

Translated excerpt

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Hannah Arendt. The Art of Political Thinking

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Introduction

"When one has no character, one has to apply a method, for better or worse"
Albert Camus, *The Fall*

On reading classics, Italo Calvino once said that "every reading [...] is in fact a rereading"[add endnote1 here] Today, Hannah Arendt is undoubtedly one of the classical authors in the history of political ideas, even if – or perhaps precisely because – her thinking is anything but undisputed. According to Calvino, being controversial is a genuine feature of the classics. Classical authors can be recognized in that they repeatedly challenge new interpretations while shaking off the old ones that surround them like a "dust cloud of critical discourse"[add endnote2 here]

Arendt's work has already acquired quite a bit of dust in the not so many decades of its reception – and managed to shake it off again. Especially the older phases of the Arendt reception are even today part of the history of ideas. For example, her theorizing has been taken up again in light of the democratic revolutions of 1989. Or, there is the debate between Seyla Benhabib and Dana Villa as to whether Arendt should be understood as a postmodern or agonal thinker or as a discourse-ethical and consensus-oriented one.[add endnote3 here] The most serious differences between interpretations of Arendt are also due to the fact that very different questions have been directed at her work in different phases of its reception. A work does not achieve the status of a classic when people arrive at a kind of final interpretation of it, as presented in textbooks and manuals. On the contrary: it gets to that point because readings of it, or the possibilities of its interpretation, have not been exhausted. Classics do not get worn out. They can be reconsidered at any time and do not stop speaking to us. For Calvino, it even seems necessary that we consistently direct new, specific questions at classical texts and not make the mistake of looking at them from a general (and rather stale) perspective: "To be able to read the classics you have to know 'from where' you are reading them; otherwise both the book and the reader will be lost in a timeless cloud." [add endnote4 here] This "from where" stems from the questions raised by the present-day problems of the reader, but that does not necessarily mean, or have to mean, that we ask immediately whether the theorist is still relevant, as if he or she were an oracle who had miraculously identified our present-day problems a long time ago.

This book attempts to see Arendt as a thinker in her own right. We should not make the mistake of treating her as if she were part of a particular tradition of thought or theory-building. Rather, I see the strength or "classicality" of Arendt's thinking in its resistance to becoming too firmly integrated into academic discourses. This is the position from which I would like to revisit Hannah Arendt's work, for I believe that Arendt's specific *attitude of thinking* [Denkhaltung] can be made productive from today and for today. Moreover, her approach can be particularly helpful in reflecting on current-day politics. What is special about Arendt's work, in my view, is that it is not a purely conceptual (or

definitional) theory of the political but instead a set of thought exercises, i.e., an attempt to adopt a certain *attitude toward the world* in the course of thinking. "Love of the world"[*Liebe zur Welt*] is what Arendt called this attitude in various places, especially in her *Denktagebuch* and her letters.

Arendt's singular style of thinking has repeatedly raised the question of what she really was: a philosopher, a political theorist, an intellectual, or a critic? And in addressing this question, she more often than not caused a stir. Consider her response when Günter Gaus touched on criticisms of her report on the Eichmann trial in a televised interview with her:

"That my tone of voice is predominantly ironic is completely true. The tone in this case is really the person. When people reproach me as having accused the Jewish people, that is a malicious lie – propaganda and nothing more. Yet when it comes to my tone, that's an objection to me as a person; and that's something I can't do anything about." [add endnote5 here]

In making such terse disclosures, Arendt certainly contributed to the fact that *the way* she said something, and not necessarily *what* she said, would create disturbance. At the same time, it is something that really has not been examined more closely until now. That said, there is another reason why Hannah Arendt's attitude of thinking – the *how* of her thought, and the internal connection between this attitude and what can be understood as her political theory – has received so little attention to this point. It has to do with the way that the history of ideas has been written and understood, that is, how we ordinarily interpret political theories. Examining an attitude or a style of thinking, in fact, is a fundamental break with our conventional notions of what theory is. As political theorists, we are accustomed to reconstructing theories systematically and "rationally"; and as historians of ideas, we are likewise accustomed to understanding theories starting with their historical context. However, this method of rational reconstruction does not work for a theorist who deliberately refused to present a systematic theory of politics.

