

Persistence in the Concentration Camp Form: Boochani's Manus Island

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Introduction

Hannah Arendt's thought in relation to the emergence of concentration camps in the twentieth century can be seminal for understanding the rightlessness of prospective migrants and asylum-seekers in the twenty-first. As well as articulating the central problem of 'the right to have rights' – that only when certified as belonging to a recognised nation state is a modern human being capable of enjoying any rights at all – Arendt contributed additional insight into what is posited here as 'the concentration camp form'. Distinguishing three types of concentration camps as innovations of the modern nation state to deal with unwanted people on a population basis, Arendt wrote of camps as belonging to any of three classical categories drawn from the traditional 'Western' imaginary: *hades*, *purgatory* and *hell*.

A focus on the concentration camp form does not exhaust the relevance of Arendt's wider thought in relation to rightlessness, refugees and people movement in the contemporary moment. As mentioned in the final section of this paper, a number of her most notable ideas and catchphrases can be brought into discussion of these broad phenomena. These include the 'banality of evil' or the problem of 'thoughtlessness' in relation to extreme evil; the problem of 'the right to have rights' as evidenced in the existence of large populations of people who fall 'into the cracks' or between the interstices of the present day nation state system, structured as it is around few more than 200 rigid and often corrupt government entities ('nation states') spanning the globe; and (perhaps less obviously) both her concepts of 'homelessness and rootlessness' in modernity (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) and her noted distinction between 'the public and the private' (in *The Human Condition*), which together support a view of nation state governments encouraging global pursuit of 'private' or economic gain while simultaneously fearing an associated and uncontrolled increase in people movement which is an inevitable consequence of this worldwide operation.

Similarly, a focus on the thought of Arendt is not meant to exclude the rich history of philosophical thought either about camps or evil of various kinds in the modern contemporary world. This history includes the thought of Giorgio Agamben, Zygmunt Bauman and Michel Foucault, to name only three much-cited thinkers whose reasoning in each case points (I would argue) in a different direction from Arendt in relation to the concentration camp. An especially significant strand of alternative (i.e. non-Arendtian) thought on these matters lies around the operations of 'power' and techniques of control. The potential for fruitful exploration of intersections between these thinkers and Arendt remains, but largely remains unexplored in this paper.

In the paper I seek to clearly delineate 'the concentration camp form', using Arendt, and apply it to a near-contemporary case of mandatory immigration detention – one with loud echoes for an apparently growing number of 'democratic' and 'autocratic' nation states which are constructing a global concentrationary universe in which essentially innocent and rightless people are incarcerated and punished on a group basis rather than for criminal wrongdoing as

traditionally understood. The case is the literary testimony of Behrouz Boochani in his 2018 book *No Friend But the Mountains*.

Boochani's is a powerful contemporary voice testifying about and critiquing the practice of mandatory immigration detention by liberal democracies. His work can be described as novel, memoir, poetry and philosophy. In relating a narrative of journeying by sea and of imprisonment on an island, it responds to traditional Kurdish literary form as well as to contemporary critical theory. Primarily working through literature and art, *No Friend But the Mountains* draws continuing attention to the largely hidden experience of immigration detention under the 'Pacific Solution' – a system of detention camps financed and operated by Commonwealth of Australia in agreement with poorer nation state governments in its immediate Pacific neighbourhood. This concentrationary system intended to deter and punish unauthorised arrivals by sea was adopted in the early twenty-first century by the Australian nation state as a flagship policy extending its mandatory immigration detention regime which had been in place since the 1990s. The published work of Boochani – a Kurdish Iranian refugee who was rescued at sea then detained at an Australian immigration detention facility on Manus Island (Papua New Guinea) – has been influential in building academic and activist opposition to Australia's mandatory immigration detention regime.

Among questions provoked by reading Boochani's text are a number that can be asked of other specimens of the concentration camp through time. Given the repeated claim throughout the work by the prisoners that they are not criminals, what kind of carceral regime is this? Are the detainees indeed non-criminals? Are they 'innocent'? Why are they kept so far away where regular citizens of the nation state cannot perceive them? A problem of 'criminalisation' – the treatment of people of doubtful criminality being treated as criminal – looms large in this literary experience.

The paper is in five parts. Sections 1 and 2 propose the idea of 'the concentration camp form', drawing on Husserl's thought on the eidetic intuition of forms and on Arendt's text about concentration camps. In the third section I introduce and describe the literary testimony to offshore immigration detention experience contributed by Behrouz Boochani. Section 4 reflects on Boochani's work in light of the general application of Arendt's theory, and the potential application of the 'concentration camp form' concept in particular. In the fifth and final section, I reflect methodologically on the foregoing treatment of a literary text using Arendtian tools, arguing for the validity and usefulness of an intertextual reading of works of political theory and literary artworks in the context of discussion of divisive and contested policy issues such as immigration detention.

Section 1: Eidetic insight and the concentration camp form

The problem of 'carceral continuity' confronts any serious investigation of the concentration camp through time. As examples of punitive institutions, are concentration camps part of a continuous spectrum of carceral types, in the same way that we may speak of a spectrum of government or state types from autocratic to democratic states? Or do they represent a distinctive *sui generis* phenomenon: an entity or phenomenon in their own right, distinct from prisons for the punishment of tried-and-convicted criminal inmates or sanatoria used for forcible detention of the diseased or mentally ill?

