

„Social Isolation Incubates Personal Solidarity“ Jerome Kohn im Gespräch mit Roger Berkowitz

Wir veröffentlichen hier ein Gespräch, das Roger Berkowitz und Jerome Kohn am 14. April 2020 führten, im Rahmen des Podcast „Looking in the Mirror“ (organisiert vom Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities am Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, USA). Das im Internet live verbreitete Gespräch wurde transkribiert und uns in einer von Jerome Kohn überarbeiteten Fassung dankenswerterweise zur Verfügung gestellt. – Red.

Announcer:

This is Episode 5, “Looking in the Mirror.” It features the Arendt Center’s founder and director, Roger Berkowitz, in conversation with Jerome Kohn, a political thinker, the literary executor for Hannah Arendt, and the editor of many volumes of Arendt’s posthumous works, including *Thinking Without a Banister*, *The Jewish Writings*, *Essays in Understanding*, and *Responsibility and Judgment*.

Jerome Kohn was Hannah Arendt’s last teaching assistant, and after her death directed the graduate program in Humanistic Studies at the New School for Social Research. Both Kohn and Berkowitz were jointly awarded the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thinking by the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the City of Bremen in 2019.

Roger Berkowitz:

My name is Roger Berkowitz and I’m thrilled to have on the phone with me Jerry Kohn. Hi Jerry, how are you?

Jerome Kohn:

I’m well, Roger, thank you.

RB:

So where are you spending your time during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020?

JK:

I’m out on Eastern Long Island, on the North Fork, where it’s very quiet. In fact, it’s a bit isolated all the time, which is one of the reasons I like it. It’s more isolated now, to be

sure, but at least I'm better prepared for it than when I lived in the City, which I did for almost fifty years.

RB:

Right. How are you finding the time? Are you finding this to be a strange time, or is this sort of like life goes on as it normally goes on for you?

JK:

I know I'm very fortunate to be able to say that this isolation has afforded me more time than usual to think about a person of mutual interest to us, Hannah Arendt. And by thinking I also mean remembering, for example, my first encounters with her in books and magazines, in lecture halls and seminar rooms, in becoming acquainted with her and working rather closely with her during the last eight years of her life. This remembering brings back things she said off the cuff, which on the surface often seemed witty or paradoxical, yet underneath showed a darker side. To give one example, during the political upheaval following our country's military rout in Vietnam, Arendt often muttered the ancient adage: "It is a curse to live in interesting times." To which one might have said: "What do you mean? Oh, perhaps I see....."

My recent ruminations in social isolation have made me realize the extent to which the faculty of thinking relies on memory and imagination. And here I'd like to add that this experience has quashed any temptation, abetted by the technological onslaught of Google, Apple, and Facebook—GAF, one might say—to fill up the experience of isolation with a semblance of social life. This estrangement from the "social sphere" has its inconveniences, but they have never for a moment tempted me to cry out for an "internet lifeline." On the contrary, and I hope I am not inviting hubris to say it, this social isolation has seemed like "one of those rare moments," as Arendt calls them, "when thinking may prevent catastrophes." Of one thing I am certain, I've experienced a relationship of personal solidarity with Arendt distinct from the wonder her mind always has inspired in me.

I think, Roger, you may agree that Arendt's diagnosis of the modern world is of its infection, not by a virus, but by all she includes under the umbrella-term "social sphere." The social sphere has many, many referents, but every one of them, as far as I can tell, occludes the distinction she draws between the public and private "realms" of human existence. The social sphere, so to speak, has cast its shadow over those authentic realms of being. The plague that threatens us—I prefer the word plague, which suggests a striking blow, to the more medically correct pandemic—in a sense, I judge, changed that. To give a single example: ancient Roman circuses were public events, whose gradual socialization was complete when ball games played in people-packed stadiums were watched on television in the company of relatives and friends. In our current social isolation, we face the prospect of watching athletes kick balls in empty arenas on screens, accompanied by

dumb numbers flashing on electronic scoreboards. One has to wonder if what is no longer public is now not even social!

RB:

Okay. I mean it strikes me that you're absolutely right that in past plagues, which were truly striking blows and awful, what made them catastrophes and awful was the unbelievable isolation that they imposed upon people. And in a way out of that catastrophe there was a chance, an opportunity, for something—I think what you're saying—some solitude or thinking to happen. And in some ways what this plague is showing us is that even a plague doesn't isolate us, doesn't allow us to escape from I think what you're calling the social realm. Is that what you have in mind?

