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0521599369 - Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Emigres and American Political Thought after World War II

Edited by Peter Graf Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt

Excerpt

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Introduction

PETER GRAF KIELMANSEGG

German emigration after 1933 and the development of political theory in the United States – does this comprise a single topic? Indeed, it does. A number of prominent names come immediately to mind, names of German Jews who, banished by National Socialism, found refuge in the United States, where they became engaged in the development of philosophy and the theory of politics, making significant, indeed definitive contributions. The list includes not only Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, of course, but also Herbert Marcuse and Hans Morgenthau – to name only the four most influential of these refugee intellectuals.

These scholars have more in common than merely their German-Jewish origin, the fate of being expelled from Germany, their new home in America, and the significance that they achieved as political theorists and philosophers in the United States. All of them had already completed their academic education in Germany (Hannah Arendt, the youngest of the group, was twenty-six years old in 1932; Leo Strauss was seven years older) and thus brought with them the imprint of the educational traditions of their native country and continent. But all of them, starting at different levels, attained their characteristic intellectual profile only after emigration. Their contributions to the history of political thought in the twentieth century were all published in the United States. Only for Leo Strauss does this statement have to be modified somewhat since he wrote his book on Hobbes, Strauss's first fundamental work in political philosophy, in the years just before he left Europe. It is true of all four, moreover, that once they had been expelled, they all turned resolutely and permanently to the country of their refuge. None of them sought and found a way back after 1945. And yet they remained the intellectual citizens of two worlds, belonging

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fully and indubitably to neither; they were no longer Germans, yet they had not become simply and exclusively Americans.

It seems quite clear that lives taking such a course will prompt questions of systematic interest. Does their thinking, in the questions they pose and in the answers they find, owe something to the fact that the émigrés belonged to two worlds? How, on the one hand, is their philosophy shaped by the world of their origin and, on the other, by their encounter with a new world that they first entered at the age of thirty or forty? Not all of the essays concerning Arendt and Strauss collected here use these questions as their explicit point of departure, but all contribute in some way to answering them. Thus, the individual contributions are linked not merely by the two names but also by an interpretive outlook that connects the work of the two Jewish German-Americans and their paths through two worlds.

With respect to Hannah Arendt, this outlook shows up most clearly in Ernst Vollrath's reflections on Arendt's concept of the political. Her search for the ideal definition of politics was given impetus by her confrontation with the most extreme form of perverted politics under the guise of National Socialist totalitarianism in her native country. The answer to the question of what comprises the authentically political, whereby the scales of human possibilities are once again brought into balance, she found in the country of her refuge. Arendt interpreted the founding of the American republic at the end of the eighteenth century, at almost the same time as, though quite different from, the epochal events of the French Revolution, as the model of political action in the modern period. She did not consider any other event of modern political history to come even close in importance to the founding of the United States of America.

Hannah Arendt's emphatically "American" answer to the question of what constitutes politics, what it can be in the best instance, that is, at the furthest remove from the pure nonpolitics of totalitarian tyranny, engenders new questions. Some are historical questions, which, though they might well be of secondary importance for the theory of politics, are anything but insignificant. Others are systematic questions. With respect to history, we must ask how Arendt's image of the founding of the American republic, elevated to the status of a myth, corresponds to the historical realities presented to us by the discipline of history. To what extent was Arendt at all interested in the results of historical research? How well did she know the writings of the Founding Fathers?

One of the accepted traditions of the American republic is the elevation of the story of its own founding to a myth. But Arendt's emphasis is not simply borrowed from this tradition. On the contrary, it reflects the liber-

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ating discovery of someone who had escaped the murderous, totalitarian perversion of all politics into violence and who had entered the republic of the United States as an outsider. Vollrath shows that Arendt's relation to current American politics was not at all uncritical. But her interpretation of the founding of the American republic as the high moment of modern politics affected her judgment of the institutions and the political culture of the United States in a manner that can only be described as nothing less than idealizing. Hence, not only her perception of American history, but also her thoughts on contemporary America need to be discussed.

The systematic questions presented here seem to me more important than the historical ones: Hannah Arendt's notion of authentic politics, in which a person finds his or her destiny as a political being, is firmly attached to the story of a founding act. The founding of a political entity or the drafting of a constitution, if one wants to express it in a more modern and technical way, represents for her the most political of all human activities; it is pure politics. But here one does not learn much about whatever else might constitute politics. All three essays devoted to Arendt expound in different ways this particularity of her concept of the political, which really must be called a weakness. George Kateb presents the most trenchant treatment of this aspect. He sees in Arendt's idealizing concept of authentic, pure politics the danger of politics becoming untied from its moorings in morality. Certainly, Arendt's concept of politics is inimical to everyday reality; it completely ignores what is everyday or routine. Arendt seemed not much interested in political action in the institutionalized context of a given constitutional order. Characteristically, as Helmut Dubiel points out, it was in civil disobedience that she discerned at least traces of the authenticity of the founding act. Civil disobedience is not an everyday act in an everyday situation.

