Domestic Homologies and Household Politics:  
A Comment on Patricia Owens’ *Economy of Force*  

by Patchen Markell  

ABSTRACT: This comment draws on the history of the idea of “homology” in biology, as well as on the political thought of Hannah Arendt, to distinguish two possible ways of understanding Patricia Owens’s account of counterinsurgency as an extension of hierarchical practices of household rule, and explores the political stakes of the choice between them.

In July 1967, Hannah Arendt wrote to the editor of *The New Yorker*, William Shawn, to praise Jonathan Schell’s recently published report on Ben Suc, a village of several thousand people along the Saigon River which the American military had recently encircled, bombed, occupied, searched, evacuated, burned, bulldozed, and bombed again. Most of the surviving villagers had been trucked to a hastily constructed relocation camp. Under a “long nylon canopy over the bare earth, without floors or walls,” ringed by barbed wire, “each family was assigned a place about ten feet square” to inhabit, along with their pigs and chickens; a sign under the canopy welcomed them to “the reception center for refugees fleeing communism” (Schell, 1967: 69, 74). “Nothing else I read has the same immediacy,” she told Shawn, adding that “compared with this nylon-concentration camp,” the French internment camp where she had been imprisoned in 1940 “was sheer luxury.”¹ In 1967, Arendt was already sharply critical of American conduct in Vietnam—“God knows the message must have spread by now,” she commented, “that one of the worst fates that can befall a people is to be liberated by us”²—but when she came to write about the war at length, her concern was with the role of deception, and of the insidious “remoteness from reality” that she referred to as “defactualization,” in the making of American foreign policy (Arendt, 1972: 20). Notwithstanding her own preoccupation with the anti-political effects both of violence and of the reduction of public life to “collective
housekeeping” (Arendt, 1958: 28–29), Arendt did not comment on the striking combination of physical destruction and social administration—the building of canopies, the digging of latrines, the registration of families, the rationing of food—that Schell had documented in the American-led program of “pacification” in Vietnam. Nor did she relate this war, except in passing, to the sweeping historical accounts she had given in earlier books of the modern development of capitalism and the nation-state system, which were both crucial constituents of the process she referred to as the “rise of the social” (Arendt, 1958: 38; Arendt, 2004: 160–61).

In her marvelous new book, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social*, Patricia Owens (2015) does what Arendt did not—and much more. Owens shows that the “armed social work” characteristic of post-World War II counterinsurgency campaigns—not just in Vietnam but in Malaya and Kenya, Afghanistan and Iraq—has to be understood as a peculiarly modern instantiation of the old art of household management or *oikonomia*, which had classically been regarded as the province of the despotic household head. Only such an account of counterinsurgency can capture its characteristic interweaving of the application of violence and the ministration of aid, each of which “negate[s] the political subjectivity of the governed” in its own way (37). Yet the connection between counterinsurgency and household management has been obscured by a powerful fiction: that modernity simply represents the liberation of a “society” of freely associating individuals from the despotic rule of the *paterfamilias*. Locke supplants Filmer; status gives way to contract; an expanding commercial economy breaks the fetters of the feudal mode of production: in each version of this story, the traditional art of *oikonomia* recedes in importance, replaced by new sciences that search for the immanent laws of social behavior, whether these incline toward harmony or toward crises that require pacifying intervention. To displace this fiction, Owens undertakes an
ambitious re-narration of these developments, recasting the “rise of the social” as the
continuation of household management in a novel, scaled-up, impersonal form—and, along the
way, exposing the ways in which “social theory” itself began as a project of controlling and
depoliticizing disorder. The resulting argument moves with enviable mastery among disparate
registers—from grand narratives about the emergence of capitalism or of social policy, for
example, to deft, perceptive readings of the rhetoric of American counterinsurgency field
manuals—and its long time-scale and theoretical sophistication never obscure the reality of
ongoing imperial war that gives the book its impetus. Little else one reads on these subjects will
have the same immediacy.

