

HANNAH ARENDT

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Chapter guide

This chapter considers the life and work of Hannah Arendt, one of the most original and influential political thinkers of the twentieth century. After a brief overview of her extraordinary life, it discusses her theory of totalitarianism and its central arguments and idiosyncratic methodology. I then turn to her effort to form a new political theory attuned to the post-totalitarian present, examining some of her key concepts, including action, speech, natality, plurality, freedom, and politics. This will be followed by discussion of her theory of revolution, its shortcomings, and its enduring importance. The final two sections consider her controversial stance on gender, race, and culture. It is argued that her legacy to feminist theory has been highly ambivalent, while some aspects of her political thought are undermined by her cultural biases and, to some extent, by her racial prejudices.

19. 1 Introduction

No political thinker has made a more determined effort to understand the significance of twentieth-century totalitarianism than Hannah Arendt. Of course, totalitarianism – especially in its ‘classical’ Nazi and Stalinist forms – was seen as a foremost political challenge by many of her contemporaries, and the term ‘totalitarianism’ continues today to signify an especially oppressive form of government. However, Arendt differs from many others in insisting that totalitarianism is a phenomenon unknown prior to the twentieth century, and that a proper understanding of this ‘novel form of government’ requires a new form of political thinking (Arendt 1979: 460–79). Although she is a versatile thinker, writing on numerous issues from *polis* life in ancient Greece to twentieth-century existential philosophy, much of her work may be seen as a continuing attempt to understand how

totalitarianism came to emerge in the first place, and how the rise of a new totalitarianism might be averted in the post-war world. As Margaret Canovan writes, 'virtually the entire agenda of Arendt's political thought was set by her reflections on the political catastrophes of the mid-century' (Canovan 1992: 7).

This chapter focuses on Arendt's major works in political theory, including *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and *On Revolution*. Although there are other writings by her that are important in their own right, such as *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *The Life of the Mind*, they do not fall within the domain of political thought in a straightforward manner and consequently are not discussed in detail here.

The only child of a secular and assimilated German-Jewish family, Hannah Arendt was born in Hanover in 1906 and grew up in Königsberg. Having developed an interest in European philosophy and literature early on, she began her university education at a time when a new philosophical movement known as phenomenology was sweeping across Germany. She had the opportunity to attend seminars by the movement's founder, Edmund Husserl, but found greater inspiration in Husserl's former student Martin Heidegger. She not only attended Heidegger's courses in 1924–25 but also had a romantic affair with him (an extramarital one, on his part). The difficult relationship between them, exacerbated by Heidegger's involvement with Nazism, continues to generate heated debate. Arendt completed her doctoral dissertation on 'The Concept of Love in Augustine', under the supervision of Karl Jaspers, in 1929.

Key Thinker: Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was one of the most brilliant and most controversial philosophers of twentieth-century Europe. He began his academic career as Husserl's

research assistant. Instead of following his teacher's path, however, he developed his own brand of phenomenology, drawing on various sources such as Dilthey, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Kant, and Aristotle. He met Arendt while he was working on his masterpiece, *Being and Time*, published in 1927. While Heidegger's influence over Arendt's thought is undoubtedly significant, the precise nature of this influence has been a matter of scholarly dispute. While some accuse her of uncritically following Heidegger's work, others see her as creatively appropriating it for her own purposes. Added to this is a further controversy over Heidegger's Nazi sympathies. He joined the Nazi Party in 1933 and made various remarks that appear supportive of a purported rejuvenation of the German nation by Adolf Hitler.

Arendt's subsequent academic career was catastrophically disrupted by the rise of Nazism. As interwar democracy in Germany came to a violent end in the early 1930s, she realized that Jewish assimilation in the country had failed. This realization prompted her to undertake illegal work for the Zionist Federation of Germany, resulting in her arrest and an eight-day interrogation in Berlin. In 1933 she fled Germany and settled in Paris, where she met regularly with other German intellectuals in exile and continued her work for various Zionist organizations. The invasion of France by Nazi Germany in 1940 disrupted her life again, however, and she was sent to an internment camp in Gurs in south-western France. The absurdity of her situation was not lost upon her: she had been expelled from Germany because she was a Jew; when France was invaded, she was interned because she was a German; but once Germany had occupied France, she was not freed, again because she was a Jew (Arendt 2007: 270).

Fortunately, Arendt escaped from Nazified Europe to the United States. Having arrived in New York in May 1941 as a refugee and a stateless person, she plunged into

activity over the next decade. She learned English, while writing columns for a German-language newspaper; she began teaching at universities; and, once the war was over, she travelled to Europe on behalf of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, Inc. to save Jewish cultural artefacts looted by the Nazis. She then published, in 1951, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, establishing her reputation as one of her adopted country's most brilliant émigré intellectuals. This book, however, largely focused on the Nazi variant of totalitarianism and had relatively little to say regarding its communist counterpart. Arendt therefore began working on a new book, to be entitled 'Totalitarian Elements in Marxism'. Although she did not complete this project, the extensive research she conducted laid the foundation for her mature work in political theory.

Key concept: Totalitarianism

Totalitarianism is a contested concept. Some use it broadly to mean oppressive government in general. Others use it more narrowly to designate twentieth-century fascist, Nazi, and communist regimes. Others use it even more narrowly, to refer to Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia specifically. Arendt's definition is at the narrowest end of this spectrum. She not only reserves the totalitarian label for Nazism and Stalinism, but sometimes goes so far as to argue that they became properly totalitarian only after the beginning of World War II. Arendt's decision to define totalitarianism narrowly stems from her wish to highlight its unprecedentedness. The downside of this, however, is that some regimes that should arguably be recognized as genuinely totalitarian, such as the Soviet Union after Stalin and today's North Korea, are excluded from the Arendtian definition.

