Agnes Heller (1929–2019) and Biopolitics

David Bennett, Carolyn D'Cruz, Glenn D'Cruz, Julia Vassilieva

Abstract: This article is published as a tribute to the late Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller, who died earlier this year. Heller was best known as a prolific writer and political activist whose academic work addressed a wide range of topics, including the status of reformist Marxism, modernism, postmodernism, democracy and aesthetics. The article comprises an introduction, outlining Heller's career as a political dissident and activist, academic philosopher and public intellectual, and an edited transcript of a discussion with Heller, conducted in 2010, focusing on her work on biopolitics. The discussion-interview reflects its historical moment both in the nature of the questions posed and in Heller's responses to them. Heller elaborates her thinking on this topic with particular reference to the following issues: the technical, moral and legal limits of biopolitics in relation to new biological technologies such as genetic engineering; the tension between conceptions of biopolitics as a type of identity politics and as a practice of governmentality and demography; Giorgio Agamben's theorising on biopolitics in *Homo Sacer* and Hannah Arendt's views on political representation and her distinction between the private and public spheres. Heller also addresses other themes that run through her *oeuvre*, such as the status and meanings of democracy, totalitarianism, minority rights, and the relationship between ecological science and politics. The conversational tone of the discussion provides a concise and accessible introduction to Heller's later work and conveys her sense of dynamic engagement with what continue to be urgent political and philosophical issues.

Keywords: biopolitics, Agnes Heller, identity politics, democracy, marxism

Like many others around the world, we were very saddened to learn of the death of Agnes Heller in July of this year. Internationally renowned Hungarian philosopher and political dissident, public intellectual and tireless critic of totalitarianisms of all kinds, Heller was the author of two dozen books of engaged critical theory on subjects ranging from reformist Marxism and radical democracy to the ethics and politics of everyday life, modernity and postmodernity, biopolitics and aesthetics.

Heller died on 19 July 2019, at the age of ninety, in Lake Balaton. Having returned to live in her native Budapest after teaching for more than two decades at the New School for Social Research in New York and, before

that, for a decade at LaTrobe University in Melbourne, she spent her annual holidays at the summer resort of the Hungarian Academy of the Sciences in Balatonalmádi, beside Lake Balaton. The Academy is under severe duress from the autocratic, ultra-nationalist Orban government, which deems its human sciences research projects on liberalism, feminism, socialism and anti-fascism antipathetic to national interests and 'alien to the Hungarian spirit'. A political thorn in the side of the Orban regime and other 'illiberal democracies' of post-Soviet Europe, Heller was fighting its decision to dismantle the Academy when, still a strong swimmer at the age of ninety, she went for her daily swim in Lake Balaton and didn't return alive.

The outlines of her politically engaged life are well-known. A Holocaust survivor whose father died at Auschwitz when she was fifteen, Heller joined the Hungarian Communist Party in 1947 as a science student at Budapest University. After attending a lecture by the Marxist philosopher and aesthetician, György Lukács, she became, successively, a student, an intellectual disciple, a doctoral supervisee and then a colleague of Lukács's in the so-called Budapest School, dedicated to what Lukács called 'a theoretical renaissance of Marxism' that would produce a social anthropology capable of justifying a democratised form of socialism.

Opposed to the democratic centralism of 'ordinary Stalinism', with its insistence on consensual unity under the supremacy of the party leadership, Heller was twice expelled from the Hungarian Communist Party: the first time in 1949 for opposing the Stalinist rule of Mátyás Rakosi; the second time in 1958 when she was sacked from her university job for refusing to indict Lukács as a collaborator in the 1956 Hungarian Uprising. Lukács had served briefly as minister of culture in the anti-Soviet Nagy government following the uprising. When the Politburo invaded Hungary to quash its democratic revolution, Imre Nagy himself was executed; Lukacs and other members of Nagy's government were deported to the Socialist Republic of Romania; Heller lost her party-membership, her job and her passport. She survived for the next four years by teaching Hungarian literature to Budapest schoolchildren.

In 1963 Heller regained a university post as a researcher in the Sociological Institute at the Hungarian Academy of the Sciences. Lukács had returned from exile and publicly abjured his 1956 positions. Under the umbrella of his renewed party-loyalty, Heller, together with her philosopher-husband Ferenc Fehér and others, participated in the Budapest School's project of renewing Marxist criticism in the face of 'actually existing socialism'.

Following Lukács's death in 1971, members of the School were subjected to official surveillance, political harassment, and dismissed from their university jobs. Heller was expelled from the university in 1973, in part for supporting denunciations of the labour conditions of workers in socialist Hungary. Unable to work or publish, she was eventually granted a passport and allowed to leave Hungary with Féher and other former colleagues in 1977. They emigrated

to Australia, forced to conclude that the Budapest School's proto-utopian project was unrealisable and doomed to function as a form of apologism for Soviet-type societies that were beyond reform and 'monumental *cul de sacs* of modernity without exit'.[1]

Between their exile and emigration to Melbourne in 1977 and the 1989 democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe and Russia, Heller and Fehér undertook theoretical analyses of, on one hand, the failures of actually existing socialist regimes and, on the other, the shortcomings of the Western Left's critiques of the alienations of everyday life under liberal-democratic capitalism from a socialist perspective culpably ignorant of the lived conditions of 'real socialism' in the East. Heller and Fehér interpreted the 1989 democratic revolutions as post-utopian, postmodern revolutions that created conditions for a politics of contingency, of fractured and decentred identities that were free to form new and multiple kinds of alliance and community, displacing the politics of monolithic class identity and its grand narrative of universal progress toward justice and equality.

In 1986, Heller and Fehér left Australia to take up jobs at the New School, where Heller held the Hannah Arendt chair of Philosophy in the Graduate Studies Program and continued to teach, after Fehér's death in 1994, until her retirement in 2009. She received numerous international awards and medals for both her academic work and her political activism, including the Goethe Medal, the Hungarian Socialist Party Medal for Public Activity, the University of Michigan's Wallenberg Medal for 'humanitarian actions on behalf of the defenceless and oppressed', and the Republic of Hungary's Order of Merit Grand Cross Star. Only weeks before her sudden death in Lake Balaton, she had been invited to the Elysée Palace by Emmanuel Macron to join a small group of philosophers in discussing the future of Europe and how to resist the growth of nationalisms in the lead-up to the May European Parliamentary elections.

Heller was an advocate of what she called *agon* – philosophical debates that presuppose dissent – and a critic of consensus, which she insisted always masks relations of domination and silenced dissent. She was committed to defending 'pluralism of forms of life' and seemed ever ready to debate and contest anything with anyone at any length. Her inexhaustible intellectual energy was legendary, as was her commitment to the vocation of philosopher, which she defined in a birthday tribute to Lukács as 'nothing less than the unity of thinking and behaviour, world view and ethics, the totality of theory and action'. Jürgen Habermas paid tribute to her in 2017 as a philosopher 'who was forced to invest incomparably more courage and fighting spirit [than himself] and who, to the present day, has had to take on so many great risks and impositions by putting her neck on the line. Agnes Heller had to, in a literally existential sense, "live" her philosophy while we in Western Germany were spared from seriously challenging situations'.[2]

Heller's legendary energy was in abundant evidence in December of 2010

1. Angel Rivero, 'Agnes Heller: Politics and philosophy', *Thesis Eleven*, no. 59, November, 1999, pp17–28, p25.

2. Jürgen Habermas, 'Response to Agnes Heller', *Thesis Eleven*, vol. 143, no. 1, 2017, pp15–17 p15.

when, at the age of eight-two, she spent an afternoon discussing biopolitics with us in Melbourne. We were planning a new journal to intervene in current debates about biopolitics and wanted its first issue to include interviews with several of the key philosophers who had helped frame those debates. In 1994, Heller and Fehér had published their monograph *Biopolitics*, taking as their starting-point modernity's failed promise of '*the liberation of the Body*'; it was followed in 1996 by *Biopolitics: The Politics of the Body, Race and Nature*, Heller's co-edited collection of papers from a conference in Vienna convened to debate her and Fehér's thesis that biopolitics constituted 'a new political phenomenon' and one 'intimately linked to the question of *identity politics*'. (Heller's ready recourse to italics in print was of-a-piece with her rhetorical style in conversation, invigoratingly different from the pseudo-apologetic, self-effacing style of many Western humanities academics. To hear Heller and Fehér debating the arguments of an article one had published, over strong coffee in a Melbourne kitchen in the late 1980s, was to imagine the pungent flavour of Lukács's magisterial voice to his comrade-colleagues in the embattled Budapest School in the 1950s.)