Such a concept of politics, elevated to a norm and situated in a far-removed historical moment, seems almost necessarily joined to a perspective of decline. One cannot linger on the high plateau of pure politics. The actual practice of politics in a republic cannot remain, even under the most favorable circumstances, what it was at the beginning. In Hannah Arendt's view, the political decline most characteristic of modern societies occurs when politics becomes the instrument to realize "the social." Yet this formulation fails to reveal the exact purposes that Arendt does not want to see served by politics. But one comes away with the impression that she condemns practically the entire substance of modern politics. Modern politics almost always aims at satisfying the material needs of society, either directly or indirectly. Precisely the democratic process itself brings this about.

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Hence, Dubiel is quite correct in stating that a concept of politics devoid of specific purpose, which abandons the social sphere to societal self-regulation, seems incompatible with the essential nature of democratic politics.

Ernst Vollrath connects this point with the way in which Arendt's thinking was shaped by her background. It is characteristic of the traditional German understanding of politics that the political is equated with the state, but also that there exists a dichotomy between the state and society. For Arendt, although the political has been released from being identified with the state, the dichotomy between the state and society lives on in the dualism of the political and the social. In any case, it seems hard to avoid the impression of a certain emptiness in Arendt's concept of politics, which is the reverse of her emphasis. And one is tempted to extend Vollrath's thesis somewhat and to see something very Germanic in this idea of the authentically political, strangely emphatic and, at the same time, devoid of content.

In all of this we have already touched on the theme of "Arendt and Democracy" which, with differing emphases, forms the focus of the essays by George Kateb and Helmut Dubiel. Despite some reservations, Dubiel does indeed find the outline of a theory of democracy primarily in Arendt's book, *On Revolution*. In her understanding of the act of founding a republic, he discerns a precise statement of the revolutionary reinterpretation of legitimacy fundamental to modernity. And in her communicative interpretation of power, which is, in a certain sense, the centerpiece of her political philosophy, he finds the only conception of the phenomenon of power that seems consistent with democracy.

Kateb assesses Arendt's relation to democracy much more critically. Speaking of Arendt and Strauss, he says, "Both radiate disapproval of modern democracy." What seems obvious, in any case, is Arendt's nonrelationship to modern, representative democracy. It means nothing to her because authentic politics does not occur in this system. Kateb recognizes an aristocratic ideal behind this lack of understanding for the representative form of democracy: A citizen is one for whom public life, participation in civil society, concern for the common weal, is the real purpose of life. And if there are only a few such citizens, then there are only a few. Democracy, in contrast, is founded on the conviction that one should never leave politics entirely to the few, even if these are citizens in the sense of Arendt's ideal. The few must be held accountable to the many who want to lead their lives in the limited sphere of private existence, and that representation serves exactly the function of accountability. There is little of this to be found in Arendt's writings. Her unconditional rejection of totalitarianism, as Kateb

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notes, did not induce her to make a realistic assessment of the conditions that might offer the alternative of freedom in modern societies.

Leo Strauss has had a much greater influence on political philosophy in the United States than Hannah Arendt, who is read more and given more attention in Germany than Strauss. He still exerts this influence because, as is well known, a school formed around him – certainly a very remarkable state of affairs for an émigré. The theme that occupied his life, his “philosophical project,” as Gebhardt calls it – whether one describes this in Söllner’s words as “the rehabilitation of tradition against modernity,” or using Gebhardt’s formulation, as “restituting the dignity of the fundamental question about right and wrong” – does not seem at first glance to have much to do with his life’s journey through two worlds, and the influence of these worlds upon him. His attack on modernity is not aimed at its specifically American variant. Rather, his condemnation applies to modernity as a whole as the destroyer of all authoritative traditions of value. It applies to the defection from the thinking of classical natural law, for this is how he interprets the entire history of modern political philosophy from Machiavelli and Hobbes onward. He is thus concerned with a process of error and decline (here again, the catchword “decline”) that impinges on Western civilization as a whole. And in order to evaluate this properly, he deemed it necessary to return to the sources of this civilization, to classical Greek philosophy, which for Strauss means, above all, a return to Plato.

