

The Political Foundation of a Common World

Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss and the Neoconservatives in the USA

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Hannah Arendt deals with two extremes in her work: on the one hand totalitarian rule as a new form of domination, and on the other hand politics as an action which is not a means to an end but whose sense lies in the action itself as the only locus of active freedom. To this extent, it is the diametrical opposite of totalitarianism, because it is clearly distinguished from the traditional understanding of politics as rule. Between these two extremes lies the liberal society, which Arendt characterises as the modern mass society and which for her is the epitome of an apolitical society without the experience of freedom and meaningful activity. According to Arendt it is in this form of society that the elements of totalitarian rule developed.

Arendt was not the only political thinker in her time who was profoundly critical of liberalism and modernism. In the Weimar Republic in Germany there was widespread criticism of modernity, mass culture, and the mediocrity associated with it. In particular, in their search for an explanation for the rise to power of National Socialism, the Jewish refugees to America in the 1930s such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Leo Strauss and also Arendt concentrated on the key elements of European Modernism: the enlightenment and liberalism.

I would like to consider Arendt and Strauss, because in their criticism of the modern age they both make use of the concept of politics from Ancient Greece, and indeed both were sometimes referred to as neo-Aristotelians. Their goal was to revive the political, in order to protect contemporary society against totalitarian dangers. Arendt and Strauss were about the same age, and after leaving Germany they both lived in the USA until their death, Arendt in New York, Strauss in Chicago. Yet neither of them made any reference to the other, and they fundamentally rejected each other's work.

The reason for this mutual rejection lay in the very different conclusions they drew from the analysis of the politics of the ancient classics. Arendt developed the idea of an opening of society for politics: politics as political, horizontal action in an open space. For her action, as the only direct activity between people, corresponds to the plurality of people, which she regards as *the* condition of all political life. Arendt replaces the modern, individualistic subject by inter-subjectivity - by man existing in relationships with other people. She outlines a tradition of

political action stretching from the Ancient Greek *polis* through the Italian city-states of the Renaissance, on to the Founding Fathers of the USA, and through to the independent councils of the revolutions and insurrections of the 20th century.

Leo Strauss, in contrast, was full of mistrust for such action. His re-assessment of politics aimed at strengthening an elite in power, but at the same time at strengthening the relationship between politics and religion, in order to ensure the integrity of society by means of a binding religious morality. Both wanted to replace the apolitical modern world with the *polis*, the politics of the citizens and an orientation towards the common good. But while Arendt favoured a Socratic approach and oriented herself on a republican tradition, Strauss turned to the philosopher king of Plato and the unrestricted sovereignty of Hobbes. Arendt focused on joint actions and the idea of power as something formed by people remaining together, but Strauss, on the other hand, focused on the rule of the few over the many. And whereas Arendt identified an irreconcilable contradiction between the modern world she was critical of and independent political action, Strauss felt that it was possible for a power elite to form even in the modern liberal state.

I would like now to outline Arendt's existential views of philosophy and politics, and her criticism of traditional political philosophy, before coming back to look again at the differences between Arendt and Strauss.

1. Existential philosophy and politics

Arendt characterises the two extremes of totalitarianism and political action from the point of view of existential philosophy. At the centre is the world, understood as a world of relationships between people and the basis for meaningful human existence. Totalitarian rule destroys this world to an unprecedented degree by replacing all relationships and free actions by the Movement, its ideology and its terror. The Movement, although made up of people, has transformed itself into a process which seems to lie outside the people. This process, according to Arendt, acts externally on the people through terror and internally by the sheer logic of the "self-compulsion of deductive thought". In this way, all traditional categories of state, nation, law, ethics, and friendship are dissolved in categories of objective processes. The basic existential experience of people in totalitarianism is characterised by Arendt as an extreme form of isolation.

This existential view of the world which Arendt had adopted from Heidegger forms the basis for her view of the political. Her alternative to total destruction of the world in totalitarianism is worldliness as a space of actions and spontaneity between people. Whereas in totalitarianism

people arrange themselves in a process whose logical laws lie outside themselves and whose dynamic is maintained and accelerated by 'the Movement', action is not subjected to any external force but arises only from itself and takes place in the present.

Whereas in totalitarianism people find themselves welded together in a singular unit by an "iron band of terror", action can take place because of the distance between people, it occurs in-between people when they speak with each other and interact in their plurality and individuality. "Wherever people come together, the world comes between them, and it is in this space that all human affairs take place."¹

Removed from all utilitarianism, totalitarianism makes people increasingly superfluous through until their very destruction, whereas action, which is also free from utilitarianism, generates the opposite: freedom to act in the sense of a new beginning. This action is free from utilitarianism because it is not the means to the end of freedom, but rather freedom is generated in action itself, and therefore the meaning of politics is freedom. The meaning of totalitarianism, in contrast, lies in destruction, including the destruction of meaning.

