

## Editorial

### Revolutionary spirit

As to the history of the revolution, my ideas may be peculiar, perhaps singular. What do we mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected ... before a drop of blood was shed.

JOHN ADAMS. Letter to Thomas Jefferson, 24 August 1815

The worldwide revolutionary awakenings in recent years – the Arab Spring, civil society protests in Europe and in North and South America – are diverse and manifold. Their reflection, the memory of the “spirit of the revolution” and the need to deal with these events have all been put aside and with them, the fundamental questions that accompanied these upheavals. Can the European and American revolutionary tradition provide the concepts, categories and terminology that allow us to grasp what has happened? What would be a fitting framework to illustrate the events and what role could Arendt’s political analysis play in this context?

Public discourse, on the other hand, is dominated by a single topic: the burden of violence, an apparently necessary evil attendant on every revolution, as currently witnessed in the ravages of the civil war in Syria and growing violence in Egypt, while the numerous initiatives that testify to the political experience and creative power of the actors are rescued from oblivion by their representation in literature, art and film. In the face of so much talk about the defeat and ineffectiveness of the democratic movements in Arab countries, we argue with Arendt: no democratic initiative is without consequence as long as its memory is preserved.

The recent clashes in Taksim Square in Istanbul, the tenacious student strikes in protest against Chile’s neoliberal government and the mass protests in Brazil indicate that the flame is by no means extinguished. They also point to something else: although the individual movements may be marked by regional specificities, they are more closely knit than the interpretation as merely regional events would allow. What we see here is the manifestation of a historical constellation, which Hannah Arendt pointedly referred to as the irreversibility of a changed world situation: we do not live in *one* world only but in a world that is measured, networked and divided. Every regional event is potentially a global event. Today, the concept of mankind is no longer merely a concept and an ideal, neither a wonderful dream nor a horrible nightmare, but a political factor and a reality. No one can escape it. There is no outside or beyond this reality, which is the result of

social processes subsumed under the abstract heading “globalization” for want of a more precise definition. (See Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s preface to the Korean translation of her book *Why Arendt Matters*, “Dear Korean Readers: on the Egyptian revolution”, which we are publishing as the foreword to our issue.)

These new revolutionary movements are not only about establishing freedom within the limited scope of a constitution, a freedom shared only by the members of a certain community. It is also about the precarious situation of human rights in the twenty-first century and the ambiguous nature of each law that defines who belongs and who remains outside. Common argumentation patterns, such as Arab countries just have to get to where Western countries are now, are short-sighted and escapist, since they promote contradictions and feelings of resentment. They likewise pre-empt any attempt to focus on awareness of the real responsibility for fatal events such as those in Lampedusa and elsewhere. Addressing all nations and the global community, human rights call for the promotion of a politics that constantly explores possibilities for change. In this sense they are “essentially revolutionary” (Christoph Menke, Francesca Raimondi: *Die Revolution der Menschenrechte*, Frankfurt a.M. 2011).

Since it is too early for a comprehensive analysis of the events, we will focus on individual aspects in this issue:

- The documentary *Three female artists and the revolution in Cairo* tells of the political commitment of the artists and discusses the reflections and artistic representations of their political experience during the early phase of the Egyptian Spring. The film is a unique historical document.

- John LeJeune’s essay “Hannah Arendt’s Revolutionary Leadership” focuses on the topic of leadership in political movements and the notion of leaderlessness, a phenomenon that would become the pride of movements such as Occupy Now and Los Indignados.

- Jens Hanssen’s essay “Translating Revolution: Hannah Arendt in Arab Political Culture” deals with how Arendt’s book *On Revolution* was not only translated into Arabic in the literal sense, but textually “applied” to the region’s problems.

- Myriam Revault d’Allonnes invites us to think again about the concept of crisis. Challenges to existing political legitimizations are multiple but do not per se lead to revolutionary situations. Does this mean that the crisis is nothing more than a metaphor for a future whose inevitability consists for many people in the continuation of injustice and social misery? Or is the crisis an opportunity to find the gap between the past and the future that for Arendt constitutes the place of action?

In the “Documents” section Hannah Arendt gets to have her say – in the transcript of a radio interview – with politician and political scientist Carlo Schmid and in the sketches of three conferences Arendt held in Chicago. The four documents produced between 1963 to 1965 are closely linked to Arendt’s works *On Revolution* (1963) and *Über die Revolution* (1965), and published here for the first time. Arendt not only discusses what is known from her book about revolution, she not only explain her “models” of the French and American Revolutions, but summarizes, queries and responds to questions addressed to her. She gives answers, and under the heading “revolution” takes a stand on the publicly discussed political phenomena of the day, such as the Civil Rights Movement and

the Second Revolution in the United States or the Cuban Revolution. With Carlo Schmid she makes a plea to keep the fires of the “revolutionary spirit” burning.

The editors

(Language editing: Sunniva Greve)