JK:

Well, perhaps partly that. But if I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror today I do not see the image of *homo societas*, a social being. To be sure, the image is definitely neither that of an actor, nor of an amateur of works of art, nor in any sense of an active participant in the play of the world. I see the image of a nomad, squinting into vacant sunlight or blinding darkness, wary eyed, seeing no real homes, no real schools or playgrounds, only illusions, *fata morgana*. And I hail this image in the looking-glass, saying “At long last!” This is what social isolation – not the partial isolation to which I am accustomed -- has provided me.

An almost opposite way of putting it would be to consider Arendt's complex distinction between private and public realms. For when they have existed, these realms are not only radically distinct, but also innately linked, each conditioned by the other. Recently I've begun to think that there may be a potentiality in personal solidarity in addition to the collapse of the social. The latter let us recoup the shelter, warmth, and humor of the private realm, You understand: social isolation and personal solidarity may be experienced together. Here's the way I put it to myself: social isolation *incubates* personal solidarity, and then I wonder what can come from that.

RB:

When you say “personal solidarity,” do you mean a coming to terms with oneself, or being together with oneself? How do you understand that?

JK:

The notion of solidarity with oneself is strange to me. What I mean by personal solidarity is reflecting on another person, or persons, on friends and acquaintances, but now without the scenery and props of the social sphere, from which we're isolated. You

and I can't meet, let's put it that way, but I can think of you and imagine you. I now ask, is this in any way related to the rediscovery of politics, referring not to what today passes for politics, but trying to follow Arendt's train of thinking when she asks: "What is Politics?" If we can recover personal solidarity, might it also be possible to recover public solidarity? We've noted the inter-dependence of the private and public realms, but public solidarity requires in addition the reanimation of public spirit, and that's quite different from anything we've yet considered. As a way of approaching it, I'd like to relate, negatively, what we're discussing to Hannah Arendt's own great teacher, Martin Heidegger—if we can do that for a moment?

RB:

Go ahead, Jerry. That would be great.

JK:

There's a couple phrases from the French writer Henri Beyle, better known as Stendhal, which may be helpful here. He says, first, "It is possible to acquire everything in solitude except character." And then later: "Having firmness of character is to have experienced the effect of others on yourself, so there must be others."¹ This, I think explains much about Heidegger, starting with Arendt's insistence to Jaspers that Heidegger had "not a bad character" but "no character at all." That is the sense in which Heidegger required social isolation to discover and clear new paths of thinking. Arendt likens his isolation to a "trap he built for himself, which fit only himself." Thus he withdrew from, without being able to leave entirely, the everyday world of *das Man*, into which he found himself carelessly thrown. A contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*) was not so much a free choice as indispensable to Heidegger. What understanding—if any—he had of active life (*vita activa*) may have come from his deep immersion in Greek tragic poetry. In the famous Chorus from Sophocles' *Antigone*, Heidegger analyzes man's active life as *deinótaton*, twice violent, violent in itself and violent when face-to-face with imposed or op-posed forces. Amidst the economic-political upheaval in Germany in the early 1930's, Heidegger emerged from his isolation rather longer than necessary to give his sought for approval to the overthrow of the Weimar Republic, which to him represented the irresoluteness of *das Man* writ large. Thus he was aligned with National Socialism, which, as we know only too well from Arendt, soon would employ every means of violence accessible to set in motion the never before imagined destruction of totalitarian rule. My point is not to cast blame or shame on Heidegger as a Nazi sympathizer—which to me reeks of inauthenticity—but to suggest that his unsettling ignorance of what Arendt calls "the polis, the space of men's free deeds, and living words, which can endow life with splendor"—*she is also quoting Sophocles!*—indicates that the case of Martin Heidegger is an example of solitude turning into loneliness. Arendt would never say this in so many words, but has not the loneliness of Heidegger's retreat from the world, especially after World War II, the ring of authenticity?

In addition, I believe, loneliness rings loud and clear in Arendt’s last words about Heidegger, which may be her last writing of all. In the last two chapters of the second volume of the unfinished *Life of the Mind*, she says there is nothing “more frightening than the notion of solipsistic freedom,” that is, that I alone am responsible for “my standing apart, isolated from everyone else.” In a nutshell, this is the depth of the problem of the freedom of the will, which does not lead her, as it has others, to deny the will’s existence, but rather to trace its history, from the will’s discovery in late antiquity to Heidegger, the last philosopher to admit the will’s phenomenal reality. What she sees clearly is that the apparent solipsism of free will led Heidegger to his “paradoxical” formulation of a will that *wills not to will*. The activity of willing became to Heidegger nothing but a “craving to persist,” an “insurrection” creating “disorder” in the “realm of errancy,” an aimless wandering from which Being is altogether absent. In a late formulation, Heidegger writes, “Being has no history in the realm of errancy,” which is to say that man’s active life is cut off from Being, to act is “to err, to go astray.” Arendt’s conclusion—she calls it “tentative”—is that “Heidegger’s denunciation of the instinct of self-preservation...is so rare” that she finds its proper epigram only in some “little-known” words of Goethe: “Everything must turn to nothing / If it will persist in Being.” Can one imagine a more perfect impression of a thinker’s solitude metamorphosing into loneliness?