And whereas in totalitarianism ideology replaces reality with the "Self-compulsion of deductive thought", for Arendt reality consists of the plurality of views, "but it must be borne in mind that everything has as many sides and can be seen from as many perspectives as there are people involved."²

Arendt was encouraged to formulate this radical counter-proposal not only by Heidegger, but also by the communicative understanding of truth of Jaspers. In both she encountered the praxis of de-tyrannising thought. But as far as political action was concerned, a decisive development was meeting her future husband Heinrich Blücher in exile in Paris in the pre-Second World War 1930s - for the rest of their lives he would be her most important discussion partner.

The political philosophy formulated by Arendt is an amalgam of the different backgrounds and thought in this stimulating union. They met at a time when Arendt was turning away from Zionism and Blücher from the German Communist Party, which he had belonged to since its foundation. Both freed themselves from the ideologies which they had hoped would provide a solution to the two key questions of that time, namely the Jewish question as a minorities question and the political alternative to monarchy and weak democracy as a political question.

¹ Hannah Arendt Was ist Politik? Munich 1992, p. 25

² ibid p. 96

They each regarded their chosen ideology as failed: Arendt rejected Zionism because of its nationalism and Blücher rejected communism because of its anti-political historical philosophy. But both held on to elements which they felt were important: for Arendt the cultural and political plurality in a non-nationalist context, and for Blücher spontaneous action in a non-communist context. Both were concerned with the liberation of thought and action from the shackles of pre-political categories. This life-long intellectual symbiosis nurtured Arendt's understanding of the totalitarian world and the special significance she attached to action and plurality.

This is the reason why, in her criticism of the modern world, Arendt concentrates on human actions, because for better and worse they influence the view of the world, politics and the sciences. The image she draws of the modern, non-totalitarian world in "The Human Condition" is extremely disturbing. It is an anti-political world, in which the main activity consists of production and consumption of transient goods, in which society is based on conformism, and in which all actions are behaviouristically measurable, and apparently governed by an anonymous bureaucracy.

Because the work and labour activities consist of the processes, the production and consumption of short-lived goods and mechanical violence, then according to Arendt, not only are every-day relationships between people strictly functional and related to the division of labour, but above all political action and thought are determined by purposive relationships, by utilitarianism, and by the categories sovereignty, hegemony and violence. This becomes clear in the development of sovereign, independent nation-states which attempt to solve the minorities question by expulsions and statelessness. The most recent example of this has been the war in the disintegrating Balkans. There are a number of examples for the relationships between sovereignty and force in modern nation-states, including the revolutions.

The alternative that Arendt develops on the basis of her understanding of actions as a direct relationship between people is based on a political sphere without hierarchy, rule and violence. Historically, such spontaneous action has only existed sporadically, for a time during the constitutionalisation of liberty in the USA, during the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, or during the Civil Rights movement in the USA and the 1968 student movement. In her book "On Revolution" Arendt shows the dilemma faced by free trade on the threshold of the modern age: in France, social and political problems overlapped, and the revolutionaries, who sought political freedom from a corrupt aristocracy, gave in to the temptation to make the poor into a political power factor, thus wasting the opportunity to found the republic. In France and the USA, as later during the Russian Revolution and the uprising in Hungary, spontaneous citizens' organisations,

councils were set up, which in Arendt's view were the first elements of a new form of government of action. However, all these councils were either destroyed by the newly-emerging parties or, as in the USA, were not included in the new constitution. This tradition was forgotten, as was the example of the successful foundation of political freedom in the USA. Instead, the failed French Revolution served as a model for all subsequent upheavals.

2. Arendt's criticism of traditional political philosophy

What assistance is offered here by traditional political philosophy? Arendt's simple response is: none. The common characterisation of politics as rule over others, politics as the will to power, the equation of power and force, and the view that politics corrupts all involved in it are all prejudices according to Arendt, although they are based on real experience. They are prejudices because politics does not necessarily have to be like that, but they are also realistic inasmuch as contemporary politics often is.

Looking back to antiquity, Arendt identifies in Plato the origins of the separation of the few from the many, and the separation of the previously united action and thought. It is the beginning of the political philosophy of the separation of the *polis* into rulers and ruled, and the dominance of thought over action. From then on, according to Arendt, western philosophy loses sight of the fact that it is always dealing with men in their plurality rather than Man, with the *polis* as a community of the thinkers and agents.

Politics has been regarded since then as a means to an end: by Hobbes to establish a common power to end the war of each against the other, or in the case of Locke to secure freedom in the sense of a free life outside the political, or as a means to the liberation of the working class before becoming superfluous in the classless society for Marx, or to obtain and secure rule as for Max Weber.

