

Hannah Arendt and World-Thought in the Twentieth Century

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My current research project focuses on the political theorist Hannah Arendt, famous for her analysis of totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century. I want to conduct research into Arendt's attempt to revive the conditions for a 'world-literature'. World-literature, a term first used by Goethe in 1827, refers to an increase in cultural exchange and international collaboration that can shape post-national forms of political agency. This project will be the first truly interdisciplinary analysis of the intellectual and political currents of the twentieth century that shaped Arendt's critical preoccupations. Moving beyond exegesis of her political thought, 'Hannah Arendt and World-Thought in the Twentieth Century' will illuminate Arendt's approach to education, her commitment to literature and literary friendships, and her indebtedness to an ethic of worldly understanding inspired by anti-fascist forms of linguistic and cultural critique.

The Significance of World-Literature in the Twenty-First Century

This project is particularly timely in the current climate where political languages of civilisational clashes and perpetual war threaten to undermine cross-cultural inquiry and international co-operation. In this context, Arendt's commitment to literature as a form of concrete experience and comparative reflection is especially important. By advocating an international literature that thematised migration, exile, and the experience of colonialism, war, and revolution, Arendt diagnosed those quintessential themes of the twentieth century that continue into our own. Arendt was interested in writers who embodied the ethic of a 'world literature'; writers with a unique and non-doctrinaire perspective on the moral failures of nationalism, the rise of stateless persons, and the capacity of national thinking to cope with crimes against humanity.

Two Dimensions of World-Thought I wish to Research:

(1) Arendt as Educator in the United States: 1955-68.

In the first six months of 2005, my first year of post-doctoral research, I want to conduct further research into those writers and themes that Arendt promulgated in political science courses that she taught in U.S. universities between 1955 and 1968. According to Arendt, these courses were designed to introduce students to political experiences 'not in the raw', but, on the other hand, 'without theoretical overtones', that is, as refracted through aesthetic imagination. The courses introduced students to the writers including

William Faulkner, George Orwell, André Malraux, Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Heller, Bertold Brecht, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and T.E. Lawrence.

There are a number of questions of interest in relation to the 'Political Experience' course. To what extent was Arendt interested in promoting the internationalist ethos of a world-literature for the sake of the political education of her students? I am interested in Arendt's interest in an international literature as an interpretive prism, mediating the subjective experience of war, revolution, and totalitarianism with representational resources such as picaresque narrative, allegory, and satire. By interviewing former students and conducting sustained archival research at Hannah Arendt's digitalised archives (available online) I want to investigate the world-oriented ethos of Arendt as an educator and theorist: to what extent did Arendt deploy her international experiences as a detention camp intern, refugee, and political exile in this course to highlight the themes of totalitarianism, statelessness, exile, and worldly commitment? How did her course change over time and respond to new and politically active generations of students? With the aid of an Australian Academy of the Humanities Fieldwork Fellowship I have already conducted helpful preliminary interviews about the 1968 'Political Experience' course with Jerome Kohn, the trustee of the Hannah Arendt Bluecher Literary Trust and director of the Hannah Arendt Center and Archive at New School University, and with Arendt's biographer, Dr. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, both former graduate students of Arendt.

(2) The Influence of post-war anti-fascist cultural and linguistic critique on Arendt's theory of a world-literature.

I am interested in the ethical effects of Arendt's long friendship with her mentor, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers, and their shared commitment to developing post-national forms of citizenship, cultural exchange, and literary collaboration. With another friend of Hannah Arendt, the German cultural-critic Dolf Sternberger, Karl Jaspers was one of the founders of the monthly periodical *Die Wandlung* (1945-49). I seek to use maintenance funds to support a two month stay in Marbach, Germany, between August and October 2005, which comprises the archives of *Die Wandlung*. I want to analyse two specific dimensions of the writings in *Die Wandlung*. Firstly, how did the comparatist spirit and linguistic sensitivities of *Aus dem Wörterbuch des Unmenschen* contribute an oppositional discourse to the mentality of nationalism and fascism? Why did Arendt and Jaspers celebrate *Die Wandlung* as a post-national 'European' journal? How did the journal deploy authors such as Bertolt Brecht, Thomas Mann, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, and Arendt herself, to generate a world-literature that could illustrate future avenues for international co-operation and world citizenship?

I believe these two research avenues are mutually complementary; they will explain how the notion of a world-literature embodied two facets of Arendt's intellectual make-up, the experimental modernist and the historical thinker: as a forced émigré intellectual to the United States after the Second World War Arendt sought a bold modern literature that concretely depicted the existential condition of statelessness and exile she had encountered. Yet Arendt also maintained contact with the revival of world-literature ideals in post-war European intellectual life, where world-literature referred back to an

Enlightenment ideals of humanist internationalism, and encouraged reflection on the deformation of language and sensibility by totalitarian regimes. 'Hannah Arendt and World-Thought in the Twentieth Century' will engender an intriguing intellectual biography of Arendt, encompassing both the American and European contexts of her life, thought and activism. It will illuminate heretofore neglected histories where political thought, aesthetics, and ethics have contributed to an interdisciplinary climate of thought. It will suggest critical methodologies and educational strategies that allow us to enhance our political languages with cross-cultural and post-national perspectives.

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