With unhesitating generosity, Heller agreed to contribute to our journal by revisiting biopolitics with us in 2010. In the event, the journal project wasn't realised and the interview remained unpublished. As a tribute to Heller, we are publishing an edited transcript of the interview in this issue of *New Formations*. The interview reflects its historical moment, both in the nature of the questions asked and in Heller's responses to them. A lot of water has flowed under the biopolitical bridge since 2010, some of it from melted New Zealand glaciers coated with heat-absorbing soot from the unprecedentedly catastrophic Australian bushfires that have already rendered thousands of species of flora and fauna extinct during this 2020 southern summer. When even Rupert Murdoch's own children have repudiated the 'climate-change denialism' of News Corp, declaring they are 'particularly disappointed with the ongoing denial among news outlets in Australia, given obvious evidence to the contrary', it seems highly unlikely that Heller would still maintain, today, the agnosticism *vis-à-vis* the science or 'religion' of climate change that she registered in our interview a decade ago.[3] Far more likely is that she would be mounting Extinction Rebellion's barricades and adding her powerful voice to the chorus of critics of Australia's right-wing government whose party coffers are generously supplied by the mining corporations of the world's biggest coal-exporting nation and whose 'denialism' is scandalously legendary. Nonetheless, the interview remains a valuable document of Heller's thinking in 2010 and its conversational tone gives a vivid flavour of her rhetorical style; it also touches on many of the key recurring issues with which her eclectic philosophy had grappled over the decades.

As her 1990s publications on biopolitics showed, identity politics had tested the limits of Heller's commitment to 'pluralism of forms of life' and her critique of what Habermas termed 'the universalism of a morality of

3. See Zoe Samios, 'Inside the Murdoch family climate schism', *The Age*, 16 January 2020: https://www.theage.com.au/business/companies/inside-the-murdoch-family-climate-schism-20200116-p53ruu.html

4. Habermas, *op. cit.*.

5. Agnes Heller, 'Has biopolitics changed the concept of the political? Some further thoughts about biopolitics', in Agnes Heller and Sonja Puntscher-Riekman, eds, *Biopolitics: The Politics of the Body, Race and Nature*, Avebury: Aldershot, 1996, p5. (Hereafter *Biopolitics*).

justice'.[4] One of her and Fehér's charges against identity politics was that they were antipathetic to representative democracy and its investment in universal rights and interests, in so far as identity politics predicate the credibility of political arguments on the embodied identities of their proponents (such that only women may speak for women's interests, only Blacks for Black interests, etc.). Heller argued of identity politics that 'The biopolitical ceremony of unmasking follows the general pattern of the totalitarian way of refuting an argument. For a Nazi a Jew, for a Bolshevik a "class alien" could not possibly assert the truth about anything. Whatever their statements, it sufficed to unmask their authors as Jews or as class aliens … [B]iologically identified ingroups dismiss their representation by others as false, incorrect *par excellence*. They acknowledge only self-representation …'[5]

A decade and a half later, while still able to describe the defence of representative democracy as her 'special thing', Heller no longer considered identity politics the dominant form of biopolitics, as she explains in this 2010 interview.

(DB)

AGNES HELLER (AH) INTERVIEWED ON BIOPOLITICS, 10 DECEMBER 2010 BY DAVID BENNETT (DB), CAROLYN D'CRUZ (CDC), GLENN D'CRUZ (GDC), JULIA VASSILIEVA (JV)

DB: Thank you very much for agreeing to discuss biopolitics with us, Agnes, and for contributing this interview to a new journal we are planning, *The International Journal of Biopolitics*. We have been re-reading your 1994 and 1996 books on biopolitics, in which you used the term to describe various kinds of oppositional identity politics – the politics of racial, ethnic and sexual differences – whose 'essentialising' or 'biologising' tendencies you were critical of, and which you described as 'defending the difference of bodies … against the universalistic concepts of human rights of freedom and equality'.[6] In more recent years, following the publication and translation of Foucault's lecture series, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, and the work of writers like Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, most discussions of biopolitics have assumed that it is a *state* project: the project of state-management of populations, their health, their hygiene, their racial constitution, their reproductive biology and so on.[7] Toward the end of *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault describes biopolitics as, on one hand, state management, regulation and optimisation of populations and, on the other, as the politics of reconciling that management with what he calls liberalism, understood as respect for legal subjects and economic entrepreneurs. The question of biopolitics, in these terms, is: how can the state address its citizens as masses, as populations, but at the same time as individuals with legal and economic rights? The term 'biopolitics', then, has been used to describe quite different problematics, political perspectives and interests, and one of the

6. See Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, *Biopolitics*, Brookfield, Aldershot, 1994; and Agnes Heller and Sonja Puntscher-Riekman (eds), *Biopolitics: The Politics of the Body, Race and Nature*, Avebury, Aldershot, 1996. The quotation is from Heller and Puntscher-Riekman's 'Preface' in the latter volume, p. ix.

7. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Senellart, (trans.) Graham Burchell, Houndsmill, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (trans.) Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998. (Hereafter *Homo Sacer*). Michael Hardt, *The Coming Community*, (trans.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993. (Hereafter *Coming Community*); *State of Exception*, (trans.) Kevin Attell, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2000; and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York, Penguin Press, 2004; Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, (trans.) Timothy Campbell, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

questions we want to ask you is: have your own views on biopolitics changed since you and Ferenc Fehér published your book *Biopolitics* in 1994 and do you think this term is still useful? Does it describe something different from the concerns of other terminologies – whether Marxian ones, postcolonial ones, feminist ones or whatever? Does it point to something different from these other discourses?

AH: Yes, I think it points to something different, but I would also add that the function of biopolitics and the types of biopolitics that appear have been changing historically. The book you mention, written in 1992-93, was meant as a kind of intervention in the then-important and very dominating concepts of biopolitics. And Foucault's concept of biopolitics was not just a general concept but was related to certain historical periods and historical experiences – demography, first and foremost – which were, for a time, the essential issues in biopolitics. I do think that, at the present moment, the main issue of biopolitics is no longer identity politics but sometimes it is still demographic.

Take China, for example. Demographic politicking in China, or demography politics, which is not really institutionalised in Europe, ended with a decreasing demography curve. But, today, there are two different issues at the heart of biopolitics, which are not entirely new but they have new ramifications. We could describe the first issue as the problem of breeding, which is an old issue because we were also breeding animals, and the idea that humans can also be bred was widespread – Plato believed we can breed humans as well as we can animals. And the utopian schemes, for example, out of Tommaso Campanella [*City of the Sun*] were also considering how to breed a human race that is superior to the other races and not just as far as the body is concerned but also as far as mental capacities and virtues are concerned. The golden soul in Plato was basically bred – it's artificially bred, mentally and morally as well as physically.