To sharpen this question, we may adopt the phenomenological language of Edmund Husserl, and enquire whether Husserl's concept of an 'eidetic intuition' can be applied to the concentration camp. There are many accounts of Husserl's phenomenology. In Kolakowski's (1975) account, Husserl's phenomenology plots a path to certitude in understanding, a certitude which has been lost or surrendered in modern thought since the influence of 'psychologism' in logic and of Cartesian doubt. For Husserl, several key steps must be taken on the path to certitude, including removing the Ego when considering the thinking process (which Descartes failed to do.) The whole field of perception (of the world) can then be clarified, and we can make a provisional 'reduction' of the world on two sides, the side of the perceiver and of what is perceived. This initial reduction, though necessary, is insufficient to deliver certitude, for Husserl, because we still do not know what the world or the Ego – even a 'transcendental Ego' – really is. A further step is needed which leads Husserl to this 'eidetic reduction'. This is connected with the search for 'universals' -- the uncovering within any phenomenon of 'the universally valid and scientifically fruitful essence, or *eidos*.' (Kolakowski 1975: 45) With eidetic insight, universals reveal themselves 'with irresistible self-evidence', in a way that is irreducible to singular perceptions. This insight is not about generalising or abstracting qualities from what is perceived but rather goes to essences in the things themselves:

Without the experience of essence, no meaning and no meaningful judgments would be possible; whatever we say of objects – real or imaginary – we intend a 'species being.'

The presence of essences is implied in all acts of comparison between one thing and another; nominalists thus have it wrong (according to Husserl) when they think that understanding of similarity between things arises or originates in acts of comparison. Essences, though they require the insights of individuals to perceive them, are irreducible to individuals and are 'timeless and spaceless'. When we think of an individual example of an object, we always imply that it is 'a particularisation of something universal'; thus, 'the individuality itself, when it is the object of our intention, shows the *eidos*.'

The example of colour makes this idea somewhat clearer. We understand, perhaps instinctively, the principle of similarity between things when they look alike, as with different objects that are coloured red. However: 'It is in the perception itself that we catch the meaning of 'being red,' and there are no things which would be red "in general," since redness has many shades.' From such an example, we acquire the 'universal and necessary knowledge' that whatever is coloured is extended in space. This knowledge is necessary because we recognize it as being a necessity of things themselves.

In an exercise called 'free imaginary variation,' Husserl shows how eidetic description can be applied to various phenomena by imagining a universal, then exchanging some of its properties with others, allowing us to see what must or must not accompany the phenomenon empirically in order to remain what it is. In this process, we apprehend the meanings of things, of objects, not through subjective psychological influences, but because meaning and order 'radiate from the object with imperative self-evidence.'

In my view, this 'imperative self-evidence' is potentially very important for us when working in the social and political sciences, particularly in relation to intersubjective phenomena, which are so often (if not always) the subject-matter of social and political discourse. In this realm – the intersubjective, the social, the political – problems of how to communicate, and even how to agree on what are facts are notoriously difficult to solve. The yearning for 'certitude' (in Kolakowski's and Husserl's terms) of a kind that perhaps falls short of mathematical certainty

but nevertheless helps us avoid being permanently trapped in hallucinatory self-delusion and doubt is therefore understandable. Husserl's eidetic intuitive method at least moves in this direction, albeit imperfectly.

In Kolakowski's judgment, Husserl's method — meaning the whole phenomenological system, not only the eidetic intuition idea — in the end falls short of delivering communicable insight, at least reliably in the way that a mathematical message is reliable. With eidetic intuition, 'everything depends ultimately on the quality of the original insight in which things reveal themselves.' Furthermore, phenomenology itself gives no answer to the question of how we can know whether our certitude is 'genuine certitude'; all that the method can confirm (he argues) is 'either you have insight or you do not.'

Related to this is the problem of communicability. In the two famous slogans of Husserl's phenomenology:

1. Back to things themselves

2. Phenomenology should be rigorous science,

an inherent contradiction of sorts is contained because 'rigorous science' implies a certain kind of communicability i.e. communicability using words or symbols. By communicating or sharing in the communication of the results of scientific inquiry using words or symbols, people can come to understanding with the same degree of certitude about the matter under discussion. Plainly though, this is not the case with phenomenology, where certitude 'is in the act of insight, not discourse.' Phenomenology does its work by describing a particular sphere of experience (e.g. eidetic insight) but this description cannot replace having the experience; 'at best it can make it easier for another person to have the insight.'

Phenomenologically, the most we can perhaps hope for in relation to the concentration camp is eidetic insight or intuition – i.e. of the 'concentration camp form' – and not a more thoroughgoing scientific description of the phenomenon and what it means. In fact at a certain level, this may be true of any object under discussion in the social and political sciences: from laws and institutions to constitutions and concepts of the state itself. The fact that descriptions of all intersubjective realities are contested and change from time to time should not cause us surprise. However in this instance, to treat concentration camps as a singular modern-contemporary reality, rather than only as part of an older and more general phenomenon of carceral continuity, is defensible. One of its uses may be to help others perceive what is presented in political discourse as being a justifiable and justified process or set of processes around some present day punitive institutions as being, in fact, unjustifiable and unjustified. This is a small contribution, if it occurs.

The question of whether to view concentration camps as an important *sui generis* phenomenon or as a not-especially significant data point within a larger carceral continuity deployed by states lies, largely undeveloped, within the cluster of thoughts and questions about evil, the nation state, imperialism and modernity that is contained in Hannah Arendt's seminal work *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt 2017.)

Section 2: Hannah Arendt and the concentration camp form

What defines the 'form' – the essence of the concentration camp – in Arendt's thought?

A close reading of her text (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, mainly) suggests that the most important phenomenological distinction for Arendt is the separation of the existing world into two worlds, which the concentration camp allows. These worlds she calls the living and the dead. This basic political metaphor is reinforced through a series of reflections on killing, murder and the removal of the necessity for corpses and graves. (The last claim is seemingly paradoxical – rather than illogical – in light of the industrial scale production of corpses that she comments on in adjacent remarks about the Nazi death camps.)