But still, it is not at all digressive to ask how Strauss’s political philosophy might have developed, what effect it might have had, if history had permitted Strauss to remain in Germany or in Europe. It is certainly true that no break in the development of his thought exists that could be attributed in any way to his emigration. Alfons Söllner’s essay, which examines the earlier and middle works of the philosopher, demonstrates this continuity in particular. His book on Hobbes, in which Strauss’s political philosophy had already attained clear contours, was after all written in the period prior to his emigration. But that does not mean that no importance should be attached to his encounter with the new world to which he immigrated. More than any other society within the sphere of European culture, the United States has grown out of and is rooted in the Enlightenment. In terms of its basic idea, the United States is, as Ralf Dahrendorf expressed it, “applied Enlightenment.” Thus, Strauss encountered modernity in its purest and most consistent form. It can be assumed that this constituted a special challenge for him. Conversely, when he questioned the essence of modernity while living and working within a society, like the American one, that de-

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rived its identity entirely from modernity, this questioning probably exerted a particular fascination.

The catchword “fascination” also involves Strauss as a person. In some respects he appears a very German figure, “a charismatic representative of Teutonic learnedness,” as Söllner describes him, a representative of the nineteenth-century German tradition of higher education, the tradition of a highly elevated aristocracy of scholars of imperious manner. This may have contributed to the influence he exerted in the very different world of the United States.

Gebhardt’s essay also emphasizes how Strauss’s background shaped him. Admittedly, Strauss was a denizen of the German university world only as a student, not as a “mandarin,” as Gebhardt formulates it with reference to Fritz Ringer’s term. His first scholarly works originated outside the university, namely, within a Jewish research institute. But the style in which he later taught, the way he asserted his claim to authority, most certainly had something in common with that academic world from which he came. Moreover, Strauss was by nature a person in whom the European world, beyond the specifically German university tradition, seemed to be present in an overwhelming way. His almost cultic veneration of the “great books” in which he sought and found the tradition of wisdom and the wisdom of tradition might appear to alienate us in some respects as a kind of scholasticism. But it testifies as well to a deep-rootedness in the culture of premodern Europe that, like Jewish culture, was uniquely passed down through the written word. In a particular way, Strauss was a product of the coincidence of Jewish and European origins. His engagement with “the Jewish problem” during his early years in Germany – a topic Gebhardt’s essay addresses – was certainly a significant step on the way to the European sources of thought in which he anchored his philosophical project. In short, Leo Strauss’s work and its effects, as with Hannah Arendt’s, can be related to his affiliation with two worlds.

The attitudes toward Strauss that we meet in the essays in this volume are quite diverse. In all of the essays, however, the challenge that radiates from the untimely message that Strauss proclaims becomes evident. Söllner attributes a half-philosophical, half-theological character to this message. It is philosophical at the core and theological primarily in the manner in which a binding tradition is proclaimed. But this character is also implicitly Strauss’s in the way it treats “sacred texts,” out of which answers to the really important questions are to be obtained, and in the style in which it condemns “heresies” – those modern developments of thought that have led away from the insights of classical philosophy.

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In an essay that compares and contrasts Strauss and Heidegger, Horst Mewes also assigns Strauss's thought a place in the unstable intellectual space between philosophy and theology, although he takes an entirely different approach from that of Gebhardt. In a certain sense, Mewes's Strauss is also at once philosopher and theologian. Strauss interprets the irresolvable contradiction between reason, in the form of Greek philosophy, and revelation, in the form of the Bible, as being constitutive for Western culture, irresolvable because ultimately, reason cannot refute revelation, nor revelation reason. It is obvious that this is the portrait of a great outsider in the academic world, especially the American academic world of the twentieth century. The Strauss we encounter in Gebhardt's essay is similar. The search for truth in the essential Straussian sense can only be pursued in opposition to the modern understanding of science, that is, in opposition to the modern scientific project.

