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Birth Strikes, Climate Responsibility, and Hannah Arendt

Mark B. Brown

Abstract: Many people today are concerned about the implications of climate change for their personal reproductive decisions. Some have transformed such concerns into activism by engaging in a "birth strike" and publicly announcing their decision not to procreate because of climate change. This article draws on Hannah Arendt to examine the political meaning and significance of birth strikes. It makes three basic points. First, by highlighting the human condition of being born, what Arendt called natality, birth strikes have illuminated a distinctive set of threats and possibilities for climate politics. Second, due to modern consumerism and instrumentalism, which Arendt saw as the dominance of labor and work over action, birth strikes have been misperceived as advocating a reduction in personal carbon footprints and global population growth. Third, birth strikes have clarified some of the challenges for efforts to link the individual and collective dimensions of climate responsibility.

Introduction

In 2018, UK singer-songwriter Blythe Pepino founded BirthStrike for Climate, an advocacy and support group that sought to protest the lack of serious climate policy by providing a platform for people to publicly share their concerns about having children in a world disrupted by climate change. In media interviews Pepino talked about two fears that were widely shared among people she knew: the fear that climate change would make life unbearable for their children, and the fear of talking about it. Within two weeks, 140 people, mostly women, had declared their "decision not to bear children due to

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the severity of the ecological crisis." Pepino called it a "radical acknowledgment" of how climate change is "altering the way we imagine our future." She added, "We're not trying to solve it through BirthStrike. . . . We're trying to get the information out there." Indeed, Pepino described birth strikers as engaged in "a very hopeful act. We're not just making this decision [to not have children], hiding it and giving it up. We're politicising that decision—and hoping that will give us the chance to change our minds."[1]

BirthStrike received extensive media coverage and much criticism. It also raised difficult questions about the politics of climate change. What does it mean to enlist the capacity to give birth as a resource for climate activism? Why were birth strike activists widely perceived as primarily seeking to reduce the carbon emissions of individuals, despite their repeated claims to the contrary? And how should we understand the relation between public and private, and the complex gender dynamics, evoked by people publicizing their decision not to have children due to climate change?

The writings of Hannah Arendt do not offer decisive answers to such questions, but they can help us think about them more clearly. Arendt did not devote much attention to the emerging environmental movements of her time, and did not provide a theory of how human beings should relate to nonhuman nature. Indeed, Arendt is well known for her view of politics as requiring liberation from nature. Her critique of approaches to politics that address the supposedly private concerns of the *oikos*—Greek for "household," etymologically the root of both "economics" and "ecology"—may seem to make her thought inhospitable to environmental political theory. But Arendt was intensely concerned with how modern science had transformed the human relation to nature, with potentially catastrophic consequences. Indeed, several studies have used Arendt's writings as a resource for criticizing industrial productivism and consumerism, and for exploring how human beings can develop a more ecologically sustainable relation to nonhuman nature.[2] Other authors

[1]Elle Hunt, "BirthStrikers: Meet the Women Who Refuse to Have Children until Climate Change Ends," *Guardian*, March 12, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/mar/12/birthstrikers-meet-the-women-who-refuse-to-have-children-until-climate-change-ends.

[2]Kerry H. Whiteside, "Hannah Arendt and Ecological Politics," *Environmental Ethics* 16, no. 4 (1994): 339–58; Peter F. Cannavò, "Hannah Arendt: Place, World, and Earthly Nature," in *Engaging Nature: Environmentalism and the Political Theory Canon*, ed. Peter F. Cannavò and Joseph H. Lane Jr. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 253–69; Marie Wuth, " Circular Politics: Potentials, Limits and Boundaries of an Arendtian Nature-Politics," *HannahArendt.net* 11, no. 1 (2021): 73–95; Mick Smith, "Environmental Risks and Ethical Responsibilities: Arendt, Beck, and the Politics of Acting into Nature," *Environmental Ethics* 28, no. 3 (2006): 227–46; Anne Chapman, "The Ways That Nature Matters: The World and the Earth in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Environmental Values* 16 (2007): 433–45.

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have drawn on Arendt to address the specific political challenges associated with global climate change.[3]

This article draws on some of Arendt's key concepts to examine the political meaning and significance of birth strikes. It neither advocates nor condemns birth strikes, and it does not speculate on the tempting but pointless question, "What would Hannah do?" Instead, the article makes three basic points. First, by highlighting the human condition of being born, what Arendt called natality, birth strikes have illuminated a distinctive set of threats and possibilities for climate politics. Second, due to modern consumerism and instrumentalism, which Arendt saw as the dominance of labor and work over action, birth strikes have been misperceived as advocating a reduction in personal carbon footprints and global population growth. Third, birth strikes have clarified some of the challenges for efforts to link the individual and collective dimensions of climate responsibility.

The next section briefly reviews forms of social protest similar to birth strikes, as well as survey research on public attitudes about human reproduction and climate change. Subsequent sections examine birth strikes with regard to Arendt's concepts of natality and action. The article then draws on Arendt's concepts of labor and work to interpret common misunderstandings of birth strikes. The penultimate section employs her concept of "action into nature" to show how birth strikes interrupt the reproduction of fossil-fuel driven labor within industrial capitalism. The conclusion reflects on the implications of birth strikes for how we understand the relation between individual and collective responsibility for addressing climate change.

Historical Precedents and Public Attitudes

Many commentators were shocked by the public statements of Pepino and other BirthStrike activists, but birth strikes have both historical precedents and affinities to many contemporary trends. Perhaps the most direct historical precedent can be found in the women's suffrage movement of the early 1900s, when women in several countries debated the merits of using a "birth strike" to assert their demands.[4] Climate birth strikes also have affinities to the climate school strikes initiated by Greta Thunberg in August 2018, which

[3]Jill Hargis, "Hannah Arendt's Turn to the Self and Environmental Responses to Climate Change Paralysis," *Environmental Politics* 25, no. 3 (2016): 475–93; Wen Stephenson, "Learning to Live in the Dark: Reading Arendt in the Time of Climate Change," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 22, 2017, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/learning-to-live-in-the-dark-reading-arendt-in-the-time-of-climate-change.

[4]Tania Shew, "Women's Suffrage, Political Economy, and the Transatlantic Birth Strike Movement, 1911–1920," *Historical Journal* 66, no. 2 (2023): 370–91; Jill Richards, "The Art of Not Having Children: Birth Strike, Sabotage, and the Reproductive Atlantic," in *The Fury Archives: Female Citizenship, Human Rights, and the International Avant-Gardes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 105–43.

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led to the founding of the international climate action network Fridays for Future. Since 2019, millions of children around the world have skipped school to protest climate change.[5] Like school strikes, and unlike traditional labor strikes, birth strikes do not involve the withholding of paid labor. They thus lack one of the most effective means of compelling governments and corporations to change their policies.