One source of this book’s dynamism lies in its synthesis of two modes of argument that,
in the abstract, might seem to conflict. On the one hand, this is a work of historicization:
especially in the face of unreflective, ahistorical uses of the idea of the “social” to refer to
ordered human interaction in general, Owens documents the relatively recent emergence of
discourses of “society” and the “social,” identifying these as a specific kind of response to
radical challenges from below to existing systems of political representation, surplus-value
extraction, and imperial government in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, *Economy of
Force* also uncovers continuities that are belied by an exclusive focus upon historical change: in
the face of evolutionary liberal narratives in which “society” emerges as a precipitate of the shift
from status to contract, but also in response to Foucault’s (2007: 106) claim that the emergence
of the biopolitical government of “populations” was something “absolutely new,” Owens argues
that the government of “society” is itself a new mode of household management. Owens’s
reliance on the concept of the “household” to capture relative constancy, and thereby to
counterbalance the historical novelty of the idea of the “social,” is reflected in her frequent use of the phrase “household ontology”—which does not imply that households are always and everywhere the same (Owens is clear about this) but which does suggest that, their historical variation notwithstanding, they do share some essential features. For Owens, these two modes of argument come together in the idea of a domestic “homology” (6): a deeply rooted structural likeness, transcending differences in function and appearance, that links various forms of social government, including modern counterinsurgency, with older forms of despotic household rule. This homology, Owens proposes, rather than the more familiar but also more superficial idea of a “domestic analogy” between individuals in a state of nature and states in an anarchic international system, is the real significance of the “domestic” for international politics.

The distinction between “homology” and “analogy” that Owens employs has an interesting history of its own, which overlaps chronologically with the story she tells about the rise of the social. As her own explanation of these terms hints, the classic version of the distinction comes from biology, and specifically from morphology and anatomy, where “homology” refers to a structural likeness across differences in function (e.g. between fins and wings), while “analogy” refers to a likeness in function despite differences in underlying structure (e.g. between feathers and hair). Likenesses of both kinds have been discussed by taxonomists going back to Aristotle, but the canonical formulation of the distinction between homology and analogy was given in 1843 by the English biologist Richard Owen (1843: 374; Boyden, 1943; Panchen, 1999). What made the idea of homology so compelling in the first half of the nineteenth century is that, by illuminating a field of relations among species that transcended function, it challenged the traditional view in which God created each kind of animal separately, giving it just those features suited to the fixed place and purposes he had
assigned it the order of nature (Appel, 1987; Amundson, 1998; Amundson, 2007). Yet the force of such “structuralist” challenges to functionalism was not confined to biology: in the France of the July Revolution and the Britain of the radical thirties, the notion of a “unity of composition” across nature, perceptible in its homologies, could also seem threatening to established hierarchies of functionally differentiated social status and the forms of religious authority that sanctioned them. This possibility drew some political radicals to embrace the idea, led some conservative figures in the scientific establishment to oppose it, and spawned a complicated field of attempts to accommodate structuralism while stripping it of its politically and theologically revolutionary implications (Desmond, 1989). In this setting, the question of the basis of homological likeness was especially fraught. While biologists now generally regard homology as an expression of descent from a common ancestor, for example, Owen instead conceived homologues as instances of the same “archetypal or primal pattern,” making explicit reference to the Platonic ideas or forms—a conception that reassuringly subordinated the possibility of evolutionary change within nature to the overarching power of the “Divine mind which planned the Archetype” and “foreknew all its modifications” (Owen, 2007: 2, 86; see also Richards, 1987; Padian, 2007).

The point of this history is not to saddle Owens with the baggage of pre-Darwinian biology. But it should at least indicate that the idea of homology has never been as straightforward as it might seem, and that its ambiguities can have important political stakes. It also foreshadows the series of interrelated questions about the basis and objects of Owens’s own “domestic homology” that I pursue here. In so doing, I also bring Economy of Force into further conversation with the work of Hannah Arendt, not for the sake of registering disagreements with Owens’s interpretations, nor for the sake of holding her accountable to Arendt’s ideas—Owens is
a meticulous reader, and in any case, *Economy of Force* wears its Arendtian influences lightly—
but because Arendt’s idea of the “rise of the social” is enough of lodestar for Owens that some reference to Arendt’s work will help sharpen my questions about the course she has plotted in this remarkable book.