In addition, and not unrelated to this distinction, Arendt identifies the concentration camp form as being distinct from prisons for criminals, and its inmates distinct in worldly terms from those citizens (of states) who have been convicted of crimes. This additional claim about the concentration camp is connected with the concepts of 'innocence' and the innocent, to which she also draws attention.

The distinction between the worlds of the living and the dead is most clearly elaborated in a passage discussing an 'atmosphere of mad unreality' which Arendt claimed engulfed Europe and surrounds in World War 2. Playing on, and re-interpreting Winston Churchill's famous 'iron curtain' metaphor from 1946, she states that 'the real iron curtain' is that which separates concentration camps from the rest of the world¹:

Seen from outside, they and the things that happen in them can be described only in images drawn from a life after death, that is, a life removed from earthly purposes. Concentration camps can very aptly be divided into three types corresponding to three basic Western conceptions of a life after death: Hades, Purgatory, and Hell. To Hades correspond those relatively mild forms, once popular even in non-totalitarian countries, for getting undesirable elements of all sorts – refugees, stateless persons, the asocial and the unemployed – out of the way; as DP camps, which are nothing other than camps for persons who have become superfluous and bothersome, they have survived the war. Purgatory is represented by the Soviet Union's labor camps, where neglect is combined with chaotic forced labor. Hell in the most literal sense was embodied by those types of camp perfected by the Nazis, in which the whole of life was thoroughly and systematically organized with a view to the greatest possible torment. (Arendt 2017: 583)

In this key passage, we can note both multiplicity and singularity as characteristics belonging to the concentration camp form. The multiplicity – totalitarian camps, non-totalitarian camps for refugees, stateless persons, asocial (perhaps indicating the homeless) and unemployed people and Displaced Person camps, that were common in Europe after World War 2 – is important for

¹ This use of the 'iron curtain' term retains its political significance at the time of writing, giving the expansion since Arendt's day of the world population of officially stateless persons and of persons whose state membership is effectively useless to them as they seek residence in other states which do not wish to recognise their right to visit or work. Arendt's delineation of this core political reality of her day as the 'right to have rights' problem retains appeal for many now who are seeking to theorise what is happening around frictions between nation state governments and 'non-citizens.' For Arendt writing in 1951, it can be simply stated that 'human rights' did not exist: only the rights of citizens did. Given how the world of 2025 is divided between citizens of nation states whose rights are largely protected, on one side, and on the other non-citizens who are *de facto* if not *de jure* rightless, it is meaningful to speak here of an 'iron curtain' not between nation states but between the global population of those with rights and the global population of the rightless. The concentration camp form – its existence and persistence – corresponds exactly to this wider reality.

allowing us to see that concentration camps can be of various types, and not only, for example, the type of the Nazi 'death camp'. The singularity – Hades, Purgatory and Hell are all instances of a singular kind of human existence, one which takes place after a person has been expelled from the world – is helpful for seeing that despite their multiplicity, concentration camps are a single *sui generis* reality whose essence is not shared with other intersubjective essences or realities. Insofar as Arendt's thoughts on concentration camps represent an eidetic intuition of a form, this is the core of the insight.

In a slightly earlier passage, Arendt is at pains to stress this essence, warning against drawing parallels between concentration camps and other punitive institutions and practices. Thus, she asserts:

all parallels create confusion and distract attention from what is essential. Forced labor in prisons and penal colonies, banishment, slavery, all seem for a moment to offer helpful comparisons, but on closer examination lead nowhere.

Again, she claims: 'There are no parallels to the life in the concentration camps.' (Arendt 2017: 581)

In a separate paper published the year before *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt also clearly denied suggestions of a parallel between the camp and the prison. In this paper she stressed 'the complete isolation which separated the camps from the surrounding world as if they and their inmates were no longer part of the world of the living.' This isolation, she says, was 'already characteristic of all earlier forms of concentration camps but carried to perfection only under totalitarian regimes'. The isolation of inmates in the camps, she said, 'can hardly be compared to the isolation of prisons, ghettos or forced labor camps. Prisons are never really removed from society, of which they are an important part and to whose laws and controls they are subject.' (Arendt 1994, 239)

In this passage we also note a clear reference to the concentration camp having its own distinct historical timeline – again, distinct from prisons, ghettos and other punitive practices and sites. For Arendt, this timeline begins with the late European imperial colonialist period: the second half of the nineteenth century, seeping into the first decade of the twentieth.

This timeline is spelled out more explicitly in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* where she states that concentration camps, far from being invented by the Nazis or the Communists of Stalin's Russia, owe their origin to European colonialism and in particular European colonial practices:

They [concentration camps] emerge for the first time during the Boer War, at the beginning of the [twentieth] century, and continued to be used in South Africa as well as India for 'undesirable elements'; here, too, we first find the term 'protective custody' which was later adopted by the Third Reich. (Arendt 2017: 576)

Again, the presence of a particular timeline or history for the concentration camp distinct from that of prisons or other punitive practices reinforces understanding the concentration camp in accordance with an eidetic intuition of an underlying form.

