

13. For a presentation of that experimental condition with its findings, see François Rochat and Thomas Blas, "Milgram's Unpublished Obedience Variation and its Historical Relevance," *Journal of Social Issues* 70, no. 3 (2014): 456–72.
14. The following quotations are taken from audio recordings and data files of Milgram's subjects that are deposited in the Milgram Papers at the Yale University Library Archives. This is subject no. 2422, experimental session run on 16 May 1962; the fellow subject in the experiment is the subject's brother-in-law.
15. The following quotations are taken from audio recordings and data files of Milgram's subjects that are deposited in the Milgram Papers at the Yale University Library Archives. This is subject no. 2428, experimental session run on 19 May 1962; the fellow subject in the experiment is the subject's nephew.
16. The following quotations are taken from audio recordings and data files of Milgram's subjects that are deposited in the Milgram Papers at the Yale University Library Archives. This is subject no. 2440, experimental session run on 23 May 1962; the fellow subject in the experiment is the subject's friend.
17. See Pierre Sauvage, *Weapons of the Spirit: Transcript of the Feature Documentary* (Los Angeles: Friends of Le Chamon Foundation, 2007), 11.
18. Jacques Semelin, *Persécution et entraide dans la France occupée* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil / Éditions des Arènes, 2013).

## A Party in the Desert or a Polis on the Playa?

Ron H. Feldman

A key area of interest to Hannah Arendt was the concept of freedom, and how it does or does not emerge in the context of human community. In particular, she saw the emergence of freedom as rare because the necessary context “does not always exist, and although all men are capable of deed and word, most of them . . . do not live in it.”<sup>1</sup>

As a participant in Burning Man annually since 2010, it seems to me that the organizers have happened upon a formula that generates a community conducive to the emergence of the kind of freedom celebrated by Arendt. In this essay, my aim is to use Arendt's political theory as a way of understanding the qualities of the public realm intentionally created at Burning Man, while also exploring how the structure and rules of the event make it a kind of lab where Arendtian freedom can emerge. I conclude that this temporary community—with its emphasis on participation, performances, art, and limitations on commerce—is as much a polis on the playa as it is a party in the desert.

The “playa” is a dusty, white, hot, flat, alkali seabed devoid of visible life that is part of the Black Rock Desert located north of Reno, Nevada. This is the site of Black Rock City (BRC), where over seventy thousand attendees (known colloquially as “Burners”) gather for a week in late August. Along with the campsites full of tents, RVs, and structures of every sort, BRC is filled with performances, music, and hundreds of works of art—primarily large interactive structures or mobile art cars (known as “mutant vehicles”). On the Saturday night toward the end of the week a large wooden effigy is burned (the eponymous “Burning Man”), a bit of performance art to which the organizers have eschewed attaching any meaning. According to the Burning Man Organization, the event is “an experimental community, which challenges its members to express themselves and rely on themselves to a degree that is not normally encountered in one's day-to-day life.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite the stereotype of Burning Man as “a party with sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll in the desert,”<sup>3</sup> it is quite different from the typical festival where participants are provided entertainment by the producers. “Participants join in the effort to co-create Black Rock City, a temporary metropolis dedicated to art and community; Burning Man isn't your usual festival. It's a city wherein almost everything that happens is created entirely by its citizens, who are active participants in the experience.”<sup>4</sup>

## Freedoms, Private and Public

Arendt celebrated the public activity of citizens. While her theoretical perspective is present throughout her books and essays, it is in *The Human Condition* (1958) that she develops a theory of politics and freedom derived from her understanding of the ancient Greek *polis* (city-state) that posits an ascending hierarchy of “three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action.”<sup>5</sup>

*Labor* is the realm of biology and economics whose purpose is to provide for the sustenance and reproduction that maintains life, and is the activity shared with other life-forms. Labor is characterized by necessity, and in Greek antiquity was relegated to the private realm of the home that included the activities of women, servants, and slaves.

