

## The Meaning of Love in Politics

### A Letter by Hannah Arendt to James Baldwin

November 21, 1962

Dear Mr. Baldwin:

Your article in the *New Yorker* is a political event of a very high order, I think; it certainly is an event in my understanding of what is involved in the Negro question. And since this is a question which concerns us all, I feel I am entitled to raise objections.

What frightened me in your essay was the gospel of love which you begin to preach at the end. In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy. All the characteristics you stress in the Negro people: their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity, are well-known characteristics of all oppressed people. They grow out of suffering and they are the proudest possession of all pariahs. Unfortunately, they have never survived the hour of liberation by even five minutes. Hatred and love belong together, and they are both destructive; you can afford them only in the private and, as a people, only so long as you are not free.

In sincere admiration,  
cordially (that is, in case you remember that we know each other slightly) yours,

---

Hannah Arendt

*Anmerkung der Redaktion:* This letter by Hannah Arendt transcribed here from the image published by the Library of Congress (The Hannah Arendt Papers, Correspondence, letters under BA) is a reply. Baldwin's essay in *The New Yorker* that prompted Hannah Arendt's letter was: „Letter from a Region of My Mind,” published November 17, 1962. Together with „A Letter to My Nephew,” it was republished by Dial Press in 1963 under the title James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin wrote in that essay:

“When I was very young, and was dealing with my buddies in those wine- and urine-stained hallways, something in me wondered, *What will happen to all that beauty?* For black people, though I am aware that some of us, black and white, do not know it yet, are very beautiful. And when I sat at Elijah's table and watched the baby, the women, and the men, and we talked about God's – or Allah's – vengeance, I wondered, when that vengeance was achieved, *What will happen to all that beauty then?* I could also see that the intransigence and ignorance of the white world might make that vengeance inevitable – a vengeance that does not really depend on, and

cannot really be executed by, any person or organization, and that cannot be prevented by any police force or army: historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance, based on the law that we recognize when we say, "Whatever goes up must come down." And here we are, at the center of the arc, trapped in the gaudiest, most valuable, and most improbable water wheel the world has ever seen. Everything now, we must assume, is in our hands; we have no right to assume otherwise. If we – and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others – do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*

The letter from Hannah Arendt was sent to us by Alexander R. Bazelow in response to what we published in *HannahArendt.net* no. 1 (2005) in our section „Miscellanea” under the heading „‘Arme Hannah’ oder Die Karriere eines Unzitats”

Mr. Bazelow comments:

”In a very thought provoking essay in the spring 2005 issue of *HannahArendt.net* Wolfgang Heuer casts a very critical eye on a sentence from a speech given by the former President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Johannes Rau. The sentence, attributed to Hannah Arendt, that „Politik ist angewandte Liebe zur Welt” [Politics is the application of love for the world] would seem, on the face of it, to be quite incompatible with any number of utterances Arendt had made on politics and love over the course of her career. However, there is one instance in particular that deserves to be more generally known in which she could not be more unequivocal about the problem of equating the two, and which more than confirms Dr. Heuer’s skepticism that Arendt ever meant what the sentence implies. It is an incident involving the black American writer James Baldwin, and is described in detail by Baldwin’s biographer [James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates*]. Many writers have defended the notion that love can be brought to bear upon the solution of political problems, but no one believed it more passionately than James Baldwin.”