Arendt emphasises that concentration camps remove inmates from the world, in a distinctive way. In a passage describing concentration camps and other places of detention in totalitarian countries specifically, Arendt uses the term 'holes of oblivion' to reinforce the idea of a 'life beyond death' within the camps. Here people are removed from the world without the need for them to be killed:

In totalitarian countries all places of detention ruled by the police are made to be veritable holes of oblivion into which people stumble by accident and without leaving behind them such ordinary traces of former existence as a body and a grave. Compared with this newest invention for doing away with people, the old-fashioned method of murder, political or criminal, is inefficient indeed. The murderer leaves behind him a corpse, and although he tries to efface the traces of his own identity, he has no power to erase the identity of his victim from the memory of the surviving world. The operation of the secret police, on the contrary, miraculously sees to it that the victim never existed at all. (Arendt 2017: 569)

Although specifically describing totalitarian states here, the claim that concentration camps can serve to effectively remove a person, or group of persons, from the world without the need for mass executions is reasonable historically. As the broader empirical history of camps suggests, there are multiple points of connection between prisoner-of-war camps (for interning military prisoners captured in wars between states) and concentration camps for interning civilian groups. As Pitzer (2017) has pointed out, the rise in modern prisoner-of-war camps in the second half of the nineteenth century was historically decisive for the rise of concentration camps. (See Pitzer 2017: 10-14)

The relevant point here is that large-scale camps of various kinds, including prisoner-of-war camps, are themselves a modern technological invention of military states – of much more recent historical origin than prisons, forced exile and other practices of expulsion and punishment. The subsequent invention and rollout of barbed wire in the 1870s served to massively boost the number of people – both soldiers and civilians – who could easily be detained in ‘camps’ for long periods. In terms of strictly military history, this new possibility (i.e. new in the nineteenth century) meant the removal of a problem that had long plagued armies – what to do with captured prisoners. Modern prisoner-of-war camps, like modern concentration camps, thus afforded governments the possibility of ‘removing’ without necessarily killing targeted populations of various sorts.

These last empirical points are not specifically raised by Arendt but are, I suggest, presumed by her. However, they serve to reinforce the eidetic intuition of a concentration camp form in which a viable alternative to large scale extermination of prisoners and unwanted people is provided by creating separate ‘worlds’ of ‘the living and the dead’. Of course, this remains metaphorical language. Nevertheless, this metaphorical language corresponds to embodied realities, concentration camps being hard physical constructions, their inmates living human beings.

Section 3: Boochani's literary testimony

The work of Behrouz Boochani is an important contribution to understanding the significance of contemporary practices of immigration detention by liberal democratic states. Boochani was detained as an illegal would be immigrant in 2013 while attempting to reach Australia in an unauthorised vessel which had set out from Indonesia. Boochani was originally from the Kurdish region within Iran, completing his university education in political theory in Tehran. He worked as a journalist and advocate for Kurdish language culture in Iran before fleeing arrest and seeking to relocate to Australia via an ‘irregular’ immigration route. Australian naval authorities detained Boochani and a group of asylum seekers of various nationalities at sea after the boat on which they were travelling sank. They were transported on an Australian naval

ship to Christmas Island, 1550 kilometres north-west of the Australian mainland. Months later, Boochani and others were transferred to Manus Island which is part of the sovereign territory of Papua New Guinea, 570 kilometres north-east of the main Papua New Guinea coast.

Boochani's experiences during his initial boat journey to Indonesia through to his rescue and arrest at sea, and through years of detention on Manus Island are related in *No Friend but the Mountains* (Boochani 2018). This is a remarkable work of eyewitness testimony to the experience of offshore immigration detention, and at the same time a work that offers an articulated theoretical perspective on the experiences it describes. Boochani's book successfully combines elements of journalistic reportage, poetry, and discursive critical theory. The distinctiveness of this mixture is underscored by the remarkable and probably unique construction narrative surrounding the book, which was composed using a mobile phone and WhatsApp and necessarily involved a team of collaborators outside the detention centre (in Australia mainly) who translated the original text (from Farsi), disseminated eyewitness reports by Boochani as mainstream media reports and elevated and advocated for his voice in the outside world.

Booker Prize-winning novelist Richard Flanagan has described *No Friend but the Mountains* as a significant example of world prison literature, comparable in importance with Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and *De Profundis* by Oscar Wilde (Boochani 2018, vii). This high praise speaks to the quality of the work and its seriousness, but also points to a question that is especially significant in Arendtian terms: is the 'prison' it describes actually a prison or a concentration camp? This is a question which hangs, barely perceptible at times but persistent, over a much wider body of literature dealing with immigration detention in numerous countries. Should immigration detention centres be viewed as prisons or concentration camps, and is there a difference? Exploration of Boochani's unique and distinctive account offers an opportunity to open this question more fully to view.

Historically, the 'facility' in which Boochani was detained for the duration of most of the book's narrative period was officially designated as the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre. As a matter of record, the Centre was closed by order of the Papua New Guinea government in 2017 following a 2016 decision of the Supreme Court of Papua New Guinea declaring it illegal and unconstitutional. The official designation of the facility a 'Processing Centre' related to the site's role in the then-existing immigration policy arrangements of the Australian government. Boochani presents the site as a prison – 'Manus Prison', as it is termed throughout the narrative. This carceral perspective is reinforced through the theoretical perspective which is articulated explicitly by Boochani and his collaborators, offered to the reader as 'Manus Prison Theory'.² Since 2019, Boochani has been resident in New Zealand, by permission of the New Zealand government and with support of the University of Canterbury, where he has been a Senior Adjunct Research Fellow.³

At this point it is helpful to delineate more clearly the various elements in Boochani's writing. As suggested above, his principal work (*No Friend but the Mountains*) brings together at least three

² Manus Prison Theory is a central concept for Boochani writing in critical mode. It features within the supplementary material contained in the original published version of *No Friend but the Mountains* and is discussed further in the subsequently published volume *Freedom, Only Freedom: the Prison Writings of Behrouz Boochani* (Boochani 2023). The theory is further discussed in the final part of this paper.