*Work* is the activity that “provides an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings,”<sup>6</sup> whose exemplary products are tools, buildings, and lasting works of art. This also includes laws, because “the laws, like the wall around the city, were not results of action but products of making.”<sup>7</sup>

The walls and laws provided the context for the people, who constituted the *polis*, to experience *Action*: “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world.”<sup>8</sup> The purpose of the Greek *polis*, Arendt writes, was “to multiply the occasions to win ‘immortal fame,’ that is, to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness. . . . Its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence of everyday life.”<sup>9</sup>

This is a realm of *freedom* beyond the necessity, inequality, and violence (to humans and nature) of economics<sup>10</sup> that manifests in the public realm outside of the home or the workplace. The main preoccupations of what passes for politics today—especially the concern with economic well-being, whether from the right or the left—is for Arendt an unpolitical intrusion of the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom. “To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another *and* not to be command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled.”<sup>11</sup>

## Arendt’s “Fundamental Human Activities” and the “Ten Principles” of Burning Man

A surprisingly Arendtian realm of freedom is created and experienced at Burning Man. One way to see how this works is to think through how Arendt’s “fundamental human activities” intersect with Burning Man’s “Ten Principles,” which were formulated “as a reflection of the community’s ethos and culture as it had organically developed.”<sup>12</sup> In what follows I will suggest

	Arendt’s “Human Activities”		
	Labor	Work	Action
<b>Burning Man’s Ten Principles</b>			
Radical Inclusion		X	
Gifting			X
Decommodification	X		
Radical Self-Reliance	X		
Radical Self-Expression			X
Communal Effort		X	
Civic Responsibility		X	
Leaving No Trace	X		
Participation			X
Immediacy			X

how these “commonly-held values”<sup>13</sup> combine to devalue the activities of Labor and Work while promoting Action, thereby inverting the priorities and experience of “the default world” outside of BRC. In the table above I suggest which principles address an aspect of Arendt’s “human activities.”

## Labor

At Burning Man the realm of “Labor” is virtually absent. The economic processes of production and reproduction that allow for ongoing life, and make it possible for people and “all the things”<sup>14</sup> they need to get to the playa, are preconditions for BRC to exist. Yet, like the household in Arendt’s *polis*, they are mostly hidden from view—in this case by time and place shifting: *everything* is created elsewhere prior to being transported and erected on the playa. Money, commerce, and markets of every kind (including bartering) are prohibited on site, replaced by alternate economic principles that conspire to devalue Labor:

**Decommodification** aims “to create social environments that are undiated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience.”<sup>15</sup> Sponsorships and branding are prohibited, and participants are encouraged to modify or deface commercial logos on their vehicles.

**Radical Self-Reliance** is the result when commerce is prohibited: each person is responsible for bringing *everything* needed to physically survive

for a week—only porta-potties are provided, financed by the entry fee. This encourages most people to band together and self-organize into “camps” of every size, cooperatively providing for their own necessities and often creating a public offering of food, drink, service, art, or performance.

Even though there is no economic production, there is certainly the potential for waste. The principle of **Leaving No Trace** aims to consciously control BRC’s impact on the nonhuman environment. *Trash* is reformulated as Material Out of Place (MOOP), implying that there is no such thing as an externality: while there may be waste, there should be no refuse left behind.

## Work

The idea that each year Burners re-create “Black Rock City” frames the endeavor as something akin to establishing a polis. BRC is especially notable as an exemplar of Arendt’s activity of “Work” because it is such an unmistakably artificial imposition on the flat white palate of the playa, including a gate and a boundary fence. In Arendt’s theory, the “element of violation and violence is present in all fabrication, and *homo faber*, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, for Arendt this artifice is not only necessary but also has a positive aspect because it is precisely the *artificial* aspect of the polis that makes it most characteristically human: “The man-made world of things, the human artifice erected by *homo faber*, becomes a home for mortal men . . . only inasmuch as it transcends both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use.”<sup>17</sup>

The principle of **Civic Responsibility** describes the idea that when people come together in mutual interaction, they “assume responsibility for public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities to participants.”<sup>18</sup> **Communal Effort** expresses the intent “to produce, promote, and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction.”<sup>19</sup> **Radical Inclusion** asserts that anyone can buy a ticket and whoever enters the gate is part of the community.

Taken together, these principles encourage Burners to be active citizens creating and maintaining the public space, not passive consumers. They provide the setting for the experience of “human plurality,” which Arendt describes as having “the twofold character of equality and distinction.”<sup>20</sup> The way Burners voluntarily organize themselves into camps and projects is both the origin and manifestation of these principles, and it is key to doing the work that makes the event successful. Just as for the Greeks the people *were* the polis, the Burners *are* Burning Man.

