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Hannah Arendt's uneasy relationship with sociology

The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt, edited by Peter Baehr and Philip Walsh, London, Anthem Press, 2017, 284 pp., £70 and $115 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78308-185-1

Given the plethora of books on Hannah Arendt's work since the collapse of communism in 1989, it is often difficult to sort through the growing amount of secondary literature about her. *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt* is neither an overview nor critical introduction to her ideas. Rather this timely volume offers a perspective on her work from within the very discipline that she held is such low esteem – the social sciences. Skilfully edited by Peter Baehr and Philip Walsh, *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt* offers a refreshing focus on the connection between her work and 'fundamental sociological problems' (p. 2). Divided into two parts, authors in Part I address books written by Arendt germane to sociology: *The Origins of Totalitarianism, The Human Condition, Eichmann in Jerusalem, On Revolution* and *The Life of the Mind.* Part II reflects on selected themes within her work and draws from a wider range of publications including her early book review of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, *On Violence* and *Responsibility and Judgment*.

In their thoughtful 'Editors' Introduction: Arendt's Critique of the Social Sciences', Baehr and Walsh outline how Arendt challenges the social sciences not only at the time of her writing (1930s–1970s) but also in the 21st century. As they write: 'Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) was a determined foe of the social sciences. She lambasted their methods and derided their objectives. Sociology was a particular target of her ire' (p. 1). Why then, did Baehr and Walsh, two notable sociologists who have written excellent books about Arendt's uneasy relationship with the discipline decide to dedicate an entire anthology to that

which she denigrated? (Baehr, 2010; Walsh, 2015) As they admit: 'The irony could not be plainer' (p. 1). To begin with, the editors argue that many of the themes that troubled Arendt in the 20th century continue to be of concern to contemporary sociologists. Mass society, loneliness, totalitarianism, revolution, social movements, the human condition, and problem of evil are rooted in a theory of action beyond that of the individual. Moreover, these themes are linked to a core idea of Arendt's, namely to the fact that human existence is simultaneously conditioned, plural, and open to new beginnings. Hence, it precisely the task that Arendt posed to herself in *The Human Condition* that is a perennial area of query for sociologists. 'What I propose here, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what it is that we are doing' (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 5). It is thus her invitation to think about what we are doing politically and sociologically that is the central theme of *The Anthem Anthology*. 'Arendt challenges us', as Baehr and Walsh suggest, 'to rethink what we are doing. She nudges us to refine, revise or abandon some of our most basic intellectual reflexes' (p. 1).

Outlining five stages of Arendt's appraisal of the social sciences, the first begins with her early critical review of Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1929) and defence of Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger against 'sociology's monochrome vision' (p. 7). Secondly, Arendt's post-war writing, most notably *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* challenges how the social sciences approach the understanding of historical events, thus failing to grasp the magnitude of totalitarianism as an unprecedented event that altered the very fabric of society. As Baehr and Walsh write: 'Arendt confronted the strangeness of totalitarianism with extraordinary clarity, and this remains, perhaps, the principal virtue of her account' (p. 10).

In the third stage, she criticised the rise of the social and social viewpoint with her distinctions between labour, work, and action. On the one hand, *The Human Condition* is a phenomenological text that outlines the structures of individual experience. However, Arendt is most interested, as they underscore, in what occurs between people – in 'the objective and intersubjective structures within which individual experience occurs' (p. 11). It is precisely Arendt's attention to labour, work and action that enable us to understand human experience – hence her affinity, as they suggest, with sociologists such as Jürgen Habermas, Zygmunt Bauman, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann.

Fourthly, Arendt's work focuses on the definition and meaning of politics and its relation to appearance in the public realm. It is particularly Arendt's argument on the meaning of politics as freedom and her distinction between power, violence, and action which is of interest to political sociology. As articulated in her metaphor of the table, politics is the space of appearance as well as the locus of speech and action. Politics is, as Baehr and Walsh write, 'a human spatial artifice' (p. 17) coeval with the creation of institutions, laws, constitutions, assemblies, traditions, discourses, and practices.