However, considering the many social and economic functions performed by schools—inculcating dominant social norms, educating future workers, relieving parents of childcare so they can work—some commentators argue that school strikes are best understood as social reproduction strikes.[6] School strikes temporarily halt the reproduction of dominant social norms, institutions, and power relations, calling attention to how existing social patterns contribute to climate change. Birth strikes arguably have a similar potential. In this respect, they are part of a long tradition of strikes in social reproduction, including the 1970s Wages for Housework movement, the 1975 and 2023 Women's Strike in Iceland, domestic worker strikes by migrant women, and the long and controversial history of "sex strikes," ranging from Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* to the 2003 campaign to end the Liberian Civil War led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Leymah Gbowee.[7] Climate birth strikes also have affinities to hunger strikes, insofar as both involve, as Amanda Machin writes of the latter, a "provocative display of politics simultaneously *by* the body and *on* the body."[8] Similarly, both birth strikes and hunger strikes, like protest by self-immolation, are often seen as sacrificing one's body for a political cause. The call to sacrifice is a common theme in environmental politics, but as I explain in what follows, it was not the goal of leading birth strike activists. To employ John Meyer's useful distinction, birth strike activists were widely seen as either sacrificing themselves

[5]Suyin Haynes, "Students from 1,600 Cities Just Walked Out of School to Protest Climate Change. It Could Be Greta Thunberg's Biggest Strike Yet," *Time*, May 24, 2109, https://time.com/5595365/global-climate-strikes-greta-thunberg.

[6]Elias König, "Striking Fossil Capital: Towards a Theory of the Climate Strike," *Socialism and Democracy* (2023), doi:10.1080/08854300.2022.2171335.

[7]Katrina Forrester, "Feminist Demands and the Problem of Housework," *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 4 (2022): 1278–92; Sujatha Fernandes, "The Domestic Workers' Strike: Migrant Women, Social Reproduction, and Contentious Labour Organising," *Feminist Review* 129 (2021): 16–31; Miranda Bryant, "Iceland PM Joins Crowd of 100,000 for Full-Day Women's Strike," *Guardian*, October 24, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/24/iceland-prime-minister-joins-womens-strike-katrin-jakobsdottir; Jack Denton, "Sex Strikes Have a Long and Controversial History as a Tool of Women's Protest," *Pacific Standard*, May 20, 2019, https://psmag.com/social-justice/sex-strikes-have-a-long-and-controversial-history-as-a-tool-of-womens-protest.

[8]Amanda Machin, "Hunger Power: The Embodied Protest of the Political Hunger Strike," *Interface* 8, no. 1 (2016): 159, emphasis original.

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or as calling for sacrifice by others, when their intended message was that their desire to have children was being sacrificed by society's failure to prevent climate change.[9]

Birth strikes are also part of an ongoing social trend of people making links, either publicly or privately, between climate change and their personal reproductive decisions. In 2019 US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez made headlines when she told her Instagram followers, "There's scientific consensus that the lives of children are going to be very difficult. And it does lead young people to have a legitimate question: Is it OK to still have children?"[10] AOC's question echoed the concerns of many who in recent years have decided not to have children due in part to climate change. Between September 2019 and July 2020, over ten thousand people joined an online pledge by Canadian teenager Emma Lim "not to have children until I am sure my government will ensure a safe future for them."[11]

A somewhat different initiative, Conceivable Future, was founded by climate activists Meghan Kallman and Josephine Ferorelli in 2015 in the United States. Rather than announcing a birth strike, they have provided a forum for people to discuss their concerns about climate change and their reproductive decisions.[12] They have attracted a large response, as public surveys would lead one to expect. In 2018 a nationally representative survey in the United States found that 33 percent of people aged 20 to 45 said that climate change was one reason they had, or planned to have, fewer children than they would like.[13] A 2020 survey in the United States found that about 25 percent of adults without children said that climate change was either a major or minor reason that they did not have children. That number was 30 percent among Black respondents and 41 percent

[9]John M. Meyer, "A Democratic Politics of Sacrifice," in *The Environmental Politics of Sacrifice*, ed. Michael Maniates and John M. Meyer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 22–26.

[10]Matthew Taylor, "Is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Right to Ask If the Climate Means We Should Have Fewer Children?," *Guardian*, February 27, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/shortcuts/2019/feb/27/is-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-right-to-ask-if-the-climate-means-we-should-have-fewer-children.

[11]Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, "The Environmental Politics of Reproductive Choices in the Age of Climate Change," *Environmental Politics* 31, no. 1 (2022): 153.

[12]Maureen Nandini Mintra, "Having Babies amid Climate Chaos," *Earth Island Journal*, Winter 2022, https://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/magazine/entry/meghan-kallman-and-josephine-ferorelli. See also https://conceivablefuture.org.

[13]Claire Cain Miller, "Americans Are Having Fewer Babies. They Told Us Why," *New York Times*, July 5, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/05/upshot/americans-are-having-fewer-babies-they-told-us-why.html; Dani Blum, "How Climate Anxiety Is Shaping Family Planning," *New York Times*, April 15, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/parenting/climate-change-having-kids.html.

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among Hispanic respondents.[14] A 2021 study that surveyed 10,000 people aged 16–25 in ten countries around the world found that on average 39 percent of respondents said they were hesitant to have children because of climate change.[15]

Studies find that people planning to forgo reproduction because of climate change are motivated by a variety of reasons.[16] The most common reason is that they think it would be irresponsible to put a child into a world of disastrous hurricanes, droughts, floods, mass migration, and other climate impacts. Many say that not having children is a way to reduce their personal carbon footprint and, thereby, to do their part to reduce global carbon emissions. (As I discuss later, forgoing reproduction is generally not an effective approach to reducing global carbon emissions.) Some emphasize the opportunity costs of having children, saying they want to devote their time and resources to climate activism rather than raising children. And some people —my primary interest here—aim to raise public awareness and pressure public officials to address climate change by publicizing their decision not to have children. By engaging in a climate birth strike, they hope to demonstrate the urgency of the issue and their intense personal concern and commitment. A large majority of those explicitly engaged in this sort of public birth strike have been women.[17] Among those generally concerned about their reproductive decisions and climate change, in contrast, one survey found no significant difference between male and female respondents.[18]

Many people who link their reproductive decisions to climate change see climate as only one factor in their decision making. Moreover, many say they might adopt children or participate in raising children in various ways.[19] Nonetheless, many find that their decision not to have children is met with disapproval and pronatalist bias from friends, family members, and society at large.[20] And some people see climate change as a reason not

[14]Lisa Martine Jenkins, "1 in 4 Childless Adults Say Climate Change Has Factored into Their Reproductive Decisions," *Morning Consult*, September 28, 2020, https://pro.morningconsult.com/articles/adults-children-climate-change-polling.

[15]Caroline Hickman et al., "Climate Anxiety in Children and Young People and Their Beliefs about Government Responses to Climate Change: A Global Survey," *Lancet Planetary Health* 5, no. 12 (2021): 868.

[16]Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Kit Ling Leong, "Eco-Reproductive Concerns in the Age of Climate Change," *Climatic Change* 163 (2020): 1007–23; Schneider-Mayerson, "Environmental Politics."