## Action

The creativity of Work provides the human-built stage for “Action,” Arendt’s realm of human freedom characterized by words and deeds. “In order to be what the world is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech, for activities not only entirely useless for the necessities of life but of an entirely different nature from the manifold activities of fabrication by which the world itself and all things in it are produced.”<sup>21</sup> The economically dominated experiences and perspectives of Labor and Work prioritize production and productivity as the highest good, and are inclined “to denounce action and speech as idleness, idle busyness, and idle talk.”<sup>22</sup> In contrast, activities often seen as “unproductive” because they have no “product” other than the performance itself—such as healing, navigation, dance, playacting, flute playing—“furnished ancient thinking with examples for the highest and greatest activities of man.”<sup>23</sup>

It is precisely these types of activities that are central opportunities for Burners to distinguish themselves. **Radical Self-Expression** “arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content.”<sup>24</sup> But self-expression is virtually meaningless if there is no audience, for the purpose is to reveal something. In this sense it emphasizes a key aspect of Arendt’s activity of Action: “This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness.”<sup>25</sup> At Burning Man people are self-consciously on display, and BRC is a stage where every moment is potentially performative. There is a heightened awareness of how one appears because almost everywhere is public, and the exploration of self-representation is encouraged—hence the evolution of Burning Man couture and costume.

The lack of commerce and physical needs (since you brought “all the things”) means that gifts are surplus, and whether the gifts are physical items or events of some type, **Gifting** is a kind of giant mutual potlatch and performance. “The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value.”<sup>26</sup> Such words and deeds are central elements of Action: these activities are done in public, largely between strangers, for the pleasure of the activity itself—none of it is essential for survival.

Gifting is one way to manifest **Participation**, which declares, “Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. *We make the world real through actions that open the heart*” (emphasis added).<sup>27</sup>

This experience of involvement creates a community where everyone is a performer as well as an observer:

**Immediacy** complements this because there is no “product” other than the activity itself. “Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers.”<sup>28</sup> This expresses the essence of Action, which Arendt describes as inherently unstable because it “does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears . . . with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves,”<sup>29</sup> thereby exhausting “their full meaning in the performance itself.”<sup>30</sup>

Some have described Burning Man as a “do-ocracy”;<sup>31</sup> people are noticed, get appreciated, and gain status for creating a great work of art, show, or activity. This is the epitome of Action for Arendt, who observes that, “Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm.”<sup>32</sup>

The temporary nature of BRC heightens the awareness of the transitory nature of action. Much of the art is also transformed from lasting edifice into performance by burning, one of the unique traditions of Burning Man: “build it up to burn it down.”<sup>33</sup> The burning of art by its own creators emphasizes immediacy by conspicuously destroying durability, thereby constituting a critique that valorizes Action over the culture of commodification and accumulation (buying and collecting the products of Work, including “art” objects) and the designed disposability of mass-produced items of consumer culture (the processes of Labor).

### A Party in the Desert or a Polis on the Playa?

Of course, in certain ways BRC is fundamentally not like the ancient Greek polis. Burning Man is a time-limited event run by the Burning Man Organization, which can be likened to an oligarchic city council that establishes the laws and takes care of infrastructure. The event itself is of course subject to the laws of the country in which it takes place. Because of these limitations there are no doubt those critics who will say that Burning Man is fundamentally unpolitical, and perhaps include it among the “communes of hippies and drop-outs”—Arendt’s words—that constitute “a renunciation of public life, of politics in general.”<sup>34</sup> The all-too-common description of Burning Man as a party in the desert is meant pejoratively, expressing the perspectives of Labor and Work that view a party as a waste since it drains resources, has no lasting physical product, and has no purpose other than the activity itself.

Yet, from the perspective of Action these characteristics of a party are a virtue. In particular, the *artificial* framework set by the Ten Principles facilitates a replicable, albeit temporary, space for the kind of public interpersonal freedom Arendt describes, multiplying the opportunities for Action while marginalizing the importance of Labor and Work. Over fifty “regional” versions of the original Burning Man event take place at other sites around the world, on every continent, with especially large events in Australia, South Africa, and Israel,<sup>35</sup> showing an ability re-create itself in different times and locations.