While the theme of totalitarianism was not the direct focus of her work in the mid- and late 1950s, it re-emerged as a central issue when one of the key figures in the enactment of Nazi extermination policy, Adolf Eichmann, was brought to trial in Jerusalem in 1961. Arendt wrote a series of essays on the trial for the *New Yorker* magazine, later published as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. This sparked an intense controversy, for it not only raised extremely difficult moral questions surrounding the Holocaust but also discussed it in a provocative manner that was widely condemned as utterly inappropriate. Refusing to be intimidated, Arendt kept writing on pressing issues of her time, earning a reputation as a fearless public intellectual in post-war America. Meanwhile, she worked on what turned out to be an incomplete opus, *The Life of the Mind*, building on her earlier observation that Eichmann's evil might be accounted for by his sheer inability to think. Hannah Arendt died of heart attack in 1975.

19. 2. The burden of our time

The unthinkable happened in the first half of the twentieth century. A totalitarian movement emerged at the heart of supposedly 'civilized' Europe, destroyed democracies, waged aggressive wars, and established a regime based on ideology and terror. It erected concentration camps across the continent and implemented extermination policies whereby millions of innocent men, women, and children were sent to their deaths. To comprehend this series of events, Arendt writes, is the 'burden which our century has placed upon us' (Arendt 1979: viii).

19.2.1 A new form of government

Arendt insisted that twentieth-century totalitarianism was a new form of government, without any historical precedent. Of course, it was neither the first nor the only type of regime to commit such evils and crimes as aggressive wars, massacres, foreign conquest, slavery, and state-sponsored racism. Even the signature institution of totalitarianism – concentration camps – had been used prior the rise of Nazism and Stalinism. The notorious pioneers in this regard were the British, who sent tens of thousands of civilians to concentration camps (where some 45,000 died of disease and malnutrition) during the Anglo-Boer War of 1898–1902 (Stone 2017: 18). Nevertheless, it is a mistake, according to Arendt, to see totalitarianism as merely a more extreme version of ‘traditional’ forms of oppressive government. In fact, it flatly contradicts the classical definition of bad government as arbitrary power. This is the case because totalitarianism, far from being arbitrary, strictly adheres to what Arendt calls ‘ideology’: a comprehensive set of doctrines that explains literally everything in the past, present, and future. Moreover, it deploys violence and terror if reality as it is does not conform to reality as it ideologically ought to be. For example, if the racist ideology of Nazism stipulates that the law of nature condemns ‘degenerate’ races such as the Jews as unfit to live, the condemned are not only understood in such terms, but also become targets of extermination. Similarly, if the communist ideology of the Soviet Union stipulates that the law of history condemns aristocrats or wealthy landowning farmers as a dying class, the condemned are not only understood in such terms, but also will be liquidated. Ideology and terror complement each other to form the twin pillars of totalitarianism.

Key concept: Ideology

The term 'ideology' was coined in the late eighteenth century to mean the 'study of ideas', as sociology is the study of society. Under the influence of Marx and Marxists, however, it came to acquire pejorative connotations, highlighting the distorting influences of 'ideological' ideas [CROSS REF MARX]. One may, for example, dismiss liberalism as a 'bourgeois ideology' if one thinks liberalism misrepresents reality, serves the interests of the bourgeoisie, and so on. In her 1950s work, Arendt went further and characterized ideology as not only distorting, but also totally fictitious, seeing Nazism and Stalinism as paradigmatically ideological movements. On this understanding, an ideology is a comprehensive set of ideas deduced from an axiomatically accepted premise such as the 'law' of nature or of history allegedly governing human conduct. Although this conception of ideology is somewhat antiquated today, it provided Arendt with an important tool to analyse key features of Nazism and Stalinism.

Nothing illustrates the infernal nature of totalitarianism better than concentration camps. On a general level, camps come in various forms and sizes, fulfilling functions ranging from confinement and forced labour to extermination. As such, they are not a uniquely totalitarian institution. Not only did imperial Britain use them during the Boer War; democracies today use them to confine refugees and asylum seekers (Parekh 2016: 17–50; Kreichauf 2018). However, according to Arendt, camps play a particularly important role under totalitarian regimes, in that they produce thoroughly dehumanized human beings, by means of total terror. Far from being confinement facilities, totalitarian camps are more even than death factories: their inmates are turned into 'living corpses' before finally being killed or left to die of disease, exhaustion, and malnutrition. In an especially chilling part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt characterizes the end of this dehumanization process

as follows: 'Nothing [...] remains but ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in Pavlov's experiments, which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death, and which do nothing but react' (Arendt 1979: 455). Such comprehensive dehumanization, which Arendt calls 'total domination', is the ultimate aim of totalitarianism, because only when no human beings with the power to resist are left can totalitarianism declare its final victory. If unstoppable, totalitarianism keeps killing and dehumanizing until the whole earth is filled with no one but 'ghastly marionettes'.

19.2.2 Crystallization

Arendt was by no means the only one trying to understand totalitarianism in the mid-twentieth century. She was aware of some of the competing explanations, but rejected them as exaggerating the continuity between totalitarianism and its alleged precursors. For example, she dismissed the anti-Germanic view, popular at the time, that purported to identify anticipations of totalitarian politics in the history of German thought and culture. She considered it absurd that German thinkers such as Nietzsche, Hegel, and Luther should be held accountable for 'what is happening in the concentration camps' (Arendt 1994: 108). Similarly, she explicitly criticized the literature on 'political religion', represented by the work of Eric Voegelin, that saw totalitarianism as a kind of perverted religion in the age of secularism (Voegelin 2000; Arendt 1994: 401–8). On this view, totalitarianism commanded mass support because it fulfilled the spiritual craving that could no longer be fulfilled by traditional religions. It offered *Mein Kampf* or *Das Kapital* as a substitute for the Bible, the Party as a substitute for the Church, and so on. This body of work again struck Arendt as misguided, because it too 'failed to point out the distinct quality of what was actually happening' (Arendt 1994: 405).