So, I think this problem, which goes on and on, of treating something in human biology as essential for morality, essential for nobility, is always accompanying our history. This is apparent when we speak about the aristocracy as 'blue blooded' or when people protest against the mixture of blood – 'my blood is spoiled by mixing with the blood of another'. Now, this kind of expression points to the continuation of an ancient problem of biopolitics, which was political because it determined to which social stratum you belonged. The aristocrats had the blue blood, the populace had the red blood, so to speak, so there was a caste idea, a class idea, behind what is called the 'biological' aspect, which was really political in character. There was also negative biopolitics from the beginning. If a child was born with some sickness or was ugly or had a hunchback or whatever, then they were killed quite legally, either directly or indirectly by being left out in the desert or in the mountains etc. That was considered natural and accepted by society as

quite legitimate. That was negative biopolitics.

Now, this issue has recurred in our projects of biopolitics concerned with the changing of human nature, with precisely the contingent aspect of birth. When you brought a woman and man together from 'pure races', as in Nazism, you had, of course, decided already that a child of 'pure race' will be beautiful, blue-eyed, blonde-haired – everything necessary for an Aryan person will be the outcome. But there was still the contingency of nature, which you could not really interfere with. Today, there is the idea that you *can* interfere in the contingency of birth, that the birth of a child should *not* be contingent. You can decide before the conception of a child whether it will be a girl or a boy, whether you will have one child or two, whether they will be twins or not, whether they will have blue eyes or black eyes, black skin or white skin – we can decide *before* propagation.

DB: If this could be described as a realisation of the Enlightenment project of Reason and its products, science and technology, 'conquering Nature' – controlling not only the environment but also the evolutionary processes of humanity within it – is this is a good thing or a bad thing in your view?

AH: This is not exactly the same thing as conquering nature, because it's only conquering internal nature. You are right, there is another aspect of the story, which has another history, one concerned with conquering external nature, but that's not transforming the contingency of birth.

DB: But, to oversimplify, are you in favour, or not, of eliminating contingency?

AH: It's a good question. There are technical problems and moral problems. The question is whether we have techniques at our disposal to do what is now called, in American and Japanese literature, 'genetic enhancements' [changing inherited characteristics] – whether we have the technical means at our disposal to do such 'enhancements' as design the sex of children. But what we can already achieve is the sex-change, redesigning adults to be a woman instead of a man or vice versa. But the contingency of birth, which was accepted even in the racist theory of breeding, will no longer be accepted. We can now influence the contingency of birth, even create alpha, beta, gamma children, children of the ruling class and of the opposite. Now, you asked whether it's a good or right thing. The question depends not on technology but on moral limits, because a moral consideration is not a technical consideration. The moral consideration is what is morally acceptable and what is not. You could say that if you can eliminate future diseases in the womb of a woman for an unborn child, it is a positive thing: a child is going to be born without cancer or several other kinds of diseases. That is not altogether a bad thing to design. I have, however, very serious doubts whether we should abolish the contingency of birth entirely, because this

impulse to design can make humankind subject to fashion before a person is born. There are fashions in women's and men's dress: you can imagine that if there are fashions in human appearance, in human character, then we will breed persons who are all alike. This is a moral limit I would not surpass.

DB: Different sectors of the population have different access to these possibilities of technology, of course – some can afford it, many can't – so it's like the old conundrum of whether people should be able to spend income or inherited wealth on buying education and its socio-cultural advantages for their children. I'm just wondering whether your moral reservations would mean that you wouldn't like to see the affluent being able to eliminate disease from their offspring if the poor can't do it, too.

AH: This is a very controversial issue, but it happens all the time. I don't appreciate it but I think that this is how things normally happen. Whatever comes into being as a discovery will first serve the health and wellbeing of a few and, later on, the same discovery, because it will be a mass product, will serve all. So, what begins as a luxury product can become a mass-product, and this can be said about new bio-technologies. Of course, abortion is now, unfortunately, a mass product: everyone can have an abortion for very little money; it's now available for poor and rich, young and old.

I don't think that 'morality' would say that if only certain people can afford it, and other people cannot afford it, that's why we should not have it. Thinking that way means we should close our opera houses, our concert halls and our galleries because only a small part of the population has access to these spaces. I don't think this is a very good egalitarian way of thinking. I don't think that, in this case, egalitarianism is all right. There are certain medications that are only available, not just for the rich but also for certain countries. For instance, the swine flu shot is available for everyone in Hungary but in America it's available only for children. Should Hungary not give it to everyone because it's only available for children in America? Even the Obama couple couldn't have a swine flu shot in America because there is a shortage there, and it's not necessarily the case that a shortage always hits the poor and not the rich, always hits *these* and not *those* people. Sometimes it's very accidental whom a shortage affects. That's why I gave the example of swine flu shots in America.

This isn't a moral issue. Sometimes there's an impossibility involved. For example: cloning. You can say there are moral limits to cloning, but I think there are also *natural* limits to cloning, because *people* cannot be cloned. These are very important things. For example, I have identical twin granddaughters: they are cloned, because identical twins *are* cloned, but they became entirely different persons. What you become depends, first, on yourself and not on your genes. Your genes give the conditions – I could not, for example, become a great musician like Mozart, certainly not, because those genes are not in

my body – but what you make of the conditions depends on yourself, not on your genetic code. So, I think people cannot be cloned, and this sets a physical limit, I believe, to what is now on the agenda, not just a technological or moral limit.

CDC: You have been talking about technical limits and moral limits in relation to biopolitics. How would you approach these issues if you were discussing legal limits?

AH: That's a good question. Basically, I think that legal limits often follow moral limits. If the majority of a population believes that something is immoral, then, finally, legislation will follow. For example, homosexuality was outlawed in Hungary in the 1950s – homosexuals went to prison – but after pressure from certain enlightened parts of the population, the government abolished the law. And there was basically never a law against rape within the family, but when feminist groups put this issue on the agenda, insisting that rape is rape and that a husband can rape his wife, then rape within marriage became illegal. And there are other ways in which law has followed morality. This can be good and bad, because moral judgments can be very fundamentalist and when the law follows moral judgment, there can be a problem. But there are no one-way streets – this is something I should have said at the outset in answer to your question. There is a kind of internal contradiction with every step you take. Basically, you want to ensure that the benefits surpass the losses.

GDC: Your early work on biopolitics was concerned with identity politics, but your more recent commentaries are about governmentality and demography. What are the connections between these two conceptions of biopolitics for you?

AH: I cannot give a general answer to this question because I think it is conditional on the politics and the situation of each and every country. There are countries of immigration, nation-states as in Europe, where the immigrants find it very difficult to settle into the traditional ways of life of the nation and, in this case, demography politics and identity politics are very strongly related. In newer countries like America, there is not a close relationship between the two. Identity politics is related to different kinds of groups, nations, nationalities, races of the United States and has little to do with demographic concerns. In fact, in the United States, there are no demographic concerns at the present moment. In Europe there are, because the indigenous population is decreasing. Basically, the birth rate in Europe, in France or in Germany, is 1.4, 1.5 – they cannot reproduce enough population. In order to reproduce their populations, they need immigrants but there is also a very great racist and ethnocentric rejection of these immigrants. And

it is very difficult to integrate them, especially young people. If you look at European newsreels, you will see people rioting in Athens, Paris, Amsterdam, Copenhagen and other places: they express their anger on the street, they burn cars, they crash shop windows – this is mere rage, *mere rage*, because of the lack of integration. So, for Europe, it's a different question from in the United States. Whether there is a relationship between identity politics and demography politics depends on the concrete situation in the country. Certainly, in China, there is no relationship: there is a very strict demography politics, but it has nothing to do with the politics of identity.

