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Hannah Arendt on Totalitarianism and Democracy

BY HANS MORGENTHAU

THE obviously outstanding contribution Hannah Arendt made to political philosophy is the understanding of totalitarianism as a new form of government. That is to say, the Aristotelian distinctions among different types of government from which our classifications of types of government derive do not suffice to understand the phenomenon of totalitarianism as it appears in Nazism and Bolshevism. For modern totalitarianism has added to the traditional characteristics of tyranny two novel qualities: an ideology which, when thought through to its logical conclusions, makes the outrages of totalitarianism inevitable; and second, the bureaucratization of terror in particular and political power in general, which gives political power an efficiency it did not have before. Certainly, large groups of people have been massacred before; for instance, the Romans put the Carthaginians to the sword. But there is a difference between mere cruelty, the mere destruction of life, and the justification of this destruction by an overriding ideology and the execution of that destruction with precision and efficiency. One can disagree with Hannah Arendt about the historic antecedents of totalitarianism and, more particularly, Nazism, and I personally think there are simpler explanations at least as convincing as the ones she has presented. But one has only to take a look, for instance, at the philosophy underlying the Bay of Pigs adventure in order to see to what extent she not only spoke the truth about totalitarianism but to what extent this truth was beneficial for

our understanding and for our action with regard to totalitarianism.

The philosophy underlying the Bay of Pigs adventure derived from the notion that here was another Latin American dictator who, his subjects hoped and expected, would sooner or later disappear. They were just waiting for someone to take the first step, giving them the opportunity to support him. But nothing of the kind happened. For what we were faced with at the Bay of Pigs and what we are faced with in modern totalitarianism is a phenomenon which our liberal tradition refuses to accept. It is the fact that people not only strive for freedom and are willing to die for freedom but that they also strive for order and are willing to die for order. So it is that modern totalitarianism represents a denial of the optimism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is a denial stemming from a human impulse which the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had refused to recognize.

The philosophic contribution which Hannah Arendt made to political thought is highly original. One is almost tempted to say that it is unprecedented in its originality. For it refuses to recognize what throughout the Western tradition has been recognized as politics. What we regard as political action is for her the preparatory steps toward true political action, or else they are irrelevant to true political action. The true political act is an act of freedom, an act performed by free individuals in the public arena, free individuals who interact with each other, who are visible to each other, and who express their personal preferences through this interaction. This and this alone is politics.

Obviously, we are here in the presence of a figure of speech which puts a positive value upon freedom and assumes that once this open space, this public space, has been created, and once individuals act within it freely and openly and visibly, then a kind of ideal situation will have come into existence which will continue indefinitely. But here we have to cite Hannah Arendt against herself, and we have to take a look at

her concept of evil, especially as it appears in her philosophy of totalitarianism. The evil is not in the deed itself but in the logic, in the persistent consistency of the philosophies underlying the actions. And so Arendt could coin that phrase, which has become a part of the language, “the banality of evil,” suggesting there exists no correspondence between the evil done and the evildoer. The evildoer can be a minor figure in a bureaucratic machine believing in the presuppositions of the doctrine. He executes almost mechanically, bureaucratically, the mandates of that doctrine. The evil he commits has its roots in an evil of reasoning but not in an evil of intent.

I am reminded of the passage in Rousseau’s *Confessions* in which judgment is rendered on Mme. de Warens, the married lady who introduced the young Rousseau into the mysteries of love. She is acquitted because she was first seduced by her doctor’s argument that, as long as her husband did not know about it, nobody was really harmed. According to Rousseau, her vice was of the mind, not of the passions; she just, by faulty reasoning, arrived at the wrong conclusion.

In any event, the public space populated by free men is not going to remain populated by free men. Here we are faced with the general dilemma of liberalism which John Stuart Mill brought to the fore. One can conceive of individual liberty being threatened by government; then restrain the government, limit its powers—that government is best which governs least—and the chances of freedom are maximized. But out of the open space of a free society there arise new social forces which, by design or historic contingencies, recreate inequality and close the open space in favor of those who have the power to close it. Thus there is a romantic element in Hannah Arendt’s conception of freedom and of the mechanism by which it is to be accomplished. For she tells us nothing about how freedom is to be preserved, how it is to be guarded against the enemies within. That it will be challenged, that it will be endangered, should be taken for granted.

Thus there is not only a romantic element in Hannah

Arendt's conception of politics but also what might be called a semianarchic one. For opposed as she is to the subjection of men by men as the central concept of politics itself, she regards this free space where peers interact freely as a kind of standard by which political relations have to be judged. But small communities of this kind, being visible to each other, are found in semianarchic utopian or prepolitical structures—one thinks of Aristotle's conception of the ideal state where people ought to be able to look at each other. In modern times one finds the typical representative of a philosophy of small-group participation in Rosa Luxemburg.

It is, of course, not by accident that Hannah Arendt felt a very profound affinity to this tragic and great figure of German socialism. But the question one must raise with regard to Rosa Luxemburg's conception of free association in small groups as well as with regard to Hanna Arendt's figure of speech of an open space inhabited by free men interacting with each other is whether, in view of the ubiquity of evil, such a situation was ever possible without the traditional political safeguards.

Let me say in conclusion a word about the novelty which Hannah Arendt's political philosophy has introduced in this matter. From the Biblical prophets and from Plato and Aristotle to Marx, political philosophy has always had a practical and pragmatic point. That is to say, people did not think about matters political for the mere sake of thinking. They did not want merely to think about what we are doing, they wanted to change what we are doing, they wanted to improve political thought and, through it, political action. There is then in all political philosophy a normative element, which is hidden in Hannah Arendt's work and does not really become explicit in the course of her argument. That is to say, how the open space is to be created, how it is to be preserved, how the natural inequality of man can be reconciled with the postulate of equality within the open space, those practical problems are

not raised, and insofar as they are raised they are dismissed as being prepolitical.

One can, of course, say that this departure from the practical concerns of the Western tradition of political theory is a symptom of the crisis of politics in the Western world. It may be argued, and I would be willing to argue, that the dilemmas which we are facing are no longer susceptible to those traditional concepts and remedies to which we have been accustomed in our thinking and in our actions. The ability to present theoretical alternatives, which was the justification for entering into the business of political philosophy to begin with, for the purpose of saving Athenian democracy or the Hebrew State, this ability of developing alternatives intellectually, not to speak of improving the actual political situation, has, if not disappeared, been greatly diminished. Perhaps one can argue that the theoretical character of Hannah Arendt's political philosophy is a symptom of this impossibility to think creatively in a hopeless political situation.

Let me at the end make a point which I have always found attractive and important, and that is the affinity of Hannah Arendt's political thought not only with general philosophy but with poetry. If you consider the enormous suggestiveness of her insights into political matters in contrast to the systematic attempts to which I have referred, you realize that her mind worked in a way not dissimilar to the poetic mind, which creates affinities, which discovers relationships that appear obvious once they are formulated but that nobody had thought of before the poet formulated them. So, having said all of this, I am left with an unutterable regret, mindful of the last line of the poem which Goethe wrote on the death of Schiller: "We shall not see the like of her again."