

# Blinded by Her Own Pertards

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Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014. xvi + 174 pp. ISBN: 978-0-253-01171-8. Paperback: \$25.00.

The Bar Association of the City of New York organized a symposium in 1970 to query whether American law had died. Notable intellectuals and legal minds gathered. They delivered papers in response to the symposium's hyperbolic cry of despair, "Is the law dead?" And there she was, political thinker Hannah Arendt, speaking in praise of American civil disobedience. One can imagine the incredulous reception of Arendt's remarks by an audience of male jurists and lawyers. The scenario is ripe with material to inspire a modern dramatist. Envision Arendt's fit of celebration resounding like Cassandra in Euripides' *The Trojan Women*. In the background, we witness an association of hysterical men grieving at the impending calamity of political disintegration, even as they exclaim uncertainties about whether disintegration has already occurred. Rather than celebrate disobedience, the leader of the symposium's chorus of men considered it time to lament the loss of the citizen's moral duty to obey the law. But I shall want to leave hyperbole with the dramatists and the questions regarding moral duty with the moral philosophers. Instead, let me explain why it is important to clarify once more the actual political significance of civil disobedience for the future of the American republic.

For Arendt, the spirit of American law still had life. Or so it appeared. Civil disobedience was the youngest child of a venerable tradition in the United States of voluntary association. The spirit that originally brought American law into existence continued to inspire the one system of government on earth with the potential to accommodate organized minorities in dissent against the opinion of the majority. Arendt believed that the people of the United States could remedy the many crises of representative government with a spirit that had its origin in the revolutionary experience of the colonists and carried within it a new concept of law based on the strength of mutual promising. Every social and political organization relied, in her eyes, on this capacity to make and keep promises. This capacity makes consent voluntary and grants power to the people. Free consent

also comes with the right to dissent or disobey, in the event that the majority breaks promises. The peculiar strength of the original inhabitants of the United States cultivated the art of associating together through the powers of consent and dissent. The mutuality of promising implies, then, the power to rebuke or even revoke the authority delegated to institutions that fail to abide by the terms of the original agreement.

Any serious engagement with Arendt's "Civil Disobedience" finds her invoking the power of black Americans to amend through collective dissent the terms of that founding agreement known as the U.S. Constitution, an agreement that originally oppressed black Americans with legalized slavery and excluded them from the rights that accompany voluntary consent. Arendt reminds us, at least those who have studied her remarks on civil disobedience, that no other minority group in the United States has a greater claim to revitalize the spirit of dissent and disobedience than do black Americans, for whom it continues to be a white lie to say that the "welcome of the commonwealth is as wide as sorrow."<sup>1</sup>

In *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, Kathryn T. Gines presents a very different Hannah Arendt. A far cry from the clairvoyance of a Cassandra, Gines presents a socially conservative and backward-looking Arendt; on certain questions, Arendt's thought resembles the position of white anti-black racists in the American South. Adorning Arendt with "profound blinders when it comes to racial oppression in the United States" (58) has helped Gines earn the acclaim of the American Philosophical Association. Her book won the inaugural Joyce Mitchell Cook Award. This welcome and honorable prize, established in 2014 by the APA's Committee on the Status of Black Philosophers, commends the scholarship of a "trailblazing black woman philosopher."

Three of the book's seven chapters are devoted to Arendt's "Reflections on Little Rock," originally written in 1957. "A Reply to Critics" was composed in 1965, along with Arendt's "Preliminary Remarks," which she would append to the original "Reflections" for a reissue. These three chapters marshal the bulk of Gines's explosive arguments, depicting Arendt's reflections on Little Rock, in particular, as representative of the dreadful position of white American racists. The arguments unfold as if Arendt had nothing to say regarding the political importance of mutual promising and civil disobedience, and how they function together in Arendt's response to the American Negro question. Gines does not see or mention the social and political role of mutual promising first unveiled in Arendt's 1958 *The Human Condition*, and makes no connection between

that account and her return to the importance of promising in her 1970 remarks on civil disobedience, after the politically tumultuous decade of the 1960s. Such neglect disarms a central argument of the book: that Arendt consistently misjudged throughout her major writings the Negro question by taking the question to present a social issue, rather than a real political problem. The neglect is made conspicuous, not only by Gines's summary dismissal of Arendt's "pithy remarks" in "Civil Disobedience" (120–122) but in the basic misrepresentations of Arendt's reflections on Little Rock.