GDC: In the preface to *Biopolitics: The Politics of the Body, Race and Nature* (1996), you and Sonja Puntscher-Riekmann claim that identity politics emerges as the authority of metanarratives – universalist projects of emancipation and progress – collapses. You argue that in the absence of any teleological political goal, the human body emerges as the ultimate source of identity and value, and this new biopolitical scene is marked by a plethora of agonistic interest groups that undermine democracy's ability to formulate universal rules and contracts. Giorgio Agamben, in *The Coming Community* (1990), proposes a collectivity based on inessential commonality, which he calls 'whatever singularity'. That is, a community bound by 'being such that it always matters' rather than by any specific property of identity – such as being black, female, or lesbian (*Coming Community*, pp 2-3). Do you think Agamben's recourse to Heidegger's vocabulary of Being suggests a way of resolving the apparently incompatible projects of identity politics and democracy?

AH: I respect Agamben's suggestion very much, although I don't think it's an application of the Heideggerian policy, because Heidegger would protest against this interpretation. Agamben is a little bit utopian, if I may say so. It would be nice if it could be the case but, speaking about empirical issues, I don't think that it's going to be the case in the foreseeable future. There is a distinction in the philosophical tradition between the transcendental and the empirical, and what Agamben suggests here is a suggestion on the transcendental level. Politics is something you do on the empirical level and I doubt very much whether his very beautiful conception can be made workable in the world in which we live: a world in which people are very unfortunate and feel themselves isolated, which is a very difficult thing to live with. They stick to the kind of community they can identify themselves with, to the kind of community that shares their goals: they like to speak in terms of 'we' and not just in terms of 'I'. It would be beautiful to have communities only on the ground of free choice. I sympathise strongly with what Agamben said, but I can hardly believe that – except in the case of certain intellectuals, thinking logically, and meeting on-line – we can realise his model in real space and time. I'm sorry, but this is what I think.

JV: There is also a more negative overtone in Agamben's theorising. In *Homo Sacer* he writes about the Camp becoming the 'biopolitical paradigm of the modern', as one of the manifestations of biopolitics turning into thanatopolitics (p174). He draws, of course, on the extensive evidence of this dynamic in the Nazi German concentration and slave camps and similar evidence can be drawn from the history of the GULAG in the former USSR. But we have also seen, disturbingly, the re-appearance of camps in the context of the Balkan war in the 1990s, in the war in Iraq, which is ongoing, as well as in the Australian politics of 'containment' of asylum-seekers through so-called 'detention centres' on Pacific islands and mainland Australia. These examples would seem to confirm Agamben's hypothesis that the camp is becoming the paradigmatic condition and his idea that what Carl Schmitt calls a 'state of exception' has become normalised in the current political landscape.

AH: I don't agree with either of those propositions. Starting with the politics of exception: a political exception exists only if there is an exception, it cannot possibly be the norm, and I think it is philosophically bad thinking to say so. I think what Carl Schmitt said about political exception has something to do with the conception of sovereignty, with the single person who has the last decision, and I don't believe this is workable now. Not even in autocratic countries can you speak about politics in these terms. I'm not saying anything about the future, but it is not workable in the contemporary world.

DB: Even if a government declares it is engaged in a 'war with terror', so it's in a state of exception and it can suspend your civil liberties, *habeas corpus*, has the right to imprison you for fourteen days or twenty-eight days, the right to take you to Guantanamo Bay without putting you on trial, without telling you what you're accused of?!

AH: But that's not the state of exception in the way Carl Schmitt believed in it, because it is limited in time. I think that, in England, a person could only be detained for three days without a trial but there was a change in British law during the Irish crisis that allowed the government to detain people for a month without a trial. That was a change in the law. When there is an emergency, states can do things like this, without violating the tradition of democratic institutions.

But there is another matter: when you speak about the war against terror, of course, you mean the situation after '9/11' in America. But the war against terrorism is a stupid expression, I'm sorry to say, because it's not a war. But if you accept this as a euphemism, then you can speak about the war against terror. This is a war which cannot be won – but it can be lost! Why do I think it cannot be won? Because, in my mind, terror belongs to modernity. As long as we have modernity, we have terror. We have different kinds of terrors. The

word is used, now, to refer to the state of fear and anxiety and the state of violence. This combination was invented by Robespierre, who spoke about virtuous terror. And from the time of Robespierre, terror is always connected to virtue, not just violence.[8]

In the case of violence, you can say: it is wrong, but we are now in an exceptional state, when we can be violent. No, terrorism can be virtuous. If you exercise terror, you are the most virtuous person. This is the combination [terror and virtue] and the terror can be state terror, it can be non-state terror, but it belongs to modernity. It will never disappear. But what *can* be lost is the so-called *war* on terror. You can lose it in two different ways. One way is to make obvious concessions. This way is cowardice. The other way is limiting what you mentioned, the institutions of liberties, because of fear of terror. That's the other way in which you can lose a war against terror. So, you can lose this war in both ways, with cowardice or concessions and, the other way, by limiting the liberties of our own citizens on the grounds that there is a danger from terror. Both ways are dangerous. Europe has adopted the first way and the second way was the position the United States used to take under Bush.

CDG: Perhaps we can approach this topic from a different angle. I remember in one of your earlier pieces you stated that Hannah Arendt, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, was very careful to distinguish even the most problematic kinds of democracy from tyranny. And so, in the present context, when we're talking about the war on terror or the post-'9/11' landscape, we're often asking questions about what it means when things like freedom of speech and other liberties are being limited in our modern democracies. Perhaps something like Derrida's concept of the auto-immune process, in which democracy starts attacking its own means of self-protection through these different laws, might help us understand the current situation. But from what you're saying, this process is not a state of exception as you use the term.

AH: Even if you have a theory of democracy – and this is true about Arendt and Derrida, who talks about a kind of 'radical democracy', 'a democracy to come' – when we talk about democracy, we should not have any illusions. I agree with Churchill that it is a bad political institution, but it is still the best that we can get. I think that is a great wisdom. Democracy is not a hand-out, you don't get it free. Democracy is something we have to acquire and fight for, day to day. And it also, always, steps back, as, for example, in the time of the Cold War in America, when a lot of aspects of democracy were lost and then people started to fight for it. And then in the Southern states the persecution of the black population was very strong, even in the 1950s and 1960s. There was a kind of institutional apartheid in the Southern part of the United States: black people couldn't sit on the bus when a white person was standing; they had to use different toilets than a white person. How does

8. Robespierre concluded his famous speech, 'The Virtue of Terror', delivered before the National Convention in Paris on 5 February, 1794, with these lines: 'It is necessary to stifle the domestic and foreign enemies of the Republic or perish with them. Now, in these circumstances, the first maxim of our politics ought to be to lead the people by means of reason and the enemies of the people by terror. If the basis of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the basis of popular government in time of revolution is both virtue and terror. Virtue without which terror is murderous, terror without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing else than swift, severe, indomitable justice; it flows, then, from virtue'.

this happen? Of course, it is democracy. If you've seen the film, *Mississippi Burning*, you'll remember the white fascist who said that this is democratic America. His words were as follows: 'We do not want Negroes because they are different from us. We don't need Jews because they crucified Christ. We don't want papists because they obey the tyrant of Rome. We are the democratic Protestant White America'.

