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Kathryn T. Gines

Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question

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Reviewed by Grace Hunt, 2015

Kathryn Gines's book details Hannah Arendt's racial and conceptual biases against Black people in the US and post-colonial Africa. Gines makes original and significant contributions to feminist philosophy by applying various feminist and anticolonial strategies, including standpoint theory and multidirectionality, to Arendt's political essays and concepts. Feminist critiques of Arendt in general and racial critiques of "Reflections on Little Rock" in particular are not new; however, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* offers a novel and comprehensive racial critique of Arendt's major writings. Gines offers a "sustained analysis of Arendt's treatment of the Black experience in the United States" (xii), as well as racial violence within the contexts of the American, French, and Haitian Revolutions, and French and British imperialism and colonialism. In this review I will offer an overview of the book as a whole, before evaluating the extent of Gines's critique as it pertains to Arendt's misguided judgments and her theory of judgment.

The central message of this book is that despite a commitment to a universal and disinterested approach to understanding, an apt critique of anti-Semitism, and personal experience of prejudice, Arendt reproduces white supremacist attitudes against Black political and social movements in the US and Africa. Not only that, but Arendt's definition of judgment leads to epistemic injustice that fuels anti-Black racism. In other words, Arendt's seemingly universal political and moral concepts actually leave her unable to take seriously the intentions of Black families seeking equal access to high-quality education.

(It should be noted that I follow Gines's lead in capitalizing "Black," "anti-Black," and "Negro" but not "white," a move she defends in her Introduction and which is intended to disrupt the norm of either capitalizing or lower-casing both terms.)

Of the seven chapters in the book, Gines devotes the first three to an analysis of Arendt's "Reflections on Little Rock." Chapter 1 develops Gines's charge that Arendt believes the answer to the Negro Question (that is, whether African Americans have the same full measure of rights as white US citizens) is that it is a Negro problem (Black people want integration because they want social, not political benefits), rather than a white problem (whites want to keep Blacks disempowered). For Arendt, the parents of the Black children sent to desegregated schools are social climbers rather than politically engaged citizens fighting for equality.

The second chapter demonstrates Arendt's inability to see how the law banning miscegenation--which she called "the most outrageous law of Southern states"--is closely related to school segregation laws, insofar as part of the resistance to desegregation is that it would allow Blacks to cohabit with whites. This resistance to desegregation is rooted in a fear about Black men in particular having access to and sexual relations with white women (37). Gines shows that Arendt's defense of miscegenation and simultaneous condemnation of desegregation is illogical, misguided, and crucially, reveals Arendt's readiness to avow a "hierarchy of rights" that reproduces "the White man's rank order to discrimination" wherein the right to marry trumps the right to quality education (33).

The third chapter offers conceptual reasons for Arendt's misguided analysis in "Reflections on Little Rock" by turning to the well-known and often critiqued distinctions found in *The Human Condition* between political, social, and private. Gines chalks up Arendt's inability to understand the political motivations of desegregation from a Black person's point of view to her relegation of education and poverty to "social issues."

In all three of these early chapters, Gines applies standpoint theory to Arendt's purported universal and

disinterested approach to understanding. First, Gines imagines and engages the actual motivations and perspectives of Black people at the time by revisiting the activism and scholarship about desegregation. Second, Gines examines Arendt's understanding and motivations via her correspondence with Baldwin, Ellison, and other Black leaders at the time. Having explored the actual experiences and motivations of both Black activists and Arendt, Gines concludes that Arendt misinterprets education equality as the social climbing of Black parents rather than as a properly political effort, and suggests that "Arendt, like many white racists, defends racial discrimination as a social custom and rejects the legal enforcement of desegregation" (37). Whereas Arendt understands the right to marry whomever one pleases as a basic right, she also "belittles discrimination in employment, housing, and education as issues of social opportunity rather than basic human or political rights" (37). Put into perspective alongside Arendt's insistence that anti-Semitism is a political issue, her view that anti-Black racism is a social problem born of private attitudes seems willfully ignorant, or worse, explicitly racist (123).