Arendt proposes the concept of 'crystallization' to characterize her own alternative approach. This elusive concept is open to multiple interpretations, but two aspects of it are worth highlighting. First, crystallization occurs when various elements coalesce under certain conditions. Second, what appears as a result of crystallization is different from any of the coalescing elements. Thus, although individual elements of totalitarianism such as antisemitism, tribal nationalism, racism, and imperial expansion, had existed prior to the twentieth century, what those elements together crystallized into – totalitarianism – was entirely new. Furthermore, Arendt continues, most of the elements of totalitarianism originated from the 'subterranean stream of Western history', rather than its main currents (Arendt 1979: ix). In other words, totalitarianism must be seen as an *usurper* of 'the dignity of our [i.e. Western] tradition', not an legitimate heir to it (Arendt 1979: ix). This conviction led Arendt, on the one hand, to investigate various obscure sources of totalitarianism. Most notably, she made a pioneering effort to examine the connection between imperialism and totalitarianism, considering how atrocities committed by Europeans against colonial subjects boomeranged back to Europe, resulting in Europeans' atrocity towards each other. On the other hand, she firmly believed that such evils and wrongs as racism and imperialism belonged to 'the subterranean stream of Western history'. This raises the question as to whether she might have been 'whitewashing' the West: for is Western history without racism or imperialism even conceivable?

19.2 The burden of our time Key Points

- Arendt conceptualizes totalitarianism narrowly, to mean Nazism and Stalinism at their most violent.

- According to Arendt, the goal of totalitarianism is ‘total domination’: the comprehensive dehumanization of each and every human being on earth.
- ‘Crystallization’ is the innovative concept Arendt employs to examine how totalitarianism emerged out of disparate elements belonging to the ‘subterranean stream’ of Western history.

19.3 The meaning of politics

Arendt has an acute sense of a fundamental historical rupture caused by the political disasters of the twentieth century. As we have seen, age-old concepts such as arbitrary power as the indicator of bad government are no longer adequate for understanding the worst form of government today. Similarly, other basic political concepts such as freedom, power, and indeed politics itself require fundamental reconsideration, because our traditional understandings no longer help us navigate through the new reality. On the basis of this conviction, Arendt undertakes two tasks in search of a new political theory. One is literally to ‘think what we are doing’ in light of ‘our newest experiences and our most recent fears’ (Arendt 1998: 5). The other is to acknowledge the total breakdown of the tradition and to ‘discover the past for ourselves – that is, read its authors as though nobody had ever read them before’ (Arendt 2006a: 201). Political thought must begin itself anew.

19.3.1 The specificity of the political

Arendt proposes to reconsider the meaning of politics itself. What is politics? How does it differ from other human activities? Part of her answer lies in the stark contrast she draws between the political and the economic. She conceptualizes the latter in the classical Greek

sense of *oikos*, or household: as the sustenance of the biological life of the human animal. The things we do to keep ourselves alive and functioning as members of our biological species, such as procreation and the production and consumption of food, belong to the economic sphere. The political sphere, by contrast, concerns distinctly human life – the life of the citizen or of the member of a community. It is a sphere of freedom, where human life is no longer governed by thirst, hunger and other biological needs and animal urges. Central to this sphere are action and speech: doing things on one's own initiative on the one hand, and using words to persuade others and deliberate with others on matters of common concern on the other. To be free in Arendt's sense is not to do whatever one wants to do, but to act and speak in the public realm. It requires the actualization of what Arendt calls 'natality' and 'plurality' (Arendt 1998: 7–9, 178, 247). The former designates the innate ability of the human being to start something new and spontaneous; and the latter means the uniqueness of each and every single human being insofar as they are irreducible to mere specimens of *Homo sapiens*. These human qualities remain dormant, however, unless one takes the opportunity to participate in politics, for it is only through political participation that one may cooperate with others to make a unique contribution to the world that one shares with them. The experience of political participation in turn gives one the sense of 'public happiness', that is, the joy of living in a distinctly human community that the Greeks used to call the *polis*.

Obviously, politics in this sense is very different from politics as we know it in our daily experience. This is the case even in liberal democracies, where citizens are in theory guaranteed the right to political participation. Indeed, individual democratic citizens today hardly ever 'act' or 'speak' in Arendt's sense. On the contrary, their principal form of political participation is voting, which one does alone and silently in a booth, to choose

one's so-called representative (Arendt 1972: 232). Similarly, some of the most-debated issues in today's Parliament or Congress – an institutionalized public realm where some action and speech do occur, at least among the representatives – are economic rather than political. They typically concern ways of sustaining biological life, such as the alleviation of poverty and the protection of public health. This makes contemporary politics look more like 'a gigantic, nation-wide administration of housekeeping' than politics in the classical sense (Arendt 1998: 28).

Why is this the case? Why is politics today so different from what it used to be? Arendt answers this question in terms of the 'rise of the social' (Arendt 1998: 38–49). This is a highly complicated process (Pitkin 1998), but her basic view is that the sphere of politics came to be eroded in modernity when economic activities accelerated exponentially to spill out of their original field and infiltrate the public realm, which used to be preserved for politics. 'The social' in Arendt's terminology designates this 'hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance' (Arendt 1998: 35). One corollary of the expansion of this realm is that politics has come to be reconceptualised in economic terms. Our language of politics is indeed filled with economic metaphors such as 'career politicians' and 'political advertising'. What are we doing when we take part in politics today? Most of us, in Arendt's view, are behaving as though we were involved in an economic transaction.

19.3.2 Philosophy and politics

What is objectionable about the modern reconceptualization of politics as akin to economic activities? One answer Arendt gives is that such politics is powerless to contain the totalitarian threat. She does not think that totalitarianism naturally arises out of defective liberal democracy, wherein everyone sees politics as a kind of economic game for the

pursuit of personal gain. This may well be bad politics, but in itself it does not give rise to totalitarianism. Empirically speaking, as we have seen, totalitarianism was an outcome of the crystallization of 'subterranean' elements of Western history. Nevertheless, opportunities to put a stop to a nascent totalitarian movement are likely to be wasted if politics is conducted on the economic model. Arendt takes this to be one of the key lessons of history from 1930s Germany, where most people did nothing to stop Nazism but kept worrying about their private security 'in the midst of the ruins of [their] world' (Arendt 1979: 338). Unfortunately, the tradition of Western philosophy and political thought have been rather complacent about this sorry state of affairs. A significant part of this tradition has rationalized or even justified the anti-political mindset pervasive among the Germans of the interwar period. Arendt singles out the seventeenth-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes as an exemplar in this context, describing him as a prophet of the coming bourgeois age (Arendt 1979: 139–47). He gave us an analysis of so-called 'human nature' which was in fact a depiction of the egoistical modern individual terrified of fierce competition in the capitalist economy. Hobbes constructed a systematic political philosophy beginning with this view of 'human nature'. The result, however, was a thoroughly anti-political political philosophy, in which individuals never act or speak but are preoccupied with survival: with, that is, the sustenance of biological life. The Hobbesian modern individual knows no freedom (Hiruta 2019: 28–29).