So, you have to re-define what democracy means! *This* is the duty. I knew some young people who went from the North to the South to work with blacks to achieve civil rights for them, and a few of them have been murdered. They were the ones who were fighting for democracy. It's the fight we have to have, each and every day. You have to be aware of this. It's not a birthday present anyone gets. And I think Derrida was also naïve, politically naive, when he spoke about 'democracy to come'. Democratic politics *exists* – and the question is what we do with it. 'What is to come' is kind of empty, of course, it's a kind of Messianism. I think Messianism is wonderful, but in religion, not in politics.

DB: Are you familiar with the Italian philosopher, Roberto Esposito?

AH: I know about him …

DB: His book *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* was translated into English a couple of years ago, along with his essay 'Totalitarianism or Biopolitics?' and I'm wondering how you would respond to two of his arguments.[9] One is that the struggle for democracy as an ideology was basically lost in the 1930s. He opposes two kinds of totalitarianism, Nazi and Communist, and argues that communism belongs on an ideological continuum with democracy in so far as both are 'universalist and egalitarian', addressing persons as a totality of equal subjects endowed with rational will and abstracted from the specificities of their bodies. In the interests of treating citizens equally, democracy and communism are, in theory at least, 'difference-blind' – colour-blind, gender-blind, etc. Communist totalitarianism simply carries this abstracting, disembodying, universalising ideology to excess: in Esposito's words, it 'suffers from a surplus of democracy', not a deficit of it; 'communism is both democracy's dream and its nightmare' (p638).

On the other hand, biopolitics, whether in its liberal or its Nazi forms, is anti-egalitarian and particularist, according to Esposito: it concerns itself with the particular 'natures' of embodied persons, whose distinctive desires and needs are both the object and the subject of politics. Lockean liberalism treated the individual as possessor of his or her own body, which she or he can use, sell, transform and so on, whereas Nazism transferred the property of the body from the individual to the state. Esposito quotes Hannah Arendt's argument that the Nazi concentration camps made no sense, either economically or politically, for a nation at war and could only be explained as an experiment in stripping

9. Roberto Esposito, 'Totalitarianism or Biopolitics? Concerning a Philosophical Interpretation of the Twentieth Century', (trans.) Timothy Campbell, *Critical Inquiry*, 34, 4, Summer, 2008, pp633-44.

humanity back to 'bare life' and seeing whether it could be rebuilt, from scratch, as a bundle of conditioned reflexes. And Esposito argues that what happened after the discrediting of Nazism's project in the mid-twentieth century was that the project of engineering humanity, which you were talking about before, has become *privatised*. It has moved into the private sector: people do it through medical interventions of various kinds, cloning test-tube babies, and so on – it stopped being a state project and has become a privatised, commercialised project available to those who want and can afford it. In short, Esposito claims that the project of democracy has been discredited because of communist totalitarianism, while the project of state biopolitics has been discredited because of Nazi totalitarianism. I'm sorry to be so long-winded but I am interested in what your reactions to these arguments might be.

AH: There are two very different things. First of all, it was not the idea of democracy that citizens are abstract, genderless, age-less, ethnicity-less etc., *absolutely not*! There was a condition: everyone was born free, all were created with reason and consciousness, and that's the starting-point; but you can *be* free in entirely different ways. The concept of democracy is not based on abstraction. There *is* an abstraction: you are a citizen – and that was Marx's point, in fact, that the citizen is an abstraction, only '*l'homme*' is a concrete thing – that was Marx's criticism of France, of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. But, even if every citizen is an abstraction, there are certain kinds of citizens' virtues and citizens' duties which are not abstractions. For example, every citizen should be able to perform jury duty, but then sitting on a jury is *qualified* and it is qualified by the principle that only the civilised should pass judgement upon you. This *concretises* the whole concept of citizenship: citizens are selected for jury duty on the basis of their age, gender, ethnicity, class and so on. If a black person is on trial, the jury will consist mostly of blacks; similarly, if a woman is on trial, women will be sitting in the jury – because it is the concrete identity of the persons who judge other persons, as concrete citizens and not as abstractions, that is at stake. I think it's basically a wrong conception, or an ignorance, of how a legal system in a democracy is really operating to say it is based upon abstraction.

Now, as far as Hannah Arendt is concerned, we must note that her knowledge about totalitarianism was very limited – she wrote her book about totalitarianism at a time when very few documents were published on this issue, and she could work only on the documents that were available to her. I think her understanding of totalitarianism was very limited. So, I would not rely on that and, anyway, I disagree with her concepts of democracy. That's my special thing, because she had a very low opinion of representative democracy. She believed that only direct democracy works, such as the Soviets, the communes, etc. People sitting in councils *works*, and you should abolish universal general elections altogether, because they have nothing to do with democracy. Only *direct* democracy is democratic. And, according to Arendt, in the whole United

States the only democratic procedure is the election primaries, as these are a case, mostly, of direct democracy, not representative democracy.

I think she was wrong. She was wrong for the following reason: there is nothing more dictatorial than a group of people sitting in judgment of their own, as a small group. A small group is supposed to be a model of democracy. But when I sit together with others, there will be an opinion-leader, and when there is an opinion-leader, the opinion-leader is very strong – you do not dare to say, 'No'. But in the ballot box you are free to make a decision. So, you can have both together, but Hannah's conception that you can have only one and abolish the other is, I think, a bad conception of democracy.

The idea that the concept of democracy is finished is a funny one. If you want to say something new – and philosophers always want to say something new! – I do! – then I recommend saying something like this.

But there is another very important point. Carl Schmitt was very much pro-democracy; the Soviet Union called itself a democracy, the *real* democracy, as against the *unreal*, *foreign* democracy; but there is no modern democracy without liberalism, that is, human rights – human rights attached to single individuals. And without human rights, citizens' rights alone do not constitute modern democracy. And this is something that I learned when I was at a conference with African people. There were talks about democracy, majority rule, general elections and secret ballots, etc. etc. Then someone from Africa stood up and said, 'Okay, all this is fine, but if there is a majority tribe, then the majority will always vote us out; we will remain in a minority, and they will legislate against us. And this is fully democratic! In a secret ballot, the majority decides, so what?' So, then I came to the conclusion that without the right of the minority, without liberalism, there is no modern democracy. And this is the answer to the problem of totalitarianism: a modern democracy needs the right of the minority and the rights of individuals *against* the state, even against its own citizens. I think that, without this, there is no modern democracy. And this is why I think this concept is loaded, ideologically loaded – I don't know much about this author (Esposito), so I can only rely on what you told me about his position.

DB: What kinds of rights for minorities, as distinct from universal human rights, are you speaking about?

AH: First of all, the right to defend the minority against the majority. The majority cannot legislate a thing that hurts, essentially, the interests and the wellbeing of the minority. It is basically a liberal conception. I don't speak about your Liberal Party, I speak about traditional liberalism. The right of the individual, the right of groups, the right of minorities – which was also emphasised in the time of identity politics, and this aspect of identity politics was not bad. The emphasis is on difference, and the mutual respect of difference, inscribed in legislation. Going back to my African example:

if the minority tribe remains always in the minority, then the majority tribe winning a majority in Parliament should not be allowed to issue laws that hurt the sensitivities and the rights of the minority. There is a kind of justice, here, which is not entirely symmetrical; it is a reciprocal, but *asymmetrically* reciprocal, justice.