Arendt's "blindness" come on as a result of the rigid distinctions she made between the public, the private, and the social. This tripartite schema distorts Arendt's view of racial oppression and anti-black racism in the United States and abroad. Since Gines's book tries to expose the consistent misunderstanding of racism in Arendt's disparate writing—in books written late in the 1950s, short opinion pieces and long essays in the 1960s, and an interview she gave in the early 1970s—one should expect the author to produce if not a sophisticated, then at least a plausibly accurate, comprehension of Arendt's thinking over the course of this period. But with this slim, 130-page volume of argument and 44 pages of extensive "Notes," Gines echoes recent criticisms of Arendt's mental "eye" by political theorists and feminist scholars, including the eloquent and critical responses to Arendt on Little Rock by Ralph Ellison. I will not rehearse or evaluate in detail the criticisms here. The interested reader can consult the "Notes." I will say only that the book restages the criticisms in a new venue with a different theme.

Now, and for the first time in the growing literature of Arendt studies, the priority is the "Negro question," what Gines identifies broadly as the myriad controversies in the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia that have arisen as the result of institutional anti-black racism across these regions. (1). In that sense, Gines's book is an application of what others have said, not a direct engagement with the alleged "blindness" of Hannah Arendt. This is not to deny that Gines has smart things to say, even if they are not said for the first time. For instance, some of Arendt's remarks about "oppressed minorities" (in her reflections on Little Rock) and "savages" (in *Origins of Totalitarianism*) are uncomfortably condescending; there are unbalanced criticisms of Frantz Fanon and Jean-Paul Sartre on the reactionary violence of the colonized (in *On Violence*); and Arendt's early Jewish writings ought to be explored for insights or blindness or anything that can illuminate her understanding of other oppressed minorities in varying

historical and political circumstances, including the Haitian Revolution. Gines's book, in the end, should act as a stimulant for further reflection on these issues. It is surely not the final word. In view of the regrettable smoke and haze—I hope the book generates further study on the political significance of the American Negro question—it is wise to expose the book's fundamental failure to comprehend what Arendt actually argued in response to the American Negro question.

Gines thinks of Arendt's factual errors in the Little Rock reflections as evidence of an "assumption" about black parents, indeed about "all black parents" (21). The "assumption" is reprehensible, and it would be slipshod to ascribe it to Arendt without clear cause. Black parents, according to the assumption, subject their children to racist mobs for the sake of social climbing. For Gines, the "assumption" has Arendt misrepresent the problem of desegregation as a problem of black parents engaged in the misguided striving for social mobility. This Negro question is, then, a social problem for Arendt rather than political. Accordingly, the problem is a social problem for blacks rather than the anti-black racism of whites politically and legally enforcing segregation.

Gines claims to know the dark reasons why Arendt confused the front-page photographs in the *New York Times* on September 5, 1957. One photograph shows Elizabeth Eckford, a 15-year-old black female student, and the National Guard barriers that prevented Eckford from entering Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, while a white female student walks freely past the barrier. The other photograph shows 15-year-old Dorothy Counts in Charlotte, North Carolina, arriving at school on the first day, the only black student eventually allowed to integrate Harding High School. Among other errors in the description of the photographs, Arendt thought she was describing Eckford in Little Rock while in fact she was describing Counts in Charlotte, surrounded by a mob of white children.

Moreover, Gines would have us believe that Arendt made this mistake because she was already committed to the monolithic view of black parents, as well as the entire NAACP, as "neglectful and opportunistic" social climbers (18). To represent the perspective of the "profound blinders" that comes from the "assumption," Gines writes the following, as if to transcribe Arendt's thought: "all Black people want nothing more than to socialize with white people" (21). Gines is mistaken.

