

## **Water in the Desert Ephemera as an Arendtian Oasis**

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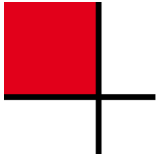
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## Water in the desert: *ephemera* as an Arendtian oasis

Christian Garmann Johnsen, Lena Olaison and Bent Meier Sørensen

... we, who are not of the desert though we live in it, are able to transform it into a human world... precisely because we suffer under the desert conditions we are still human and still intact; the danger lies in becoming true inhabitants of the desert and feeling at home in it...

Hannah Arendt, *The promise of politics*, 1955: 201

To join the *ephemera* collective, whether 10 or 20 years back, was to be invited into an oasis whilst wandering in the desert. In this oasis we found a community of scholars, created by the social relations between its members. To believe in *ephemera*, for us, is to insist that the possibility of community unmediated by instrumentalism always exists. To believe in *ephemera* is to be reminded of who and where you are, to be convinced that the desert can be transformed, that a human world can be created. Indeed, *ephemera* reminds us that the world can be different, for like Michel de Certeau's concept of tactics, the journal holds the promise that 'however bad things get, they are not necessarily so' (2000: 89). Such a promise, however, can easily lead to disappointment.

For Arendt, the desert is a metaphor for the modern condition – a condition marked by the spread of worldlessness. To be in the possession of a 'world' can refer to two aspects of such world: at one level, the world can be seen as comprised by created artifacts, but at another as being constituted by unmediated social relations (Gomez, 2016). Arendt refers to the former as

the human condition of work, which in Arendt's view entails the creation of durable objects and is thus always a means towards a given end. Arendt refers to the latter as the human condition of action, something that happens between humans insofar as they are able to do and say things that others can respond to, such as taking initiative and creating a new beginning. It is this condition of social relations – the ability to be together – that Arendt sees as being threatened by desertification. The desert is nothing but a worldless place devoid of unmediated social relations. Thus, 'the modern growth of worldlessness, the withering away of everything *between us*, can be described as the spread of the desert' (Arendt, 1955: 201). The experience of losing the world, in Arendt's optics, is to lose the ability to be together.

The experience of finding an oasis in the desert – somewhere to feel at home – exists, however much a mere potential, a virtual or utopian mirage. The *ephemera* community represents just such an experience for us. In all its plurality of writers and readers, theorists and activists, reformists and revolutionaries, this community and the sense of belonging it bestows cannot be subsumed under a single, unitary concept like 'home'. Indeed, Freud was unlikely to fully enjoy such an experience of home as he strode into his Biedermeier-style boudoir in mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Vienna, this being where he developed his idea of the *unheimlich*, the 'unhomely' or uncanny, that place where not even the home could be understood as homely. Humans remain in search for a home, but Arendt maintains that a home is not restricted to a physical location, but is rather the experience of feeling home as one *stays in the desert*, of refusing to project the desert into one's own soul, and of rejecting the desert's totalitarian sandstorms as part of its coming redemption. So, how do we find that oasis in the desert?

### **Arendt's struggle to find an oasis in the desert**

For Arendt, modernity puts belonging to the world at stake – not the world defined by a subject-object relation, as we have neither lost ourselves nor the objects that surround us, but instead the world we share with others. It is, as Arendt writes, 'everything between us' (Arendt, 1955: 201). As such,

the problem of worldliness cannot be reduced to a psychological problem, and the formula ‘fix the subject, and all will be fine’ therefore cannot solve problem. In fact, the real danger of modernity, Arendt insists, is that we have become too comfortable in the worldliness we inhabit. Once we become isolated subjects in a worldless world not shared with others, other perils arise, most notably desert sandstorms – Arendt’s metaphor for totalitarian movements. Although having become desert dwellers, we are not *of* the desert, as our suffering in it makes only too clear. Therefore, the real ‘danger lies in becoming true inhabitants of the desert and feeling at home in it’ (Arendt, 1955: 201). Benjamin sees the full consequences of this desertification in the necessary apotheosis he and Arendt endured in their own, war-torn lives as refugees: humankind’s ‘self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order’ (Benjamin, 2015: 235). How do we end up becoming true desert dwellers?