DB: But there are problems with this as a general principle, aren't there? Much depends on *which* minorities are at issue and how they are constituted. For example, what about ultra-right, racist minorities – neo-Nazis – who say they should not be silenced by the state or the majority?

AH: This is what I told you about Hungary and I'm very ambivalent about it, about the fact that the right of free speech of this minority is granted, that you *can* publish books by Hitler, that this right is totally granted. And it's an open question whether limits should or shouldn't be put on this right for any kind of minority whatsoever. The only thing is that the minority should not offend the law of the state, and the law of the state should not hurt the interest and sensitivity of the minority either. This is a no-win game, so you cannot satisfy all parties, essentially. But democracy is about conflict. It's a conflict model. Democracy is about the contestation of justice. Why do we have newspapers? We have newspapers so that people can say, 'Everything that is happening is wrong, something else would be right'. Some think it's unjust and some think it is just. Justice is always contested. And a modern democracy essentially depends on this constant liberty for the contestation of any existing law.

CDC: Can we stay on this issue of conflict for a moment, please, because I'd like to take you back to the title of your essay, 'Has Biopolitics Changed the Concept of the Political?'(*Biopolitics*, pp3-15).There has been a recent resurgence of interest in Foucault's theories of biopolitics with the posthumous publication of his 1970s lectures for the College de France in *Society Must be Defended* (1997), *Security, Territory, Population* (2008) and *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008).[10] In the first text, Foucault reverses Clausewitz's phrase, 'war is no more than a continuation of politics', to suggest, instead, that 'politics is the continuation of war by other means'. This statement seems to align Foucault with your earlier assessment of biopolitics as closer to Carl Schmitt's concept of the political being based on the friend/foe distinction than to Hannah Arendt's separation of the political from both social and economic spheres. How apt or accurate, historically and philosophically, do you think Foucault's reversal of Clausewitz's phrase is for rethinking the concept of the political today?

AH: Now, when it is said that politics is a continuation of war by other means, what is meant is foreign policy, not internal policy. Of course, the Cold War *was* a continuation of war in peace and, in a way, it is a correct description,

10. Michel Foucault, *Society must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, (trans.) David Macey, (eds.) Maura Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, New York, Picador, 2003; and Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France 1977-78*, (eds) Francois Ewald and Alessandro Fontaina (trans.) Graham Burchell, London, Palgrave, 2007.

but it is not related to internal, domestic policy. It *can* be related: you can say that politics is a continuation of civil war, but that is mostly not the case. This whole saying does not refer to domestic politics. As far as foreign politics is concerned, it is sometimes very relevant. Now, they want to get away from this position in the European Union. They want a kind of politics within the European Union which is no longer the continuation of war by other means. But, by this, they change the unity of the decision-making processes. No longer the state, but the Union is the maker of foreign policy decisions, so that would mean the foreign politics of France or of Germany is the foreign policy of the Union as such. So, that would indicate that foreign politics is changing.

CDC: So, where do you think Foucault is heading in trying to reverse Schmitt's statement?

AH: You know, Foucault doesn't believe this saying about politics is war by other means. I don't think he really accepted this point. But these things are also historically concrete. Foucault had the politics of foreign policy in mind, not domestic policy and, where foreign policy is concerned, even the reverse might be true in certain cases. But these are big, wonderful and very illuminating sentences; they are *abstract*. It doesn't matter because they're very illuminating; you cannot apply this abstraction to each and every concrete situation.

JV: On this note, can I ask you, do you think that the Cold War is over?

AH: The Cold War was a war between the Soviet Union and the United States. That was the Cold War. It was really the preparation for a possible new war or a replacement for an *im*possible new war – however you might wish to describe it. This Cold War was over, finished, even before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was over by the first and the second agreements about nuclear warfare, controlling nuclear arsenals, between the United States and the Soviet Union. And there are certain analysts who believe that the whole Cold War was nothing but theatre, basically, performed for domestic purposes; that is, both in America and in the Soviet Union, it was basically a theatrical performance. They never believed for a moment that it was preparation for war or a continuation of war. They played this game, a mutual game of Cold War, for domestic audiences, to control their own populations by pointing to the terrible danger that comes from the other side. I don't know how relevant this interpretation is, but this Cold War is over, because there is no Soviet Union anymore. And the so-called war against terror does not replace the Cold War – absolutely *not*, it cannot replace it.

DB: But wouldn't you say that a so-called 'war on terror' still provides an opportunity for the internal theatre of a government controlling its population in the name of protecting it from terror?

AH: Yes, that was basically tried by President Bush, but it was not very successful, as you know. The population turned away from him, it did not really approve of limitations on their own civil liberties because of this threat. Of course, '9/11' was a great shock to the United States; it was the first time they were attacked on their own ground. And the loss of life was huge in relation to the population of the city: it was a loss of population, and it was a trauma. But, in this case, the trauma hasn't lasted very long. What remains is the memory, the mourning, but the trauma itself is gone. And the election of Obama has already shown that the trauma is gone. The trauma is no longer active in the population; this doesn't mean that they forgot about the '9/11', but they no longer believe there is a threat against the United States which they have to take absolutely seriously.

There *is* a threat, of course, but not the same kind of threat. At the time, people believed '9/11' was the first try, and that after this first try comes the second and the third try. And this meant it was a real trauma, because they could not know what to expect in the future. But a long time has now passed, nine years are gone already, so they know that they are fairly well-protected, that this event was only possible due to a total neglect of their internal space. It was such a stupid thing, it shouldn't have happened; it was due to the lousiness of the Secret Services in the United States. The ineffectivity of the internal secret services, a total ineffectivity was basically the major reason this thing could happen. How can you imagine that people learning to fly aircraft could say that they only want to fly, they do not need to learn how to land, without ringing a bell for anyone? So, it was absolute stupidity, and now, I think, the whole secret service has been reshuffled and people realise that there is no continuous threat. It was our own stupidity.

DB: We have to ask you about the human–animal relationship and whether you think it has changed, ontologically, ethically, in recent times and, if so, why? Why is the relationship between human and animal now such a topical concern of artists and philosophers as well as eco-activists and biopolitical theorists?

AH: Which kind of animals? I don't think you mean cockroaches, of course, or viruses! But they are animals, aren't they? Of course, they are animals but the question is basically only about vertebrates, somehow – that is, the higher type of animals. They (artists, philosophers etc.) make a very strong distinction between different kinds of animals and to which class they belong, and it is only in relation to certain classes of animals that this is a question.

GDC: But is the question really more about the category of life itself and the notion that we are part of a tradition that gives authority to our species to do what it will with the environment, the world we live in? One of the points that Esposito makes is that one of the deficiencies in Arendt's theorisation is

that she didn't really interrogate the category of life itself, thoroughly. And then he comes up with this idea: he says it is only an impolitical philosopher like Martin Heidegger who is capable of dealing with this category of life, because he refuses to define life biologically, scientifically, believing there is something lost when one takes that kind of narrow view of what constitutes life. And I notice in some of your work that you also express a scepticism towards a purely scientific analysis of biopolitics.

AH: Now, with this branch of biopolitics, we start with Marx pushing back the borders of nature: the idea that, basically, what men should do is conquer nature, so we are the conquerors and nature is the conquered. Going deeper and deeper into nature, we transform nature into something human, into society. Nature *has* to be transformed into society, and this is basically the counterpart of what we were saying about internal nature having to be transformed. We have to transform external nature and there is no limit to this. Basically, Marx said it's very important that there is no limit to the exploitation of nature because nature gives us, humans, everything free. There are only limits to time. Time is the limit, working-time is the limit, but there is no limit in the exploitation of nature. That was the principal position in the nineteenth century: the idea that nature gives everything free, it doesn't cost a penny. The whole labour theory of value is based on the conception that only humans create value, there is no value in nature whatsoever.