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Gines reveals other oversights in three of Arendt's major works: *On Revolution*, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, and *On Violence*. Chapter 4 turns to Arendt's *On Revolution*, wherein Gines calls to our attention Arendt's praise for the American Revolution's focus on constitutional rights, a political achievement, rather than on social oppression, which, as the cause of the French Revolution, led to tyrannical disaster. But Arendt's relegation of the French Revolution to the social also erases French slavery and Haitian resistance. Arendt's misunderstanding here seems to result from her problematic divisions in *The Human Condition* between political and social, where poverty and slavery, as economic issues, are rendered invisible as social problems.

But more than that, Arendt's praise for the American Revolution entails willfully ignoring the complicated relationship between the foundation of political freedom in the US and institutionalized slavery. This is just one example of how Arendt's problematic distinctions are applied haphazardly.

Beyond the United States, Arendt's racist descriptions of African people and her inability to see the connection between imperialism and Nazism have been called out by several theorists, including Anne Norton and Dana Villa, whom Gines engages at length in chapter 5. But Gines offers original insights of her own when she describes and dispels some technical distinctions Arendt defended between race-thinking and racism, opinion and ideology, colonialism and imperialism, nationalism and Nazism. Arendt's situational knowledge about the rise of Nazism informs her understanding of the link between anti-Semitism, imperialism, and nationalism, but also distracts her from seeing the link between racism, colonialism, and imperialism. Because Arendt makes questionable distinctions between the neutral "race-thinking" of colonialism and the racism of imperialism, she can defend the uniqueness of Nazism and the totalitarian Holocaust. But Arendt's own "thoughtlessness"--which, we must remember, is morally worse than intention for Arendt--is revealed by Gines, who points out that for Arendt, imperialism has a comparatively briefer and more brutal history than colonialism. Whereas imperialism often denied the extension of laws, colonialism "involved more of an extension of the laws and ideals of the mother country into the colonial territory" (78). Imperialism may have grown out of colonialism, but Arendt sees the former as something "radically different and new in the history of political thought and action" (78, referring to Arendt 1951/1973, 125).

Chapter 6 examines Arendt's bias concerning violence: that is, her hypercritical stance toward counter-violence used by the oppressed and colonized and her uncritical acceptance of violence used to master necessity and move into the political realm of speech and action. Arendt empathically describes and often defends violence as it pertains to Jewish people in *Origins of Totalitarianism*, the property-owning leisure class in ancient Greece in *The Human Condition*, and white American revolutionaries in *On Revolution*, while nonetheless denouncing anticolonial violence in *On Violence*.

But Gines goes further than merely demonstrating the biases created by Arendt's divisions between political and social (a critique that is not new). Gines engages Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory throughout chapters 4, 5, and 6 in order to call out Arendt's inability to see how seemingly incompatible legacies of victimization are connected. The originality of Gines's approach shines through as

she challenges Arendt's zero-sum approach to memory, where memories of her own past as a persecuted Jewish child erase her ability to understand the plight of African American children. Arendt does not recognize that collective memories of slavery and Nazi genocide, imperialism and colonialism, anti-Semitism and anti-Black racism are connected. It is a mistake to view such memories as competing rather than cross-referencing (Rothberg 2009, 3).

Chapter 7 returns to the question of education and the role of violence in making political demands for equal opportunity. Gines examines Arendt's misunderstanding of the Black Power movement and concludes that, "for Arendt, from 'Reflections on Little Rock' to 'Reflections on Violence' and 'Thoughts on Politics and Revolution,' integration amounts to the degradation and contamination of white space (physical and intellectual) by Black bodies" (115).

By the end of seven chapters, Gines has argued three central claims: 1) Arendt sees the Negro Question as a Negro problem, not a white problem; 2) Arendt cannot constructively connect her analysis of the Jewish Question to her analysis of the Negro Question; and 3) Arendt's description of the Jewish Question as political and the Negro Question as social or private undermines the reliability of the criteria for what is political, social, and private (123). Gines's concluding chapter examines the role of judgment in Arendt's approach to the Negro Question by connecting these three critiques to Arendt's analysis of judgment and representation thinking, which Gines argues inhibits rather than enhances her understanding of the Negro Question.