One way of sheltering in the desert is to retreat into the inner self and seek comfort in our inner experiences, feelings and thinking, but then another danger lies in wait. Once obsessed with ourselves, we interpret external problems from our surroundings as internal problems springing from within our beings. This mindset leads us to believe that we are at once the disease and the cure, and so the self ultimately becomes a ‘pharmakon’ (Derrida, 1981). The truth is that the desert is not ‘in ourselves’. Indeed, to Arendt, Nietzsche made his ‘decisive mistake’ in thinking that the desert is within us (Arendt, 1955: 201). Modern psychology proceeded to fall into the same trap, and has been trying to ‘help’ us ‘adapt’ to our desert nature ever since (the inverted commas are from Arendt, 1955: 201). Becoming a true desert dweller requires subscribing to coping strategies that make our surrounding worldliness endurable. Both totalitarianism and modern psychology want us to suffer less. Yet, this loss of suffering and endurance comes at a price, as it is only through suffering and endurance that we can make room for the passion and action ‘that patiently enable us to transform the desert rather than ourselves’ (Arendt, 1955: 202).

However, Arendt’s pessimistic reading of modernity is not without hope. In fact, Arendt insists that an oasis always has the potential to occur in the

desert when ‘one heart reaches out directly to the other, as in friendship’ (Arendt, 1955: 202). For Arendt, an oasis is thus not a place out there, bound to a physical and geographical location, but the space wherein humans can meet and show each other who they are. Arendt uses the concept of ‘action’ to describe this phenomenon, defining it as the ability of humans to express themselves to each other. Against this backdrop, an oasis becomes what Arendt calls a ‘space of appearance’, that is, a space that ‘comes into being whenever men are together in the manner of speech and action’ (Arendt, 1958: 199).

Still, Arendt stresses, we cannot escape the desert and simply enter the oasis but must constantly struggle to transform the desert into an oasis – hardly a simple task with all of modernity’s inherently conflictual tendencies. Modernity has led us to become obsessed with either the things around us (objects) or ourselves (subjects). Another danger Arendt saw in modernity was how instrumentality has infiltrated social relations, so people no longer meet for the sake of showing who they are (action), but to exchange services (work). By understanding a community in merely instrumental terms, we fail to acknowledge that the desert is not our natural habitat. For this reason, Arendt believes that we must remind ourselves who we are. And this is precisely what *ephemera* allows us to do: to remind ourselves of the intellectual thinking, contemplating, theorizing, and writing in which we engage – not to garner academic prestige, but to develop new ideas that let us see the world differently.

To Arendt, transforming arid land into a verdant oasis requires the miracles of philosophy, art, friendship, love and, we may add, engaged scholarship, none of which we could survive without in the desert. What is more, we as writers, thinkers, organization scholars or, to copy Arendt’s own example, ‘political scientists’ must know how to make the most of the oases in our thinking, or they themselves will dry up (1955: 203). The transformation depends on an *Amor Mundi*, which is to say a love of the world impossible to realize in isolation, even if the isolation entails a necessary component of this love – solitude, which we would like to take some license to translate as engaged scholarship.

In solitude, we read the sacred texts at the heart of the university and, in dialogue, speak about them. In the academic community, we enact the truths of past writings and realize plurality. Of course, all these activities occur in atmospheres of controversy: Which texts may we talk about? Where exactly is this alleged heart of the university? How is an inclusive dialogue even possible in a metaphorical desert with its totalitarian storms? How would action connect to truth, and how long until plurality, democracy and freedom are inscribed in a durable world for all? And who are 'we' anyway? Certainly, we have witnessed 'the withering away of everything *between us*' (Arendt, 1955: 201) and our common world attacked by tech giants and monstrous concentrations of wealth. Such totalitarian sandstorms have succeeded in purging love from the concept of friendship, thinking from the concept of speaking, and courage from the concept of action. Nevertheless, we insist that the experience of *ephemera* is the experience of believing in the oasis.