So, that was the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, very, very slowly, people came to realise that, because the labour theory of value collapses, this is basically not the case. And now we have to cope with the question of how *far* it is not the case, *why* it should not be the case, that obviously we cannot exploit nature infinitely; that there is a limit; that nature doesn't give anything free, that nature *costs* money, to put it mildly. And so, today, we have the idea that it is not necessary to protect everything given in nature, to protect nature in general, but only the things in nature which are important for human beings. I'm sorry, but, basically, almost every ecological concept, not all but most of ecology, is concerned with the kind of natural life that somehow belongs to the human habitat. That's why I asked the question about cockroaches. Of course, we love animals. Animals belong to our tradition, to our paintings – trees and fruits belong to our culture. Nineteenth-century painting, which wanted to believe in the conquering of nature, was basically *landscape* painting: the beauty of the landscape was simultaneously discovered with the idea of conquering the whole of nature. Now that this beauty of nature has surrendered to us, we have to preserve it; it cannot be spoiled – earth, air should not be spoiled; the green, the sky should not be darkened, so that the tradition of our life and our art can be kept alive. And *this* is the natural world we are interested in, *these* are the trees, *this* is the forest we are interested in, *these* are the rivers and the fresh air we are interested in, first and foremost.

This is empirical, and it has nothing scientific about it. The scientific comes with calculations of global warming, but what is empirical is that we want to see the green, we want to have nice animals around us, and this strictly empirical human concern was discovered when the urbanisation of our environment meant that more and more of all this was gone, that living nature became farther and farther away from our experience. Then comes nostalgia for this kind of lost experience and the insistence that it shouldn't be lost.

Now, this is what I mean: urbanisation, the desire and the nostalgia for a nature that we should not lose, creates a kind of camp. You mentioned a camp. Isn't nature itself a camp? It's surrounded by a fence and it is *here* that we have to go to see animals, *here* to see different kinds of trees, vegetables, etc. This is, I think, very important for us but entirely different is the scientific concern that we cannot conquer nature, that we cannot go on without limit, because of global warming, because of climate change, because of this and that; this has very little to do with personal experience.

These are sometimes ideologically formulated concerns. I do not know, by the way, whether there is global warming or not, because no one has persuaded me either *pro* or *con*; but I think it is a very useful concern. I don't know if it's a religion, but if it *is* a religion, it's a very useful one – because it keeps our air clear, we have less fumes, less petrol, less cars on the street. But that's another matter from the empirical concern with living things. And when you say 'animals', in relation to the human, I must protest that these are the kinds of animals that are in the paintings, the animals of our past, wolves and foxes included, of course, but certainly not insects, certainly not the kinds of animals we find disgusting.

DB: Policies like eliminating the use of DDT are partly about protecting the insect world, of course, but can we go back to what you were saying about contingency? There was a time – let's imagine a mythical history – a time when contingency belonged to Nature: it was the realm of the wild, of wilderness, of that which might, perhaps, be tamed, conquered, made rational. But with scientific breeding of animals and plants over centuries and, more recently, with regulation of carbon emissions and industrial pollution, Nature becomes that which *can* be controlled, which is not contingent. The project of arresting global warming, averting ecological catastrophe, 'saving the planet', assumes this. And, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially, there were various projects of scientific breeding for human beings – projects supposedly discredited by Nazi eugenics in the 1940s, though continued after World War II by the forced sterilisation programmes administered by the Swedish, US and Canadian governments. But, with the widespread discrediting of eugenics in the mid-twentieth century, contingency moves from the animal or 'natural' world to the human world, where the idea of what you're protecting in the essentially human is some element of contingency. To submit society to scientific breeding programmes, then, is to eliminate

that contingency and to 'dehumanise' humans. But I'm wondering whether there is a politics, now, of trying to restore contingency to natural processes.

AH: I think, basically, our empirical perception still makes an absolute difference between animals and humans. Not everywhere, but we live in a Judaeo-Christian world and, in this world, the absolute difference between animals and humans is one of the basic tenets. That's not everywhere the case, but in our culture this is the case. So, we have a totally different position here, in a Judaeo-Christian culture, from, say, the ancient Greek or the Indian. Judaeo-Christian culture makes an absolute difference between animals and humans. And this is our culture, whether you like it or not. So, we have nothing against animal breeding, we have wonderful race horses, and we would like to be breeding a wonderful elephant or whatever. We get beauty out of wonderful bodies. But human breeding is entirely different: they feel that, here, you have to leave things to contingency and, you see, that is a religious tradition; it really *is* a religious tradition. Just as it is a religious tradition that you do not put children out in the desert to die because they are not very healthy, or that the father has no right to kill his son, as he had in Roman society.

DB: So, does contingency become identified with divinity?

AH: Yes, sure, sure! Because God is the one who makes the selection, so to speak. There is blessing, there is destiny, there is something which comes from the divine and we should not interfere in the project of the divine, whether you believe in God or not. This has been a tradition for more than 2,000 years and you cannot get rid of this tradition so easily. That is basically how we are born, but now we leave less and less for the divine project, and yet certain things we *must* leave to the divine project because that *is* the absolute distinction between animal and man. That is the Genesis story of Adam and Eve and the snake. The snake should not speak. God punishes him for speaking. Only men should speak. But look at the different kinds of gods that there are in Egyptian, Indian and many other religions around the world, gods that are half-elephant, half-man, or whatever it is. This is totally alien to our tradition, it is idolatry, and this *must* have something to do with our making such a strong differentiation between animal and man.

DB: But you seem to be at the opposite pole from where you were at the beginning of this conversation, when you were talking about the elimination of contingency through genetic engineering and seeing that as a good thing, even if it's only accessible to an elite.

AH: I have nothing against a person protecting a newborn against diseases and I would, in a way, greet the interference in human life. But I don't

think interference in human character or morality or intellect is warranted, because it is too dangerous. One danger is our religious tradition – forget it! The other danger is to breed a slave population for a ruling population, to return to slavery by breeding, which is a very great social danger. Forget even about the Bible – although I cannot forget it because, according to the Bible, we are all equal – but we're all stemming from Adam and Eve and even God tried his hand at genetic engineering, in fact. You remember the story of Noah and the Flood, how everyone was destroyed except one single person who was virtuous, and the virtuous man was supposed to breed a virtuous population? But that was not the case. Even God was unsuccessful, because the second human was as bad as the first one! So, breeding doesn't help. It's a lesson!

JV: We're probably about to finish, but just to refer to one of the things you said in your introduction to *Biopolitics* in 1994, which was that when Hannah Arendt was asked what would be left for politics to discuss if not social and economic questions, she said there will be cultural questions. And what you are calling the divinity or religious tradition also sounds very much like a cultural tradition, the cultural tradition in which we live, which defines very substantially the kind of political issues we are dealing with.

AH: I think Europe has basically two master-narratives. One master-narrative is Greco-Roman historiography and philosophy, the other master-narrative is the Bible. We have these two master-narratives, but we don't really need to *know* them, because they are culturally inherited. Why is there a Senate in the United States? Because there was a Senate in Rome. These institutions are inherited. Why do we speak of ourselves as citizens? Because there were citizens in Rome, this is where the word comes from – *they* were citizens, *we* are citizens. And a Republic? It's from *Res publica*. So, the Greco-Roman tradition is here with us. And the Bible is, too; hence we have the absolute distinction between man and animal; we cannot help it, it's in our brains. That's why people are so madly protesting against euthanasia. No problem if it's euthanasia for a dog – who has a problem with that? But they have a moral problem with human euthanasia. They have no moral problem with eliminating the sex organs of a cat, but with a human female or male … that's another question. It's a scandalous thing!