In other words, in the concluding chapter, Gines draws a link between Arendt's personal bias and her theory of judgment. Arendt's inability to critically judge American and imperialist whiteness, according to Gines, has something to do with her Kantian concept of judgment developed in *Between Past and Future*. That is, in order to gain understanding of the world, opinion-formation requires disinterested imagination, "the liberation from one's own private interests" wherein "I remain in this world of universal interdependence, where I can make myself representative of everybody else" (Arendt 1961/2006, 219). Judgment, for Arendt, "must liberate itself from 'the subjective private conditions'" (220, cited in Gines, 124), and as Gines reminds us, "involves being in a public space, communicating one's opinions, reaching agreement with others, and considering other viewpoints to move beyond private opinions and interests" (124).

Because some voices and interests, deemed social and private, will never appear political, judgment also entails representing absent others through this disinterested position or representational thinking, outlined in "Truth and Politics," and modeled after Kant's "enlarged mentality." For Arendt, "Political thought is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them" (Arendt 1961/2006, 241, cited in Gines, 125). Gines claims, however, that "rather than representing and making present the absent standpoints of the oppressed, Arendt occupies and represents the standpoints of those already present in the public realm, the oppressors" (124). *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* ends with Gines's claim that despite her efforts, Arendt fails to understand and represent the standpoint of African Americans' political struggle for equality, and that that failure is reflected throughout her major works.

On the whole, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* offers a wealth of research that will be valuable to scholars and graduate students interested in how racial bias operates in Arendt's major works. Gines's writing style is lucid and to the point, and her engagement with secondary sources is comprehensive; with thirty-five pages of notes, the book draws the reader further into the web of relations out of which Arendt's work, and our understanding of it, emerges. Gines also engages with photographs and letters Arendt exchanged with Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, all of which adds depth and richness to her work.

Gines has been challenged in the past to be more assertive in her critique of Arendt by Clarence Sholé Johnson in his review of her 2009 essay, "Hannah Arendt, Liberalism, and Racism: Controversies concerning Violence, Segregation, and Education" (Gines 2009). Johnson states, "Gines is a bit hesitant to indict Arendt although the evidence she has amassed does call for just such an indictment. Did Arendt espouse anti-black racism? The answer, from my perspective, is 'Yes'" (Johnson 2009, 82). In my view,

Gines has met and exceeded the challenge set forth by Johnson. I suggest that Gines's critique of Arendt's own philosophical concepts is original and compelling, if not forceful. Gines's critique, as I see it, is twofold: She demonstrates not only that Arendt held anti-Black, racist views, but also, and crucially, how Arendt's theory of judgment gave rise to such views.

Gines succeeds in demonstrating Arendt's insufficient understanding of Black experience and Black activism in the US and Africa. For example, Gines challenges Arendt's assumption that the parents of young African American students placed in newly desegregated (formerly white) schools denied their children the "absolute protection and dignity" that her mother had given her as a Jewish child encountering anti-Semitism (19). Gines counters, "Hannah Arendt does not consider the possibility that Black parents could or would teach their children lessons similar to those taught by her mother" (20). More than that, Gines argues that Arendt's inability, or unwillingness, to connect the lessons she received from her mother to similar lessons taught by Black parents is revealed in Arendt's judgment that the Supreme Court's ruling to desegregate schools put Black people's children in a more humiliating position than they had been in before (20). This position is more humiliating, according to Arendt's logic, because the parents are using their children as a means to gain access to white communities rather than protecting them from white racists. This is the first way in which I see Gines's critique working: by demonstrating Arendt's inability to make connections that should have been apparent to her and her unwillingness to take a stance against anti-Black racism that is protective of the parents and children it affects.