³ This institution has a history of providing refuge and supporting significant work by stateless refugees, the outstanding earlier example being Karl Popper who wrote *The Open Society and Its Enemies* as a Jewish refugee from Austria there during World War 2. (University of Canterbury 2020)

distinct elements: poetry, journalistic reportage, and critical or scholarly theory. Here I will make explanatory and critical remarks touching upon these three aspects of the book.

The poetry written by Boochani is influenced by Kurdish literary forms. It appears interspersed throughout the book, alternating with conventional prose text that describes the narrative action and offers theoretical reflections. Passages of poetry in *No Friend But the Mountains* relate to death, violence and war. Boochani describes the buses taking the asylum seekers to board their dangerous boats as 'couriers of death' (Boochani 2018, 3), then speaks of a fellow asylum seeker ('the Blue Eyed Boy') who is scarred by a memory of watching his brother drown (Boochani 2018, 6). Powerful death images recur through the book's first 100 pages, where on the warship sit human beings, the refugees, who 'still wear the scars of dying' (Boochani 2018, 65), overseen by a sky where 'the stars know that it is no longer necessary to inflict violence upon us' (Boochani 2018, 64). Later we are told that 'Death is death/Plain and simple/Absurd and sudden/Exactly like birth' (Boochani 2018, 75-6). In the closing part of the book the poetic imagery expands to the related theme of war, as we experience a riot in Manus Prison, with 'the sound of gunshots . . . I mean the sound of death/The sound of death . . . the sound of war/The sound of war . . . another battlefield' (Boochani 2018, 347). As the threat of violence retreats and the battle (linked to the riot and its quelling) fades, we learn that fear for the prisoners only increases, and that this silent fear is 'one of the colours of war' (Boochani 2018, 350).⁴

At moments the poetry also helps elucidate the underlying political question suggested above – is this a prison or a concentration camp? It does so by explicitly raising the question of the detainees' criminality or non-criminality. We hear slogans written out by the detainees presented in verse: 'Why must I be in prison?'/ 'What is my crime?'/ 'Trial me in court'. (Boochani 2018, 354–5). Also in poetic mode, Boochani reflects on his dangerous boat journey saying that 'the ocean has put me on trial' (Boochani 2018, 70). Thinking of the children who are part of his asylum-seeker cohort, he asks 'What crime are those children guilty of?' (Boochani 2018, 117). One way of reading these lines is that the refugees are being tested by the extremities of life – war, violence, the elements – while at the same time they crave the political community that would recognise them as human, even if 'criminal'.

Boochani's text works to engage the reader with a powerful sense of the writer's distinct sensibility, working as an artist (i.e. poet and journalist) who commands his material – the raw data of his experience on Manus – and shapes it to present a literary artifact that may impact our perspective on the world, changing or shaping it in some way. A layer of this endeavour is Boochani's particular perspective on political theory. The frequent 'theoretical' references within his narrative account of detention contrast in tone but still merge with his highly personal writing style, which also includes devices such as the use of colourful satirical language (e.g. 'the Bastards Security Company' – Boochani 2018, 141) to describe individuals or groups of people.

The mixture of literary and discursive elements in Boochani's work raises general philosophical questions: such as what is the nature of the separation between philosophical reflection that takes place at a distance from the world, and description and observation of events from the author's perspective as an active participant in those events? This separation corresponds to a traditional distinction within Western thought between philosophy as an activity undertaken

⁴ As a Kurdish-Iranian author, Boochani's experience of war in his home country is embedded in the background rather than the foreground of the book's narrative. The suggestion is that many if not all the detention inmates described have experienced war, and continue to experience it in detention.

while withdrawn from the world with all its cares and conflicts and politics as an activity divorced from, and in many respects inimical to philosophising⁵. A question to be posed in response to this notional separation of the two realms is whether the philosopher (in this case, the writer, Boochani) must be withdrawn from the world or whether she/he can philosophise while acting: to be both theorist and activist at the same time. Is this possible?

The answer suggested by the body of Boochani's work is that there is no inherent contradiction between action and theory. However they are two separate activities and while the actor may philosophise, some gap between acting and thinking is inevitable; thus Boochani, acting as a participant in the riot scene, by being present and avoiding as far as he can the violence inflicted by the camp guards, cannot explicitly theorise *in that moment* but may do so (and does) afterwards by organising, structuring and composing his thoughts, in this case using a mobile phone and WhatsApp, about this and related events, connecting them explicitly with his theory of the Kyriarchal System, and disseminating these thoughts for others to read by publishing them.⁶

The theory expressed here by the active participant who reflects on his participant experiences, then articulates his reflections theoretically, is not inherently less valid than any other kind of theory. Indeed a certain authority may accrue to Boochani's critical reflections given his direct experience of the reality described. Nevertheless the theory itself can be considered by us as judges – readers as the audience judging, exercising their own judgment as actors and philosophers with their own unique perspectives – separately from the eyewitness testimony, and assessed on its own merits, as theory. (See further discussion of this point in Section 5.)

Section 4: Arendtian reflection on Boochani

The process of criminalisation – particularly of 'irregular' refugees and asylum-seekers, though also of others, such as people seeking paid employment, who cross a nation state's borders without explicit and usually written authorisation ('permission') being given to their person from the nation state government which protects those borders – is essential in the persistence of the concentration camp form in the present day. This is clear with regard to democratic (as distinct from autocratic) nation states; the concentration camp in autocratic states, by contrast, might be more strongly shaped by separate considerations and rely less on the characterisation of camp inmates as being criminals. (The scope of this paper does not allow discussion of the

⁵ For example, see the essay 'Action and "the Pursuit of Happiness"' (Arendt 2018, 208-11.) In this essay, published in 1960, Arendt addresses the philosophical shallowness and unoriginality of the language used in the American Declaration of Independence, whose authors were 'unhappily the prisoners of a tradition whose authentic sources lay beyond their scope of experience as well as beyond the grasp of their understanding'. The authentic grandeur of the Declaration derived instead, she argues, from the fact that it reflected and was inherently bound to action rather than theory; it seemed 'the perfect way of an action to appear in words'.