[17]Stephanie Bailey, "BirthStrike: The People Refusing to Have Kids, Because of 'the Ecological Crisis,'" *CNN*, June 26, 2019, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/06/05/health/birthstrike-climate-change-scn-intl/index.html.

[18]Schneider-Mayerson and Leong, "Eco-reproductive Concerns," 1007.

[19]Schneider-Mayerson, "Environmental Politics," 164–66.

[20]Sabrina Helm, Joya A. Kemper, and Samantha K. White, "No Future, No Kids—No Kids, No Future? An Exploration of Motivations to Remain Childfree in Times of Climate Change," *Population and Environment* 43 (2021): 121–22.

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to forgo reproduction but the opposite. Some respondents to a recent survey said that not having children would feel like "giving up" on the future. Having children would give them a direct and embodied connection to the next generation, thus increasing their motivation to fight climate change. Others said they viewed having children as a way to raise future environmentalists. Some worried that politically conservative people today are having more children than climate-conscious people on the political left.[21] One commentator said that the young people leading recent climate protests "are a reminder that often—far from being the problem—children embody a profound hope for the future."[22]

It is also useful to distinguish between climate birth strike activists and those who choose to remain child free primarily for other reasons, ranging from personal preference to unfavorable social and economic conditions. Some commentators also distinguish between people who are voluntarily "child free" and those who are "childless" despite their desire to have a child.[23] Some studies explain the declining birth rate in advanced industrial countries in part as a result of the social pressures and disincentives generated by neoliberal capitalism (e.g., the lack of adequate childcare and family leave policies, the disrespect for care work).[24] While the term "birth strike" has been used to describe this trend, it generally has not involved purposeful political action or been directly linked to climate change.

My focus here is birth strikes as a public form of political action, but there is no sharp boundary between public and private modes of linking reproductive decisions and climate change. Indeed, as I discuss in what follows, birth strikes provide a fresh perspective on the ambiguous relation between public and private in liberal-democratic societies. The vast majority of those whose reproductive decisions are shaped by climate change do not publicize their decisions or link them to climate activism. Nonetheless, many of those who do not take a public stance still see their decision as having a political dimension. In a survey of people who said they were factoring climate change into their reproductive decisions, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson found that most did not see themselves as part of a political movement. Nor did most see themselves as engaged in political activism. Instead, Schneider-Mayerson concludes, they saw their reproductive choices as constituting a midpoint between "private" environmental lifestyle movements (gardening, recycling, green consumerism) and "public" political engagement (organizing, protesting, campaigning). "Though respondents' plans and choices were individual and private, they were frequently made or explained

[21]Schneider-Mayerson, "Environmental Politics," 160–64, 167.

[22]Taylor, "Is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Right."

[23]Amy Blackstone, *Childfree by Choice: The Movement Redefining Family and Creating a New Age of Independence* (New York: Dutton, 2019).

[24]Jenny Brown, *Birth Strike: The Hidden Fight over Women's Work* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019).

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with reference to their potential to contribute to public and collective environmental politics, in the present and in the future."[25] In the words of one, "I see my decision to not have children as a political tool."[26]

The most public and explicitly political manifestation of the birth strike idea was BirthStrike for Climate, founded by Blythe Pepino, as mentioned previously. Pepino was inspired in part by her involvement with the radical climate activist group Extinction Rebellion. As Pepino explained in numerous media interviews, she was also motivated by many conversations with people who shared her anxieties about having children under conditions of climate change. In one interview she said that, as an artist, she has "a comfort with making feelings public," and found that many others shared her feelings but thought it would break a taboo to express them in public.[27] BirthStrike spokesperson Alice Brown said, "We are hurtling towards disaster, and if I can bring awareness to the situation by sharing this personal choice that I've made, I'm willing to do it."[28]

Natality and Climate Birth Strikes

Arendt examined the human condition in terms of three basic human activities: labor (the activities associated with biological needs and reproduction), work (the instrumental construction of a world of durable artifacts), and action (the public initiation of something new through words and deeds). She saw each of these activities as "rooted in natality, in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers." Indeed, natality "may be the central category" of political thought.[29] Arendt's concept of natality has two dimensions. First, natality includes literal human birth as a part of the biological process of human reproduction. Arendt thus describes genetic engineering and efforts to "create life in the test tube" as "cutting the last tie through which even man belongs among the children

[25]Schneider-Mayerson, "Environmental Politics," 166. See also Erik Nakkerud, "Choosing to Live Environmentally Childfree: Private-Sphere Environmentalism, Environmental Activism, or Both?," *Current Psychology* (2023), https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04295-9.

[26]Schneider-Mayerson, "Environmental Politics," 165.

[27]Heather McMullen and Katharine Dow, "Ringing the Existential Alarm: Exploring BirthStrike for Climate," *Medical Anthropology* 41, no. 6–7 (2023): 664; see also Katharine Dow and Heather McMullen, "'Too Afraid to Have Kids'—How BirthStrike for Climate Lost Control of Its Political Message," *The Conversation*, September 15, 2022, https://theconversation.com/too-afraid-to-have-kids-how-birthstrike-for-climate-lost-control-of-its-political-message-181198.

[28]Hunt, "BirthStrikers."

[29]Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9. Subsequent citations to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

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of nature" (2). Arendt also notes that "the enormous improvement in our labor tools . . . has made the twofold labor of life, the effort of its sustenance and the pain of giving birth, easier and less painful than it has ever been" (121). And she mentions biological human birth with reference to the sexual division of labor in the ancient Greek household, which depended upon "the labor of man to provide nourishment and the labor of the woman in giving birth" (30). As these quotes suggest, Arendt sees human birth as part of the recurring cycles of nature. But as scholars have noted, her comments on birth are surprisingly abstract, and she says nothing about the experience of either giving birth or being born.[30] In *The Human Condition*, for example, in her opening comments on birth as a source of human plurality, Arendt's example is Adam and Eve, who are created by God rather than born. Her other prominent comment on an actual human birth is the birth of Jesus—"A child has been born unto us" (247)—which also has little to do with the biological process of human birth.[31]

Arendt says far more about the second, figurative aspect of her concept of natality, the "second birth" of human action (176). She sees action as an actualization of the potential that each person has by virtue of being born as a unique individual. With action "we insert ourselves into the human world," and "confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance" (176–77). Action is neither "forced upon us by necessity" nor "prompted by utility." And while action may be stimulated by others, "its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative" (177). Action is "the new beginning of which each man is capable by virtue of being born" (204). The human faculty of action is thus "ontologically rooted" in "the fact of natality" (247).[32] The "new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting" (9).

Arendt's concept of natality illuminates three key features of birth strikes. First, she helps us see how birth strikes call attention to the direct threat that climate change poses for natality in both literal and figurative dimensions. By making some people too scared to have children, climate change

[30]Fanny Söderbäck, "Natality or Birth? Arendt and Cavarero on the Human Condition of Being Born," *Hypatia* 33 (2018), 276–77.

