

Hannah Arendt: Many in One

By Regula Staempfli, www.regulastaempfli.ch (copyright) Article published in German in the Swiss Newspaper “Der Bund”, October 14th 2006



On 14th October 2006 Hannah Arendt would have celebrated her hundredth birthday. A classic thinker on modernity avant la lettre, she has divided opinion amongst philosophers - and not least among feminists - like few others. Hannah Arendt's ideas are always better in the original than in the versions relayed by her interpreters.

The philosopher of ‘thinking without boundaries’ wrote and engaged in politics throughout her eventful life (1906-1975) with an energy which, to this day, still manages to inspire admiration. Hannah Arendt was simultaneously a philosopher, a historian, a politician and a journalist. In short, she was many in one. In this she is essentially a classic thinker on modernity “avant la lettre” and, as such, she is increasingly our best choice of guide through the thicket of post-modernity.

Arendt had learnt the art of philosophical thinking in Germany, having studied under Edmund Husserl, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger (with whom she had an affair in her student years). Her experience of National Socialist totalitarianism would later alter her thinking in radical ways. Germany took away not only her citizenship but also her faith in the political trustworthiness and instincts of intellectuals: “The fact that the Nazis were our enemies – dear God, we didn’t need to witness Hitler’s rise to power, to find that out! Surely it had been obvious for at least the last four years to everyone who was not soft in the head! (...) The real problem, our personal problem, was not what our enemies were doing, but what our friends were doing.”

Tools for Thinking

Her experiences turned Hannah Arendt into a radical thinker, courageous in her actions and cogent in her life-decisions. Deprived of her German citizenship, she narrowly escaped

deportation to a concentration camp in 1933. She fled to Paris where, in 1941, thanks to the support of Zionist organisations, she was at last able to escape from the inferno of war. In her luggage she carried texts by Walter Benjamin, which she later published and translated into English with great dedication, thereby saving them for posterity. Once in the United States, she embarked on her large oeuvre, beginning with a detailed study of the sources and structures of totalitarianism. In her writings she constructs tools for thinking and for political activity, in a spirit far ahead of her times. This she achieved through that fresh and independent way of thinking and with that acute sense of differentiation in political and ethical matters which would mark her whole life.

Indifference: The Great Danger

In her lecture on the nature of evil, for example, Arendt winds up her deliberations with the remarkable statement that society must re-enact the democratic process time and again, through ideas, examples and projects involving the entire community. This implies, for example, that, in the unlikely event of anyone insisting on wanting to live with the notorious serial wife-killer Bluebeard, the only sensible reaction should be to prevent him or her from going anywhere near the man. Arendt comments: “And yet, I am afraid that it is far more likely that someone will invoke indifference and argue that any social order is good enough as it is. This lack of commitment is widespread and represents the greatest danger of all, both morally and politically. Associated with it (...) is also the well-known general tendency to abstain from any evaluative critique.” Arendt sees such a glaring renunciation of political responsibility as the seat of the truly scandalous or, more accurately, of the *scandala*: those stones that trip you up and precipitate the advent of evil in all its horror and banality. For Arendt, this attitude is particularly typical of the intellectual for whom, in true post-modern style, everything has become equivalent, equally valid and therefore indifferent. Given such views, it goes without saying that Hannah Arendt’s professional career wasn’t smooth and easy.

Easy she was not

To survive financially Arendt initially had to rely on the support of Zionist organisations, which, however, she was increasingly able to supplement through stipends and, later on, through the income from her books, prizes and various teaching contracts and lectureships. It was thanks to her journalism and essays that she was able to finance her wide-ranging travels which – after the War – took her back to Europe and also to Germany and to new State of Israel. *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* is her report of the Eichmann trial written for the

renowned *New Yorker* magazine. It proved to be a document which, in the early 1960s, triggered one of the most important philosophical and political controversies of the twentieth century. The many intellectual, emotional and political attacks she sustained in consequence only motivated her to continue to write all the more productively. Through the philosophy set out in her “The Human Condition” she fashioned a revolutionary interpretation of modernism and the modern age. She argued that the revolutionary - “discovery of heaven” (Staempfli) - through Copernicus and Co had brought about progress, yet equally the loss of the world as perceived - not only the loss of old perceptions, but the loss of certainty. With Copernicus and Descartes we learned that things were not as they seemed, that what we had taken as the most basic of truths was not so: “De omnibus dubitandum est”.