RB:

And by what she said about Heidegger you mean that he made a mistake, or what do you mean when you say what she said about him.

JK:

I brought up Heidegger as a *via negativa* into considering a potential reanimation of public spirit in personal solidarity. I can try to clarify that now by turning to what Arendt has written about the French poet René Char. Char fought in the French Résistance towards the end of World War II. He kept a book of aphorisms which he wrote in daily. After the war these aphorisms became widely read, published in English as “Hypnos Waking,” that is, *sleep itself awakening*. To me the fact that Char never revised any of his aphorisms is meaningful, for in them he inscribes daily his wartime experience of living in caves with a small band of fellow *maquisards*, resistance fighters. They hid in caves not only from Nazis but also from many if not most of their fellow countrymen who were Nazi collaborators. It was in the darkness of caves, a form of social isolation, that they discovered themselves bound together—each to each and all to all—in an extra-familial form of personal solidarity. Char describes that solidarity as a “citadel of friendship.” The newness of their bond coined words and images intelligible only to themselves. It was “within our darkness,” Char writes, that “we discovered a hidden treasure.” That treasure was their freedom, or more precisely, their freedom to be free, which is not measurable and unaware of its own limits. The illumination of their treasure may be likened to the

mystery of a flame, or a spirit, co-eval with the appearance of human beings on earth. Absent actual freedom, freedom’s spirit burns unseen—that is its mystery.

Yet Char never imagined that the flame of freedom would illuminate France when the war was over. His aphorisms that foresee France’s abrupt abandonment of freedom are of indignation: “Our comfortable unanimity, our rabid hunger for justice, will be short-lived when the tie is gone that has bound us in combat... We will be quick to forget. We will quit throwing out rubbish, cutting away and healing.” To be clear: Char sees the disappearance of the light of freedom *in* the reappearance of *das Man*.

Let me end this too long story by noting that Heidegger and Char, a thinker and a poet—alone together on distant peaks, to paraphrase Heidegger—met and spoke several times after the war. These meetings are known as their *Rencontres sous les marronniers* in Provence. The reason given for these conversations was their mutual preoccupation with language and etymologies. But of greater interest to me is that the disillusion of Char’s post-war experience in France well may have encouraged him—unlike many of his fellow-countrymen—to overlook Heidegger’s earlier Nazi leanings. Unlike those others, Char would not act in *mauvaise foi*: he’d lost his freedom, not his character, which are not the same. Char and Heidegger remained friends until the latter’s death in 1976, less than a year after Arendt died. How I wish I’d asked her about them.... Sorry, Roger....

RB:

No, I think that’s wonderful, Jerry. I mean, it strikes me that the question that you’re raising maybe not as a question, but for me it’s a question, is to what extent what you’re calling personal solidarity, the fact that you feel solidarity for your friends, that René Char felt solidarity for his friends, is transferable to a more public solidarity. And Arendt talks about this somewhat similarly in the end of her book *On Revolution*, where she talks about islands of freedom and the idea that, even if most people don’t have this kind of feeling of the treasure that René Char had, or that people in a deliberative body have, the fact that there are these islands of freedom keeps the flame of freedom lit and allows it to continue to inspire people. But I guess the question is, how does one expand a personal solidarity for one’s friends and one’s acquaintances, which is a kind of private solidarity, how does one expand that to the public? I mean, one sees that to some degree in doctors who are volunteering to come across the country and serve in hospitals in New York and elsewhere. I’m wondering if that’s the way you see this question, or not.

JK:

Well, that’s a very good analogy. Are our doctors volunteers in a sort of medical army? Will their solidarity end with the plague? May I suggest that what Arendt has to say about thinking in its non-cognitive and non-specialized sense is relevant here? For her such thinking is the actualization of the difference given in consciousness. She’s not interested, I believe, in solving the “problem” of consciousness, which occupies so many scholars. For Arendt, human beings as such are conscious. Be that as it may, the activity

of thinking, which actualizes consciousness, is not the prerogative of the few, any more than thoughtlessness is the prerogative of—I’m quoting her now—“those many who lack brain power, but the ever-present possibility for everybody, scientists, scholars, technicians, and other specialists in mental enterprises not excluded.” But how is inner plurality meaningful when freedom’s flame no longer illuminates the world?