[31]Adriana Cavarero, "Hannah Arendt: 'A Child Has Been Born unto Us,'" in *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, trans. Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 114, 118.

[32]One of Arendt's most explicit links between the first and second birth appears in *On Revolution*, where she says "men are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners," and "the very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth." Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1963), 211.

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transforms the meaning of human birth. Some people no longer want to give birth, and for many, the idea of birth has become associated with doubt and anxiety, rather than the joy and hope commonly (though certainly not always) associated with new human life. Moreover, from an Arendtian perspective, this change in the meaning of human birth has dire political implications. If people no longer celebrate human birth as a new beginning, birth cannot continue to function as a symbolic reminder of the unique human capacity for beginning something new. By undermining natality, climate change threatens the possibility of genuine human action as Arendt understands it.

Second, birth strikes show how climate change threatens natality indirectly, insofar as climate change undermines the stable background conditions that make natality meaningful. For Arendt, human natality means human beginning, and beginning something new is only intelligible when contrasted with things that do not change.[33] "Birth and death presuppose a world which is not in constant movement, but whose durability and relative permanence makes appearance and disappearance possible, which existed before any one individual appeared into it and will survive his eventual departure" (97). This "world" is not the natural world, but the artificial world of relatively stable artifacts, created through work, which provides a necessary material context for both natality and action (136–39). Without a stable world, people would still be born, of course, but their births would lose their distinctly human meaning and become part of the cycles of nature. "Without a world into which men are born and from which they die, there would be nothing but changeless eternal recurrence, the deathless everlastingness of the human as of all other animal species" (97). Insofar as climate change contributes to social and political instability—mass migration, crop failure, wildfires, political upheaval, etc.—it threatens the stable world and, thereby, the meaning and significance of human natality.[34]

Third, by highlighting the political meaning and implications of the human condition of being born, birth strikes help to construct a distinctive ethos of climate activism, which is quite different from the common instrumental focus on carbon reduction targets. As Alison Stone argues, calling attention to human natality—and, thereby, the vulnerable infants that all human adults once were—highlights our basic dependency on others. It emphasizes the relationality of our personality structures and sense of self, as well as the historical and geographic situatedness of our choices and opportunities. Natality also calls attention to our embeddedness in various social structures and power relations, and to the basic vulnerability and contingency of human

[33]See Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, *Arendt, Natality and Biopolitics: Toward Democratic Plurality and Reproductive Justice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 176.

[34]Wuth, "Circular Politics," makes a similar point by drawing on Arendt to argue for recognition of planetary boundaries that create "a safe space for action" (74).

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life.[35] In the words of Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, "Defining human existence and politics in terms of the appearance of new beginnings emphasises novelty, unpredictability and frailty as central features of the human condition and human affairs."[36] Insofar as climate change is the result of ignoring these features of the human condition in favor of the individualist mindset typical of neoliberal capitalism, birth strikes offer a promising response.

Some critics of birth strikes probably would interpret their relation to Arendt's thinking very differently. They might see birth strikes not as an embrace of natality but as its renunciation—literally, in the case of individuals who choose not to give birth; and symbolically, with regard to the human capacity to start something new, and thus action itself, as Arendt understood it. Indeed, the perception of many critics (especially men) that birth strikers (usually women) were rejecting natality as such might help to explain the vehemence of the critics. Many people are highly offended by the notion that anyone would reject their natural capacity to give birth. While the causes of such offense vary, it is not difficult to discern an antifeminist sentiment underlying critiques that implicitly accuse women of renouncing their traditional role as child-bearing mothers. When Fox News host Tucker Carlson interviewed Pepino in March 2019, he concluded by saying, "I think you should have children, I think they solve a lot of problems and put things in perspective, you seem like a nice person and I bet you'd love it."[37] Carlson is well-known for his support of the "Great Replacement" conspiracy theory, which alleges that political elites (specifically Jewish elites, in some versions) are attempting to "replace" white Christians in wealthy countries with nonwhite immigrants from poor countries.[38] Carlson's remark apparently combines paternalism and pronatalism with the suggestion that a "nice" (white, Western, middle class) person like Pepino is especially suited for procreation.

By "natality" Arendt did not primarily mean the capacity to give birth. Her concern was "the human condition of natality" (178), the basic fact of being born, which all human beings share. By assuming an essential link between women and natality, critics like Carlson arguably make a similar mistake as some woman-centered feminist readings of Arendt. According to Mary Dietz, such interpretations read Arendt's concept of natality as essentially feminine. "The key to this gendering lies in accepting natality as the central category of politics (as Arendt does) and then configuring it literally as women's experience in giving birth and mothering, or figuratively as a

[35]Alison Stone, *Being Born: Birth and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2–5.

[36]Diprose and Ziarek, *Arendt, Natality*, 2.

[37]McMullen and Dow, "Ringing the Existential Alarm," 669.

[38]Anti-Defamation League, "The Great Replacement: An Explainer," April 19, 2021, https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/great-replacement-explainer.

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feminist concept derived from women's 'life activity' (as Arendt does not)."[39] For Arendt, natality is not a distinctly feminine concept but a key part of the human condition. Dietz argues that Arendt implicitly codes her concept of labor (biological processes) as feminine and her concept of work (instrumental activity) as masculine. But Arendt presents both action and natality as nongendered concepts. Dietz's analysis casts a useful light on media portrayals of birth strikes as narrowly focused on the instrumental goal of reducing people's carbon footprints, as discussed later. Despite Pepino's repeated protests to the contrary, the media repeatedly portrayed birth strikes in the masculine and instrumental terms of work, rather than in terms of Arendt's nongendered, noninstrumental concepts of human action and natality.

By associating natality with the concept of beginning, Arendt was echoing pre-twentieth-century conceptions of birth, before the medicalization of the fetus in Western societies. As Silja Samerksi writes, "Historically, birth was not essentially meaningful because it would generate an independent individual, but because it was revelation and beginning."[40] With the advent of ultrasounds, prenatal diagnosis, fetal rights legislation, and other modes of treating the fetus as an independent human subject, the cultural meaning of birth has "largely been reduced to the simple transition of a human life from an intrauterine to an extrauterine state."[41] This development "not only jeporadises women's freedom and capacities, but also disquietingly impinges upon the cultural conceptions of humankind. Following Hannah Arendt, the eradication of birth as a meaningful moment of beginning threatens the human capacity to act freely and thus dims the possibility of hope."[42] It is surely no accident that the most prominent birth strike activists have been women, but like Arendt, they have generally not presented human birth as a uniquely feminine concern. Instead, they have sought to use their personal fears and anxieties about procreation as a resource for political action. By publicizing these fears and anxieties, they have implicitly linked self-revelatory political action to the concept of natality. Perhaps without intending to, they have invoked an earlier, Arendtian conception of human birth as a moment of beginning.

Action and the Relation of Public and Private

Arendt's concept of action, closely related to natality, also provides resources for interpreting the political significance of birth strikes. She distinguishes

[39]Mary G. Dietz, "Feminist Receptions of Hannah Arendt," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 28.