Key concept: Tradition

Arendt accuses the mainstream tradition of Western philosophy and political thought of an anti-political bias. This began with Plato. Dismayed by the condemnation of his teacher Socrates by Athenian citizens, Plato defended a hierarchical division between the rational

unity of philosophy and the confused multiplicity of politics. This division has been inherited by generations of Western thinkers all the way down to Hegel and Marx, all of whom assumed the primacy of philosophy over politics. While Arendt's notion of 'the tradition' is somewhat simplistic, it made her realize the significance of unorthodox political thinkers such as Augustine and Machiavelli, who on her reading were partially exempt from the anti-political bias. It never occurred to Arendt, however, that she should study non-Western thought to see if this might provide some resources to counter some of the undesirable tendencies of the Western tradition. She never freed herself from the cage of Eurocentrism.

Hobbes's work, however, is but one variation of the deeper anti-political bias that animates the whole of the Western tradition. Arendt's indictment here is sweeping, stemming from her view that Western philosophy since Plato onwards has had built-in hostility to the contingency and unpredictability that action and speech bring to the human world (Arendt 2005: 5–39). Philosophy has been monistic, while politics is by nature pluralistic. The former seeks *one* truth that silences all competing opinions, whereas the latter consists in debate, deliberation, negotiation, provisional decision-making, reconsideration, and further debate among a multiplicity of people. Consequently, Arendt continues, philosophers have viewed politics with suspicion, tempted to suppress the haphazardness of human affairs by appealing to the force of truth. She illustrates her point by way of discussing the eighteenth-century French thinker Mercier de la Rivière, who argued that the law of society that he had supposedly discovered should command the same 'despotic force' as the law of geometry (Arendt 2006a: 236). According to Arendt, however, Rivière merely articulated the same anti-political bias that tainted Hobbes's work.

In many of her essays devoted to the history of ideas, Arendt reiterates this same claim about the anti-political bias purportedly animating the Western tradition from a variety of angles (e.g. Arendt 2005; Arendt 2006a: 17–169; Arendt 2018: 3–68). While her historiography simplifies a good deal, it should be noted that she is not concerned to interpret the Western tradition objectively and impartially. Rather, her intellectual project is to rescue from the past whatever is usable in order to navigate the post-totalitarian present, highlighting the originality of a handful of political thinkers, such as Augustine, Machiavelli, and Montesquieu, who had resisted this bias. Her source of inspiration here is her friend the philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). Striking an autobiographical note, she writes that the task Benjamin set himself was ‘to bend down, as it were, to select his precious fragments from the pile of debris’ (Arendt 1968: 200). As the Western tradition has been irreparably destroyed by the rise of totalitarianism, all those who think today are destined to be waste-pickers amid the ruins.

Key Thinker: Augustine

Augustine of Hippo (354–430), also known as Saint Augustine, is one of Arendt’s surprising intellectual heroes. Born in what is now Algeria, he became a follower of Manicheanism as a young man, and his difficult spiritual journey to Christianity is vividly documented in his *Confessions*. Arendt’s engagement with Augustine’s work was lifelong, beginning with her doctoral dissertation on ‘The Concept of Love in Augustine’ and ending with her final book, *The Life of the Mind*. Arguably the most important idea that she derives from Augustine is that of natality. It may be doubted if Augustine was really the philosopher of natality she made him out to be; but this objection is perhaps beside the point, for Arendt was willing to inflict considerable interpretive violence on past thinkers if that was necessary to find ‘precious fragments from the pile of debris’ of the broken tradition.

19.3 The meaning of politics Key Points

- Arendt conceptualizes the political as the sphere of freedom, in contrast to the economic as the sphere of biological necessity.
- Arendt attributes the transformation of the meaning of politics in modernity to the rise of the social.
- Arendt's sustained effort to reconsider central political concepts is based on her critical view of the tradition of Western philosophy and political thought as having had a persistent anti-political bias.

19.4 'The end of revolution is the foundation of freedom'

Arendt's historical analysis of modernity does not make for happy reading. It is a story of the rise of the social and the decline of the political, leading ultimately to the emergence of totalitarianism. But she is not completely pessimistic about modern history. On the contrary, she finds in it the development of an alternative tradition, in which politics is rediscovered and freedom experienced among ordinary people. This is the tradition of revolutionary politics.

19.4.1 France and America (and Haiti)

Arendt contrasts revolution with rebellion, writing that 'the end of rebellion is liberation, while the end of revolution is the foundation of freedom' (Arendt 2006b: 133). A rebellion succeeds if the rebels overthrow an oppressive regime and release themselves from chains. A revolution succeeds, by contrast, if the revolutionaries create a new political order in

which citizens can and at least occasionally do act and speak in the public realm. Although a revolution typically grows out of an act of rebellion, the successful overthrow of an oppressive regime does not automatically generate a new order of freedom. On the contrary, it sometimes leads to chaos, anarchy, and civil war, giving rise to the establishment of a new oppressive regime. Arendt deploys this conceptual scheme to examine the French and American revolutions of the late eighteenth century. Her greater sympathy is with that of America, which she sees as a revolution in the proper sense of the term. Revolutionaries there not only overthrew the yoke of monarchical rule by the British but also established a new republic: the United States of America. The French Revolution, by contrast, fell short of being a full-fledged revolution because it did not yield a stable political order but merely ended the *ancien régime*. To this contrast Arendt adds a further and highly controversial claim about the motives behind the two revolutions, based on her contention that colonial America, unlike pre-revolutionary France, knew no 'mass poverty' (Arendt 2006b: 148). According to her, what ultimately motivated the rebels in France was the desire to end material miseries such as poverty and hunger, whereas what motivated the American revolutionaries was the hope of living in a free republic. In other words, the French were concerned with the social question, while the Americans were concerned with the political. It is little wonder that she held the latter in higher regard.