⁶ This general distinction between the actor as actor and as philosopher may hold for many other kinds of action, including violent action by soldiers in war, pointed to by Arendt in her commendation of *The Warriors* by J Glenn Gray, in which the author, a philosopher and ex-World War 2 US Marine with deep experience of active service, reflects philosophically on the nature of war, beginning his reflections 14 years after concluding his time with an American combat unit. (Arendt 2018, 316-321)

concentration camp in the Peoples Republic of China, a separate instance of the concentration camp form in recent modernity.)

As an example of refugees and asylum-seekers being treated as people worthy of being interned in a concentration camp, we may consider the literary text of *No Friend But the Mountains* by Behrouz Boochani (Boochani 2018). A remark by Stonebridge on Arendt's 'We Refugees' essay of 1943 (Arendt 2007: PAGE — that it contributed not only eyewitness testimony from one refugee but also offered a critical perspective from within the 'lacuna left by the law's inability to imagine a legal cosmopolitanism capable of protecting all of humanity' — can be made also in relation to Boochani's book. (Stonebridge 2011:103)

Boochani's *No Friend But the Mountains* has been discussed in the previous section. It is a literary text that deploys poetry, narrative and critical reflections (or critical theory) to describe the experience of refugees imprisoned in an Australian Government-controlled 'offshore' detention camp for 'irregular' or 'illegal' immigration-seekers in the years leading up to 2019. In this section, I will look briefly at it from the vantage points of two Arendtian ideas: (first) the concentration camp form as discussed in section 3, and (second, and related) the problem of 'the right to have rights.'

For Arendt a defining feature of concentration camp populations is an absence of dangerous opinions and a lack of punishable actions such as expressing those opinions and doing those actions which might warrant incarceration in a prison, under normal circumstances. Reasoning further from this premise, the 'innocence' of these people in fact has become 'the mark of their rightlessness [as well as] the seal of their political status'. (Arendt 2017, 386). Post-Arendt, the non-criminality of concentration camp inmates is a characteristic to which recent historians have also drawn attention (Applebaum 2003, xxxiv; Stone 2017, 6).

Turning to Boochani, it is possible to build on Arendt's insight into the 'innocence' of camp inmates by recalling certain scenes and representations of inmates on Manus Island, as articulated in *No Friend But the Mountains*. One example is the children-detainees of whom Boochani writes. Of children he has met on his asylum-seeking journey, he writes in verse:

Why does the Australian government have to exile little girls of six or seven years old?

Why does the Australian government have to incarcerate them?

Where in the world do they take children captive and throw them inside a cage?

What crime are those children guilty of? (Boochani 2018: 117)

A second example is the portrait of his friend Reza Berati, a fellow-detainee who is killed during the book's riot scene. Berati is portrayed as 'the gentle giant' who, amid scenes of conflict among prisoners and with guards during the pre-riot period in detention, acts as a peacemaker within the world of the 'Prison'. His death amid the violence of the prison-detention centre thus appears starkly as a kind of travesty of justice. The innocence of such people (i.e. not just their non-criminality) is perhaps the most relevant element in Arendt's critique of camps for understanding contemporary immigration detention experience: i.e. both the particular case of what Boochani describes and, more generally, what the world is witnessing on a possibly growing scale with large-scale internment of non-criminal, civilian populations.

A second striking feature of Arendt's analysis of camps is the logic of isolation embedded in their construction. Recalling her words ('Most difficult to imagine and most gruesome to realise

is perhaps the complete isolation which separated the camps from the surrounding world as if they and their inmates were no longer part of the world of the living': Arendt 1994: 239) we may conclude that the 'logic of isolation' has been carried to a new extreme in the experiential world described by Boochani. The practice of 'offshore detention', originated by the Australian Government for immigration detainees after 2001, and witnessed to by Boochani, can easily be seen as a newer adaptation of the same logic. Here inmates are detained at Australian Government expense in remote locations (remote from Australia) by agreement with (generally poorer) Pacific Island nation state governments. In terms of Arendt's idea, this arrangement brings the logic of isolation more plainly into view; it isolates camp inmates further from public visibility (i.e. visibility from the home territory of the imprisoning state) compared with mandatory immigration detention camps on home territory.⁷

As discussed, Arendt depicts concentration camps as being a distinctly modern empirical phenomenon; for her, they have in some sense spontaneously emerged in modern times, explicitly around 1900. Over a century later than this, we have the emergence of the detention regime described by Boochani. Here we may interpret Arendt as offering a contrasting insight to that urged by Boochani. His insistence that the Manus Island Regional Processing Centre should be referred to as 'Manus Prison' is part of a literary-rhetorical strategy that draws on an idea of the carceral continuity of older, pre-existing (and pre-modern) prison institutions as places of punishment and power; one way of expressing this view is that though the Australian Government may *call* the detention site a 'processing centre', it is in fact a prison. The (Arendtian) alternative view is sharper still: the term 'processing centre' disguises the fact that the site is actually a site for the punishment of the innocent. This fact is evident from the fact that the inmates, or at least a majority of them, are civilian, non-criminal (not having been sentenced by courts) and innocent of the crimes or opinions that warrant imprisonment under normal circumstances.