Fifthly, Arendt rejects what she perceives as the sociological aim to uncover laws governing human nature in favour of stories about a unique event. As the editors point out, although she argued against sociological attention to

process, causation, and explanation, she herself wrote about processes of bureaucratization and the rise of the social (p. 20).

In chapter one, Charles Turner situates Arendt's writing on totalitarianism within the ambiguity of whether the term refers to a type of government, state, or entire society. Most importantly, he argues that Arendt was not looking for a 'neat classification' or 'conceptual map'. Rather she sought 'to make sense of the catastrophes that befell millions of innocent people in the 1930s and 1940s, and to cultivate our capacity for discerning what is at stake for human beings who have to live in their shadow' (p. 29). Indeed, it is this sentence that resonates most strongly with the critical reception of Arendt in Eastern Europe as she is read against the background of the legacies of Nazism and communism, imperialism, the migrant crisis, as well as the current war in Ukraine. Turner draws the reader's attention to key elements of the novelty of totalitarianism that Arendt emphasised relevant to social thought: the seminal role of the movement for understanding how bureaucratic organisation functioned in totalitarian societies, the relationship between ideology and terror, and the camps as the laboratory for total domination.

In addressing the importance of action as a sociological theme, John Levi Martin outlines why Arendt turned to Greek philosophy and Kant to understand the loss of judgment in the 20th century. As he contends, *The Human Condition* attempted to rethink basic categories for how we understand what it is that we are doing. While acknowledging that Arendt's intention was to criticise Marx, the book developed into distinctions between public and private, social and political, as well as analysis of labour, work and action. Indeed, as he writes, although a sustained criticism of Marx seemed to have 'slipped away' (p. 68), *The Human Condition* continues to fascinate readers because of Arendt's emphasis on 'the capacity of human beings to condition themselves on a world that they transform' (p. 54).

Whilst Judith Adler is sharply critical of Arendt's portrayal of Adolf Eichmann, the Jewish Councils, and the trial in Jerusalem, she acknowledges that 'Eichmann's afterlife in public memory remains decisively shaped by her portrait' (p. 75). Indeed, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* continues to influence debates on sociological theories of judgment and the problem of evil. Adler argues that the banality of evil as thoughtlessness was a 'compelling fiction' and 'falsifying cliché (p. 94) that did not adequately address Eichmann's antisemitism. Instead, 'thinking itself takes place *in* social relationships and in collectively structured situations' (p. 95). In particular, she interprets Arendt's ironic tone as one of 'black comedy' that detracted from the gravity of the problem of evil within National Socialism.

Since Arendt published *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *On Revolution* in the same year (1963), Daniel Gordan suggests that the books illustrate 'two poles of modernity as she understood it: Nazism and democracy.' In other words, the two poles represent 'genocide (the destruction of a people) versus revolution (the founding of a people)' (p. 109). *On Revolution* focuses on the French and American revolutions as founding events that ruptured ordinary time to create something new. Most interestingly, as his chapter title suggests, Gordon

focuses on 'the perplexities of beginning' – as the paradox of starting something new that endures beyond the foundational moment, leading Arendt to reflect on the principle of constitutionalism. As he writes, her focus is on 'the history of the origins of revolution' which is different from the history of revolution itself (p. 119).

In her chapter, entitled 'The Life of the Mind of Hannah Arendt,' Liah Greenfeld argues that *The Life of the Mind* is not at all representative of Arendt's 'canon'. Instead, the book, for her, is 'completely out of character' (p. 129). While Walsh is a more sympathetic reader of Arendt's distinction between thinking, willing and judging, Greenfeld is deeply critical of how Arendt depicts Greek and German philosophy as indicative of a universal philosophical tradition, while downplaying the role of John Locke and David Hume. She is most scathing in her reduction of *The Life of the Mind* into a weak exoneration of Heidegger and 'rejection of her Jewishness' (p. 150). As Greenfeld boldly states: 'She decided to spell out why a philosopher who dedicates himself to the search for meaning cannot be evil and deserves to be loved. It did not work' (p. 151). It is, however, at the end of her chapter that Greenfeld points readers to Arendt's biography of Rahel Varnhagen (pp. 150–151). Indeed, a chapter devoted to Varnhagen's social world of salons, antisemitism, pariah, parvenu, and conscious pariah (1957/1974) is unfortunately missing from *The Anthem Companion*.

