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THE ANTI-POLITICS OF TWO-WORLD THEORY

“... the word ‘education’ has an evil sound in politics” Hannah Arendt

During the last decade of her life, Hannah Arendt grappled with the “crises of the republic” that beset her adoptive country: the struggles for civil rights, the cult of violence that appeared in some sections of the students’ movement, the relationship between American foreign policy and a domestic order in which lies, half-truths and bungled burglaries had become the very currency of government. At the same time, two previous streams of thought continued to flow in her imagination. The first concerned Eichmann, the man who could not think from the standpoint of anyone else. Could it be that thought is “among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually ‘condition’ them against it?”¹ The second concerned that side of existence which in *The Human Condition* she had somewhat neglected and, seeking to rescue the life of action from the philosophers’ tendentious description of it, even to some degree impugned: the *vita contemplativa*. Now she wanted to explore it more fully. “What are we ‘doing’ when we do nothing but think? Where are we when we, normally always surrounded by our fellow-men, are together with no one but ourselves?”² The result of these and related deliberations was a series of analyses that culminated in *The Life of the Mind* (published posthumously in 1978), an attempt to understand the qualities of the thinking, willing and judging faculties. Each is autonomous, and thus irreducible to the other two; yet each, even as it follows its own distinctive rules, exists in a complex and a dynamic relationship with its partner faculties. At the time of the heart attack that killed her on December 4, 1975, only the two volumes on thinking and willing were (more or less) completed; her ideas of judgement have

had to be pieced together from occasional comments and lecture notes on Kant’s aesthetic theory.³ All this may seem very remote indeed from the highly political nature of her other work. And in one sense it was remote; Arendt’s first love was philosophy and it was to philosophy she returned most deliberately in the last years of her life. Even so, she remained one of its most severe critics. The mainstream Western tradition of philosophy, Arendt argued, had never been able to reconcile its deductive mode of reasoning, or its equation of *freedom* with freedom of thought, or its search for a single truth, with the inherently messy, contingent quality of action among plural persons: the reality of politics par excellence. Moreover, *The Life of the Mind*, if not obviously political, offers some vital clues to the philosophical commitments that guided her political thought. Hannah Arendt’s approach to politics embraced a particular kind of phenomenology in which *appearance* is accorded a dignity that is lacking in so-called *two world theories*: theories, that is, which assign metaphysical priority to forces that lie below the surface of action and events, and which are believed to possess a greater reality than they. Typically, *two world theories* posit a being or agent (spirit, the class structure, the force of progress) whose substantial reality consists in the causal powers it possesses to generate events and experiences. These events and experiences are not to be understood or valued in their own right, but rather to be construed derivatively: as manifestations of the truly significant structures that purportedly lie *behind* or beneath them. Arendt offered a number of philosophical arguments against *two world theory* that need not concern us here.⁴ Of greater importance is for

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1 *The Life of the Mind* Volume 1: *Thinking*; 2: *Willing* (One Volume Edition) (New York 1978), p. 5.

2 *The Life of the Mind* Volume, p. 8.

3 Collected as *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, edited and with an interpretive essay by Ronald Beiner (Chicago 1982).

4 *The Life of the Mind*, pp. 19-65.

5 Hannah Arendt, "Preface," *Men in Dark Times* (New York 1968), p. viii.

6 Although Roy Bhaskar's project of *critical realism*, and that of his school, is much more nuanced than the *two-world* theory sketched above, it is still open to the Arendtian structure that it denigrates appearance and politics. Any philosophy that postulates the idea of *generative* structures logically subordinates events to causality, and appearance to a shadowy realm which is its putative source. Since politics is something performed at the manifest level of appearances and events, such a philosophy threatens to make it conceptually disappear. The *critical realist* response to this kind of objection is to depict politics itself as a structure, interlocking with other structures, each equipped with their own hierarchy of experiences, events and mechanisms. Such an account, which allows in principle for ontological pluralism (in practice, most realists are Marxists) is thus distinct from *essentialism*, the doctrine according to which a single structure is considered primary and all others mere derivatives of it. Nonetheless, both essentialism and critical realism are reductionist in their fashion ("the empirical is only a subset of the actual, which is itself a subset of the real") and both, but especially the latter, tend to spawn an educative model of politics ("emancipation is necessarily informed by explanatory social theory," Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (London 1989), respectively p. 190 and p. 178. By contrast, Arendt spoke less of emancipation and more of freedom i.e. "the human capacity for making a new beginning," whose locus is the actor himself, *Understanding and Politics* (The Difficulties of Understanding), [1954] in: Jerome Kohn, ed., *Essays in Understanding 1930-1954* (New York 1994), p. 325, n. 13.

7 *The Human Condition* (Chicago 1958), p. 50.

8 *Preface to Between Past and Future: Six Exercises* in: *Political Thought* (Harmondsworth 1993 [1961]), p. 15, emphasis added.

9 Though not to Heideggerian phenomenology: see the discussion in: Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York 1962 [1927]), II: 7 = pp. 49-63. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson.

10 On metaphor, see the discussion in *The Life of the Mind*, pp. 98-125.

11 *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York 1966 [1951]), pp. xv, 120.

