

Arendt on Freedom, Liberation, and Revolution

Kei Hiruta (Ed.), *Arendt on Freedom, Liberation, and Revolution*, Palgrave Macmillan 2019, 302 pp.

Arendt is a particularly pertinent theoretician to think with and against today. One of the foremost reasons can be found in her sensibility as concerns the temporal dimension of politics that she manifested in her analyses of the great challenges of her time. An example hereof is the crucial role that the idea of the world plays in her thought, but also, and in particular, the tension between the struggle for liberation, specifically in the form of revolution, and the art of practicing freedom. How these themes – freedom, liberation and revolution – are intertwined in Arendt's thought as well as their relevance for a number of burning political topics is the focus of the recently published anthology *Arendt on Freedom, Liberation, and Revolution*, edited by the Aarhus- and Oxford based political philosopher Kei Hiruta.

The book falls apart in three sections, each comprised of three chapters revolving around one of themes indicated in the title. By exploring these themes, the study serves to fulfil three aims. First, to elucidate Arendt's flagship idea of political freedom in relation to the closely connected ideas of liberation and revolution. Drawing on Arendt's claim that the subject of our thought is experience, the second objective is to consider her theory of freedom and evaluate its continuing relevance in light of recent political experiences. The third purpose is to examine Arendt's theory of freedom comparatively, by way of exploring which insights we can gain by juxtaposing Arendt's thought with other, less obvious thinkers, such as John Rawls, Frantz Fanon and Isaiah Berlin.

The editor opens the first part with an analysis of Arendt's critique of the liberal notion of freedom. Arendt's criticism, Hiruta contends, is far too generalised – there are a number of thinkers considered part of the liberal tradition that not only fall outside the scope of Arendt's critique, but on which she herself even draws extensively, such as e.g. Tocqueville. Rather than, as Arendt occasionally did, emphasise the republican ideal of the practice of freedom at the expense of liberal non-political freedoms, we must understand the two as interrelated. With the same comparative approach, also dealing with the private/public freedom divide, Keith Breen contrasts Arendt's idea of freedom with the neo-republican thought developed by Philip Pettit. The lion's share of the article is dedicated to argue that Pettit's reading of Arendt is misguided. Breen does, however, give Pettit right in that the occasionally very strict separation of individual liberation from oppression and practice of freedom in her thought sometimes obscures more than it illuminates. The tension between the liberty of the individual and freedom stands at the centre in C. J. Emden's text as well. In contrast to the first two, Emden is much more confrontative, arguing that Arendt's "existentially tinged concept of freedom" is incompatible both with an institutionally structured practice of freedom and a justice-oriented normative framework. Arendt's fierce criticism of what she refers to as the social undermines her own adherence to pluralism and democracy, both inseparable from the

types of social rights that Arendt on some occasions – notably in “Reflections on Little Rock” – criticised.

The second theme of the anthology is liberation. First out is an analysis by William Smith and Shiyu Zhang of the role of civil disobedience in the thought of Arendt with a particular focus on the role that social contract ideas play in her thought on dissent. In contrast to the forms of backward orientations underpinning most social contract approaches, where the focus is directed towards the contracting parts in the past, which consequently leaves outside those excluded in the initiating act, the authors highlight how Arendt’s reflections on civil disobedience opens up for a more dynamic understanding of the contracting act by stressing its orientation also toward the future. Drawing parallels to her reflections on the right to have rights, they show how her thought enables ways of envisaging civil disobedience not only as a strategy to infuse vitalizing injections of rupture into a political body by those already forming part of it, but also to enable individuals excluded from the initial agreement to be integrated in the contract. From a very different angle, Tal Correm takes on Arendt’s thought on national liberation movements with regard to, on the one hand, her critique of the intrinsic value of violence in liberation movements that she – disputably according to Correm – ascribes to Fanon, and, on the other hand, her reflections on federalism as a preferable political form to the nation-state. By reconstructing Arendt’s thought, the author maintains that violence is a legitimate means of defense to *liberate* oneself from an oppressor, but as such *strictly* instrumental, and that this is a point where many decolonization wars failed. A further, closely related, argument in Arendt’s understanding of why so many decolonialization movements failed, were their dependence on the nation-state as a political form. In their place, Correm points out the opportunities rendered possible by the federation as a political form, in particular its capacity to circumvent the devastating effects of having state and nation coinciding. In the table completing the triptych, Natasha Saunders and Patrick Hayden attempt to understand and respond to the ongoing migratory crisis with the help of Arendt’s idea on the right to have rights as well as her reflections on politics as an inter-individual practice. Along the same lines as Smith and Zhang’s argument, they highlight Arendt’s way of envisaging solidarity as a politically rooted emotion, serving to engender new political solidarities, where human rights activist act *with* rather than *for* the emigrants.

The texts in the third section revolve around the theme of revolution. In “Arendt’s Revolutionary Antiquity”, Miriam Leonard argues that Arendt’s uses of ancient thought is more ambiguous than, and not as romanticizing as, some critics would have it. A careful reading of her analyses reveals an intriguing attempt to re-envisage the relationship between revolution and freedom by drawing on both drawbacks and insights from antiquity and modernity in order to lay bare the glimpses of political freedom identifiable in her own time. In the ninth chapter of the book, Anthony Lang discusses the failures of the Egyptian revolution of 2011 to bring about durable forms for exercising freedom through revolution. Drawing parallels to Arendt’s analysis of the American and the French revolutions, Lang argues that one of the major drawbacks of the Egyptian revolution was – and remains – the revolutionary’s inability to create a constitutional framework. In this regard, the Egyptian revolution failed for reasons comparable to those

that Arendt associated with the failures of the French revolution, i.e. the revolutionaries idealization of “the people” and struggle to realize the general will rather than setting up constitutional forms enabling the practice of freedom. In the final case study of the compilation, Schmuël Lederman offers an analysis of the specific role of the counsel system in Arendt’s thought. Lederman argues that it is crucial for gaining a more comprehensive understanding of how Arendt’s idealizations of ancient Athens could be understood in light of the modern political landscape with which she herself dealt.

From different angles, the different contributions convincingly evince why it is crucial to distinguish liberation from the practice of freedom without losing sight of how intimately intertwined the two are. The editor has successfully been able to create a unity out of the individual contributions, each of which illuminate the different themes with an eye on both the philosophical complexity of Arendt’s thought as well as the historical contexts in which they were given birth to. By highlighting contextual aspects of Arendt’s thought, the book also sparks the question of the wider context in which the anthology itself has been begotten. A number of the contributions stress the temporal dimension of the issues discussed – be it in terms of the different temporalities operating in Arendt’s thought, or in the temporal orientation of contracting parts, just to mention some examples. Yet, the space of experience and the horizon of expectation through which Arendt herself addressed the three phenomena and their internal relationships was primarily nourished by an attempt to grasp the modern future-oriented regime of historicity, visible perhaps most notably in her attempt to understand and articulate a critique of the process-oriented perspective on history that fed into political movements throughout the modern period. By contrast, one of the major challenges of late-modern society is rather our increased incapacity to envisage and enact politics beyond the immediate, trapped in what some scholars refer to as a presentist predicament. By addressing contemporary problems via the themes giving form to the present compilation, the editor has managed to highlight the dialectics between liberation and the practice of freedom in ways stretching beyond *both* the reified visions of future-projected utopias with which Arendt primarily dealt, *and* our contemporary difficulties to envisage the future as different from today. For this reason, as well as for the many illuminating case studies as such, this is a highly readable anthology for anyone interested in the political thought of Arendt as well as in contemporary political theory more generally.

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