Contemporary Political Theory, **2003**, **2**, 397–399


www.palgrave-journals.com/cpt

Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem
Steven Aschheim
University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 2001, xii + 442pp.
ISBN: 0-520-22056-0/0-520-22057-9.

Contemporary Political Theory (2003) **2,** 397–399. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300095

The reception of Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem has been markedly different from that in Heidelberg and New York. In Germany, there are streets named after Arendt, a rail service called the Hannah Arendt Express, two prestigious academic prizes offered in her name and even a postage stamp in her honour (pp 47–48). By contrast, the editor of *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* tells us, Arendt was implicitly excommunicated from the public-intellectual life of Israeli society following her controversial report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1963. Aschheim's claim is supported by the startling fact that the work of this philosopher, who placed the experience of the Holocaust at the centre of her thinking about modern politics, was not translated into Hebrew until 2000 (p. 1).

As the outcome of a conference held in Jerusalem in December 1997, this book seeks to redress this neglect. More interestingly, however, by focusing on the historical and cultural intersection between Germany, Israel and America in which Arendt thought and wrote, it provides a fruitful context within which to consider her work. As such, this collection is likely to be of interest primarily to Arendt specialists, but to this limited audience it will be very interesting indeed. Particularly striking is the extent to which Arendt's recently published minor essays and correspondence (with Mary McCarthy, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Heinrich Blücher and Kurt Blumenfeld) are drawn upon to support contextualist readings of her life and work.

For instance, several answers are offered to the question of what Arendt was *doing* in writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Gershom Scholem famously criticized Arendt's account of the trial for its 'heartless, frequently almost sneering and malicious tone,' which seemed to betray a greater empathy for Eichmann than his victims (quoted on p. 8). Yet Arendt presented herself as simply reporting unwelcome facts within a hostile political environment. By situating this 'report' in relation to the earlier libel trial brought by the Hungarian Jewish leader, Kastner (who was accused of treason and collaboration for exchanging 'trucks for lives' with Eichmann), Leora Bilsky argues that Arendt was challenging the staged silence about Jewish complicity necessitated by the official attempt to appropriate the Holocaust as the basis of state legitimacy.

Alternatively, Susan Neiman suggests that Arendt was offering a theodicy. In contrast to Jean Améry's insistence that refusal to comprehend Auschwitz is the only proper moral response (since to comprehend it would be to accord it a place within God's design), Arendt insists on comprehending evil as banal rather demonic in order that it might be resisted politically through the cultivation of judgement.

Arendt's Zionism is also considered against the background of her correspondence. Although a supporter of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, she had deep misgivings about chauvinist Zionism and Israeli attitudes to the Arabs. In a letter to Blücher in 1961, for instance, she characterizes Israel as 'the ghetto-mentality with tanks and military parades' (quoted on p. 11). Walter Lacquer questions Arendt's relevance as a political commentator on Israel given that her reflections on Zionism were not only 'far fetched and utopian' but much of the time 'she did not know what she was writing about' (p. 54). Yet other contributors suggest that Arendt remains relevant for considering the difficult political situation confronting Jews and Arabs in Israel/Palestine.

In this context, a parallel emerges between Arendt's seemingly naive celebration of the revolutionary councils and her bi-national 'solution' to the ''Jewish question.'' Against a 'concretist' interpretation of the distinction Arendt draws between liberal and republican freedom, Albrecht Wellmer argues that Arendt's relevance within contemporary debates about deliberative democracy lies in her conceptualization of freedom in terms of 'the self-organization of the people, which is not the same as a maximum of justice but in a way redefines the parameters of justice itself' (p. 43). While the revolutionary council structure seems implausible as an institutional embodiment of this ideal when taken literally, he suggests that metaphorically it serves to elaborate an account of public freedom that is not simply an equal *right* of participation (as in Rawls and Habermas) but rather a certain *mode* of participation as the actualization of freedom (p. 45).

Similarly, Raz-Krakotzkin suggests the principle of bi-nationalism that Arendt advocated (together with Judah Magnes) should be understood 'as a set of values, not necessarily a concrete political arrangement' according to which a process of reconciliation might be directed between Israelis and Palestinians (p. 173). Bernstein shows up the relation between Arendt's political philosophy and her Zionism when he argues that just as it was politics that was the basis of Arendt's initial sympathy and identification with Zionism, so it was politics that was the basis of the sharp and bitter critique of the direction the Zionist movement took during the 1940s (p. 198). Arendt was attracted to Zionism because she was convinced that Jews must fight for their political rights as Jews. Consequently, she saw the resolution of the American Zionists in 1944, which laid a claim to the whole of Palestine for the Jews, as a betrayal of her

ideal of politics. For, in omitting mention of the Arabs, it left them with 'the choice between voluntary emigration or second-class citizenship' (Arendt quoted on p. 199).

Arendt's correspondence is again relied on in several enlightening essays on Arendt's relation to Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. In an outstanding chapter, Peter Baehr discusses how Arendt's and Jasper's respective appraisals of Max Weber were the source of a longstanding but largely unspoken disagreement between them. While for Jaspers, Max Weber stood for 'truth itself', Arendt was suspicious of Weber's German nationalism. Moreover, her ideal of public freedom is directly opposed to Weber's realism. By tracing their guarded disagreement over Weber through their correspondence, Baehr shows that, far from embodying a 'vigorously candid and open' ideal of communication, Arendt and Jaspers' intellectual dialogue was considerably constrained by the reverence each held for her/his mentor. Indeed, given Jaspers' strong reaction to a mildly critical footnote on Weber in *The Human Condition* (p. 317), Baehr's suggestion that Jaspers' likely censure was the reason why Arendt offers only a muted critique of Weber in 'On Violence' seems entirely plausible (p. 323).

Arendt in Jerusalem demonstrates the increased sophistication in our understanding of Arendt that has been afforded by the publication of her correspondence and minor essays. This suggests that the time is right for a new intellectual biography on Arendt: one that is able to take advantage of the wealth of scholarship accumulated in recent years, which was not available to Young-Bruehl when she wrote her comprehensive and illuminating but somewhat reverential biography 20 years ago.

Andrew Schaap
Department of Philosophy,
University of Melbourne.