While there are certainly limitations that make BRC less than an ideal polis, the Ten Principles conspire to create an experience where the extraordinary becomes ordinary, provoking an awareness of liberatory potential and a desire for a better world. The week of art and play alerts Burners to alternative possibilities within themselves and of freedom in human togetherness (as indicated by many testimonies of personal transformation). A vision of how their own lives and the life of the human community at large might be different is aroused, and Burners are less likely to be complacent about accepting what “is” as what “must be” in the default world. In a political world dominated by the activities of Labor and Work, setting aside a time and place for the activity of Action to come to the fore may be the best way to get a taste of Arendtian freedom. While Burning Man may have started as a party in the desert, I think that Black Rock City has become a kind of polis on the playa.

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 199. In what follows I will not consider whether Arendt’s interpretation of Greek thought or vision of the Greek polis is correct. For purposes of this essay, when I discuss the polis I will be doing so through Arendt’s perspective.

2. burningman.com/whatsburningman/  
3. Catherine Sallant, “Burning Man Becomes a Hot Academic Topic,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 2010.

4. burningman.org/event/brc/

5. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

6. *Ibid.*, 7.

7. *Ibid.*, 194–95.

8. *Ibid.*, 179.

9. *Ibid.*, 197.

10. *Ibid.*, 32.

11. *Ibid.*

12. burningman.com/whatsburningman/about\_burningman/principles.html

13. survival.burningman.com/culture/the-10-principles/

14. fest300.com/magazine/pack-all-the-things-the-ultimate-burning-man-checklist

15. survival.burningman.com/culture/the-10-principles/

16. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 139.

17. *Ibid.*, 173.

18. survival.burningman.com/culture/the-10-principles/

19. *Ibid.*

20. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 175.

21. *Ibid.*, 173–74.
22. *Ibid.*, 208.
23. *Ibid.*, 207.
24. [survivalburningman.com/culture/the-10-principles/](http://survivalburningman.com/culture/the-10-principles/).
25. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 180.
26. [survivalburningman.com/culture/the-10-principles/](http://survivalburningman.com/culture/the-10-principles/).
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 199.
30. *Ibid.*, 206.
31. [journal.burningman.org/2016/04/black-rock-city/participate-in-brc-glc-2016-volunteering-the-backbone-of-flummer-culture/](http://journal.burningman.org/2016/04/black-rock-city/participate-in-brc-glc-2016-volunteering-the-backbone-of-flummer-culture/).
32. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 180.
33. [blog.burningman.com/2012/08/building-brc-the-time-is-now/](http://blog.burningman.com/2012/08/building-brc-the-time-is-now/).
34. Hannah Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 232.
35. [regionals.burningman.org/](http://regionals.burningman.org/).

## Hannah Arendt, Charlottesville, and the Crises of Democracy

A Discussion between Roger Berkowitz and Samantha Hill

*This discussion took place on August 16, 2017, as part of the Rostrum Lecture Series sponsored by the Language and Thinking Program at Bard College.*

**Roger Berkowitz:** Hannah Arendt was a German Jewish student in the 1920s. She was brilliant and quite precocious. She was arrested in 1933, escaped Germany, went to France, worked bringing Jewish children to Israel or Palestine, eventually made her way to the United States in 1941, and then in 1951 published a book called *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which is considered one of the great books of the twentieth century. It's on all those silly lists of the 100 Greatest Books of the Twentieth Century. In this case it's really justified. It was an attempt to understand the intellectual roots of totalitarianism, both in Germany and in the Soviet Union, and understanding it as a problem that lasts because it's a part of modernity. And that's why she remains important. Her work throughout her life is an attempt to think through politics, our real-world problems, with the background of the humanities and philosophy and literature and thinking.

Professor Bill Dixon has asked Samantha and I to talk with you about chapters 24–26 of Arendt's book *The Human Condition*.<sup>1</sup> My understanding is you've read these chapters. The way we're going to do this is, we're going to talk about a couple of quotes, mostly from the readings that you've done from this book. We are also going to talk to each other about them as a way of taking you through some of the main ideas of this book, and then open it up to questions.

Given that the topics of the readings today are plurality and politics, they intersect in important ways with the events of the last year, last six months, and last three or four days in Charlottesville, Virginia. We are going to try and highlight how what you're reading very much relates to the events of the last few days and last six months, in ways that will affirm many of the things you believe, but I also believe very strongly they will challenge and provoke you in many ways that you might find difficult. So, I ask you to be open to that and try and understand why we emphasize the ways that Arendt is provocative, not for the sake of being provocative but for the sake of getting us all to think clearly and deeply about these issues.

**Samantha Hill:** *The Human Condition* is actually the first book of Hannah Arendt's that I read in my first semester of college. And I had no idea what