If “society” and the “social” are relatively new, households and household management, in Owens’s story, are very old; and while they have taken significantly different forms across time and space, what matters most for Owens are the invariant features of these phenomena. The household, Owens writes, is a “historically variable uni[t] of rule in which the life processes of members are reproduced and the collective unit of the household is maintained” (7). It is not reducible to the modern understanding of the “family” as a conjugal unit (89): historically, households have been conceived as including non-kin servants, slaves, tenants, animals—even “inanimate” property (3, 96, 146). The relations among members of a household are, however, “always” hierarchical (89), with some ruling and others being ruled “according to the assumed biological and other status attributes of different members” (8). This rule is usually based on “violent compulsion,” and it is always “despotic” (37, 241), though the despotism it involves need not be direct and personal, but can be “indirect and decentralized” as well as “impersonal” and “bureaucratic” (37, 280). There is an internal connection between the despotic relations among members of the household and the fact that household rule is concerned with the basic needs of embodied life: through the strategic fulfillment or painful frustration of those needs, household rulers compel their subordinates’ obedience “as if it were a dictate of biological necessity” (242). Finally, one of the “defining” features of household rule is the attempt—never entirely successful—to reduce the governed members of the household to tractable objects of
administration rather than “political agents” in their own right (37). The ancient oikos, most familiar from Aristotle’s portrait in the Politics, represents just “one particular understanding of households in a relatively brief historical context” (8), yet it is an especially useful illustration of all the features Owens assigns to households in general, and it is thus the first of “four very broad household forms” she traces through European and North American history (92–95).

In claiming that the “rise of the social” does not displace household management but gives it a new form, Owens could be asserting continuity in (at least) two different ways, which one might think of as corresponding to two different readings of the place of the classical oikos in the argument of Economy of Force—and also to two different understandings of the objects involved in this “domestic homology.” On the one hand, the idea of the oikos may be meant, as my exposition so far has implied, to give Owens’s readers a concrete example of the archetypal household, an illustration of how its essential features fit together in a specific context. On this reading, to say that the “rise of the social” and of sociocratic forms of government represent new forms of household rule is to say that these new phenomena fit the archetype: they have all the essential features of households and household management as exemplified in the oikos. And, crucially, it is also to say that the household itself is involved in this homology: the claim, as Owens puts it, is that “the modern social realm is a distinctive form of household,” or again that, “rather than the antithesis of household government, the nation-state itself is a distinctively modern and bureaucratic social form of household” (7, 9; emphases added).

On the other hand, the classical oikos may be meant instead to represent an important and unrecognized ancestor of certain modern forms of government, a way of organizing human life whose problematic legacy “still structures much modern thought” even now, “long after the ancient oikos and its polis” have disappeared (95). On this reading, to say that the “rise of the
“social” and of sociocratic forms of government represent new forms of household rule is to say that they can be traced back genealogically to this and other older forms. And, importantly, on this reading the object in which this continuity exists need not be the household as such: it may be, instead, certain “techniques and organizational devices” of modern government that are “homologous with older forms of paternalistic and despotic” household rule (129–130); or the element of continuity may lie in discourses about households, ways of representing the nature of household life and making it meaningful (94–95) whose transmission across time and space can be charted through historical research of the kind Owens herself performs. These two possibilities are not necessarily logically incompatible. But it seems to me that the first way of conceiving of the “domestic homology” comes with significant theoretical costs—indeed, that it threatens the delicate balance Owens pursues in *Economy of Force* between the acknowledgment of the novelty involved in the “rise of the social” and the establishment of the continuities of household rule. By unpacking these costs, I hope to persuade Owens—against a background of broad agreement with the purposes and claims of the book—to opt decisively for the second alternative.

Notice that in order to make the claim that the modern social realm is a household (a claim necessary for the first but not the second conception of the “domestic homology” I’ve described) Owens has to omit certain features from the household archetype—features that are important constituents of some other influential uses of the concept of the “household” that, like hers, rightly refuse to equate the household with the conjugal family. The most notable of these features is *co-residence*: as the introduction to a classic anthology of comparative research on households by anthropologists and historians puts it, families (in the modern sense) are “kinship groupings that need not be localized” while households are “task-oriented residence groups”
(Netting et al., 1984: xx). For Owens, by contrast, “households are the units of rule in which the life processes of members are reproduced, whether or not they are co-residents or kin” (35); this is what allows the household, on her definition, to be scaled up to the level of the nation-state or society as a whole. For similar reasons, Owens also de-emphasizes the connection between households and *houses* or other physical dwellings (89): “households,” she writes, “are not defined primarily by their location but by the nature of the relationships between members” (98); and while households are always “located in space,” this space is “not always fixed or strictly bounded,” which makes households “fluid,” “porous,” and “mobile” (8). This allows Owens to conceive of overseas empires, sustained by the razing of villages and forced relocation of populations during counterinsurgency campaigns, as households, too (98).