But Gines demonstrates that the problem with Arendt is not only that she makes poor judgments; her theory of judgment is misguided too. This is where the force of Gines's critique emerges. The standpoints Arendt can represent in public must be considered political, and it is obvious that Arendt categorizes poverty and education as social issues, and Black parents as social climbers. The Black experience is rendered unintelligible and untheorizable according to Arendt's own criteria for what counts as political, but also according to the criteria of representational thinking, the central mechanism at work in her theory of judgment.

The inadequacy of representational thinking is suggested throughout *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Problem*, and addressed directly in the conclusion. For Arendt, as Gines makes clear, representational thinking is key to making a disinterested judgment, the idea being that if absent others are not represented when making judgments about the public good, the decisions reached will be biased. But the process of representational thinking, according to Arendt, "does not blindly [sic] adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining the majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where I actually am not" (Arendt 1961/2006, 241, cited in Gines, 125). So then what does representational thinking entail? Rather than incorporating the experiences and voices of others, one imagines oneself in the place of another. The very meaning of representational thinking entails, according to Gines, "[displacing Black people's] standpoint while inserting one's own, imagining oneself in their place, but never inquiring about their own experience in their place" (125). Gines's critique culminates with her claim that "although Arendt assumes that she is writing from the position of a disinterested or unbiased outsider representing standpoints that are absent, the position she occupies and represents in the Little Rock essay is actually the position of white racists" (127).

Arendt's racism is not due merely to oversight or poor judgment. It is the result of the very mechanisms of her theory of judgment. Ultimately, for Gines, Arendt's enlarged mentality amounts to "exclusive misrepresentative thinking" (126), a kind of epistemic arrogance that erases the political aspirations of Black people and promises to erase the very condition required for politics: plurality.

To return to the critical question, does Kathryn Gines go far enough to indict Arendt's philosophy in *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*? The answer is, from my perspective, Yes.

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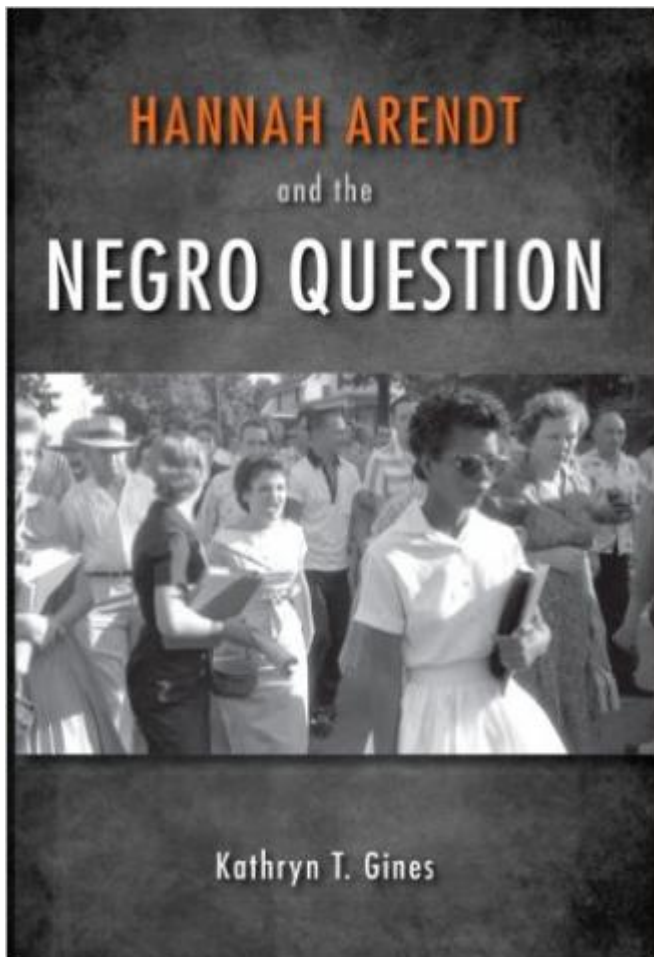
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