A separate vantage point relates to Arendt's concept of the 'right to have rights'. Arendt's delineation of this problem goes to the practical capability of humanity to protect its own – of human beings to protect other human beings. In her words: 'The right to have rights, or the right to belong to humanity, should be guaranteed by humanity itself. It is by no means certain whether this is possible.' (Arendt 2017, 297)

The fundamental theoretical problem can be summed up thus: for Arendt the history of the nation state since 1789 shows that the nation state has only preserved or protected the rights of its native or naturalised citizens, with the result that those human beings who live in the interstices of the nation state system – in the spaces between nation states, as people who do

⁷ The Australian innovation in offshore detention, initially called (within Australia) 'the Pacific solution', has become influential in policy circles internationally with numerous European governments, including the United Kingdom, having imitated what is termed in Europe 'the Australian solution' by removing immigration detainees to 'third countries' outside the EU, including in Africa and the Middle East, and encouraging third countries with material incentives to build detention infrastructure to help prevent future would-be immigrants from reaching European borders. See Mark Akkerman (2021), *Outsourcing Oppression*.

not belong to any nation state, who are 'stateless' in the sense of not belonging or being welcome anywhere – in fact and in practice have no rights at all.⁸

The persistence of this problem is effectively highlighted by Boochani's work. The particular rights in question for Boochani and his fellow immigration detainees on Manus may be viewed against a standard schedule of human rights, such as the United Nations' Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR). From Arendt's perspective, the most significant right denied to Boochani and his ilk – refugees and stateless people of her day and of ours – is the right to freedom of movement.⁹ This right is explicitly spelled out in the UDHR, Article 13 of which explicitly states: '1. Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each State. 2. Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.' (United Nations 1948)

Others among the UDHR rights are also clearly relevant. Boochani claims that his intention was to travel to Australia and there claim asylum: the right to asylum is likewise one of the itemised UDHR rights (Article 14). This right is clearly denied to Boochani through his detention on Manus Island; indeed its emphatic denial is, from the perspective of the nation state imposing it, precisely the point: it is the primary purpose for the existence of the detention centre with its supporting policy machinery. A third UDHR right denied to the detainees – frequently referred to in Boochani's work – is the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law (Article 6.¹⁰) (United Nations 1948)

However, it is clear that some rights were delivered to Boochani throughout the experience described in *No Friend But the Mountains*. The first of these is the right to life and to have life preserved (Article 3, UDHR: 'the right to life, liberty and security of person'.) While liberty is denied, life is protected. Rather than being left to a fate of drowning in international waters or (in accordance with numerous historic examples of the treatment of unwanted or 'problematic' human beings by states) deliberately exterminated, the incarcerating state here (the Commonwealth of Australia) laboured to construct an offshore detention site for Boochani and his cohort that effectively preserved their lives while ensuring that the reality of punishment (which extended to 'torture', Boochani claims) was subsequently experienced by them.¹¹

In addition to the negative reading of Boochani's situation given above may be added certain acts of care described in the narrative. This includes the authorities' regular giving out of cigarettes to detainees (two packets each) and the affording to detainees of some level of health care. According to Boochani this health care was at least problematic; for example, he claims that no dentist ever visited the detention centre despite internees being encouraged to

⁸ This interstitial nation state problem is arguably the acutest source of the problem of 'bare life', much discussed by Agamben and those working within 'biopolitical' frameworks.

⁹ In a qualifying remark in her essay 'What is Authority?', Arendt says that some of her own distinctions tend to assume that in the modern world 'the freedom of movement of human beings' is under threat everywhere, but is 'abolished radically' only in totalitarian states (Arendt 2006a, 103-4).

¹⁰ It is arguable that Articles 7, 10 and 11 are also relevant in the Boochani case, meaning the whole group of detainees on Manus Island: these Articles relate to equality before the law, a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, and the right to be presumed innocent.

¹¹ A qualification should be added. Certain of the detainees died in detention (for example, Boochani's friend Reza Berati) and self-harm and attempted suicides in detention were also not unknown, as are deaths in immigration detention elsewhere. A general focus on *preservation or prolongation of life* while mindfully punishing those detained, as distinct from wholesale *extermination of life* within immigration detention, seems nevertheless evident from Boochani's text.

register for dental consultations (Boochani 2018, 312). He adds: 'it is rare that any medicine other than Paracetamol is prescribed.' (Boochani 2018, 303)

A most important question when assessing the rights or rightlessness of Boochani as an immigration detainee is that in relation to freedom of speech. The right to freedom of speech is expressed in the UDHR at Article 19: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.' Given that Boochani became a well-known voice of print commentary and reportage and analysis of immigration detention at Manus even before his escape from that detention – and is now an internationally-recognised author of the book under discussion – it is fair comment to say that his right to freedom of expression has not been repressed. *Prima facie*, his freedom of speech has not been restricted in any way.

Nevertheless, the question of *how* the author's right to free speech has been protected is relevant to this discussion. An obvious point to be raised is that insofar as it exists, Boochani's freedom of expression is delivered not by the government of the imprisoning nation state, which has sought to restrict that freedom also, at least during the time of his detention; it has been guaranteed instead by the wider civil societies in Australia. This is an important point because it indicates limits of state (i.e. government) power in certain 'liberal democratic' nation states when it comes to the control of individual rights¹².

However, it remains true that contemporary nation states which are in the business of administering punitive detention regimes for troubling populations that are deemed irregular or troublesome to the government do show a decisive interest in silencing the right to free expression of those from these populations whom they imprison.

Reading Boochani is persuasive in conveying understanding of a democratic nation state's 'criminalisation' of refugees and asylum-seekers, a process closely connected to the persistence of the concentration camp, which can be read as a place for warehousing 'the living dead' (Arendt 2017: 572.)