Tony Judt, for instance, regards Arendt as a bad theorist yet also a great critic. In his *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten 20th Century*, he writes that Arendt's political philosophy is thoroughly flawed: "[S]he is every bit as diffuse and muddled as her critics claim [...]. Categories tumble over one another, their meaning unclear and variable [...] Arendt may or may not have been confused, but she is certainly confusing." [add endnote6 here] Yet at the same time, he considers Arendt a good, i.e., passionate critic, one who is not afraid to judge and raise her own voice. Yet at the same time, in his view, Arendt's thoughts are, on the whole, so contradictory that they cannot lead to good theory, that is, to any "conceptually all-embracing [. . .] account of how we got where we are" [add endnote7 here]. Arendt's attitude of thinking may thus resemble that of Michael Walzer, who argues that good social critics do not need a theory to formulate relevant insights; instead, they merely need to practice three virtues: "Courage, compassion and a good eye." [add endnote8 here] It is, according to Walzer, precisely a rigid theoretical framework that blinds a thinker to the real problems of a society. Arendt herself puts forward a similar argument. When approached from the

abstract point of view of the theorist, politics cannot really be understood adequately. For the political is the sphere of appearance, of opinions, and of plurality. In some sense, these can only be opened up from an internal perspective. In the foreword to her *Vita Activa*, Arendt writes that she does not try to think about solutions to political problems from a theoretical, universal, and (thus almost) godlike perspective, citing the problem of "a society of laborers without laborers"[add endnote9 here] – a problem which is still virulent! Instead, her book merely presents a "reflection on the conditions under which [...] humans have lived thus far":

"The present work offers no answer to all these questions, preoccupations, and problems. Whatever answers there are, are being provided every day and everywhere by human beings. And as far as these are to be considered solutions to problems, they are a matter of practical politics that rely – and must rely – on the agreement of many. They are not and must not be theoretical considerations made by an individual, which never reflect more than one person's opinion, as if we were somehow dealing with matters for which there were only one possible solution."[add endnote10 here]

Arendt is thereby proposing a radically different view of the political, one in which the plurality of perspectives is central. Politics, according to her, always takes place "between human beings", and this space is a constant source of the new that comes into the world when individuals meet and allow their perspectives to collide. For Arendt, this space cannot be grasped from the standpoint of a privileged observer; for that is the location of the philosopher ever since Plato allowed the philosopher step out of the cave under the firmament of eternal ideas. "It could be," she maintains in her *Denktagebuch*, "that 'political philosophy' is a *contradictio in adjecto*." [add endnote11 here]

Tony Judt could be thus be countered by arguing that Arendt was deliberately a "bad theorist" who refused to turn political thinking into a theory. This is similar to how she put it in her televised interview with Günter Gaus: "I want to see politics, in some sense, with eyes unclouded by philosophy." [add endnote12 here] Arendt is diagnosing the tradition of Western political thought that commenced with Plato, as an inability to deal with the skewed nature of politics. [add endnote13 here] And Arendt wishes to "to have no part" in this "occupational disorder of the philosophers," [add endnote14 here], who fundamentally mistrust the world and thus its politics as well. [add endnote15 here] Philosophers, one might say tersely with Arendt, do not simply want to understand politics. Rather, in a sense, they wish to question it from a higher vantage point, explaining and arranging it while ultimately (and always) mastering it. Now it is actually difficult to imagine a philosophy that would question or challenge nothing, i.e., that would not be mistrusting. For philosophy is the search for truth; it makes us aware of prejudices and must thereby look behind things. However, in Arendt's eyes, that's precisely what is inherently problematic about politics. For her, politics can only be understood by someone who gives up this isolated observer position, and thus the need for absolute objectivity, choosing to embark on the adventure of plurality, opinions, and

appearances. To put a point on it: Arendt does not mistrust the world but rather theories. When she speaks of theories (and she often does so pejoratively) Arendt does not mean the activity of thinking, "What is the object of our thinking? The experience! Nothing else! And, if we lose the ground of experience, then we end up in all kinds of theory." [add endnote16 here]