The problem is not that the resulting definition is wrong—whatever that could mean with regard to a contested concept like “household.” Nor is the resulting definition implausible or useless, as Owens amply shows. But a definition of the household *itself* that is sufficiently minimalist to encompass nation-states, societies, and overseas empires may also sacrifice some traction when it comes to indexing the nature and extent of the transformations in household rule that are involved in the “rise of the social.” The idea of a household as a co-residential unit, for example, had allowed Aristotle (1998: 1256a12–1258b8) to distinguish the kind of wealth-acquisition that belonged to *oikonomia*—limited in extent by the non-infinite needs of each relatively determinate, localized *oikos*—from unlimited acquisition. Capitalism, by contrast, orients production and exchange instead toward infinite expansion, abstracting the notion of value from qualitatively determinate usefulness—a development that Arendt figured in *The Human Condition* by referring to the resulting social realm as “constantly growing” (Arendt, 1958: 47; see also Arendt, 2004: 170ff). Whatever the elements of continuity between the
techniques of management involved in the government of this new “social” system and those that had been characteristic of earlier forms of household rule, this new form is also at odds with key features of the old ones: though the social realm may be the medium through which most people are now bound to meet the necessities of biological life, the rise of the social also wrenched those necessities into a different role: no longer the organizing purpose of the domain of capitalist production and exchange, but something more like the raw material on which its engine runs. Likewise, if the spatial context for the activities through which people meet those needs is now fluid and mobile, detached from any necessary “location in a particular part of the world” (Arendt, 1958: 61–62), this mobility was itself the result of a violent historical transformation that was achieved in part through widespread expropriation, including the mass expulsion of peasants from their homes and the burning of whole villages (Marx, 1977: 889–92). The point is not that Owens overlooks these facts: she doesn’t (111–116). But any version of the “domestic homology” that depends on a definition of the household in general from which co-residence and location have always already been subtracted—at the level of the concept—cannot do justice to the richness of Owens’s own narrative, which shows how and at what cost these subtractions have been achieved in history.

This, I suspect, may be why two of Owens’s own key sources for the idea of the social realm as a domain of “collective housekeeping”—Arendt (1958: 28–29) and Gunnar Myrdal (1953)—did not actually endorse the claim that society or the nation-state is a household. Myrdal (1953: 140ff) kept the term “social housekeeping” in scare-quotes, and his purpose was not to endorse the idea but to expose the unavowed assumptions on which its use in economic theory and discourse depended. Arendt, too, treated this notion less as a first-order reality than as a discursive artifact associated with certain schools of “scientific thought,” and wrote that “the
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A collective of families economically organized into the facsimile of one super-human family is what we call ‘society’” (Arendt, 1958: 28–29, emphases added). I have suggested elsewhere that Arendt’s project in The Human Condition is not simply an attempt to explain or to evaluate historical developments like the rise of capitalism and the nation-state, but a discursively self-conscious inquiry into the ways in which our inherited theoretical vocabulary fails us when we use it to try to make sense of our historical situation and its stakes (Markell, 2014: 122–23). That orientation, with its focus on the mutation of political and theoretical discourse over time, and on the frictions that arise between the world and the words people use to try to capture it, seems to me to align Arendt squarely with the second conception of the “domestic homology” described earlier, whose continuities lie not in the conformity of a succession of household forms to an archetype of the household as such, but in the creative transposition of “techniques and organizational devices” (129) of household rule, along with the associated terms, discourses, and ideologies, into new settings. And it is this kind of genetic continuity that Economy of Force itself already documents in compelling detail—from its sensitive genealogies of social policy and social theory, in which Owens carefully distinguishes between the historical changes constitutive of what we now call the “social realm,” and the later development of discourses of “society” and “the social” as never-entirely satisfactory attempts to grasp and respond to those changes and their effects (16–17), to its fascinating account of the transmission of ideas about pacification from French North Africa to Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan, and beyond.