Is he, with his philosophical theology and theological philosophy, a great outsider, not only in the academic world of the twentieth century, but also in the world of modern democracy? One cannot become involved with Leo Strauss, the political philosopher, without confronting this question. It appears in various guises in the contributions of George Kateb, Timothy Fuller, and Jürgen Gebhardt. Kateb treats it most explicitly and most skeptically, without of course reaching any final judgment. If it is characteristic of Hannah Arendt that the political is elevated and stylized, for Leo Strauss the political is rather relativized. For him, the highest level of life is the philosophical life of contemplation, not the political life of action. The positions of both of these thinkers appear to distance themselves from democracy. In Strauss's texts there is certainly much negative evidence. And if one sums up what the texts say, considers the philosophical position behind them and the manner of proclaiming the truth, it seems hard to think of Strauss as anyone but a man of Platonic aristocratic ideals, even though it remains obscure what that means in the twentieth century. Kateb nonetheless asks the question of whether one might read the philosopher in a different way, namely, the way Strauss himself taught students to read political philosophical texts, which he believed carried hidden messages that had to be deciphered. Following Strauss's own method, is it possible to read into his distanced attitude toward democracy a sympathy for democracy which has to be warned of its weaknesses? Kateb poses this question without answering it.

The emphases are somewhat different in Timothy Fuller's essay. Fuller's observations on what seems to be quite a different topic, "Leo Strauss's Defense of Liberal Education," can be read as well as a contribution to the discussion of democracy. Strauss's educational ideal is doubtless an aristocratic

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one. The study of the “great books,” the dialogue with the masters, which for Strauss composes the nucleus of liberal education, forms a concern of the few and is intended only for the few. But this ideal of education is related to the idea of democracy. When Timothy Fuller describes liberal education, as Strauss means it, as “the necessary endeavor to found an aristocracy within democratic mass society,” then it is presupposed in this description that democracy requires such an aristocracy as a counterweight – here Aristotle’s mixed constitution surfaces as a distant memory. Possibly the connection between the aristocratic ideal of education and the democratic constitution is to be understood in such a way that, for Strauss, democracy deserves approval and support if and only if the democratic principle can be perceived as asserting the universalization of the aristocratic principle.

Finally, for Gebhardt the question of how Strauss regarded modern democracy seems less important than the question of what his philosophical project means for democracy. And here his answer is unambiguous: “The Straussian philosophical project is to be understood as a restitution of the historical form of Western civilization, that is, the city of man set against the modern project of the universal and tyrannical state, which aims to eliminate the city as well as man.”

Be that as it may, Strauss’s judgment of democracy is closely tied to his judgment of modernity as a whole. Thus, every discussion of the topic, “Strauss and Democracy,” ultimately runs up against the question: How valid is the principled critique that Strauss levels at modernity? How well founded is his philosophical attack on modernity? This is the theme at the center of Robert Pippin’s essay. His thesis that Strauss perceived modernity only selectively and did not really become aware of certain options inherent to the thinking of modernity bears significantly on our understanding of his views of democracy. Pippin illustrates this primarily by using Strauss’s interpretation of Rousseau. Like no other thinker in the history of modern political philosophy, Rousseau joined a fundamental critique of modernity with the highly modern attempt to found a civil society consistent with the ideal of self-determination. Rousseau thus indeed represents a particular challenge to Strauss’s thought.

In this contribution as in all the others in this volume the positions become clear from which further discussions of Leo Strauss’s and Hannah Arendt’s works can be pursued. The influence of these two thinkers has not yet reached an end, something that cannot be said of very many political thinkers of our century. Our findings suggest that the fruitfulness of their thinking is linked to the tragedy of their emigration.

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PART I

Hannah Arendt

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Hannah Arendt and the Theory of Democracy: A Critical Reconstruction

HELMUT DUBIEL

INTRODUCTION

On Revolution is Hannah Arendt's major contribution to political theory, and although the book's potential as a source of a theory of democracy is not immediately apparent, it is not necessary to dig very far to unearth the treasures this work contains. Arendt's notion of the secular foundation of political authority and of communicative power as well as her concepts of "public freedom" and the "founding act" have since been adopted as the standard components of numerous theories of democracy that are based on a philosophical approach. Yet it is true that the book's potential does not speak to theories oriented toward current issues. There are two reasons for this.

First, the parts of her work that can be related to systematic questions of a theory of democracy are mainly clad in the guise of a comparative reconstruction of the conceptual worlds of men who lived during and reflected upon the American and French revolutions. In other words, the reader is constantly forced to take the trouble of extracting a systematic political theory from a superbly presented history of ideas. The second reason why *On Revolution's* potential for a theory of democracy is not immediately apparent is Arendt's idealization of the founding of the North American confederation, which she treats as though it represented a historical realization of the utopian democratic republic. This tendency, which determines the perspective she adopts throughout the book, compels her to conceive of all the political developments of the following two centuries as constituting a decline. The impression that Arendt's chosen form of presenting political history is based on a theory of decline has earned her the reputation of a "conservative utopian" or a "political antimodernist," and this impression is all the stronger when viewed in the light of other parts of her overall oeuvre.