RB:

Do you see amongst people in private or public that you’re encountering now an increase in that kind of thinking? Or, as you sort of suggested maybe at the beginning, that in fact people are seeking out busyness so much that it’s almost even less? Or how do you imagine this impacting the quality—

JK:

I agree with what I understand you to say, Roger, that now, importing the busyness, which our technology allows us to do, into our isolation, we appear inclined—and I think it’s such a missed opportunity—to socialize our isolation. But is not ‘socialized isolation’ a contradiction in terms? You ask if I find what Arendt means by thinking more widespread in our isolation. I have no way of knowing, except from what individuals have written to me. One such correspondent is an Italian friend who lives in Rome, and we’ve been corresponding about the emptiness of the eternal city, which I visited for years and love. I sent my friend a video of the Piazza Navona, which is very near where she lives—not in the piazza, but near it—when it was completely empty of people. Empty, and this is a paradox, Piazza Novona appeared as one of the most glorious public spaces in all of Rome. When one could still go there, the piazza was always full of people and clowns, fire eaters, and God knows what, hawkers of this, that, and almost anything, overflowing with bargain hunters and of course the endless antics of tourists. Now it’s completely empty. And on the video, a tenor was singing high above the piazza, alone, on a balcony, the *Nessun dorma* from *Turandot*. *Nessun dorma* (“No one sleeps”) ... *guardi le stelle che tramano...di speranzo* (“watch the stars trembling...with hope”) ... *All’ alba vincerò* (“at dawn, Victory!”). I’ve deleted the subject “I” from the verb, *vincerò*, which I trust will not offend anyone who, like Arendt, admires Merleau-Ponty’s late philosophy of flesh, if you see what I mean. And when my friend who lives near Piazza Navona replied, she said, “My God, Jerry, seeing what was, which we haven’t been able to do for years and years and years, maybe again—a city.” To me that is meaningful: *maybe again—a city*. Not likely, but perhaps potential in our experience of personal solidarity in isolation.

RB:

Wow. Yah, I mean, uh! We are experiencing an emptiness. And it sounds like you're experiencing it in some way in the middle of the country, countryside. What are you finding yourself doing? Are you reading? Are you looking in the mirror? How are you finding--?

JK:

[laughs]. I don't spend a lot of time looking in the mirror, Roger, but—that was meant to be, I guess, a metaphor—I do read...

RB:

What do you find yourself reading these days?

JK:

When this isolation began, I decided not to mark each day on a calendar but by reading one of Shakespeare's Sonnets. There are 154 Sonnets, and I read one first thing in the morning, again in the evening, and sometimes in between—but only one a day. They're like heavily bejeweled Renaissance caskets, deflecting light into new and unanticipated openings. What the Sonnets mean overall is a huge question; volumes have been written in answer to it. I'll tell what I think when I'm done.

I'm also reading Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time*, which was a gift from our mutual friend Thomas Wild. It is an extraordinary work, a record from Stalin's death in 1953 through the following forty years. Told always in the words of witnesses, which weave stories of faith beyond belief or expectation always succeeded by disillusion, abject fear, and terror. Over and over—the patterns change, of course, but the time recurs, “secondhand.” The work is a kaleidoscope turned by the deftest of hands. In a sense Alexievich's stories take you behind the facade of your own world. How well she and Arendt would have understood each other. To put it negatively, and briefly, neither ever speaks of “empathy,” which is ubiquitous today. Empathy is a pseudo-Greek 19th century German aesthetic term with no political or social meaning whatsoever. If it were proved, which it cannot be, empathy would spell the end of human plurality, the uniqueness of every human being, apart from which neither the depths of Arendt's thought or the intricacies of Alexievich's oral histories are conceivable.

And I also read articles.... let me tell you about a sentence I read in one by David Remnick, the editor of *The New Yorker*. He wrote; “The human need for solidarity is frustrated by the need for social distancing.” I take great exception to that. What Remnick sees in social isolation is not the personal solidarity we've been talking about but rather the reinstitution of the social. That makes me think of the wit and insight of Karl Marx when he remarked that world-historical events occur twice, first as tragedy, then as farce.