[40]Silja Samerksi, "Pregnancy, Personhood, and the Making of the Fetus," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 708.

[41]Samerksi, "Pregnancy, Personhood," 709.

[42]Ibid., 717.

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human action from both the routinized behavior characteristic of mass society and the cycles of biological necessity. "To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin" (177). Moreover, action always reveals the doer in the deed; it "is not the beginning of something but of somebody" (177). When engaged in action, human beings reveal not just their ideas, opinions, or instrumental goals, but also themselves. This means that action requires speech to reveal the "who" that does the action. "Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor" (178). For Arendt, genuine action is not merely about getting things done, but about revealing oneself in the presence of others who are both distinct and different from oneself. Action thus depends on human plurality. Arendt also emphasizes that the outcomes of human action are inherently unpredictable (190–91, 232–33). "Although nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word, he must be willing to risk the disclosure" (180). The outcomes of genuine action—both what it changes in the world and what it reveals about the person who acts—cannot be known in advance. Arendt's concept of action is thus closely intertwined with her view of politics and democracy as inherently open-ended, pluralistic, and participatory.

In some respects, Pepino and other birth strike activists were engaged in the kind of self-expressive, self-revelatory, risky human action that Arendt championed. Their political action consisted not primarily of pursuing instrumental goals or advocating specific programs or policies. Their main activity was to make public their personal concerns about having children in a world disrupted by climate change. Birth strike activists could not know how their message would be received. They took the risk of being misunderstood—not just in terms what they wanted, but with regard to who they were as unique individuals. By publicly saying they would not have children unless governments made serious efforts to stop climate change, Pepino and others took original and self-revelatory action, accompanied by speech, with no guarantee where it would lead or how others would see them as individuals.

Arendt's concept of action also illuminates the ambiguous relation between public and private apparent in birth strikes, in part because her work contains similar ambiguities. As Claire Arnold-Baker writes, "Birth strikes by their very nature concern the essence of life: natality, maternity, and mortality."[43] In contrast, Arendt has been criticized for her apparent insistence that genuine political action requires liberation from maternity, mortality, and other biological processes. She often seems to say that true politics is not about what we share with other life forms, but about what makes each human being distinct (28–31, 72–73). For example, she deplores the rise of

[43]Claire Arnold-Baker, "Birth Strike: Holding the Tension Between Existence and Non-existence," in *Eco-anxiety and Planetary Hope: Experiencing the Twin Disasters of COVID-19 and Climate Change*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch and Sam Mickey (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2022), 63.

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"the economy" as a central issue of politics. She associates the modern politicization of economic and personal concerns with "the social," and portrays it as a threat to politics (38–49). Commentators have rightly argued that Arendt's distinction between public and private was not as rigid as it often appeared.[44] Nonetheless, one might draw on these aspects of her thinking to criticize birth strikes for politicizing human reproduction, thereby opening the liberal private sphere to patriarchal regulation. From this (traditional liberal) perspective, the attempt to use human procreation as a "political tool" amounts to playing with fire. Birth strikers arguably forget that making private reproductive decisions into matters of political concern—as with government restrictions on abortion and contraception—tends to harm women more than men.

One commonly noted problem with this view is that the liberal split between public and private has often served to mask private relations of domination. Feminists have long argued that human reproduction should be conceived politically, as a matter of public health, rather than in terms of private rights.[45] In this respect, birth strikes challenge the notion that genuine politics should not address the material and biological concerns of private life. According to Heather McMullen and Katharine Dow, Pepino and colleagues "were using a very local (one's own body) and individual choice to advocate for change at a much larger societal scale."[46] Birth strikers' use of personal testimony to promote political change is a familiar feature of contemporary social movements, associated especially with identity politics and the feminist slogan "the personal is political."[47] The goal has been to challenge the widely assumed dichotomy between public and private, revealing the political dimensions of domestic labor, reproduction, child care, and other practices often deemed private and thus nonpolitical. Critics have often seized on this feature of identity politics, portraying the reliance on personal experience as a source of dogmatic sectarianism. In the case of Pepino's group BirthStrike, both critics and ostensible supporters used the activists' personal testimony to distort their message.

Labor and Carbon Footprints

Arendt's concepts of labor and work can help us to clarify what was at stake in the most common misperceptions of birth strikes: their frequent association

[44]See Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Public and Private," *Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (1981): 332; Patchen Markell, "Arendt's Work: On the Architecture of *The Human Condition*," *College Literature* 38, no. 1 (2011): 15–44.

[45]Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Abortion: On Public and Private," in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 184–94.

[46]McMullen and Dow, "Ringing the Existential Alarm," 668.

[47]Renee Heberle, "The Personal Is Political," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, 593–609.

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with efforts to reduce individual carbon footprints and/or to reduce global population growth. Some people see not having children as contributing to both goals, and in some ways they are two sides of the same coin. But they have different histories and somewhat different rationales. I discuss carbon footprints in this section and population growth in the next.

For Arendt, the rise of consumer society amounts to a decline in the public importance of both work and action in favor of labor. Labor is about biological needs and, for the wealthy, superfluous appetites. In modern society, "the *animal laborans* was permitted to occupy the public realm," and as long as that condition persists, "there can be no true public realm, but only private activities displayed in the open" (134). One key aspect of this development is that "our whole economy has become a waste economy," where consumer products are relentlessly "devoured and discarded" rather than "used" over time as part of a stable public world (134).

If Arendt is right, it should be no surprise that birth strikes were often seen—by many critics and also some supporters—as part of a larger tendency to view climate change as a problem of individual behavior and individual conscience.[48] As BirthStrike activist Jessica Gaitán Johannesson asked, "What does it say about the cause and effect of climate collapse that the carbon footprint of a child is hauled in instantly wherever climate and birth are brought up?"[49] It says that climate change is being framed as a problem of individual private decisions. In 1998, climate activist Bill McKibben published *Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families*, which made a case for having fewer children, while rejecting coercive population reduction policies.[50] More recently, a widely publicized (and widely criticized) study published in 2017 claimed that forgoing childbirth would have a much larger impact on a person's carbon footprint than driving and flying less, eating less meat, and other forms of green consumerism.[51] And in the popular 2021 book *The Climate Diet*, environmental writer Paul Greenberg asserted that it is a "painful truth" that "the single most powerful way Americans can reduce their carbon footprints is by creating fewer Americans."[52]

[48]Hargis, "Hannah Arendt's Turn," 484.

[49]Jessica Gaitán Johannesson, "Birth Strike: A Story in Arguments," in *The Nerves and Their Endings: Essays on Crisis and Response* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2022), 123.

[50]Bill McKibben, *Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998). McKibben focused on refuting prejudices against single-child families and reviewing research on the environmental impact of population growth.