It is clear throughout Economy of Force that Owens’s critical interest in the persistence of household rule is informed by her commitment to a compelling vision of politics as something fundamentally different from the production of order to which counterinsurgency is devoted, and
also as something more or other than the administration of the necessities of life. In the concluding chapter to the book, Owens spells out these commitments in detail, explaining that “politics” and the “hierarchical household” represent “profoundly different, even antithetical kinds of relationship between people” (282). As Owens unpacks this fundamental difference, she makes two important theoretical moves that I think stand in some tension with each other, reflecting—I will suggest in conclusion—their affinities with the two different versions of the domestic homology I have identified here.

Owens’s first move is to suggest that “it may be possible to identify what politics is by examining what the counterinsurgency household seeks to domesticate”; the result, she says, would be a “theory of politics as non-domestication, the activity of resisting despotic rule,” whose focus would be on “episodic and fragmentary moments of political action” (282, 284). This first move—reminiscent of Sheldon Wolin’s (1996: 43) table-turning embrace of the critique of democracy as a “rebellious moment” rather than a “form of government”—reacts to the dominance of the techniques, orientations, and ideologies of household rule by grasping them whole and rejecting them. This is why it fits well with an archetypal view of the household in which—historical variation notwithstanding—concern with biological necessity, hierarchy, despotism, and hostility to the political agency of the subordinated invariably go hand in hand. But Owens also proposes that a conception of politics attentive to its radical difference from the “hierarchical household” would not necessarily exclude “the administration of life processes,” but could involve “organis[ing] life processes in a properly political manner; that is, attentive to—rather than destructive of—human plurality and freedom” (282). This second move pushes the argument in a different direction. While Owens initially seemed to set aside the temporally extended, institutionalized activities of organizing, governing, and regulating in favor of episodic
resistance, she now suggests that these former activities might themselves be or become political. Against the background of a book that at least intermittently suggests that organized relationships devoted to the satisfaction of life’s necessities are *always* hierarchical and despotic, this second move recasts the household archetype as a contingent assemblage that could have been, and could yet be, composed differently.

For me, Owens’s second move—and thus also the second version of the domestic homology—is especially exciting because it breaks out of the deep argumentative rut in twentieth-century political theory that has consistently pitted the distinctiveness and dignity of the political against the concerns of everyday, embodied life. It is also—surprisingly enough, given Arendt’s reputation as a sentry policing the boundary between authentic political action and the anti-political activities of labor and work—a deeply Arendtian move. It expresses the insight that the experience of necessity in the form of what Arendt (1958: 119–20) had called “the burden of biological life”—our ineliminable need for sustenance and shelter, which requires “toil and trouble” to satisfy—is *not* always already identical to the experience of necessity involved in the compulsion of some people by others: instead, the equation of these two kinds of necessity is the persistent but contingent achievement of discourses and practices of household rule, which exploit the former kind of necessity in order to impose the latter kind. For Arendt, one of the adhesives that had bound together biologically given necessity and the imposed necessity of domination in this way was a third kind of necessity: *logical* necessity, which she said possesses the “same force of compulsion as the driving necessity which regulates the other functions of our bodies” (Arendt, 1958: 171), and which she found to be the animating principle both of totalitarian ideology and of the “defactualized” elaboration and application of calculative theories by expert “problem-solvers” during the Vietnam War (Arendt, 2004: 604–608; Arendt,
1972: 33–43). The essay of Jonathan Schell’s that impressed Arendt so much ended with a detailed recounting of the fate of the empty village of Ben Suc, first leveled by bulldozers and then bombed again, “as though,” he wrote, “having once decided to destroy it, we were now bent on annihilating every possible indication that the village of Ben Suc had ever existed” (Schell, 1967: 43). Schell’s essay was an act of insurgency on behalf of the reality that had literally been flattened with the help of the ideological lamination of different kinds of necessity. So, too, is Patricia Owen’s *Economy of Force*: in its vivid account of the persistence and mutation of discourses and practices of household rule and their extension into the governance of European and American empires; in its exposure of the incapacity of existing social theory to grasp this phenomenon and its political stakes; and in the alternatives it describes and performs.

REFERENCES


Arendt H (1972) *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harvest/HBJ)


2. Ibid.

3. Readers interested in Owens’s detailed interpretations of Arendt’s thought should consult her earlier book (Owens, 2007).