Section 5: Methodological reflection

A principal method used in this paper is interpretation of a substantial, near-contemporary literary text, namely Behrouz Boochani's 2018 book *No Friend But the Mountains* (Boochani 2018). This interpretive method is used as a device to uncover deeper meanings and significations relating to the empirical, political and theoretical contexts in which the book has emerged. While this exploration begins in a single reader's subjective reading and response to the text, a preceding concern with concentration camps and the thought of Hannah Arendt forms an important part of the background to the adoption of this method. In earlier iterations of the research paper, an attempt was made to criticise the theoretical aspects of this literary work, specifically concerning Boochani's conceptualisations of Manus Prison Theory and of 'the Kyriarchal system', from an Arendtian perspective, in an attempt to demonstrate a presumed

¹² This limitation, or more accurately self-limitation by certain nation states is often referred to by Arendt, for example in her essay 'Introduction into Politics': 'What we today understand by a constitutional government, be it monarchy or a republic, is essentially a government controlled by the governed and limited in its powers and use of force. such limits and controls exist in the name of freedom, for both the society and the individual.' (Arendt 2005, 143)

theoretical 'improvement' which could be established in this way. After feedback and further reflection, an alternative approach has been adopted here. Given the understanding that easy separations between 'the theoretical' and 'the literary' in a work of literary art are difficult if not impossible to achieve, the method adopted now has been to attempt an intertextual reading of the separate work of Boochani and Arendt.¹³

This is inevitably a highly selective process. The potential number of points of intersection between any two writers is so vast as to render the task improbably optimistic without a clear sense of some terrain that they work in common. Biographically there is some common ground between these two. Both Arendt and Boochani at times were inmates of detention centres for alien non-citizens in different countries and lived to write of it. Both developed distinctive theoretical rationales that made sense of their experience and that of others in detention, in some way. As part of those theoretical rationales, each writer has given a privileged status to the value of literature and art – and the language of poetry in particular – in the building of worlds by artists.¹⁴

Nevertheless, to focus on one of the (inevitably, many) differences between Arendt and Boochani is helpful in seeing how a reading of one accompanied by the other may help in perceiving the strengths of both. Despite the caveat above about the difficulties of separating art from theory in an artwork, a distinctive difference between the two thinkers emerges in their respective theoretical perspectives on power, control and the meaning of the punitive carceral regimes which feature in their writings. As A. Naomi Paik has expressed it, the 'Manus Prison Theory' advanced by Boochani 'centers the knowledge of those ensnared in ... border regimes.' It also 'offers[s] us an epistemological framework with which to understand our complex relationships and mutual accountability to one another, a framework that extends a decolonial imaginary.' (Paik 2021)

Paik also mentions that the other key dimension of Boochani's critical theory, 'the kyriarchal system', is a borrowing from radical feminist scholar Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, referring to 'interlocking social systems of oppression including patriarchy, racism, colonialism, militarism, and Indigenous genocide.' Helpfully Paik adds: 'this resonates very strongly with Kimberlé Krenshaw's notion of intersectionality, which was coined around the same time.'

In Boochani's own words, the Kyriarchal system is a 'system of control.' This involves controlling everything among people and in society: 'the relationships between the refugees, Indigenous people [on Manus], local people, Australian officers.' The system's locus of control extends all the way back to the Australian mainland. Boochani's collaborator and translator Omid Tofighian states: 'What happens on Manus impacts Australia in the same way that Australia impacts Manus. So, the relationship is symmetrical, there's a part-whole relationship taking place here.' (Paik 2021)

By contrast, Arendt's theoretical concern with systems of control, insofar as this exists, expresses itself in different ways. Arendt is centrally concerned with totalitarianism, and thus with systems of total social and political control, but she also frequently distinguishes between totalitarian and non-totalitarian governments and totalitarian and non-totalitarian countries.

¹³ I acknowledge editors at *Arendt Studies* for their feedback on an earlier draft, and Dr Marina Connelly for pointing me towards intertextual reading approaches.

¹⁴ This is seen, for example, in Arendt's citing of Pindar's maxim in relation to poetry, that 'A thing said walks in immortality if it is said well' and Boochani's statement that 'the realities of this place can be better exposed through the language of art and literature' (Boochani 2018, 360.)

Some of this sense of distinction is implied in the foregoing discussion of types of concentration camp, as those deployed within totalitarian and non-totalitarian countries and states. In Arendtian terms, we might distinguish totalitarian *practices* from totalitarian *states*, and judge practices like the construction and use of concentration camps as a totalitarian practice engaged in by both totalitarian and non-totalitarian states. Such a distinction could be potentially helpful within ongoing public discourse and debate around policy practices by governments of all kinds.

Consideration of points of difference between the (theoretical) perspectives of Arendt and Boochani might then expand outwards without doing harm to either: indeed, key Arendtian concepts and tools beyond consideration of the concentration camp form could be helpful for seeing aspects of the world created in Boochani's account, and vice-versa. These include, as mentioned in passing in the Introduction, Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil' or the problem of 'thoughtlessness' in relation to extreme evil; the problem of 'the right to have rights' as evidenced in the existence of large populations of people who fall 'into the cracks' or between the interstices of the present day nation state system, structured as it is around few more than 200 rigid and often corrupt government entities ('nation states') spanning the globe; and (perhaps less obviously) both her concepts of 'homelessness and rootlessness' in modernity (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) and her noted distinction between 'the public and the private' (in *The Human Condition*), which together support a view of nation state governments encouraging global pursuit of 'private' or economic gain while simultaneously fearing an associated and uncontrolled increase in people movement which is an inevitable consequence of this worldwide operation.

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