Part II of the volume comprises four chapters dedicated to selected themes in Arendt's work relevant to sociology. Peter Walsh's 'Thinking, Personhood and Meaning' places *The Life of The Mind* within the larger context of *The Human Condition, Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *Responsibility and Judgment*. Like Greenfeld, he asks why sociologists should care about Arendt's views on thinking. However, unlike her, Walsh argues that 'she advances an original and extensive account of the structure of mental activity, especially the capacity to think' (p. 155). Situating Arendt within the sociology of inner life and reflexivity, Walsh links her preoccupation with the relationship between thinking and judging directly to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Like Adler, he underscores how Arendt's portrait of Eichmann was incomplete and misinformed. However, despite her empirical shortcomings, it is Arendt's 'reflections on morality as a social institution' and the 'taken for granted' quality of morality before National Socialism that remains relevant to sociology (p. 157). The strength of Walsh's chapter is how he uncovers Arendt's 'social conditions of thinking' in public spaces, with others and in dialogue with oneself (p. 168). As he argues, her insights can be developed in tandem with social theories of reflexivity found in the work of Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Scott Lash.

While entitled 'Explaining Genocide,' the spirit of Johannes Lang's chapter is more one of understanding than of explanation. Lang argues that the novelty of Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism was rooted in processes of dehumanisation that were inadequately addressed by the social sciences because they failed to recognise its unprecedented quality. When trying to understand a historical event, Arendt focussed on processes of crystallisation and amalgamation, as well as the 'ontological condition' that made genocide possible. 'This was the

method: to identify political, social and intellectual elements that had fused into totalitarianism (p. 178). While acknowledging criticism of Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism and total domination, Lang affirms her depiction of how terror and ideology distorted reality. It is precisely when individuals are rendered superfluous that the capacity for being humane is diminished. Moreover, dehumanisation is indicative of 'the collapse of a shared social reality – between perpetrators and victims' (p. 192).

Guido Parietti situates his chapter, 'Arendt on Power and Violence' within her method of understanding concepts such as authority, freedom, action, work, culture, and history. As he emphasises, she stressed the important role of understanding 'for its own sake' (p. 198). Influenced by Heidegger, her phenomenological method sought 'to uncover our most basic ways of being, not through theoretical abstraction, but rather starting from our practical comportment – in this sense an inversion of Husserl's *epoché* or the suspension of judgment on the external world' (p. 200). Power corresponds to the faculty of action, and even more concretely to acting in concert with others for the durability of the world, while violence is instrumental and ends oriented. In examining Jürgen Habermas's reception of Arendt's concept of power and Steven Lukes's three faces of power, Parietti acknowledges that although her theory of power remains distant from mainstream political theory and social science, there is much to be learned from her distinctions.

The volume concludes with Peter Baehr's chapter on Arendt's theory of totalitarian leadership in which he suggests that Arendt is a 'covert sociologist: a thinker who recurrently resorts to sociological explanations, despite her express opposition to sociology as a discipline' (p. 221). In contrasting Arendt's understanding of totalitarian leadership with Weber's idea of charismatic domination, Baehr emphasises the important role of mass movements. In reading his chapter, one cannot help but think of Leni Riefenstahl's film, *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and Sergei Loznitsa's documentary of Stalin's death in *State Funeral* (2019). Baehr points out how Hitler and Stalin were fixated on the movements of National Socialism and communism. Arendt's 'covert sociology,' he argues was visible in the fascination of the masses with totalitarian leadership. As he underscores, Arendt herself wrote: 'Fascination is a social phenomenon, and the fascination Hitler exercised over his environment must be understood in terms of the particular company he kept' (Arendt, 1951/1973, p. 305 fn1 quoted on p. 228). The totalitarian leader is thus a 'vector of the masses' (p. 230) and creation of a fictional world of conspiracies, plots, fabrications and lies. As Arendt emphasised, totalitarian leaders understood that reality itself was malleable. Since the leader, masses, and movement are interwoven, her argument, Baehr suggests, shares much in common with the functionalist theories of the 1940s and 1950s. By the end of this volume, the reader is left wondering whether Arendt was indeed a 'covert sociologist'.