Key concept: liberty and freedom

In some of her writings, Arendt distinguishes explicitly between liberty and freedom. The former means liberty from arbitrary restraints; the latter designates the actual exercise of the distinctly human ability to act and speak in public. Although she does not always adhere to this terminological distinction, the conceptual distinction she draws is an important one,

making her one of the most original theorists of freedom in the twentieth century. Her distinct contribution lies in her insistence on the inherent connection between freedom, politics, and action: 'The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action' (Arendt 2006a: 145). Of course, this idea has attracted criticism, especially from liberals who conceptualize freedom first and foremost as the freedom to choose between different options. To this Arendtians have made various counter-arguments, and scholars continue to disagree over the 'true' meaning of freedom.

Arendt's discussion of the French and American revolutions is more nuanced than might be surmised from the short overview of her *On Revolution* provided above. For example, she tells a complicated story as to how the revolutionary spirit that used to animate the early American republic came to be lost in subsequent years, turning the United States into a consumerist mass society (Arendt 2006b: 207–73). Still, her contrast between the two revolutions has been criticized as simplistic, schematic, and hardly supported by empirical evidence. An especially harsh criticism came from the celebrated Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who wrote that Arendt's discussion of the two revolutions 'at no point [...] touches the actual historical phenomena she purports to describe' (Hobsbawm 1965: 258). Even some of Arendt's defenders concede her historical inaccuracies, although they regard them as insignificant, arguing that her highly stylized presentation of the two revolutions should be read as a 'fable', to which the normal standards of historical scholarship do not apply (Honig 1991: 107–8; Young-Bruehl 2004: 403–4). Arendt's theory of revolution has moreover been criticized for what it does *not* say as well as for what it does. Perhaps her most significant omission is any reference to the Haitian Revolution that unfolded in 1791–1804 in what was then the French colony of Saint-

Domingue. (CROSS REF CLR JAMES) This revolution would seem indeed to be an ideal case to illustrate Arendt's theory. Beginning as a revolt against slavery and colonial domination by the French, it ultimately led to 'the establishment of an independent Black state by former slaves and their free allies' (Gines 2014: 74). Yet this extraordinary story of human freedom and new beginnings is completely ignored by Arendt, to many of her readers' disappointment.

Despite these limitations, it would be a mistake to dismiss *On Revolution* simply as bad history written by a theoretician compromised by 'white ignorance' (Mills 2017: 49–71). The book develops Arendt's highly original insight into the tragic nature of modern politics: politics *qua* action and speech has appeared almost exclusively in times of revolutionary upheavals in modern times, and has thus far lasted only briefly. Her study of revolutionary politics in *On Revolution* thus complements her analysis of the rise of the social in *The Human Condition*. The latter tells how politics came to decline in modernity; the former tells how it has occasionally resurfaced in extraordinary circumstances, unleashing men's and women's potential to act and speak in the public realm. There is a tension between these two sides of Arendt's analysis, however. An important question suggests itself, to which she does not give a satisfactory answer: can politics be institutionalized in modernity, when the conditions of its possibility are constantly undermined by social forces?

19.4 'The end of revolution is the foundation of freedom' Key Points

- Arendt draws a distinction between liberation as the overthrow of an old oppressive regime and revolution as the establishment of a new order of freedom.

- Arendt's *On Revolution* has been criticized for its neglect of the Haitian Revolution as well as for its historical inaccuracies. It may, however, be read as an original attempt to delineate theoretically a modern revolutionary tradition.

19.5 Between feminism and anti-feminism

Arendt was a female thinker who lived in the male-dominated world of twentieth-century philosophy and political theory. But unlike some of her contemporaries, such as the pioneering French feminist Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86), she showed little interest in feminist theory and had almost nothing to say on social and political issues concerning gender and sexuality. Moreover, the little she had to say about these issues seems inconsistent, and some of her remarks sound surprisingly conservative. She said, for example, 'I always thought that there are certain occupations that are improper for women, that do not become them, if I may put it that way. It just doesn't look good when a woman gives orders' (Arendt 1994: 2–3). To take another example, Arendt gave the following advice to William Phillips, an editor, on how to deal with Beauvoir: 'The trouble with you, William, is that you don't realize that she's not very bright. Instead of arguing with her, [...] you should flirt with her' (Arendt and McCarthy 1995: xiii). How should we assess Arendt's puzzling stance on gender and sexuality?

19.5.1 Arendt as an anti-feminist

Arendt presents her political thought in gender-neutral terms. She is concerned with general issues of high abstraction such as the *human* condition and the *human* capacity for action and speech, rather than with concrete issues specifically related to women's

oppression, domination, exclusion, struggle, empowerment, and emancipation. This silence has raised the suspicion that her apparent gender neutrality in effect masks age-old gender biases, and *The Human Condition*, especially the second chapter entitled 'The Public and the Private Realm' (Arendt 1998: 22–78), is often cited in support of this allegation. Drawing an seemingly inflexible distinction between politics and the public on the one hand and the household and the private on the other, Arendt appears to associate the former pair with various 'masculine' virtues such as courage and responsibility, and the latter with various 'feminine' categories such as the family, the body, birth, nourishment, and species reproduction. Furthermore, her analysis of the 'rise of the social' sometimes strikes a gendered note, as if to say that the feminine sphere of human life – the household – came to contaminate the masculine sphere – the public – such as to undermine the latter's dignity. She writes,

The distinction between the private and public realms, seen from the viewpoint of privacy rather than of the body politic, equals the distinction between things that should be shown and things that should be hidden. [...] The fact that the modern age emancipated the working classes and the women at nearly the same historical moment must certainly be counted among the characteristics of an age which no longer believes that bodily functions and material concerns should be hidden (Arendt 1998: 72–73).

