

## Zohar Mihaely, Hannah Arendt and the Crisis of Israeli Democracy

Review: Zohar Mihaely: *Hannah Arendt and the Crisis of Israeli Democracy*, Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2022, 84+xiv., 20,33 EUR.

*Hannah Arendt and the Crisis of Israeli Democracy*, published in 2022 by Zohar Mihaely, an independent scholar based in Israel, is an attempt to link Arendt's thought to current political events, trying to show how her analysis of American political life in the 1960s can apply to the still ongoing Israeli protests that started in 2020.

Since the tie between philosophical theory and political action is the main thread of this book, it opens on the problem of current turmoil in Israeli society, and how Arendt's ideas can help to understand and act on it. Divided into 5 chapters of varying lengths (3 to 22 pages), it first gives an overview of Arendt's philosophy of politics, and then follows *Crises of the Republic's* structure, commenting on its four essays, as each one of them focuses on distinct themes and events.

The first chapter sketches the main lines of Arendt's political works, and especially her will to deconstruct what she diagnoses as the "*Platonic tradition*", from Plato to Marx, which bases political activity on knowledge (p. 2). This very short chapter manages to give a clear view of the central point of the essay: Arendt's original perspective on politics is particularly relevant to the analysis of current crises, specifically the Israeli one.

The second chapter focuses on "Lying in politics", trying to paint the nuances with which Arendt grants that lying is a component of political activity, but needs to be contained in order not to lose the very concept of truth, which ensures that men act within a shared world that does not only depend on relative points of view. After a detailed account of Arendt's analysis of the Pentagon papers (the 1971 leak revealing governmental lies on the Vietnam War), Mihaely spends a couple of pages reflecting on how this applies to present Israeli politics, focusing on the shared characteristics between the 1970s in America as described by Arendt and the 2020s in Israel: how professional politicians' lies led to a "*de-factualization*", and to citizens losing "*their ability to distinguish between picture and reality*" (p.16), thus fostering a desire for authoritarian figures.

While the second chapter establishes a diagnosis, chapters 3 to 5 constitute the backbone of the argumentation on how to resolve the issue: Chapter 3 comes back to a more conceptual perspective, starting from an historical example (the 1960s American civil disobedience movement) and how Arendt relates it to the philosophical tradition (Rousseau, Kant, Montesquieu, Locke), revealing the flaws of said tradition. At this point, Mihaely recounts his own experience amongst the anti-Netanyahu protests (p. 25) to

support the point of both Arendt and himself — that civil disobedience is a healthy process for democracy and therefore should be legitimized, including through legal and constitutional ways.

Chapter 4 focuses on *Crisis of the Republic's* third chapter, “On Violence”, detailing the distinction between power and violence, based on the historical example of the student riots from the 1960s. Mihaely endorses Arendt’s criticism of the pseudo-Marxist ideology these social movements claimed. Using her distinctions between force, violence, power and authority, he assesses the possibility of justifying violence but also shows how bureaucracy can lead to increased violence. He then links all this to the specific Israeli situation, discussing the relationship between force and violence in this context, and drawing a parallel between Arendt’s view of African Americans and his own view of right-wing Mizrachi (p. 48).

In Chapter 5, Mihaely uses Arendt’s thought more directly against ideologies, and especially Marxism and Stalinism, opposing several objections, like the danger of granting economic power to the government (p. 58), or the alleged nationalist tendency of the proletariat (p. 61). All this is done with the goal of defining what a true revolution is, and how revolutionaries should be wary of ideologies, as “*the only way to create a revolution is to push for a non ideological search for truth in order to say what is there*” (p. 63). The end of the chapter could have needed a clearer structure, as pages 64 to 68 are interlaced with lengthy footnotes. However, their insights on Arendt’s view of Zionism and its ties to nationalism are more than welcomed.

Finally, the conclusion gives a clear outline of Arendt’s diagnosis, and of how it applies to Netanyahu’s Israel (p. 69), centering around the idea that one of the biggest dangers for politics is to lose sight of public affairs in favor of private ones. Mihaely’s best qualities show in this section, as he manages to summarize Arendt’s concepts very clearly, and shows how it pertains to current issues: he explains how the question of government in Israel has been reduced to foreign policy, and how the 2023 protests are in his view a redeeming act of taking back politics by the people.

Indeed, this book is by no means a scientific in-depth study of Arendt’s works: it is rather a tool that seeks to spark thoughts and action, as it starts with the question “What is to be done?” (p.ix), and ends with the answer “Arendt inspires future Israeli revolutionaries to start something new” (p. 81). In this view, the essay achieves its goal, by focusing on the main threads of Arendt’s assessments in *Crisis of the Republic*, and showing how they bear practical lessons for today. However, this book’s extreme topicality and action-focused quality is a double-edged sword: it tries to examine a still ongoing situation, and manages to give insight into it, even though the uncertainty of potential outcomes does show — for example, it describes Netanyahu as the “former Prime Minister” (p. 15). In this sense, the book achieves its aim, clarified on the second

page: “to think about this reality through the prism of the political theory of Hannah Arendt” (p.x).

Moreover, the main fragility of the book is that it depends heavily on the opposition between ideology and reality, while not explaining how the author’s account of ideology works in specific cases. Marxism is deemed “cliché” without further justification, the idea that Ashkenazi tend to be prevalent in the higher spheres of Israeli society is considered a “pseudo-these” (p. 48) without discussion of this complex social and historical issue. It sometimes sounds like the dichotomy between ideology and reality was a way to discard certain positions without actually arguing against them. Moreover, the book covers three different levels (the historical cases at the basis of Arendt's reflection, her theory, its application to the Israeli protests), meaning that it tends to examine quite quickly these three topics, especially considering it is under 90 pages long. The size and swiftness of this essay can border on a lack of contextualization, especially on Arendt’s position on African-Americans, whether it be their supposed “lack of basic education” which “lowered white standards to their level” (p. 34) or their alleged focus on immediate, therefore not political, interest (p. 61). This could have called for some amount of critical scrutiny, especially given the state of debate on racism in Arendt today.

Overall, this book is aimed at readers with both a good knowledge of Israeli political history and an awareness of the currently developing events. This becomes clear through the way background issues are mentioned, rather than more thoroughly explained or discussed: for example, the quick allusion to the issue of the constitution in Israel leaves the reader still curious (p.29), or the parallel between African-Americans and right-wing Mizrahi (p.48). In a way, it is an essay on the current situation in Israel, adopting an Arendtian perspective on it, rather than an essay on her political theory, taking the state of Israel as its case study.

To more Arendt-oriented readers, Mihaely gives an inspiring first outline of how we could use Arendt to think about what is currently happening, even though this book calls for a more in-depth study of the articulation between Arendt’s thought and what is still unfolding in Israel.

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