For Arendt, the task of philosophy is not to provide moral guidelines or justifications for action. Nor is it to control politics. However, she also seems to be telling us that we should instead learn to trust that the antidote to political evils cannot be found in theory but only in action and in communicating with one another. In Arendt's assessment, it is the invention of philosophers to transfer the necessity of justification from the field of politics, that is, of action, into the field of philosophy:

"Critical thinking, and thus thought, emerged as a crucial factor in public political life and the sciences when Plato reproached his predecessors for not knowing how to give an account [Rechenschaft]. [...] This giving of an account for something was originally political: it was what the Athenians (and only they) were demanding of their politicians. Thinking thus demanded giving this account of itself in dialogue with itself." [add endnote17 here]

By contrast, Arendt's thinking is about reconnecting thought back to the real world, to the intricate paths taken by political action; it is about concrete experience. What we find in Arendt is not a rational, systematic theory of politics – I am at least suggesting that we *not* read her that way – but rather the testimony of a certain attitude [Haltung], an exercise in the art of dealing with the "crooked wood of humanity," as Isaiah Berlin once called it, borrowing from Kant. [add endnote18 here] Hence, Arendt's political thinking – quite in the spirit of Wittgenstein – can be understood as therapeutic. It proposes a therapy for political philosophy and invites us to take a different attitude when thinking about politics.

Yet what are Arendt's sources for a different thinking that is less prone to the occupational disorder of the philosophers? In her sketches for a planned (but never completed) "introduction to politics," Arendt herself asks: "If not the philosophers – who should inform us?" [add endnote19 here] In place of the classical work of theorizing, Arendt sees terms and concepts being confronted with a sphere of concrete political experience, something which she often conveys in narrative or by using literature. By her own admission, Arendt knew "a fairly large portion of German poems by heart." [add endnote20 here] One of her very early publications is an essay on Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, which she co-authored in 1930 with (then husband) Günther Stern (a.k.a. Günther Anders). [add endnote21 here] Throughout Arendt's oeuvre, there are references to novels, stories, poems, and dramas, which she at times quotes extensively. For Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, Kafka's stories, and Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* are not simply illustrative examples of political analysis and theoretical reflection; they are themselves a source of political insight and knowledge. Without having read Franz Kafka, Arendt might

not have identified the novel character of total rule or have described it as we can (re)read it nowadays in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Previous readings of Arendt's political theory do not completely obscure this singularity of her thinking, which has its very own radicalism in terms of the history of ideas; instead, those readings fail to focus on that singularity. But Arendt's reference to literature, her demand to think experientially, and her criticism of political philosophy are anything but marginal themes in her work: they are constitutive for her attitude of thinking [Denkhaltung].

In my examination of Arendt here, I am therefore bringing together three themes:

First of all, I understand Arendt's political thinking as *practicing a critical attitude*. However, criticism here denotes something other than the classic type of ideology critique that seeks to demonstrate how conditions really are, that is, who goes on behind the veil of deception. Arendt's critical attitude, by contrast, invites us to open our eyes to pluralism in the political space, to different perspectives and perceptions of the world, as well as encouraging us to recognize political truth as something multi-faceted, multi-perspectival and complex. This is the theme of the *first part* of this book.

Furthermore, Arendt's attitude relies less on the philosophical tradition of critical thought. Indeed, she is developing a countermodel to Plato, Descartes, Hegel, and Marx, by drawing on another source: that of *literature* or *narrative*. The *second part* of my book is concerned to explore the systematic place and meaning of literature and narrative in Arendt's thinking. Based on the writers most important to her and the references to them in her work, it becomes clear why narrative becomes so pivotal in Arendt's understanding of politics.