Although Arendt's discussion of the public and the private is more nuanced than is often supposed, passages like this have unsurprisingly maddened many a feminist. Adrienne Rich, for example, made the following remark about *The Human Condition*: 'To read such a book,

by a woman of large spirit and great erudition, can be painful, because it embodies the tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideologies' (Rich 1979: 212).

It is, moreover, not only *The Human Condition* that has been seen as disappointing from a feminist perspective. Arendt's biographical study of the early nineteenth-century German-Jewish salonnière Rahel Varnhagen (Arendt 1997) has attracted the charge that the author is far more interested in Varnhagen's predicament as a Jew than as a woman. A similar criticism has been levelled against Arendt's writings on Jewish issues more broadly. She has been taken to task for failing to extend her insight into the Jewish plight to that of women, at best missing an opportunity to contribute to feminist theory, and at worst ignoring or marginalizing sex and gender as *political* issues, notwithstanding their clear significance. Furthermore, her sporadic remarks on gender differences, as well as the apparently inflexible conceptual distinction she draws in *The Human Condition*, have been seen as suspiciously essentialist: that is, as taking such categories as 'men' and 'women' as givens, rather than as social constructs ideologically produced and reproduced within a specific historical context and power structure. In short, as Mary Dietz observes, some (especially early) feminist critics have taken Arendt to be 'a woman who thinks like a man' (Dietz 1995: 23).

19.5.2 Arendt as a (proto-)feminist

Despite these criticisms, there is no shortage of feminist attempts to claim Arendt as an idiosyncratic feminist, or at least as someone whose work is not antithetical to feminism. Some partially accept the early reading of Arendt as an anti-feminist, while declining to dismiss her political thought as a whole as unequivocally anti-feminist. For example, Hanna Pitkin (1981; 1998) and Seyla Benhabib (1993; 2003) have both highlighted important

ambiguities and inconsistencies discernible in Arendt's work, and proposed a reconstructed Arendtian theory incorporating certain key feminist demands. Others, by contrast, such as Bonnie Honig (1995), Amy Allen (1999), and Marty Dietz (2002), have vigorously repudiated earlier readings of Arendt as an anti-feminist, criticising Rich and others for imposing *their* gendered and binary framework on Arendt's un-gendered and non-binary thought. By this account, Arendt is an anti-foundationalist *avant la lettre* and her primary contribution to feminism consists in her radically anti-identitarian conception of politics. Categories such as 'women' and the 'private', Honig and others argue, are for Arendt by no means fixed and given but are acquired, contested, and negotiated in a fluid manner, in an endless play of performative acts in politics.

This anti-essentialist reading, for its part, is in conflict with another reading by a different group of feminists, who see Arendt as a theorist of natality, birth-giving, pregnancy, and motherhood. They argue that her thought *is* indeed gendered, but it is so in a pro-feminist way, such as to give expression to women's experiences (Elshtain 1986; Ruddick 1989). This body of work has in turn been challenged by yet another group of feminists, according to whom Arendt's conception of natality is not naturalistically connected to the female body or to 'women's experiences' in the abstract. Rather, despite its abstract tendencies, it allows us to appreciate how actual births are experienced differently depending on social contexts and power structures, and how such inequality at birth may result in inequality in individuals' capacity to act, speak and be free when they mature into adults and citizens (Cavarero 2016; Söderbäck 2018)

And so the interpretive debate continues. There is no end in sight to the dispute over 'the "woman question" in Arendt': whether there is a hidden feminist message in Arendt's work. Nor likewise to the dispute over 'the "Arendt question" in feminism': how to locate

Arendt in the history of feminist thought (Maslin 2013: 587–89). One thing that is beyond dispute, however, is that her work has inspired numerous feminist thinkers representing a range of theoretical strands, notwithstanding her own lack of interest in feminist theory. The credit here must go to Arendt’s feminist readers as well as to Arendt. The burgeoning literature on Arendt and (anti-)feminism is a testimony to the intellectual vigour of contemporary feminists, who have tirelessly engaged with and built on Arendt’s thought in various ways.

19.5 Between feminism and anti-feminism Key Points

- While Arendt showed no interest in feminist theory, this does not necessarily mean that her work has nothing to contribute to it.
- Although Arendt’s work is sometimes seen as anti-feminist, it has inspired many feminist thinkers, who have re-interpreted it from a variety of innovative perspectives.

19.6 Arendt’s ‘Negro question’

As discussed in the section on ‘The burden of our time’, Arendt was one of the first scholars to underline the connection between imperialism and totalitarianism. In her view, it is the imperial experiences of racial domination, global conquest, bureaucratic rule, and administrative violence that made the emergence of totalitarianism ‘experientially and conceptually possible if not inevitable’ (Mantena 2010: 91). Thanks to this insight Arendt has earned a reputation as a proto-postcolonial thinker and *The Origins of Totalitarianism* has been hailed as ‘a constitutive book for postcolonial studies’ (Grosse 2006: 37; see also Lee 2011). Nevertheless, both in this book and other writings, Arendt made a number of

questionable remarks on race and culture, attracting the charges that she was not only Eurocentric but also a racist and even a 'white supremacist' (Frantzman 2016). Are these allegations supported by textual evidence?

19.6.1 Arendt's 'horrific racial stereotypes'

Arguably the most important text in what has come to be known as Arendt's 'Negro question' (Gines 2014) is the section entitled 'The Phantom World of the Dark Continent' in the second part, on 'Imperialism', of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In this section she attempts to trace the beginnings of European racism by way of discussing the experience of Dutch settlers (the Boers) in southern Africa. While this may be a laudable goal, Arendt approaches the issue in a highly controversial manner, using a racially charged language indebted to Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. For example, she describes Africa before European colonization as a 'Dark Continent' inhabited by 'native savages' or 'black savages'. Although they were not literally inhuman or subhuman, the 'savages' were 'prehistoric men' who never transformed nature into a 'human landscape' but, on the contrary, 'treated [it] as their undisputed master' (Arendt 1979: 190–92). Never having created a specifically human world, they lived 'without the future of a purpose and the past of an accomplishment' (Arendt 1979: 192, 190). In short, Africa was 'a world of folly' (Arendt 1979: 191).