### **Believing in the oasis of *ephemera***

If Arendt conceptually connects thinking and doing, the *ephemera* collective has continuously sought to connect them directly in practice. Any intervention, then, would necessarily have both aspects. A so-called 'Critical Mass cycling intervention' performed by the collective in London about twenty years ago illustrates this connection of thinking and doing, as well as the challenges such connections bring about. The critical mass aspect of the intervention pivoted on the notion that if enough bikers swarmed the capital's streets, they would be seen as legitimate road users. In other words, the demonstration was calculated to disrupt the city's reigning traffic regime and thereby make space for cyclists in a city designed only for motorized vehicles.

To reinforce this aim, on the day of the event the *ephemera* collective placed Steffen Böhm and Chris Land, safely equipped with bikes, helmets and whistles as part of the group of active cyclists. With the activism aspect having now been attended to, the collective also designated two of its members, Campbell Jones and the Sørensen of this publication, to observe

and, in the words of intervention organizers, ultimately ‘theorize the event’ as it unfolded. The observers had been placed at the event’s slated final destination, the square in front of the National Gallery. As a resident of Copenhagen, Sørensen could just picture the Scandinavian-scale droves of bikes arriving at a nice pace, perhaps even cheered by bystanders and liberals in cruiser cabriolets.

Reality had something else in mind. After some hours of rather uneventful observation, Sørensen heard sudden whistling and shouting, growing louder as it apparently approached the square. Two lone cyclists, the aforementioned Böhm and Land, were pedalling towards the square with an enormous phalanx of London Metropolitan Police in heavy vehicles surrounding them. The police immediately apprehended the cyclists as they arrived on the square. However, with only a critical mass of two activists to throw in the massive police wagon, law enforcement turned their sights on the two ‘theorists’, the status of which the police found somewhat more dubious, for unlike classic activists, the observers wore dark suits and were standing still. To the detriment of annual arrest rates, the police were compelled to assess that these two individuals represented no *immediate* threat to law and order in the greater metropolitan area. So with the drama over, the police left, and the two theorists quietly walked into the art museum.

In all its glorious inconclusiveness, the Critical Mass event played out in a way that brought the schism that has always lain at the heart of *ephemera*: activism versus theorizing, the politics versus theory in the journal’s title. The same members of the critical mass in the London event eventually edited a book, *Against automobility* (2006), that elucidated the distinction between activism and theory. The book states that as ‘undoubtedly important as the *automobile* is, however, the aim of this book is to look beyond the car itself to consider the concept of *automobility* that underlies it’ (Böhm, Jones, Land and Paterson, 2006: 1). This short quote already reveals the schism. Even, as in this book, when the adversary is palpably manifested in an armour of steel and wheels, it is nonetheless assumed to cunningly conceal its true force, the *concept* that underlies it. This inclination not only demonstrates the need for theory, but also points to theory’s superior

strength at lifting the veil concealing the regime of forces actually functioning in the world.

The *ephemera* collective has always debated this schism between the visible action and its invisible causes, swaying between the tangible activism connected to and often directed against organizations and the high-end theory capable of uncovering the workings of such organizations. The activists have seemed to feel the theorists are trying to escape the burden of action, to see it as something only to watch and speculate about rather than partake in. The theorists, on the other hand, have distrusted activism's ability to grasp and thus change the configuration of the world's true forces, which hover above us, beyond the reach of our influence. Arendt, however, considers the movements into either action or theory to be forms of escapism:

to escape from the world of the desert, from politics into... whatever it may be, is a less dangerous and more subtle form of ruining the oases than the sandstorms that menace their existence, as it were, from without. (1955: 203)

In both cases we 'carry the sand of the desert into the oases', since to Arendt (1955: 203) the distinction between thinking and acting is false. Plurality, the human condition of action, exists only where thinking, speaking, and acting remain intimately connected. Many actions consist solely of speaking, and no meaningful action was ever taken without being born of thinking and talking, a fact to which the very duration of many editorial meeting at *ephemera* attests. Whether facing the sheer force of the London Metropolitan Police or the soul-shattering art of the National Gallery, thinking, speaking, and action demand a belief in the courage of human action.