In the *third part* of my book, I propose a new reading of Arendt's political thought based on the central role of narrative in her work. Arendt develops a *politics of limits* in her thinking. This is to be understood as a *critique of the hubris of modernity* in which everything is considered possible. Her thinking represents a "rebellion against everything great,"[add endnote22here] since political action always takes place in limited spaces. Arendt's attitude of criticism aims to identify relationships of abstraction and processes of violence that destroy contexts for action [Handlungszusammenhänge]. Storytelling is for Arendt a means of acquiring experience through *narrative concretion* and of discerning the limits of what is possible. Consequently, thinking poetically always means limited thinking, according to Arendt. In this sense, she appears to have been a pioneering critic of what we discuss today under the keyword of "Anthropocene." Now, Arendt did not use that term but made arguments in the 1950s that we can pick up on for today's discussion, specifically in the debate that commenced in those years on the role of technology and humanity's relationship to nature and the planet. There she developed a strong critique of our alienation from the world, criticizing the belief that we might be able to control both people and nature technologically and politically. Against that, she presents an attitude directed towards the concrete, the detailed, our senses and experiences; at the same time, she maintains that we only find the freedom to act politically on this small scale. What makes us free are the things we can tell stories about. Arendt's attitude turns against everything great in order to regain the dignity and significance of humanity.

This book, then, is the attempt to outline the alternative that Arendt develops for political thought and to defend it as an attractive model for a specific form of political criticism.

Hannah Arendt's thinking is attractive – precisely because it involves a form of criticism that does not unmask, that does not suspect the world of being false, but that instead claims to open up reality and the world. Here is how Arendt describes this attitude of independent thinking in her "Dedication to Karl Jaspers" that introduces her volume of essays, *Die verborgene Tradition*:

"To find my way in reality, without devoting myself to it, as one previously "devoted" oneself to the devil: it is relying only on the truth and not on worldviews; it is having to live and think in peace and not in an "enclosure" (regardless of how nicely furnished it might be); it is [recognizing] that necessity in every form is only a phantom which wants to entice us in playing a role instead of somehow trying to be a human being." [add endnote23 here]

It is an attitude of thought that we can acquire if we let ourselves be inspired by Arendt. The objective is not to adapt a political theory, some concepts, or a method of thinking, but to give much greater latitude to keep thinking [weiterdenken] with her. At the same time, such an approach calls for understanding political theory not simply as a work of construction, but as a certain *way of thinking in the world*. Uwe Johnson once designated Arendt's attitude as an "attitude of independence" that "objectively observes the selfishness of opposing factions and does not allow itself to be forced into judgment by anyone else." [add endnote24 here] The three parts of the present book are three attempts to describe this attitude of Arendt as a specific way of thinking.

Part I

Independent Thinking

In that well-known TV interview with Günter Gaus, Arendt is asked if she wishes to achieve a broad impact with her work. "No," she replies; her goal is to understand. "And if other people understand something in the same sense as I have," then it gives her "a satisfaction, like a sense of home." [add endnote1 here] This statement could easily mislead one, however, because one might think that Arendt is invoking the classical topos of philosophy as unworldly contemplation. But her thought is anything but an undertaking that is extrinsic to the world and reality. On the contrary: it is constantly circling around the question of what relationship (political) thinking should and can have to the world. Arendt asks herself specifically: "why is it so hard to love the world?" [add endnote2 here]. Yet it is astonishing that she also places the representatives of critical philosophy and social theory – who like her are trying to make philosophy more practical – among the ranks of "anti-political" theorists. Marx had stated in his famous "Theses on Feuerbach": "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." [add endnote3 here] However, Arendt insists that Marx's "overturning" of the Western intellectual tradition – that is, his attempt to transform philosophy into a world-changing practice – does not fundamentally break free of the traditional scheme even if this overturning brought the tradition to an end. Nonetheless, just like the traditional thinkers whom he is defying, Marx also understands action – into which he wishes to translate philosophy – as something made or produced [Herstellung]. He is thus subject to the illusion that society – or more precisely, the transformation of it – proceeds according to regularities, and that this transformation can take place just as soon as those social laws are known. Yet, for Arendt, Marx commits precisely that cardinal error in understanding the political which already caused philosophy's unqualified (occupational) disorder. Even the expression "changing the world" is evidence of the problematic notion (*problematic* because it induces political violence) of being able to plan, control, and dominate action:

"Wanting to change the world, i.e., transferring change from the sphere of action [Handeln] to that of doing [Tun], would be odd – since one precisely wants to change what is by definition changeable – if it were not possible. By stipulating that acting has purposes (that is, by preventing action from developing its meaning), one renders it as doing and removes precisely the element of the changeable. In other words, 'changing the world' always amounts to preventing people from acting and changing definitively." [add endnote4 here]

Both models of political philosophy – the old, contemplative one and the critical one developed by Marx – are for Arendt part of the same paradigm, which she designates as the "great tradition" [add endnote5 here] or, more frequently, the "Western tradition of political thought" [add endnote6 here]. What they all have

in common is placing the producing [Herstellen] (the "doing" in the above quote) above acting and thereby misunderstanding action in a very fundamental way, that is, misjudging its potential for changing the world:

"The Western tradition of political thought hence began with the philosopher first turning away from politics for the sake of philosophy, only then to return to it and imposing standards on the realm of human affairs whose origins and foundations lay outside the political realm – in a realm that is expressly defined as the most alien and most unknown to human affairs." [add endnote7 here]

According to Arendt, Marx is still moving within the paradigm of tradition, to which he wants to oppose critical thought. His standards for politics likewise stem from the outside. He may wish to change the world but only according to the rules of philosophy. For her own thought, Arendt formulates the claim of freeing herself from this tradition. Nonetheless, we would be misunderstanding Arendt if we saw her here as making a grand gesture intended to dismiss 2,500 years of the history of philosophy. The "tradition" has its justification in specific experiences of the political:

"The place that politics occupied in philosophy was above all determined by Plato's dictum that *praxis* is somehow further from the truth than *theoria*. This expresses: (a) the experience of a plurality that prevents us from remaining master over our actions; (b) the experience of *techne*, which is an activity in which, though acting, we remain masters. As a consequence, we overestimate [the role of] *techne* in the domain of doing." [add endnote8 here]

Arendt combines this critique of the philosophical tradition with a diagnosis of the present, an interpretation of the modern world: "What Marx 'wanted,' however, was in effect already in full swing." In fact, the world has been 'changed' by doing, namely through technology and science." [add endnote9 here] It is not the history of ideas alone that represents the root of the challenges and problems of political thought, but rather the fact that the world has radically changed in modern times. In Arendt's analysis, the fact that action is a producing [Herstellen] is no longer merely a dangerous idea but rather a political fact within modern political orders.

For Arendt, the central question is which consequences the paradigm of modern production [Herstellung] has for human coexistence and what the experiences are of individuals in such a world. Three major complexes of experience play an important and recurring role in Arendt's thinking in this context: the experience of the break with tradition, the experience of the pariah, and the experience of plurality. At issue is an analysis of experiences, from which new possibilities for action are always simultaneously appearing.

First and foremost, this is *the experience of the break with tradition*, which in Arendt's thinking is much more than a cipher for the annihilation of European Jews. It is a diagnosis of the state of the world and a term for the crisis of modernity, i.e., for the emergence of total systems of rule and – at their most

extreme – their crimes. The second complex of experience here, *the experience of the pariah*, is linked with the question of the specific attitude individuals can take in modern societies. What begins first as a confrontation with the "Jewish question" – that is, with the theme of Jewish integration and emancipation in the modern nation-states – develops for Arendt into a fundamental political question that goes beyond the particular. The "conscious pariah" thus becomes a figure in which Arendt's political thinking is expressed. Thirdly, it is *the experience of plurality* and the question of how the world-skepticism of philosophy can be overcome in thought and, most of all, by a different attitude towards the world.