[51]Damian Carrington, "Want to Fight Climate Change? Have Fewer Children," *Guardian*, July 12, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/12/want-to-fight-climate-change-have-fewer-children. See also Sigal Samuel, "Having Fewer Kids Will Not Save the Climate," *Vox*, February 13, 2020, https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/2/13/21132013/climate-change-children-kids-anti-natalism.

[52]Paul Greenberg, *The Climate Diet: 50 Simple Ways to Trim Your Carbon Footprint* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021), 29.

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When framed as a way to reduce one's carbon footprint, birth strikes easily appear as little more than virtue signaling. The most significant impact is not on the global climate, but on the birth striker's self-image and public reputation as an environmentally responsible person. Birth strikes thus potentially deflect attention from the systemic dimensions of climate change. They risk reinforcing the widespread tendency to blame individuals for social problems, thereby letting corporations and governments off the hook. From a consumer perspective, Johannesson notes, "survival comes purely from the choices we make in the shopping aisles, and our wombs appear to also have ended up in the shopping aisles."[53] Meehan Crist reflects these concerns when she writes that choosing to forgo procreation seemed more like succumbing to neoliberal climate rhetoric than an effective way to fight climate change. "Before I got pregnant, my partner and I tried to parse the ethics of having a child at such a time. . . . In the end, not having a child didn't seem, for us, like a powerful or particularly meaningful response to the realities of a changing climate, but a way of allowing the toxic logic of the carbon footprint to shape our sense of what was possible."[54] Crist's assessment is reinforced by research on the history of the "carbon footprint," which was popularized in the early 2000s by the oil company British Petroleum. BP's "carbon footprint calculator" was part of an industry-wide strategy to deflect blame for climate change from fossil fuel companies onto private consumers.[55]

Work and Population Growth

Arendt's concept of work casts an instructive light on another common misperception of birth strikes, which portrayed them as focused on population control. Population control policies have a long and dark history, and were a key element of totalitarian regimes. For Arendt, totalitarianism was the high point of the modern domination of the political realm by instrumental thinking and, more broadly, by the concept of work. Alongside labor and action, work is a key component of the human condition. Through work we create a stable world of things that provides a necessary context for human action (22). But if politics comes to be seen entirely as a matter of work, then citizens become raw material for the abstract plans of

[53]Johannesson, "Birth Strike," 129–30.

[54]Meehan Crist, "Is It OK to Have a Child?," *London Review of Books*, March 5, 2020, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n05/meehan-crist/is-it-ok-to-have-a-child.

[55]Mark Kaufman, "The Carbon Footprint Sham," *Mashable*, n.d., accessed November 26, 2023, https://mashable.com/feature/carbon-footprint-pr-campaign-sham; Kate Yoder, "Footprint Fantasy," *Grist*, August 26, 2020, https://grist.org/energy/footprint-fantasy; Matt Huber, "Ecological Politics for the Working Class," *Jacobin*, October 12, 2019, https://jacobin.com/2019/10/ecological-politics-working-class-climate-change.

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philosophers and politicians. Arendt traced the origins of instrumental thinking in politics to Plato's philosopher-king who, like later technocratic reformers, "'makes' his City as the sculptor makes a statue" (227). Arendt associates modern life with the rise of *homo faber*: the aspiration to "replace acting with making" and thus assert instrumental control over the world (220). Such efforts always fail eventually, she argues. Utopian communities and other attempts "to design a blueprint for the making of political bodies . . . broke down quickly under the weight of reality, not so much the reality of exterior circumstances as of real human relationships they could not control" (227). And on their way to inevitable failure, such efforts to remake the world according to preconceived blueprints create enormous destruction.

Many ostensible supporters of BirthStrike assumed the group was seeking to manage and control human population growth, thereby placing birth strikes in the tradition of *homo faber*. Some critics shared this view but took it further, accusing BirthStrike of evoking the legacy of eugenics. Even though the group clearly had no intention of using state power to regulate reproduction, even voluntary, "bottom-up" attempts to control reproduction for political reasons are understandably suspect. Partly in response to such views, Pepino and associates invested enormous effort to distance themselves from advocates of population reduction. As Johannesson wrote, "In Birth Strike's declaration, we explained that we didn't see population as a core driver of climate change. We made clear that we, in fact, weren't telling people whether they should or shouldn't have children—only that there's a threat so ghastly, and so ignored by those in power, that we're too scared to have any ourselves."[56] In an interview Pepino noted that even with "drastic, draconian, eugenic policies of population reduction—which are completely immoral . . . we wouldn't save ourselves. We have to change the way we live."[57] As noted previously, Pepino and fellow activists hoped that publicizing their fears and anxieties about having children in a world disrupted by climate change would shock people into taking the issue more seriously. They aimed to provoke people into increasing political pressure on governments and corporations to take effective action. Crucially, Pepino repeatedly emphasized that her goal was not to tell other people not to have children. BirthStrike sought to use intensely personal decisions about reproduction to invigorate political struggles over climate policy. As Arnold-Baker noted, "the aim of the movement is to enact change in the systems that have created the destruction of the natural world, through activism and discourse, rather than attempting to reduce the size of the population."[58]

BirthStrike activists had good reason to avoid presenting birth strikes as a way to reduce population growth. There is a long history of

[56]Johannesson, "Birth Strike," 125.
[57]Hunt, "BirthStrikers."
[58]Arnold-Baker, "Birth Strike," 59.

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environmentalists pointing to global population growth as a key driver of ecological destruction. But the primary cause of climate change is not global population growth. It is carbon emissions in wealthy countries. Over the past few decades, the highest levels of population growth have been in poor countries, which contribute the least to climate change.[59] Additionally, the actual climate impact of an individual's decision not to have children is highly uncertain, because it depends on long-term developments in public policy and technology. To the extent that the global economy turns to renewable energy and takes other steps to decarbonize, the climate impact of each new human life decreases.[60] More generally, the very idea of "global population growth" as a key factor in climate change tends to depoliticize and decontextualize the issue. It obscures the historical responsibility of wealthy countries for climate change, and makes it seem irrelevant whether carbon emissions are reduced by lowering birth rates or by bringing about fundamental changes in social relations of production, consumption, and distribution. Susanne Schultz thus calls the recent Neo-Malthusian focus on population in the politics of climate change "a statistical apology for the status quo."[61] It also evokes a racist history of eugenics and coercive population control, and neglects the fact that many women lack effective access to family planning.[62]

As Arendt might have predicted, given her view that modern culture is dominated by the instrumental mindset of *homo faber*, BirthStrike activists faced constant pressure to define themselves as fighting population growth. In March 2019, a headline on a prominent environmental news website announced: "'BirthStrike' Movement Encourages People to Stop Having

[59]"Since the start of the millennium, U.N. reports show, global resource use has been primarily driven by increases in affluence, not the population. This is especially true in high- to upper-middle-income nations, which account for 78 percent of material consumption, despite having slower population growth rates than the rest of the world. Meanwhile in low-income countries, whose share of the global population has almost doubled, demand for resources has stayed constant at just about 3 percent of the global total" (Sarah Kaplan, "It's Wrong to Blame 'Overpopulation' for Climate Change," *Washington Post*, May 25, 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-solutions/2021/05/25/slowing-population-growth-environment). See also Corey J. Bradshaw and Barry W. Brook, "Human Population Reduction Is Not a Quick Fix for Environmental Problems," *PNAS* 111, no. 46 (2014): 16610–15.