Errors in Gines's reasoning make the ascription of this "assumption" to Arendt fallacious. In the 1957 "Reflections," Arendt says nothing—positive or negative—about "social climbing," or about a desire for social climbing

among blacks in the United States. From what Arendt does say, we can infer that she holds nothing against “social climbing” *per se*, only the attempt to legislate social climbing. She does make passing mention of “social climbing” in the 1965 “Reply to Critics.” There Arendt describes imagining herself as one particular Negro mother: “Instead of being called upon to fight a clear-cut battle for my indisputable rights—I would feel I had become involved in an affair of social climbing.” When she does refer to this imaginary “affair,” it is not with respect to actual black parents, and nothing is said of the NAACP; the “affair” emerges as a concern Arendt would have if she were a Negro mother, not as a declaration that such “affair” is actually being carried out by black parents. The use of this imaginary exercise as an indicator of an “assumption” about all black parents—mothers, fathers, and those parents active in the NAACP—does not convince.

The core of Arendt’s concern with the “affair of social climbing” is a controversial and provocative thought concerning the dangerous extension of equality. As equality permeates society, differences among individuals and social groups will become increasingly resented. This thought does not provoke Gines. Her book makes no attempt to consider this belief about equality, and we suffer from not knowing Gines’s reasoned stance on the issue. Instead, she blames Arendt for identifying the agents of this “affair” as the Negro people, when it should be clear that Arendt worried about the politics of Supreme Court decisions and the federal government mandating equality across the spectrum of society via legalized enforcement. Rather than unearthing the underlying cause of Arendt’s factual mistakes, Gines simply ignores Arendt’s thought concerning the dangers of equality. In Arendt’s “Preliminary Remarks,” there is reference to a “fight for social opportunity,” but the agents of this fight are spoken of in the generic terms of “oppressed minorities,” not as blacks themselves. Again, Arendt does not criticize in these brief remarks the desire for social opportunity, as such; she targets for criticism only the waging of the battle for social opportunity at the cost of the fight for basic political rights.

Chapter Two begins with a brief overview of the legal campaign by the NAACP in the decades leading to the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v Board of Education*. Gines provides a fuller historical context of the NAACP’s campaign for equal educational opportunity than Arendt’s “Reflections.” In this task Gines certainly succeeds, but only for a moment. The conclusion that follows from the fuller context of the NAACP’s legal campaign before the Brown decision cannot be the one Gines deduces. Arendt may have been unwilling in “Reflections” to acknowledge the polit-

ical implications of the NAACP's legal work leading to the Brown decision, but that context does not provide evidence of Arendt's alleged "assumption" about the NAACP. The lack of historical context in Arendt's composite reflections on Little Rock suggests that Arendt made no explicit claim regarding the legal campaign of the NAACP in the decades leading to Brown, unless of course we consider Arendt's remark identifying the current strategy of the NAACP to battle legalized "discrimination in employment, housing and education" to include the legal campaign of the NAACP. To the extent that such a campaign fought against legalized segregation, there can be no doubt that Arendt considered the NAACP an organized society involved in a political battle for equality.

Using Gunnar Myrdal's explanation of white's man rank order of priorities, Gines argues that there is a troubling alignment between Arendt's condescending claim in her "Preliminary Remarks"—"oppressed minorities are never the best judges of priorities"—and the position of white racist segregationists in the South. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that Myrdal's rank order of priorities is of great strategic importance, the argument for alignment of priority does not demonstrate anything more profound than a difference of political strategy among those unequivocally against the legalized enforcement of segregation, Arendt being one of them. The aligned order of priorities, it is worth emphasizing, is an alignment of contraries: Arendt endorsed interracial marriage, white racists did not; Arendt rejected the legal enforcement of segregation, white racists did not; and the claim that Arendt belittled "discrimination in employment, housing and education" (37) as social issues is perfunctory at best, given her position against discrimination in these areas when it is legally enforced, in blatant violation of the freedom of association.

Gines even makes the unscrupulous statement that Arendt "defends discrimination laws in education" (39) even though Arendt presented legal enforcement of discrimination as unconstitutional. Such basic misrepresentations expose Gines's poor judgment with far more salience than the alleged racist tendencies of Hannah Arendt. The arguments against Arendt in this book are explosive, but they backfire. I suspect Gines's petards have for the moment left her blind to the visionary promise of civil disobedience for black Americans.

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1. Hannah Arendt, "Civil Disobedience" in *Crises of the Republic* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972), 91 (quoting George Bancroft).