaning of the word.
- 13 As recent studies of science have tried to show, this clash of newcomers and established scientists over what theory should be adopted as 'truly' reflecting nature defines what is considered true as a result of these battles. The 'who' of a newcomer will emerge only after the whole reconfiguration of the web of human relationships in a given branch of science, a complicated interaction between the emerging life-story and life-stories that seemed already established, and the myriad of reactions and lateral effects that this interaction elicits, is complete. See Latour (1987).
- 14 Timofeev-Resovsky, a subject of Daniil Granin's biographical sketch (1988), was a controversial Soviet geneticist who was caught by the Second World War in a lab in Nazi Germany, was not interned to everybody's surprise and spent the war in experimentation. Upon returning to the Soviet Union he was imprisoned but subsequently released, and became the central figure who opposed Lysenko's biology. Paradoxically, his absence during the purges of geneticists in the Soviet Union saved him from extermination, while close interaction with German genetics made him a principal actor in the rebirth of scientific genetics in the Soviet Union.
- 15 Also, it is not for nothing that 'producing actors' sounds so ominous for a contemporary reader.
- 16 Recent French sociology of action resolutely strives at making objects the central part of investigation. For example, Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot (1991) single out six incommensurable worlds of everyday disputes on justice – which are all tied together not only by the distinct ways an argument is made within a world, but also by specific objects that 'found' this particular world. See also Dodier (1993).

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