Arendt well may have had Marx in mind when she asked if great artists who survive “oblivion and neglect” can also survive entertaining versions of their works? The return of the social may be expected, but it’s nothing to hold one’s breath for! In the last analysis, even the rise of domestic violence in conditions of isolation is a sign of the social sphere’s disfiguration of private life.

RB:

In fact, it seems what she’s saying is that we can’t resent this world that’s been given to us. We must be thankful and have gratitude for it. We must love this world for giving us the chance to act in it in spite of it, and for giving us the chance to act in it in ways that will be meaningful. And it’s that turn to meaning, right, which is at the very core of what she thinks thinking is about.

JK:

In the sphere of politics, gratitude implies that we are not alone. Together we might try to reconcile ourselves to the variety of mankind, to the differences between human beings, which many find frightening precisely because of the essential equality of rights of all men and our consequent responsibility for all deeds and misdeeds committed by people different from ourselves. Arendt, it seems to me, is the first person who has written meaningfully about responsibility. She takes the word literally as the human ability to respond, to speak back, which is never more exactly said than in the words of Sophocles she loved: “Great words that counteract great blows teach understanding...” That’s what she means in a nutshell by responsibility: to what is given us by chance, our choice to exercise the human ability to respond, which is what doctors and nurses and many others are doing as we speak.

RB:

You know, I mean for her thinking is different. It doesn’t lead to truth; it leads to meaning, it leads to asking what is meaningful for us. It strikes me that meaning is what for Arendt is the aim of thinking, not truth; and one of the problems that we are having now, it seems, in our response to the plague is that we don’t have public figures articulating for us the meaning of what this is. People are all obsessed about the truth, the facts, how to survive it, how to live; but very few people are trying—or yet, and maybe it’s too early—to be able to have the space to think and say, what is important now that we be doing? Not just about going back to normal, as David Remnick suggests in the quote you read; but what do we want to bring out of this and in some way be grateful for that it shows us about ourselves?

JK:

That’s very well said and important. Still, for better or worse, Remnick’s opinion is rather widespread and deserves a more complete answer than I gave before. Turning again to Arendt, at the end of the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*,ⁱⁱ she writes: “... those who were expelled from humanity ... need the solidarity of all men to assure them of their rightful place in ‘man’s enduring chronical.’ At least we can cry out to each one of those who rightly is in despair: ‘Do thyself no harm; for we are all here.’”ⁱⁱⁱ Just slightly earlier (*Ibid.* 630-31) she writes: “Neo-humanists [such as Remnick], in their understandable yearning for the stable world of the past... and in their vain efforts to re-establish such stability by making man the measure of all things human, have confused the issue, which is the choice between resentment and gratitude....Generally speaking, such gratitude expects nothing except – in the words of Faulkner – ‘one’s own anonymous chance to perform something passionate and brave and austere not just in but into man’s enduring chronicle ... in gratitude for the gift of his time in it.’” Politically speaking, gratitude means we are never alone in public. We can reconcile ourselves to the tremendous variety of mankind, as well as to the actual differences between individuals, as Arendt says, “only through insight into the tremendous bliss that man was created with the power of procreation, that not a single man but Men inhabit the earth.”

These are trying times. We are not in dungeons but isolated, and enjoined to stay at home. Yet one thing is clear: we are all in this together. Perhaps we may agree on a potentiality of social isolation, which would be a renewal of personal solidarity between friends, between persons. If so, it may be possible to see our image in a mirror which does not reflect the failures of society, which Arendt counts and recounts, but rather the care and warmth of being-at-home *enhanced* by the experience of personal solidarity with those physically distant. It is this experience that may animate, as it has only extremely rarely in all of human history, a spirit whose essential excellences of courage and happiness are manifest only in public.

RB:

I think that’s fine, and I think it’s a great place for us to end. So thank you very much, Jerry. That was great.

JK:

Thank you, Roger, thank you very much, and with all good wishes to you and your family.

RB:

You too.

i Stendhal: “*Fragments Divers*” (*De L’Amour*, Paris: Garnier 1959, p. 241) *Fragment 1* (241): “*On peut tout*

acquérir dans la solitude, hormis du caractère.” Fragment 92 (265): “Avoir de la fermeté dans le caractère, c'est d'avoir éprouvé l'effet des autres sur soi-même, donc il faut les autres.”

- ii Arendt, H., *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 632. Aside from the First Edition, this is the only edition of *Origins* in which Arendt's “Concluding Remarks” exist.
- iii Acts 16:28. Paulus says “Do thyself no harm” to the soldier guarding early Christians in dungeons. Does that not reveal Paul's solidarity even with someone who had used Paul and his fellow Christians with awful severity and cruelty?