This was the world, Arendt continues, in which Dutch settlers arrived in the seventeenth century. Two things soon ensued. First, outnumbered by the native population, the settlers started to commit 'senseless massacre'. But this was, according to Arendt, an understandable reaction on the Boers' part, because such massacres were 'quite in keeping with the traditions of these tribes themselves' (Arendt 1979: 192). Second, confronted by

the additional problem of the infertility of the southern African soil, the settlers enslaved 'native savages'. Again, Arendt writes, this 'was a form of adjustment of a European people to a black race', because the Dutch settlers now had to live in fear and misery, surrounded by entirely hostile nature (Arendt 1979: 193). Besides, it was relatively easy for the Boers to institute a new slavery because, in Arendt's words, '[t]he natives [...] recognized them as a higher form of tribal leadership, a kind of natural deity to which one has to submit; so that the divine role of the Boers was as much imposed by their black slaves as assumed freely by themselves' (Arendt 1979: 193). These are but samples of what Patricia Owens (2017: 405) calls the 'horrific racial stereotypes about Africans' in which Arendt appears to indulge in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

Arendt's discussion goes through an interesting turn as she shifts her attention from the Africans to the Boers. As they continued to live in Africa, she writes, this (formerly) European people came to be indistinguishable from 'native savages', notwithstanding the former's enslavement of the latter. They trekked, became nomadic, 'lost the European's feeling for a territory', and went wherever they needed to in order to reap the fruits of nature (Arendt 1979: 196). Having developed an aversion to settling, cultivating, and creating a specifically human world, the Boers 'behaved exactly like the black tribes who had also roamed the Dark Continent for centuries' (Arendt 1979: 196). Arendt calls this adjustment and change of lifestyle 'degeneration' – degeneration of 'Western man' into the savage (Arendt 1979: 194). According to her, it was during this process of 'degeneration' that the Boers discovered racism. Now that the Boers had 'gone native' (Klausen 2010: 404), the only thing that separated them from the original natives was the colour of their skin. Race became the only source of identity for the Boers. Thus, in Arendt's view, Boer racism was not something that the Dutch settlers brought from Europe to Africa. Rather, it 'was

and remains a desperate reaction to desperate living conditions' (Arendt 1979: 196). Arendt in this way distinguishes between the Boers' experientially grounded racism and European writers' more theoretical race thinking, although her point is that these two distinct elements eventually merged into the racist ideology of Nazism. The validity of this larger claim need not concern us here, however. The relevant point is that Arendt sounds suspiciously like a racist in her discussion of southern Africa, identifying herself more with the slave-owning and murderous Boers than with the enslaved and massacred Africans.

19.6.2 The world and its other

How should we interpret Arendt's seemingly racist remarks about Africa and Africans? This question received little attention until recently, as the 'Imperialism' part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* tended to be overlooked in the early Arendt scholarship (see King and Stone 2007). Most scholars took it for granted that Arendt – a persecuted Jew – could not be a racist, assuming that she used racist language borrowed from Conrad selectively and tentatively, for the sole purpose of helping her readers to understand how the Boers discovered racism. On this reading, Arendt's use of such racist language is purely strategic; it by no means reflects her own views. This reading, however, has been vigorously challenged in recent years, as Arendt's stance on race and culture has come to be subjected to closer scrutiny (e.g. Presbey 1997; Klausen 2010; Gines 2014; Owens 2017). According to this new body of scholarship, Arendt not only failed to distance herself from the Boers, but also repeatedly made, in her own voice, racially biased comments on Africa and Africans. For example, when she contrasted Africans with Indians and the Chinese, and went on to say that treating the former 'as though they were not human beings' was 'humanly comprehensible' while treating the latter in the same way was not (Arendt 1979: 206), she

was not paraphrasing the Boers' opinions but was expressing her own misguided view of a civilizational hierarchy.

Unfortunately, moreover, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* is not the only work in which Arendt expressed her prejudices against Africans and, for that matter, against African Americans. Of particular note here is her essay 'Reflections on Little Rock', occasioned by the controversy, beginning in 1957, over the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas (Arendt 2003: 193–213). Although she never saw herself as a political conservative, Arendt ended up by taking a highly conservative position on this issue, mounting an attack on the school integration movement in the American South, about which she knew next to nothing (see Arendt 2003: 193–213). Similarly, she was not at her best when she dismissed Swahili and African literature as 'nonexistent subjects' that should have no place in education, or when she misrepresented 'Negro students' as uniquely violent compared to their white counterparts during the student rebellion of the 1960s–70s (Arendt 1972: 192, 120–21). These errors of judgement, according to some critics, are due at least in part to Arendt's anti-Black racism. In a similar vein, it has been suggested that her anti-Black racism accounts for her aforementioned failure to include Black people's struggles for freedom, such as the Haitian Revolution, in her narrative of human freedom – as if to say that Black history is no part of human history.

The new critical scholarship on Arendt, race and culture has not persuaded everyone, and some of her readers remain reluctant to accept the charges of racism alleged against her in recent years. By contrast, it is now widely accepted that Arendt is highly Eurocentric and that her work is infected by various *cultural* prejudices. For example, much of her political thought hinges on the distinction she draws between nature as the realm of necessity and the human world as the realm of freedom. Yet the image of the '*human*

world' that she tacitly assumes is the one she is most familiar with: Europe. It is for this reason that she offhandedly dismisses other modes of world-building that do not conform to this image as 'savage' and 'prehistoric', despite her evident lack of knowledge about those modes. As Gail Presbey (1997: 176) argues, it never occurred to Arendt that Africans might have their own 'ways of creating a cultural world that incorporates ritual, dress, ornamentation, and oral literature traditions', rather than exhibiting what Arendt took to be the markers of human civilisation, such as building houses, temples, cathedrals, and city walls on the one hand, and expressing ideas and feelings in the form of written literature on the other. In short, Arendt's intellectual horizons were narrow when it came to culture. What this limitation implies is far from obvious, however. Does this mean that her political theory remains valid if and only if it is complemented by an additional, anthropologically informed theory of culture? Or do her cultural prejudices rot her theory to the core? Is it possible neatly to separate cultural prejudices from racial ones? Or do Arendt's cultural prejudices in fact slide into racism, as some of her critics have argued? Although Arendt scholarship in the last century largely sidestepped these and other difficult questions raised by her problematic stance on race and culture, an increasing number of researchers today bear the burden of tackling them squarely. We have every reason to hope that this development will continue.