Leo Strauss also stands in this tradition. He orients himself on Plato and distinguishes between the few who think and lead, and the many who work and are led. He deals with rule which secures itself through the control of the society. Arendt never recommends people as objects of dominance and criticises their subjugation under the mindless activities of the working world, which only leads to the loss of orientation which the totalitarian movements are able to exploit. She develops the image of what can roughly be termed a society of citizens. Strauss, on the other hand, sees the main problem in the weakness of liberalism, which leads to a decline of standards and eventually to widespread nihilism in the society, which was in the end the cause of National

Socialism. He also saw the liberal conditions in the USA as a danger, and in particular the plurality of values, the separation of state and religion, the individuality of people and their isolation, and the freedom from values in the sciences. Liberalism, with its doctrine of equality, leads to mediocrity, and by giving priority to individual liberty leads to arbitrariness and disorder, the decay of society, and finally in the USA to nihilism.

The problem of the modern age is the secular rationality of the Enlightenment, which threatened to destroy itself. It was therefore necessary to provide a moral backing for society, and to replace the separation of state and religion with a final orthodox instance which establishes criteria for judging true and false, and good and evil, which the state must if necessary implement by force. The separation of reason and revelation must be replaced by the combination of classical political philosophy and religion. History had shown that the assumption of liberalism about the reason of humans was not tenable, because people did not act rationally and there was an unbridgeable gap between the interests of the individuals and the needs of society. It was therefore necessary by means of adroit rule of the few to bring people to subordinate themselves to the needs of society. Adroit can also mean by using deception, lies and also with the use of religion. Even if there is no final truth, and religion and society are only an invention, truth is reserved only for the few. Strauss was convinced that the world is ruled by ideas, and thus he understood his classical studies to be a contribution against the predominance of the social sciences at the universities of the USA. Young academics should contribute to "ennobling"³ democracy against liberalism and if possible form the new elite.

In contrast to Arendt, the political philosophy of Strauss remains confined to traditional and conservative-authoritarian concepts of rule. At the level of political thought there are also striking differences, as for instance regarding the Jewish question. Strauss attributes the success of anti-Semitism in Germany to the assimilation of the Jews, which was in turn a consequence of liberalism. Since there was no solution for the fate of the Jews, it would always remain a problem and the only possibility was to comprehend oneself as a nation in contradiction to the isolated masses in liberalism.

Arendt rejected such Jewish nationalism. The alternative she developed for the solution of the minority question during her exile in Paris involved the creation of a federal post-war Europe, which could not only transcend the nation-states and thus nationalism, and also create a European parliament, but which could finally overcome the separation between majorities and minorities. Arendt was therefore thinking of a political solution, and the federalism corresponds at the

³ Thomas Pangle, *The Ennobling of Democracy: The Challenge of the Postmodern Age*, Baltimore Md., 1992

institutional level precisely to what she was later to develop as the space for actions. Strauss was unable to imagine any such a way out of the traditional confrontation between majority and minority, liberalism and nationalism.

However, Strauss was successful, and his strategy of a neo-Platonic elite bore fruit. Neo-conservative theoreticians in the USA such as Harry Jaffa, Allan Bloom, Irving Kristol and others represented his objections against liberalism, and indeed a Straussian School developed, which can be viewed on the World Wide Web under Straussian.net. Among the "teachers in the Straussian tradition" is the Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. The political utterances of these teachers are clear. Harry Jaffa supported the violations of laws by the government in the Iran-Contra affair as means justifiable by the ends, or as he once phrased it in an election slogan for the hard-liner Barry Goldwater: "Extremism in defence of liberty is no vice. Moderation in pursuit of justice is no virtue". Bloom, whose criticism of the open culture in his book "The Closing of the American Mind" became a best seller, argued for a limitation of pluralism by providing a common ethnic and religious foundation. Irving Kristol, who coined the term neo-conservatism, pleads for orthodoxy instead of cultural plurality, nationalism and priority for the only true values, namely the American values. For him, the US even has an ideological identity: "Large nations, whose identity is ideological, like the Soviet Union of yesteryear and the United States of today, inevitably have ideological interests in addition to more material concerns."⁴

A leading scholarly critic of Strauss, Shadia Drury, writes that this neo-conservatism is characterised by a new radicalism, going beyond the traditional separation of liberalism and conservatism.⁵ It wishes to intervene actively in the economic, moral and private lives of the citizens, represents an aggressive nationalism, and separates the world into good and evil. The current attempt to reorder the Middle East by Napoleonic means is an expression of this. The neo-conservative anti-liberalism is successful to the extent that it promises the population decentralisation and participation, and the revitalisation of the sickly Republican Party as well as drawing on an anti-liberal, puritan tradition.

Arendt's criticism of liberalism aims at upgrading political action against the rule of a group. She separates pre-political justifications such as religion and even more so ideology, from political actions, because the former limit the freedom to act. Therefore she distinguishes in her essays between precisely those phenomena in politics where her political thought differs from Leo

⁴ Irving Kristol, The Neoconservative Persuasion, in: The Weekly Standard, 25. August 2003 See also: Harry V. Jaffa, American Conservatism and the American Revolution, Durham, N.C., 1984; Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind, New York 1987

⁵ Shadia B. Drury, Leo Strauss and the American Right, New York 1997

Strauss: Power and violence, truth and lies, politics and religion, authority and ideology. In this criticism, the ideas of a common world confront those of a divided one.