Anyway, I don't make a judgment. I don't think that there's a better or worse tradition. But I think that if we make judgments about the thing, then, wittingly or unwittingly, we are somehow … I wouldn't say *defined*, but at least *influenced*, by a tradition.

CDC: You must take that into account.

AH: Yes, even if you *don't* take it into account, you still take it into account!

You may have no idea what Aristotle said, or no idea of who Cicero was, but you still take them into account.

GDC: Do we have time for one more question, maybe?

AH: It's up to you. I will answer your question. What are you asking?

GDC: Okay. Reading your earlier work, where you were talking about President Clinton's health-care plan as not being biopolitical, I was wondering if you could just elaborate on what you meant by that. And also, what do you think of the current situation in the USA, where healthcare, government welfare, for the entire population is now on the agenda and Obama is trying to push this through?

AH: Yes, I was sure that – going back to Hannah Arendt – the social question, as such, is not a biopolitical question. A social question cannot be identified with a biopolitical question because concerns of the general welfare and life-expectancy of single individuals in a given world are not just a biological thing; health is not biological only, it's also a spiritual thing and, as I said, I don't think the economy is a biopolitical question. At least, justice and economic redistribution are not biopolitical questions. In this respect, I don't accept Hannah Arendt's position.

GDC: So, the distinction Arendt makes between the private and the public is something that you reject?

AH: No, I don't reject it. As I say, there is a difference between private, public and intimate spheres, and it's a very big problem if one sphere interferes in the life of the other sphere without certain kinds of arguments or the support of the population. Now, regarding the Clinton plan, I very much supported Hillary Clinton's plan, but it was rejected by the Congress, as you well know. And about Obama's health plan, I think I would say it's a good thing, but, at the same time, Europeans and Australians have some misconception about this. The misconception is that because many – I don't know how many million – Americans had no health insurance, that meant that the state was not ready to offer great expenditure. But the truth is that the state expenditure was greater before the obligatory health plan than with it, because, of course, everyone was treated in a hospital whether they had insurance or not. If somebody had a problem, went into the hospital, was operated on, only after the operation were they asked whether they had insurance or no health insurance. With no health insurance, the state would cover the expenses, but *preventative* medicine was not for everyone. If you had no health insurance, there was no preventative medicine. Now, Medicare will be extended to the whole population. I think it's a good idea. It's a kind

of equality – equal contribution to your own health, wellbeing and cure. I think it is fair to have such a thing. It contradicts the tradition of American people who are individualistic enough to say *nothing* should be obligatory, but I think Obama's health plan will go through. How it will work, whether it will improve or deteriorate the medical situation in America, we cannot know ahead. Let's see. That's not a biopolitical issue, in my mind, because it's a human rights issue, not a biopolitical one. Political rights and so-called social rights are different kinds of rights and cannot be treated in the same way. But rights they are, anyhow.

DB: So, just to clarify and to go back to where we started: do you think this term 'biopolitics' *does* designate a very specific area or aspect of political or social life that the discourses of human rights, class or race can't deal with? Does this term 'biopolitics' name something that no other term names?

AH: Now, in those countries where there is open or hidden racism, biopolitics is normally state politics or, at least, tolerated by the state and it has a very negative political message. In other countries, with democratic institutions, biological issues can be political through legislation because, obviously, the question of whether this or that kind of human breeding is permitted or not permitted depends on legislation. So, politics enters into this scene even if it's about individuals: X or Y wants to do it, but is it permitted by legislation? And this is influenced by morality, by whether people believe, normally, that it would be a good thing to permit or not. Then there is a third sector, here, a sector we have forgotten so far, the sector of science. We spoke about technology but we haven't really spoken about science.

Now, modernity is about the freedom of science. That is, modernity starts with the freeing of science: you cannot control, cannot limit, the scope of modern science and the possibility of scientific discoveries being tried out. And that's modernity, because religions and morality, fundamentally, always put a limit on scientific discovery – we don't need to speak about Galileo – but this was obvious. Now, modern science gets an absolute freedom: when we discover something, we have the right to – at least – try out whether it works. Now, if there is interference in human nature, the kind of transformation that interferes with the accident of birth, then there is a very important moral conflict. On one hand, you have the moral tradition that insists you should not interfere in the accident of birth; on the other hand, there is the modern tradition of science: no one should interfere in the free development of science.

This is a conflict situation and conflict situations are normally not solved to the satisfaction of all parties. Basically, there is greater satisfaction for one party and lesser or zero satisfaction for another. And this is true of ecological science and politics, because sometimes ecological considerations – global warming, climate change – interfere with humans who are going to lose their

jobs. To give an example: there were two simultaneous demonstrations in Hungary. One was against a factory in which all human refuse was burned because it could not be buried, and there was a great demonstration of ecologists saying that the factory should be closed down. Equally great was the demonstration of workers of this factory who wanted to keep their jobs, especially in the face of unemployment: 'What will our families do if our jobs are gone?' So, these conflicts are not just speculative conflicts: people are behind all parties in conflict, and it's very difficult to offer a general solution. It's always *ad hoc*, and not everyone will be satisfied.

CDC: So what did happen?

AH: Nothing happened. The decision is postponed.

GDC: I was listening to talkback radio yesterday and a caller rang into the programme, which was discussing the carbon emissions trading legislation that hasn't passed Parliament in Australia, and this man said: 'Why do we need politicians to argue the case back and forth? Why can't we just go to the scientists? The scientists should tell us yes or no'. I thought the comment really dramatises this question of the relationship between science and politics, or, indeed, the biopolitical. It was a naive question, but it's as though there's a belief that the answer is simple: science is the way. If we trust in rationality, scientific method, we will know what to do – so, politics is unnecessary.

AH: That's a very interesting comment, indeed. Scientists, normally – he was not a scientist? – scientists, normally, think in data and to hell with the politicians! They want to talk about what is rational – but not everything is about rationality and rationality also cuts both ways. In fact, science is not always united on an issue. To go back to the very popular issue of climate change: scientists are divided on the question of whether climate change is caused by humans or is due to natural changes. There is no unified scientific view and, in many cases, there is a conflict between the scientists. There are hypotheses and it *does* depend on politics and the perception of citizens *which* hypotheses are regarded as the more acceptable or plausible – which of the two or three. Now, we have to act upon these hypotheses. But that's what a democracy is all about: trial and error. We tried this one; maybe that was an error. That's it.

DB: I think that *should* be it! Thank you so much, Agnes.

AH: Thank you all, very much, for your interesting questions.

David Bennett is on the editorial board of *New Formations* and is Honorary Principal Fellow in the School of Culture and Communication, University

of Melbourne. His books include *The Currency of Desire: Libidinal Economy, Psychoanalysis and Sexual Revolution*, Lawrence & Wishart, 2016.

Carolyn D'Cruz is a Senior Lecturer in Gender Sexuality and Diversity Studies at La Trobe University, Australia. She is the author of *Identity Politics in Deconstruction: Calculating with the Incalculable*, Routledge 2008.

Glenn D'Cruz is Associate Professor of Art and Performance at Deakin University, Australia. His most recent book is *Teaching Postdramatic Theatre*, Palgrave, 2018.

Julia Vassilieva is a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Media, Film and Journalism, Monash University, Australia. Her latest book is *Narrative Psychology: Identity, Transformation and Ethics*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.