

Maria Robaszkiewicz and Michael D. Weinman: Hannah Arendt and Politics

Review: Maria Robaszkiewicz and Michael D. Weinman: *Hannah Arendt and Politics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 232 pp., 24,59 EUR.

Despite the steadily enduring surge of attention for Hannah Arendt, it has not necessarily become easier to know how to gain access to her work. She does not present a system in the sense of philosophical modernity, which if anything is more of a target for her. Nor does she launch arguments that privilege methodological strictness set apart from worldly considerations, emphasizing this worldliness instead. Classifying Arendt more positively can give rise to multiple, quite different starting points: Robaszkiewicz and Weinman provide a list from influential secondary literature which would style Arendt as a critical theorist, reluctant modernist, phenomenologist; an anti-feminist or feminist ally, a democratic or republican theorist, a nostalgic or critical Greacophile (p. 3¹). The authors note that the book responds to this multiplicity in two ways: first by acknowledging that all of these supposed starting points play a role in Arendt's work, while also extending Arendt's well-known saying that after her political awakening she never belonged to any party, nor had any need to, to the 'political' starting point of her work as a whole. Robaszkiewicz and Weinman take this fact of not belonging to a party not in the way that this formulation suggests, namely as a lack or negation of belonging, but as indicative of Arendt's own positive approach to her work. This approach is seen as stemming from her own formula of 'political exercises', which was part of the subtitle of her book of essays, *Between Past and Future* (first published in 1961). Taking its cue from this subtitle and the singular explanation Arendt herself provides of it in the short preface to that work, *Hannah Arendt and politics* is organized into two parts. The first part outlines the materials of thought that are needed in order to interpret the genre of 'political exercises' as part and parcel of her thought. The authors note how this "opens a theoretical perspective" engaged in the second part, in which they themselves "propose six such exercises, all of them illuminating some aspect of Arendt's political theory, and at the same time engaging, through an Arendtian lens, in a discussion of questions and challenges we face today" (p. 7). Before summarizing and providing a note of reflection with respect to this dual strategy, I first want to offer a more general reflection with respect to the book as a whole.

Hannah Arendt and politics is published as part of a book series which aims to combine first introductions and critical commentary. This deepens the need for clarity, which would have been a necessity in an introduction into a philosopher's or political theorist's work in any event. Add to this the fact that Arendt straddles the line between

¹ Page references are to Robaszkiewicz & Weinman 2023.

classifications, as noted above. The task to not only provide an introduction that is accessible but also sufficiently complex, but to combine this with a critical perspective of the work, is a tall order. For me personally this has meant that I have been unsure which text to recommend to students of Arendt's work, whether in a formal educational setting or in terms of responding to someone's more personal interest in coming to know this important thinker. Not because there are few texts to choose from – if anything, the opposite. *Hannah Arendt and politics* distinguishes itself through its clarity in presentation and to the many uses to which it can be put. Speaking concretely, I expect to include the book in my next syllabus which features Arendt, whether as a general introduction at an undergraduate level (in which case I would select the first chapter on action and the web of related concepts in which it is enmeshed) or in the context of a more advanced critical seminar to discuss the question what, if anything, can be learned from Arendt with respect to contemporary ecological questions (in which case I would select chapter six). Still, for all this flexibility, *Hannah Arendt and politics* is organized in a systematic way.

The first part aims to establish the practical nature of Arendt's work and its engagement in judgments or political thinking. To this end, the first chapter introduces Arendt's lexicon of politics (with Lisa Disch) not from the point of view of key concepts, which would suggest a series of isolated starting points, but rather taking their interconnection as its cue (p. 12). The frames of reference are natality, plurality, action, power, freedom, the private and the public, and the social ('and how to make sense of all this', p. 27). The point is made even in the typography, with each new concept being introduced in the heading simultaneously forming the end of a sentence ("We need them all to get a grasp of the world as described by Arendt, beginning with – **Natality**", p. 12; "Such, certainly experimental, acting in concert produces – **Power**", p. 18). The presentation of Arendt is necessarily selective but is well-supported through references both to Arendt and mostly recent secondary literature. The background strategy of establishing the practical nature of Arendt's work adds to its convincingness. The second chapter, 'between human action and the life of the mind', establishes Arendt's practical-political as opposed to purely philosophical aims, by tracing Arendt's resistance to intellectual isolation. Its closing section fittingly asks: 'Was Arendt a philosopher after all?' (p. 47). This shows both the introductory qualities of this first part of *Hannah Arendt and politics* as well as its penchant of relating critically not only to philosophy, in this instance, but also to Arendt herself. The third chapter, which rounds off the first part, connects the lexicon of politics and the insistence of practical relevance together into the genre of political exercises which is the backbone of the book. Robaszkiewicz and Weinman provide a non-exhaustive list of three 'modes' of political exercises. First, studying political concepts and inventing new political categories (p. 67), second, describing "exemplary spaces of action that can be actualized through and for common action" such as, but not limited to, the polis (p. 68), and third, "drawing portraits of people", real or fictional, "whose appearance in the common world can be seen as exemplary for political praxis" (p. 69) as the company we keep in thought.

The authors note how the unwillingness to keep any company at all, and to be part of the world at all, may have been a dual source of fear for Arendt herself. In responding to these fears Robaszkiewicz and Weinman engage with that which today should ‘make us think’, to put it in another vocabulary. The authors note that some of the issues under consideration in the second part of the book stem from Arendt’s biography and others aim to engage worldly questions we face today (p. 71), but really all of them relate to both Arendt and our contemporary political plight. The selected issues are Arendt’s relationship with philosophy (through the figure of Heidegger), ‘Eichmann, mass democracy, and Israel’ (the title of the fifth chapter), ecology, education, feminist agency, human rights and sovereignty, and the issue of race, within Arendt’s work and beyond it. All of these ‘exercises’ are worth multiple readings in their own right because of how thought-provoking they are while remaining recognizably Arendtian. None of the exercises shy away from difficult passages in Arendt’s works. At the same time, as exercises they are “not trying to tell (...) readers what they should think, but inviting them as dialogue partners to think and judge together about the world we share” (p. 71). I am tempted at some points to respond, rather than just agree, to the judgments developed in the second part of the book, which in itself shows them to be a success. As exercises, all of them are well-developed.

Hannah Arendt and politics provides a convincing, thought-provoking and clear introduction to the work of Hannah Arendt, in critical conversation with the letter of the text while always embodying its spirit. In so doing, it also contributes to difficult scholarly discussions surrounding her work in a refreshingly practical way, with its understanding of Arendt’s work and its self-interpretation in terms of engaging in political exercises as an ideal guiding thread.

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