### **Where do we go with our courage from here?**

The actions of *ephemera* have often been courageous, if only infinitesimal in the great scheme of things. Whether such actions are schematically ephemeral or not, the sheer existence of the journal is a Herculean accomplishment in its own right, and one achieved by the entire *ephemera* collective as it seeks to correct the dark sides of the publishing business. Although this darkness deepens, we are tempted to cite Arendt once again:



‘the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization’ (1968: 206).

This issue of decay and crystallization takes us directly to our present day and the University of Leicester School of Business. Founded at the University of Warwick in 1999/2000, *ephemera* moved to Leicester School of Business in 2002. Someone looking at the university now would think this move must have been to another planet. Leicester School of Business still harbours strong, independent researchers, but the university management’s new policy is clear: no more Arendtian oases are to be sprouting at this school. In 2021, the university management decided that 16 academics, all treasured colleagues and friends of *ephemera*, were redundant and forced them to leave. Indeed, *ephemera* has been engaged in this struggle to maintain critical research alongside and together with more mainstream business studies, sending Professor Nishan Canagarajah, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leicester, a letter that said the journal ‘stands in solidarity with our colleagues who face compulsory redundancy because of their commitment to critical organizational scholarship’. The letter goes straight to the core of the matter: ‘The research excellence of critical organizational scholars at the School of Business is beyond question.’

The storm blowing through Leicester School of Business knows nothing of excellence and does not confine itself to any one campus. Even as we write this note for *ephemera*’s anniversary issue, our own business school, like so many others, is undergoing a reform that includes fewer admissions. So-called ‘soft’ programmes in the social sciences and humanities are being singled out for reductions and closure. We all have formal roles in this process, so we have had to cancel our plans, even our precious writing time, to devote ourselves and days to this situation. One such day, early in the process, as the pressure and exposure grew unbearable, the Olaison of this note, found herself closing down everything – her email, phone, all documents – and shutting the office door. She then opened her computer folder containing the *ephemera* contributions for this very anniversary issue and began formatting, proofreading, and laying-out. She turned to *ephemera* and engaged with someone else’s reference list, experiencing this as meaningful work. This may all sound like a deliberate act, but it was not.

Indeed, it was only sometime after this seclusion that she realized what she had done, and how meaningfully this act expresses what we are writing about and trying to share in this anniversary issue. In truth it simply happened, like a habitual act of self-preservation: it was a way to endure the sandstorm in the desert.

Within such courageous acts of self-preservation, of sheltering and saving and of waiting lies human excellence as the most profound and hermetic secret of the oasis – a secret predicated on the constant struggle of transforming the desert into that oasis. The journal has been itself a fruit of such acts of excellence and would not have come about without it. When the oldest of this note's authors joined the *ephemera* collective almost 20 years back, he walked into a room full of scholars at Leicester University. This was the editorial collective. The scholars were creating an intense intellectual and social environment strong enough to leave a lasting, physical impression. The room was light, not because of the grey concrete cityscape outside its windows, but rather in the Heidegger sense of *Lichtung*, namely as the 'clearing' or 'lighting' in the woods, a place not only where light more easily streams down, but also where things are more clearly put forward as Dasein engages authentically and resolutely with the world.

