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0521477735 - Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought

Margaret Canovan

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Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt is one of the most original and controversial thinkers of the twentieth century, and her work has attracted a great deal of criticism and comment. In this major reinterpretation Margaret Canovan makes extensive use of unpublished material to trace the themes of Arendt's mature thought back to their origins in her concern with Nazism and Stalinism, and shows that Arendt has been widely misunderstood because her writings have not been read in their proper context.

Dr Canovan sheds new and often surprising light on many of the most controversial areas of Arendt's work, including her theory of totalitarianism itself, the links between *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, her theory of action, her puzzling and disturbing comments on 'the social question' and on morality in politics, and many other aspects of her work. Arendt's thought turns out to be more complex and more deeply preoccupied with totalitarianism than is generally recognised, but also, paradoxically, to have greater contemporary relevance than might be expected. Dr Canovan's reinterpretation strengthens Arendt's claim to be regarded as one of the most significant political thinkers of the twentieth century.

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Reader in Politics, University of Keele



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Preface

There are two senses in which the interpretation of Hannah Arendt's political thought presented here is a *reinterpretation*. It is, in the first place, a reading of her work that differs in a number of important respects from other accounts. I hope to persuade students of her work both that this reading is closer to her thought, and that there are good reasons why she should have been widely misunderstood.

The second sense is more personal, for this is not my first book on Arendt. A brief introduction to her ideas, aimed at students and written while her work was still incomplete, appeared in 1974 and (being the first in the field) became fairly well known. While subsequently working in other areas I kept in mind the possibility of going into the matter in more depth, and occasionally published pieces on Arendt. But it was only when (with the aid of grants from the British Academy) I started to study her unpublished writings, preserved in the Library of Congress, that I began to realise just how much more there was to explore. Rereading Arendt's published work in the light of these other writings, I found myself obliged to revise my previous understanding of many aspects of her thought, and to suspect that what was needed was a full-scale reinterpretation. This book is an attempt to begin that process. It cannot pretend to be comprehensive, but it is focussed particularly on the areas of Arendt's thought where a revised reading seemed to me especially necessary. Other students of her work will certainly find much to criticise here, and will want to dispute many of my specific interpretations. More generally, some may be worried by the notion that there can be anything to be *discovered* about Arendt's thinking, and may want to take issue with the suggestion that the writings she chose to publish might need to be read with one eye on those she did not. Rather than argue in the abstract about hermeneutic principles, I would ask sceptics to read the account given here and see whether I can convince them that the additional sources do indeed shed light on Arendt's major works, and, in particular, that scholars cannot afford to concentrate on *The Human Condition* to the point of ignoring her earlier work, including her unpublished writings.

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Fortunately, many of Arendt's manuscripts are now being prepared for publication by Jerome Kohn,¹ to whom I am particularly indebted for his help and encouragement. Others who read all or part of the book in draft include April Carter, Sandra Hinchman and Richard King. I am profoundly grateful to them for helpful comments and incisive criticisms that have saved me from many errors, although all of them will no doubt find plenty to take issue with in the final version. James Canovan bore the greatest burden, reading successive drafts and contriving to be invariably supportive. It is to him that the book is dedicated.

I am grateful to the British Academy for the grants which made it possible for me to investigate Arendt's unpublished work, and to the Library of Congress (especially the photocopying department). Mary McCarthy (now, alas, deceased) was generous with encouragement and with permission to quote from the manuscripts.

An earlier version of chapter 7 appeared in *Social Research* (volume 57 no.1) in 1990.

¹ The first volume, *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, edited by Jerome Kohn, is published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (New York, 1994). Ursula Ludz's edition of fragmentary German drafts for Arendt's unwritten *Einführung in die Politik* is also now available: *Was ist Politik? Aus dem Nachlass herausgegeben von Ursula Ludz* (Piper: Munich, 1993).

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Abbreviations

<i>HC</i>	<i>The Human Condition</i> (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958)
<i>L of M</i>	<i>The Life of the Mind</i> (London, Secker and Warburg, 1978) vol. I: <i>Thinking</i> ; vol. II: <i>Willing</i>
<i>MSS</i>	The Arendt Papers in the Library of Congress, Washington DC
<i>OR</i>	<i>On Revolution</i> (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973)
<i>OT1</i>	<i>The Burden of Our Time</i> (British title of 1st edition of <i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i>) (London, Secker and Warburg, 1951)
<i>OT2</i>	<i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i> , 2nd edition (London, Allen and Unwin, 1958)
<i>OT3</i>	<i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i> , 3rd edition (London, Allen and Unwin, 1967)
<i>OT4</i>	<i>The Origins of Totalitarianism</i> , paperback edition (London, André Deutsch, 1986)