[60]Samuel, "Having Fewer Kids Will Not Save the Climate."

[61]Susanne Schultz, "The Neo-Malthusian Reflex in Climate Politics: Technocratic, Right Wing and Feminist References," *Australian Feminist Studies* 36, no. 110 (2021): 492.

[62]George Monbiot, "Population Panic Lets Rich People off the Hook for the Climate Crisis They Are Fueling," *Guardian*, August 26, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/26/panic-overpopulation-climate-crisis-consumption-environment.

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Children in the Face of Climate Change."[63] Johannesson noted that despite constant efforts to clarify their message, "the population argument was there, waiting for us in every conversation; every pitched article and journalist request carried with it a whiff of 'there's too many of us.' It was the headline we were allocated by default, after we'd explained to the journalist why that headline shouldn't be used."[64] Pepino said that interviewers often focused on population growth, despite her efforts to distance herself from the issue, and on television talk shows she was paired with advocates of population-reduction policies. McMullen and Dow conclude that many understood BirthStrike's primary demand "to be that people consider having fewer children to save the planet, rather than pointing out the existential threats of climate change in order to pressure governments and corporations to act to prevent climate change from getting worse."[65] Many of those who sought to join BirthStrike said their motivation was to reduce their carbon footprint. As Pepino said in an interview, "There were a lot of people who signed up to BirthStrike, and I welcome them in, who are more on the kind of 'I don't want to contribute to this nightmare' and I think that's a really understandable emotional reaction. But it's been a real fine balance between inviting those people in and preventing them from trying to use BirthStrike to coerce other people to have the same feelings."[66] Numerous activist groups that focus on reducing population growth contacted BirthStrike to seek collaboration.[67] Despite Pepino's repeated efforts to explain otherwise, many people persisted in assuming that BirthStrike's main goals were to reduce both human population growth and the carbon footprints of individuals.

This perceived focus on population growth led some critics to say that by trying to shock people with their decision not to have children, BirthStrike activists assumed an effective right to reproductive freedom that many poor people and people of color do not enjoy. Pepino and other birth strike activists—mostly middle-class white people in wealthy countries—were accused of being unaware of their various forms of social privilege. Similarly, critics pointed out that the reproductive fears and anxieties highlighted by BirthStrike activists have long been familiar to members of socially disadvantaged groups.[68] Such criticisms were not surprising to Pepino. Indeed, her belief that it was her responsibility to use her social privilege to address the climate crisis was part of what motivated her in the first place. In an interview she said that "if people like me who have the time and the

[63]Madison Dapcevich, "'BirthStrike' Movement Encourages People to Stop Having Children in the Face of Climate Change," *EcoWatch*, March 27, 2019, https://www.ecowatch.com/birthstrike-movement-climate-change-2632936043.html.

[64]Johannesson, "Birth Strike," 125.

[65]McMullen and Dow, "Ringing the Existential Alarm," 665.

[66]Ibid., 664.

[67]Ibid., 665.

[68]Ibid., 666.

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money and the privilege, basically, to be agitating aren't doing that, then what chance do we have?"[69] Indeed, one might argue that birth strikes challenge the biopolitical paradigm in which privileged white women are subject to pronatalist pressures to reproduce, while poor women and women of color are discouraged or forcibly prevented from having children.[70] But critics did not see it that way.

Action into Nature

A somewhat different perspective on birth strikes appears in Arendt's discussion of how scientists no longer merely study nature but transform it in unpredictable ways. She thought the modern world had destroyed most possibilities for genuine action. But "the capacity for action, at least in the sense of the releasing of processes, is still with us, although it has become the exclusive prerogative of the scientists, who have enlarged the realm of human affairs to the point of extinguishing the time-honored protective dividing line between nature and the human world" (323–24). Seventeenth-century experimental scientists shifted from studying raw nature in the wild to exploring phenomena that scientists created in the laboratory. By the twentieth century, scientists had begun to "act into nature" (238). They initiated new processes within nature, producing entities and phenomena that would not exist without human action (148, 230–31, 238). All of this started "harmlessly enough," but "has finally ended with a veritable art of 'making' nature, that is, of creating 'natural' processes which without men would never exist and which earthly nature by herself seems incapable of accomplishing" (231). As examples Arendt mentions radioactive fallout from atomic bomb tests, the creation of new elements, and genetic engineering, among other developments (2, 262).

Action into nature, for Arendt, has enormous destructive potential. We have always been able to destroy what we made, but we "have become capable today of the potential destruction of what man did not make—the earth and earthly nature" (232). By "acting into nature," we have "carried irreversibility and human unpredictability into the natural realm, where no remedy can be found to undo what has been done" (238). Arendt worried that by importing action into nature, scientists are initiating unpredictable and uncontrollable processes that may destroy not only the human-built world but the earth itself.

Birth strikers call attention to such risks in a way that both echoes and goes beyond Arendt's focus on nuclear weapons and genetic engineering. Within her conceptual framework, as noted previously, human reproduction is part of the same biological cycles as the various forms of human labor (on

[69]Ibid., 663.
[70]See Diprose and Ziarek, *Arendt, Natality*, 183.

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farms, in factories, etc.) through which humans fulfill their material needs. By publicly interrupting processes of human reproduction, birth strikes call attention to human labor as a cause of anthropogenic climate change. Writing long before climate change became a public issue, Arendt said the "continuous process" of human labor would "reliably and limitlessly provide the species man-kind with the necessities of life" (152). For her, human labor, unlike action, could not, by definition, initiate new natural processes. But as Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen argues, decades of research in climate science has shown that carbon-based industrialization led to a fundamental transformation in human labor. In industrial economies driven by fossil fuels, labor became a key source of climate change, and thereby, of new and unpredictable processes within the natural world.[71] In this respect, long before the scientific experiments that worried Arendt, labor had already taken on certain qualities of human action. As Hyvönen notes, labor lacks the purposefulness and self-expression of distinctly political action. But in modern industrial economies, labor is intertwined with the extraction of fossil fuels. And we now know, as Arendt did not, that burning fossil fuels releases carbon into the atmosphere, which (like Arendtian action) has unpredictable and probably irreversible consequences. "Action into nature" began not with splitting the atom, but with the employment of human labor in the much earlier rise of carbon-fueled industrialization.[72] By interrupting the reproduction of human labor, climate birth strikes implicitly call attention to these historical and conceptual links between human labor and the extractive fossil fuel economies that are driving climate change.