To Heidegger, however, the clearing is not a merciless enlightening that slams the hard facts on the table, but rather an opening that brings forth *and* shelters and through this sheltering allows being to reveal itself. Only when an area in the forest has been opened and its vegetation cut down can its open space, *das Offene*, offer both protection against dark forces and the disclosure of being. This opening brings being 'to presence in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where *alêtheia*, truth, happens' (Heidegger, 1993: 319). Indeed, the room on the university campus appeared beset with a particular intellectual energy that, unbounded by the participants' diverse situations in their home woodlands/concrete jungles, deserts/business schools, could flow more freely. Both the stakes and the drama were high, and one's courage came to be demanded as well as recognized, as it is today at the University of Leicester. At these early meetings, things took off in the belief that change was possible; some beliefs

were crushed. It too was a manner of ‘critical mass’ events, and many such were to follow.

An oasis can often materialize as a place of rest, ease, and leisure, but this is not what Arendt teaches us. An oasis is created and maintained in action, and takes courage, passion, and an individual as well as collective investment to come into being. Indeed, an oasis in a desert is an improbable miracle, which brings us effortlessly to Olaison’s first editorial meeting. A founding member of the collective contributed to the first item on the agenda, the election of a new editorial manager. However, in his opening statement he said: ‘I don’t think we should elect a new editorial manager, I think we should go for the nuclear option.’ He then continued by explaining that *ephemera* may have lost its role, if it ever had had one, that he could not see how it would be able to live on. Nor was he sure it should live on. Did *ephemera* matter? Did we really push any boundaries anymore? Or had we just been co-opted by the publishing machinery? Were we just another journal?

Silence. After a few trembling moments a collective member started to speak, more voices chimed in, and slowly we began to regain faith in each other and in *ephemera*. After electing a new editorial manager, we moved on to discuss the matters at hand – the issue pipeline, website maintenance and layout. Having dealt with ‘the nuclear option’, we could concentrate on what appeared to be the journal’s most pressing issue: should *all* the words in reference book titles be capitalized or only the first? The heated debate extended into the next meeting, and, as for the issue, it became an *ephemera* classic.

Our aim with this example is to expose the fragile and dangerous relation between the desert and the oasis. Arendt warns us about feeling at home in the desert, and the same must be said about the oasis. True desert dwellers feel no need for an oasis, but then anyone seeking to escape rather than endure the desert brings sand into the oasis, instead of water into the desert. In this way we ‘ruin the life-giving oases when we go to them for the purpose of escaping, it sometimes seems as though everything conspired mutually to generalize the conditions of the desert’ (Arendt, 1955: 203).

Becoming a true inhabitant of the oasis is also dangerous, for we risk internalizing the oasis, thinking that changing ourselves into oasis inhabitants will resolve the problems of living in the desert. However, in inhabiting the miraculous oasis, we will find it hard to separate ourselves from such an ephemeral community, and impossible to imagine the oasis without ourselves as its necessary centre. In actual fact, though, *ephemera* was always meant to be ephemeral, despite its collective endurance as an oasis in the desert. That's the point of its name, and although it is now turning 20, collective members will continue to come and go; people will leave and others will join. With these people and their actions, with the community's very plurality, *ephemera* changes but is also maintained.

As such, *ephemera* has been an oasis in which one could train one's courage among friends. Some were activists, some theorists, some friends of the revolution, some friends of Plato, some all of the above, but every action has always taken place in a certain atmosphere of hope and belief. It has taken place, we suggest, within the strange glory of what Benjamin terms 'a *weak* messianic' power:

For we have been expected upon this earth. For it has been given us to know, just like every generation before us, a *weak* messianic power, on which the past has a claim. This claim is not to be settled lightly. (Benjamin, 2003: 390)

This claim has not been settled lightly in the history of *ephemera*. For that matter, it has not to this day been settled at all. The question remains how, in the context of our ephemeral oasis, this *weak yet collective* power of mind and heart, of thinking and action, of *ephemera: theory and politics in organization* may be brought to bear on the desert.

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