19.6 Arendt's 'Negro question' Key Points

- *The Origins of Totalitarianism* includes *both* questionable remarks on Africa and Africans *and* penetrating criticisms of imperialism and colonialism.
- Arendt's racially biased comments are found not only in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* but also in her later work on American politics and society.

- Arendt's political thought is compromised by her Eurocentrism and cultural prejudices. Whether these weaknesses amount to racism proper remains a matter of debate.

19.7 Conclusion

Hannah Arendt was a political theorist of many paradoxes. She was a Jewish woman and an idiosyncratic Zionist, who antagonized the Jewish community with the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. She was a female thinker who took little interest in feminist theory or social and political issues specifically related to gender and sexuality. She was a fierce critic of the Western tradition of philosophy and political thought, but she never attempted to expand her intellectual horizons beyond the West. She was in theory opposed to all forms of racism and yet made racially biased remarks in practice, especially with regard to Africa, Africans, and African-Americans. She also had a distinct style of writing, mixing long and densely composed sentences with short memorable ones, reminiscent of the great aphoristic writer Friedrich Nietzsche. For all these reasons, reading her work is often a disorientating experience, and her readers are presented with both prescient visions and surprising blindness, 'innovative insights alongside outrageous oversights' (Gines 2014: 30).

It may be tempting to seek an easy way out from such disorientation, either by overlooking her blindness or by ignoring her prescience. Both of these paths are indeed well trodden, and Arendt has attracted blind admirers and bigoted detractors in equal measure. Neither group, however, has done much to help us understand her thought and its legacy. They are one-sided to the extent of becoming mirror-images of each other. A more helpful approach, such as I have attempted to take in this chapter, is to acknowledge the paradoxical nature of Arendt's work and ruminate upon it. I hope to have demonstrated, for

example, that her highly complex conceptual apparatus has *both* the ability to expose some of the questionable practices that have been normalized in capitalist modernity *and* the downside of privileging a particular mode of world-building at the expense of others. Similarly, I have tried to show that Arendt's work has simultaneously been criticized for its alleged anti-feminism and praised for its purportedly hidden feminism. To read Arendt is often to navigate through such ambivalences and interpretive divides.

Nevertheless, serious readers of Arendt may agree on at least one thing: she could not be accused of intellectual cowardice. She unfailingly fulfilled what John Stuart Mill called the 'first duty' of a thinker, namely, 'to follow his [or her] intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead' (Mill 2015: 34). Those who read her work today might be well advised to follow her own example in this respect and engage critically with her work, even if this leads to conclusions that would have surprised her, would disappoint her bigoted detractors, or would irritate her blind admirers.

Study questions

1. Evaluate Arendt's claim that totalitarianism is a 'novel form of government'.
2. How does Arendt conceptualize politics and what is distinct about her conceptualization?
3. What does Arendt mean by the 'rise of the social'?
4. Why does Arendt think that the tradition of Western philosophy and political thought is of little help to guide political life?
5. Explain Arendt's distinction between liberation and revolution.
6. How should we assess Arendt's contributions to feminist theory?
7. Why do some scholars see Arendt as an important contributor to postcolonial studies?

8. Analyse the implications of Arendt's Eurocentric biases for her political theory.

Further reading

Primary reading

Arendt, H. (1979) *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 3rd edn. New York: Harcourt Brace.

Arendt's *magnum opus* and a classic in the study of totalitarianism and twentieth-century political thought.

Arendt, H. (1998) *The Human Condition*. 2nd edn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Arendt's most important philosophical work, investigating the basic human activities of labour, work and action.

Arendt, H. (2006) *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. London:

Penguin Books. An accessible collection of Arendt's essays in political thought, displaying her brilliance as an essayist.

Arendt, H. (2006) *On Revolution*. London: Penguin Books. Arendt's influential but

controversial study of the American and French revolutions.

Arendt, H. (1972) *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harcourt Brace. A collection of Arendt's

essays on pressing social and political issues of the turbulent 1960s and 1970s.

Secondary reading

Baehr, P. (2010) *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences*. Stanford: Stanford

University Press. The best book-length study of Arendt's theory of totalitarianism.

- Benhabib, S. (ed.) (2010) *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An outstanding collection of essays examining major aspects of Arendt's work.
- Canovan, M. (1992) *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. An exceptionally incisive study and a classic in Arendt scholarship.
- Gines, K. T. (2014) *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*. A thought-provoking re-examination of Arendt's political theory, focusing on her problematic stance on race.
- Hayden, P. (2014) *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge. A reliable and accessible overview of Arendt's central ideas.
- Hiruta, K. (ed.) (2019) *Arendt on Freedom, Liberation, and Revolution*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. A collection of essays examining the continuing relevance of Arendt's political thought in light of events in the twenty-first century.
- Honig, B. (ed.) (1995) *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*. An excellent collection of essays by leading feminist thinkers, discussing Arendt's contested legacy to feminism from a variety of angles.
- King, R. H. and Stone, D. (eds.) (2007) *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nation, Race, and Genocide*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn. An important collection of essays examining critically the historical side of Arendt's work.
- Villa, D. (2021) *Arendt*. New York: Routledge. A comprehensive overview of Arendt's life and work by one of the leading authorities in the field.
- Young-Bruehl, E. (2004) *Hannah Arendt: For the Love of the World*, 2nd edn. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. An indispensable biographical study of Arendt's life and work.

Web links

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/hannah-arendt-papers/> – Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress is the digitized collection of Arendt's correspondence, lecture notes and other archival materials.

<https://www.arendteditionprojekt.de/en/index.html> – Hannah Arendt's Complete Works, Critical Edition, is an ongoing project to publish all of Arendt's works with critical commentary.

<https://hac.bard.edu/> – The website of the Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College contains articles, videos, and other online materials inspired by Arendt's thought.

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