Conclusion: The Politics of Responsibility

BirthStrike for Climate disbanded in August 2020 with a statement posted on the group's website (no longer available) that it would become a support group for people wrestling with reproductive decisions. The statement noted that the Black Lives Matter movement had increased public awareness of the links between social justice and the climate crisis. Consequently, it would be "dangerous" for BirthStrike to continue, apparently owing to its unwanted association with the racist legacy of population control. "Witnessing the loss of control of our narrative has been very distressing and humbling. We have to concede that we underestimated the power of 'overpopulation' as a growing form of climate breakdown denial—even in some of our most revered scientists and fellow climate activists."[73]

[71]Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen, "Labor as Action: The Human Condition in the Anthropocene," *Research in Phenomenology* 50, no. 2 (2020): 240–60.

[72]Hyvönen, "Labor as Action," 250.

[73]McMullen and Dow, "Ringing the Existential Alarm," 667.

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The experience of Pepino and BirthStrike for Climate offers a telling example of the cultural forces that lead many people to frame both human reproduction and climate change in narrow terms of individual guilt, responsibility, and sacrifice—in stark contrast to the activists' stated goals. As Meghan Kallman of Conceivable Future makes the point, "The narrative that we are trying to push back on is that having one fewer kid for climate reasons is political activism. Political activism concerns itself with changing the systems that govern all of our lives."[74] Corporations, governments, and many media outlets have strong incentives to portray climate change as something best addressed not by changing social and political systems, but solely through the private choices of individuals. Similar cultural forces can be seen in the politics of human reproduction, with the fetus now seen by many as an independent human subject with rights of its own, "pressuring women to turn themselves into managers of fetal development."[75] A woman who fails to conform to the dictates of highly medicalized guidelines for pregnancy and childbirth (nutrition, prenatal testing, etc.) is widely seen as "irresponsible." Similarly, birth strike activists have been blamed for not fulfilling an imagined individual responsibility to procreate.

Arendt had a very different notion of responsibility as a distinctly political concept. Echoing her mentor Karl Jaspers, she distinguished between individual guilt and political responsibility. Individual guilt, both moral and legal, applies only to wrongful actions that a person has done themselves. Indeed, Arendt wrote, "Morally speaking, it is hardly less wrong to feel guilty without having done something specific than it is to feel free of all guilt if one is actually guilty of something."[76] For Arendt, asserting that one is or feels guilty for wrongs committed by others is a sentimental gesture that has the effect of exculpating the wrongdoers.[77] One bears political responsibility, in contrast, for wrongdoing by those with whom one is associated by membership in a political community.[78] Arendt's concept of political responsibility cannot be fully explored here, but two points are worth emphasizing.

First, Arendt sometimes suggests that political responsibility rests solely on passive membership in a national political community, but as Iris Marion Young argued, a careful reading shows that Arendt associates political responsibility with some kind of support for, or involvement in, the deeds of one's community.[79] Arendt repeatedly suggests, for example, that the

[74]Mintra, "Having Babies amid Climate Chaos."

[75]Samerksi, "Pregnancy, Personhood," 704.

[76]Hannah, Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 298. See also Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 28.

[77]Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 147–48; Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 251.

[78]Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 149.

[79]Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 86–87.

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German people's political responsibility for the Nazi regime rests not merely on German citizenship but on the widespread popular support, self-deception, and indifference that enabled the regime. Birth strike activists did not link political responsibility to a particular national community, but they suggested a view similar to Arendt's when they invoked their (largely unchosen) participation in fossil fuel economies as a reason for their sense of political responsibility.

Second, Arendt says governments have political responsibility for the deeds and misdeeds of their predecessors, but she also makes clear that individuals have political responsibilities that we fulfill by acting together in public.[80] Arendt calls this individual dimension of political responsibility "responsibility for the world," and she notes that it "always presupposes at least a minimum of political power."[81] Birth strike activists echoed her views on this point when they sought to take responsibility themselves, rather than waiting for governments, while doing so publicly and collectively. Moreover, they explicitly linked their sense of political responsibility to their relatively high degree of social and political power.

Climate change has rightly been called a structural injustice, the causes of which cannot be traced back to the blameworthy actions of specific individuals.[82] But focusing solely on obscure social structures risks discouraging political action and absolving individuals of all responsibility.[83] (People may be tempted to say, "There's nothing I can do, because it's the structure that has to change.") Both Arendt and the birth strike activists mitigate this risk with a view of political responsibility that calls on individuals to work to change social structures through forms of collective action. Moreover, this conception of political responsibility does not say that private actions to reduce carbon footprints are entirely unnecessary, only that they are insufficient. It also does not say that individual guilt is irrelevant to climate politics. Nobody is personally to blame for the industrial world's long history of greenhouse gas emissions. But many powerful individuals are guilty of actively undermining effective climate policy, and everyone who benefits from fossil fuels can ask themselves if they are guilty of not trying to meet the demands of political responsibility, especially when they have the power and resources to do so.[84]

[80]Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 298; Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, 89.

[81]Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 45. On this point see Valentin Beck, "Two Forms of Responsibility: Reassessing Young on Structural Injustice," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 26, no. 6 (2023): 918–41.

[82]Robyn Eckersley, "Responsibility for Climate Change as a Structural Injustice," in *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory*, ed. Teena Gabrielson, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer, and David Schlosberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 346–61.

[83]Michael Christopher Sardo, "Responsibility for Climate Justice: Political not Moral," *European Journal of Political Theory* 22, no. 1 (2023): 235.

[84]Beck, "Two Forms of Responsibility."

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The widespread misinterpretation of the birth strikers' message indicates that not everyone shares their view of political responsibility. As Michael Goodhart argues, political responsibility is highly contested terrain, and some climate activists have not only been taking responsibility but making or remaking it, trying to change what it means in particular contexts.[85] Birth strikers have been doing so by publicly linking their most intimate personal decisions to the most far-reaching political and economic institutions. Viewing their efforts through an Arendtian lens highlights and clarifies the ambiguities of using procreation as a political tool. On one hand, birth strikers have generated increased attention for many people's intense (and quite reasonable) fears and anxieties about climate change and the urgent need for more effective political action. And by linking climate change to the human condition of natality, birth strikes have highlighted our basic human dependency, relationality, and vulnerability. On the other hand, birth strikers have found it difficult to avoid becoming publicly associated with misguided efforts to prevent climate change by reducing human population growth or by focusing solely on individual carbon footprints. The public association of birth strikes with both goals follows directly from the framing often imposed on them by powerful media outlets. It seems unlikely that birth strikes will be able to resist this individualist framing, which raises serious doubts about their efficacy as a form of climate activism.

Nonetheless, one might find both consolation and inspiration in Arendt's belief that the human condition, and especially the condition of natality, remains a source of innovation and surprise. For her, human action "almost never achieves its purpose" (184), and the human desire for mastery "is forever defeated by the actual course of events, where nothing happens more frequently than the totally unexpected" (300). Given the many dilemmas they raise, birth strikes are unlikely to produce their intended effects. But Arendt would perhaps remind us that there is a small but distinct possibility that things will turn out better than we have reason to expect.

[85]Michael Goodhart, "Climate Change and the Politics of Responsibility," *Perspectives on Politics* 21, no. 2 (2023): 550–68.

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