What unites chapters in *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt* is attention to how social transformations have a conditioning effect not only on individual perception and political institutions but also on the very structures of social life. Given that Arendt emphasised how we understand ourselves within

webs of relations in the world, it is not surprising that sociologists are attracted to her work despite her scathing critique of the discipline. The strength of the volume is that it clearly addresses Arendt's critique of the social sciences in tandem with how her writing intersects with sociological themes. By placing her into conversation with sociologists who lived during her lifetime such as Karl Mannheim, Raymond Aron, Claude Lefort, and David Riesman, as well as with contemporary sociologists who have critically developed her ideas, the volume demonstrates the relevance of her writing for social thought. Reflection on Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman are all present in this volume; however, Robert Fine and Hartmut Rosa are curiously absent. Granted Rosa's more serious engagement with Arendt was published after this volume; however, attention to Robert Fine's writings on revolution, evil and the Holocaust would have been a welcome addition (Fine, 2001, 2014; Fine & Turner, 2000). Likewise, although Bauman's work on liquid modernity, morality and the Holocaust was acknowledged, reflection on his subsequent writing with Leonidas Donskis on moral blindness and liquid evil were unfortunately missing (2013, 2016).

In conclusion, *The Anthem Companion to Hannah Arendt* demonstrates that although Arendt was quick to dismiss the social sciences, she continues to challenge sociologists with her (perhaps accidental) sociological insights. Whether writing about loneliness, the masses, totalitarianism, revolution, thinking and moral considerations or the problem of evil, Arendt employed, as Baehr wrote, 'a kind of sociological reasoning – highly idiosyncratic and bracingly imaginative, to be sure' (p. 242). If one casts a wider net and traces the origins of sociological thinking back to Montesquieu and Tocqueville, two thinkers who strongly influenced Arendt's own political writing, she was perhaps more open to sociological reasoning than she herself acknowledged.

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Sorting machines: Reinvention of the border in the 21st century, by Steffen Mau, translated by Nicola Barfoot. Cambridge: Polity, 2023, 174 pp. £15.39 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-5095-5435-5

In his new border and migration studies book, *Sorting Machines*: *Reinvention of the Border in the 21st Century*, Steffen Mau seeks to recontextualise the persistent narrative within globalisation discourse in which the 'opening of borders is seen as inevitable' (p. 32). To illustrate, consider two influential texts on globalisation from recent decades. Kenichi Ohmae's (1989) *Harvard Business Review* essay 'Managing in a Borderless World', later to become a perennial bestselling book on corporate management, imagines an integrated global economy changing consumer expectations because 'we now know—directly—how people elsewhere live. We now travel abroad'. Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Thomas Friedman's (2007) bestseller, *The world is flat*, reflecting on the fall of communism occurring when Ohmae published his essay, tells readers 'there were no walls. Young Americans could think about traveling … to more countries than any American generation before them. Indeed, they could travel as far as their imaginations and wallets could take them' (p. 608). However, according to Mau, modern borders are not disappearing but have been reproduced and reconstituted in forms both traditional and novel to constrain this supposed permeability. The result is a complex of sorting processes which facilitate the flows of privileged classes (such as Ohmae's Japanese and Friedman's U.S. Americans) while limiting the flows of migrants designated as undesirable. The substance of Mau's thesis is that rather than a project of creating a frictionless, egalitarian movement of people across borders, globalisation is marked by a prerogative of 'division: it grants mobility to some, but denies it to others, and it uses the border to sort different groups' (p. 26).

Mau's work reflects a long trend in globalisation scholarship which notes how personal mobility is far more constrained and managed than that of information, goods, and capital. As early as 2000, Cohn (2000) wrote how 'the cross-border movement of people is one area where there is often a more generalized negative societal reaction to globalization. Although many states and societal groups support freer trade and capital flows, they are far more resistant to the freer movement of people' (p. 143). Indeed, the power of *Sorting Machines* is not its