12 Hannah Arendt, *A Reply to Eric Voegelin*, [1953], in: *Essays in Understanding*, p. 405. Arendt does often speak

in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do."⁵ Where that visibility is absent or occluded, where *dark times* of sheer violence or of *invisible government* prevail, politics itself withers. By the same token, politics as a distinctive theoretical object tends to evaporate wherever philosophers and social scientists describe it as an outcome of something else more causally significant than itself (as in the Marxian base-superstructure model) or claim, as *critical realists* do, that the visible, experiential realm is ultimately explicable in terms of generative causal structures. For then it seems that the most real aspects of existence are those most remote from sight, from action and, hence, from politics as Arendt understood it,⁶ where "appearance ... constitutes reality."⁷ Arendt's position does not, it should be added, preclude metaphors of depth, though her reference to an "underlying phenomenal reality,"⁸ would appear incoherent and absurd in most "two-world" theories;⁹ it only insists that these are metaphors, not indicators of a depth ontology.¹⁰ So that when she describes an historical current as subterranean she means that it is hidden until the theorist exposes it, not that it is more causally important than that which has already become manifest.¹¹ Similarly, totalitarianism may possess an *elementary structure*, but this is not a structure of mechanisms or causes or *essences*, since the so-called essence of totalitarianism, "did not exist before it had come into being. I therefore talk only of 'elements,' which eventually crystallize into totalitarianism, some of which are traceable to the eighteenth century, some perhaps even further back."¹² Such elements may be the *ground* of a phenomenon, constituting its conditions, but that is not to say that they *caused* it, any more than the ground on which a mountaineer ascends causes his climbing. Equally, not everything that exists either *appears* or is obvious. Much of what affects us is not known by us, but it is not thereby more *real* for being invisible; it is simply more obscure. Propaganda, ideology, the manufacture of facts, conduct based on ulterior motives are attempts either to manipulate appearances or hide them; the role of the citizen and the

political theorist is to expose them to the light of the public realm and through scrutiny to reveal them for what they are. Moreover, the search for deep causes has a highly ironic consequence: it distracts its enthusiasts from seeing what lies immediately in front of their noses. For Arendt, this in part explained the abysmal failure of conventional social science to take seriously the *emphatic assertions* of dictators in the pre-totalitarian phases, or to understand the experience that informed their *fictitious* world, or even to comprehend the significance of systematic lying. Infatuated with causes, social science had proved unable to understand everyday events. Other political implications follow. *Two-world* theories open up a chasm between those who claim to have understood Being, or at least aspects of it, and those who remain *trapped* in the illusion of appearances; when translated to the register of social science, the job of the theorist is then conceptualized as that of the debunker, tearing away the veil of life-as-it-is-lived to reveal its hidden core. Such language made Arendt shudder not only because of its Olympian conceit, and its implication that those who lived in the world of appearance were ignorant-amuses. She was also struck by the uncanny and disturbing resemblance of that discourse to the idiom that characterized the Stalinist purges in which it “was always a question of uncovering what had been hidden, of unmasking the disguises, of exposing duplicity and mendacity.”¹³ Furthermore, the claim of the theorist to know a hidden realm, denied to the senses, also encourages him to see his task as emancipation: enlisting reason or science to enlighten or *educate* those who have still some way to go on the royal road to Truth. Against such a perspective, Arendt believed that politics could never be plausibly given a scientific or rationalist warrant. It is important to see why. In a political dialogue, people argue in principle as equals; such equality is based on the citizenship conferred on them in virtue of being a member not of a species but of a polity. Communication proceeds through discussion and accommodation as actors seek to persuade each other of their case. Conversely, whenever a scientific argument is invoked in the political realm, as it is in many naturalist

philosophies, discussion and accommodation become subordinated to an educative model of politics – Arendt would have said anti-politics – that is fundamentally asymmetrical in character: instruction displaces discussion; people are not simply *wrong*, but benighted and in need of enlightenment. Education, after all, is a social activity that is vertical and unequal by its very nature. It rests on the authority of the teacher to teach, and that authority is based not on the goodness or even the wisdom of the teacher, but on his or her accredited competence in a particular area, and responsibility to the world of fellow citizens.¹⁴ Wherever the educative model underpins a conception of politics, disagreement is seen as the result of error or mystification; consciousness has to be *raised*, opinions corrected. The citizen is envisaged as a child to be taught. Education is extended to a sphere where it has no business to be, while politics becomes a sphere bereft of free and equal citizens. Does this mean that *political education* is a contradiction in terms? Not necessarily. When historians talk about the political education of, say, the working class in the nineteenth century, they are typically referring to the growing knowledge that its members attained through observing and participating in political events. Political education in this sense proceeds reflexively through experience rather than instruction. Similarly, one might consider political education as the kind of learning that results from the “slow, strong drilling through hard boards, with a combination of passion and a sense of judgement.”¹⁵ Arendt’s strictures are aimed not against these sensible ideas, but rather against those currents of modern thought that continue to depict citizens as children, and that mistake the world of politics for the teacher-student relationship. As she remarked, “Education can play no part in politics, because in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated. Whoever wants to educate adults really wants to act as their guardian and prevent them from political activity. Since one cannot educate adults, the word *education* has an evil sound in politics.”¹⁶

of *causes*, though invariably in a broad, general manner to mean something like conditions. Moreover, it is significant that when she comes to theorize the concept of cause, in her discussion of Dun Scotus (*The Life of the Mind*, pp. 137-138), it is its *contingency* she emphasizes. See also *Understanding and Politics*, op.cit. p. 319: “Causality ... is an altogether alien and falsifying category in the historical sciences. Not only does the actual meaning of every event always transcend any number of past *causes* which we may assign to it (one has only to think of the grotesque disparity between *cause* and *effect* in an event like the First World War), but this past itself comes into being only with the event itself. Only when something irrevocable has happened can we even try to trace its history backward. The event illuminates its own past; it can never be deduced from it.”

13 *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth 1990 [1963]), p. 100. See also pp. 11, 19, 25, 62, 73, 96, 99, 174, 220, 263, 290.

14 *The Crisis in Education* [1958] in: *Between Past and Future*, p. 189.

15 *The Profession and Vocation of Politics*, in: Weber, *Political Writings*, eds. and trans. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs, (Cambridge), p. 369.

16 *The Crisis in Education*, p. 177.