With that came the loss of common understanding and, at the same time, an increasingly obsessive and compensatory self-appraisal. Our attention shifted from the understanding of polis and democracy towards introspection. The discovery of heaven and the loss of a common world made the division between the public and the private, between representation and identity more and more vague as the subjectivity of perception takes centre stage. A division which is – in Arendt’s view – the basis for any politics. Insisting on the division Arendt earned the reputation of being a ‘conservative revolutionary’ while, at the same time, also alienating her from the political left and, not least, from the feminists. The slogan “the private is public” of 1968 horrified the great classic scholar and philosopher.

Can One Love a Collective?

Arendt’s philosophy always takes the side of the individual rather than the collective. The rigour with which this intellectual embraced her own principles is shown by her famous confrontation with the Jewish intellectual Gershom Scholem at the height of the difficult Eichmann controversy. Scholem accused Arendt of having no love (Ahabath Israel), no compassion for the Jewish people. She replied : “You are absolutely right, I do not have such a love (...). First of all, I have never, in my whole life, been able to ‘love’ a people or a collective (...). Indeed, I can only love my friends and am incapable of any other love. Secondly, even if I were capable of loving the Jewish people, I would find that kind of love suspect, since I myself am Jewish.”

Similarly Hannah Ardent felt no love for women as a collective, which to this day angers feminists and feminist philosophers. But reading Arendt it is clear that the German philosopher does not make much of the concept of ‘us’- no matter where it establishes itself. Why should

she? Equality for her is a concept for politics, not for humans. In her view humans are free, different and plural, not bound in an identity collective but bound for a common world.

In consequence Arendt does not take to the categories established by the sociologists. Her stringent opposition to mass in whatever shape, her resistance to “fit in” makes her work fascinating and unsettling. Human beings tend to link the concept of ‘us’ to promises of political redemption. Arendt’s understanding of the world, and also the loss of the world, can only be appreciated by those who have faith in the human ability to shape the world communally, democratically and peacefully. Such an understanding of the nature of humankind needs neither the pathos of solidarity or identity nor a euphoric embrace of the entity of humanity.

A Life Fulfilled

In *On Revolution* Arendt argues that, more than anything else, politics need good communication, competence in the shape of a thorough education, and the ability to make informed political judgements. Politics must be about facing facts without prejudice and combining power with ethical considerations so as to counteract any tendency towards ready fundamentalisms. Those who read Hannah Arendt’s texts will learn that the democratic process requires not love but justice, honesty, common sense and unfettered dialogue.

Hannah Arendt died of a heart attack in 1975 in New York after a rich intellectual life and two marriages, of which the one with Heinrich Blücher may well be called a happy one. Her life was also shaped by passionate and intellectually rewarding friendships with such personalities as Karl Jaspers, Mary McCarthy, Kurt Blumenfeld and Günther Stern, alias Günther Anders, her first husband.

The political scientist Regula Stämpfli comes from Berne and lives and works in Brussels and Switzerland. She writes and teaches on the subjects of politics and political philosophy, see www.regulastaempfli.ch

Translation by Agnes Cardinal, Kent and Derek Reed, Brussels

Selected Works (German originals)

- Hannah Arendt *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*. Piper, München, 1986
- Hannah Arendt *Eichmann In Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen*. Piper, München, 1986
- Hannah Arendt *Vita activa oder Vom Tätigen Leben*. Piper, München, 2006
- Hannah Arendt *Macht und Gewalt*. Piper, München, 1970
- Hannah Arendt *Über das Böse. Eine Vorlesung zu Fragen der Ethik*. Piper, München, 2006

Selected Biographical Material

- *Hannah Arendt und Mary McCarthy: Im Vertrauen. Briefwechsel 1949-1975*. Piper, München, 1995
- Laure Adler *Dans le pas de Hannah Arendt*. Editions Gallimard, Paris, 2005
- Seyla Benhabib *Hannah Arendt. Die melancholische Denkerin der Moderne*. Suhrkamp. Frankfurt am Main, 1996
- J.M.Schönherr-Mann *Hannah Arendt. Wahrheit, Macht, Moral*. Verlag Beck, München, 2006
- Kurt Sontheimer *Hannah Arendt*. Piper, München 2006