

## Crisis Management: Hannah Arendt and the Rehabilitation of Teacher Authority

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I want to thank Johan Dahlbeck and Peter Lilja for so clearly articulating a problem that is, unfortunately, not confined to the boundaries of Sweden. Risking simplification, the authors argue the following: There is a crisis of teacher authority in Sweden. The seeds of this crisis were already sown in the progressive challenge to hierarchy and inequality that, while well-intentioned, turned on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of teacher authority. Confusing authority with coercion, the progressives sought to replace the authority of the teacher with a child-centered pedagogy that leans heavily on persuasion and the motivations of the learner. The recent marriage between progressivism and market liberalism has further eroded teacher authority and tarnished Sweden's once enviable international rankings, prompting conservatives to recommend a return to traditional methods of discipline and instruction. However, neither the progressive efforts to replace authority with persuasion, nor the return to coercion recommended by traditionalists, will effectively address the current crisis. Instead, the authors suggest that a rehabilitation of teacher authority, as conceived by Hannah Arendt, can provide a viable basis for democratic education in a pluralistic society.

I am quite sympathetic to this critique and their call to rehabilitate authority. Arendt's greatest virtue lies in her ability to obliterate our clichés and categories, and to illuminate a world that is oddly both strange and familiar. Yet while her resistance to categorization and dogged refusal to simplify reality or cater to expectations leads one to marvel at her fresh insight, one often struggles to make sense of her prescriptions. In that sense, Dahlbeck and Lilja's paper might be too tidy and neat. Permit me to muddy the waters by highlighting some ambiguities in her work.

Those wishing to follow the authors' advice must acknowledge, as the authors do in passing, that the crisis in education is merely a symptom of a more general crisis of authority. Arendt's provocative claim that "authority has vanished from the modern world" requires qualification.<sup>1</sup> What she means by this implausible statement is not that all authority has vanished, only that the historically specific form of authority, legitimated by a robust tradition spanning back to ancient Greece, is no longer convincing. In its place, and the true object of her scorn, is an authority that is nameless, blind, and shallow.

When adults refuse to take responsibility for the world, as she and the authors claim progressive teachers do, children succumb to the capricious and often suffocating whims of the crowd and the superficial yet irresistible appeal of consumer culture. The result is predictable. Denied a gradual initiation to their cultural inheritance, children inevitably suffer from world-alienation and fail to develop their capacity to truly make something new. In the process, the world is also diminished.

In later years, Arendt sharpened her critique. The consequence of this crisis is not simply that we must cope in a culture dominated by an infantile consumerism and a naïve embrace of the new; the consequence is no less than the proliferation of evil itself. She writes:

It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never “radical,” that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste to the whole world precisely because it spreads like a fungus on the surface. It is “thought-defying,” as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. That is its “banality.” Only the good has depth and can be radical.<sup>2</sup>

Against evil born of superficiality stands tradition, and its role in legitimizing authority and bestowing depth to human speech and action. The authors are only partially correct when they claim that Arendt isn’t interested in preserving the past for the sake of tradition itself. Arendt certainly rejects all attempts to rigidify tradition, preserve the *status quo*, or return to a golden age. At the same time, a teacher’s role is primarily preservative; she must “take responsibility for the world” to ensure its continuation.<sup>3</sup> Of course, what Arendt means by world is often narrowly characterized as a public space of speech and action, but this sphere also has a temporal aspect that makes it hard to distinguish from tradition.

In my reading of her work, tradition exists in a symbiotic relationship with human beings; it gives shape and meaning to human lives, and they in turn, through thought and action, grant tradition new shape and meaning. The loss of tradition, writes Arendt, “would mean that, humanly speaking, we would deprive ourselves of one dimension, the dimension of depth in human existence. For memory and depth are the same, or rather, depth cannot be reached by man except through remembrance.”<sup>4</sup> That authority based in tradition has vanished, or at least has become less convincing, is of utmost concern, especially in the field of education.

All this remains rather abstract, I am afraid. It isn’t clear what we should make of a society that is “neither structured by authority nor held together by tradition,” nor what recourse we might have to address this crisis in education. The challenge facing those convinced by Arendt’s analysis is how to fruitfully apply these insights to current realities. The authors leave this task for another day. But I would like to take the remaining time to examine some of the challenges of doing so.

Arendtian educators hoping to rehabilitate teacher authority often find themselves in a predicament. This is clearly evident in practice. Rejecting both persuasion and coercion as failures of authority, the Arendtian teacher is left in the unenviable position of having to rely on students to acknowledge her rank and superiority, in a culture that rejects such terms of deference. Students, so the story goes, will not bow to authority unless they are convinced or coerced into doing so. And since the crisis extends beyond the classroom, teachers can hardly hope to rehabilitate authority without resorting to force or argument.

Perhaps all is not lost. Have we reached such a nadir that teachers lack any authority? I am not convinced. While the anti-authoritarian currents in today’s culture are strong, teachers are not without appeal. Newcomers continue to look to adults

for guidance. The mysteries of the world illuminated by some teachers can still illicit awe and reverence from the curious and respect from the rest.

Moreover, righting the errors of progressives and conservatives need not lead us to reject persuasion and force outright. In my mind, Bruce Lincoln's treatment of authority provides a useful corrective. While he acknowledges, with Arendt, that the enactment of authority is never a matter of persuasion or force alone, he nevertheless insists that authority is related to both in "symmetrical ways."<sup>5</sup> Force and persuasion, he writes, "exist as capacities or potentialities implicit within authority, but are actualized only when those who claim authority sense that they have begun to lose the trust of those over whom they seek to exercise it."<sup>6</sup> The co-existence of these three powers does not diminish their respective strengths. Try as they might, progressives cannot root out coercion, nor conservatives the need for persuasion. Nor should we.

Lincoln's conceptualization of authority has the added benefit of being Arendtian in its sensitivity to context. He defines authority "not so much an entity as it is 1) an effect; 2) the capacity for producing that effect; and 3) the commonly shared opinion that a given actor has the capacity for producing that effect."<sup>7</sup> Authority is actualized when there is a "conjuncture of the right speaker, the right speech and delivery, the right staging and props, the right time and place and an audience whose historically and culturally conditioned expectations establish the parameters of what is judged 'right' in all these instances."<sup>8</sup>

Conceptualizing authority as an effect rather than as a property encourages us to consider the ideal conditions for its legitimate enactment. Arendt's characterization of schools as places apart - between the private and the public - and teachers as representatives of the world, provide the framework for such conditions.

But the moment we create the conditions for authority we must also ask authority *of* what and *for* what? The authors characterize teacher authority as superior knowledge about the world, legitimately enacted for the sake of "student emancipation" and the "continuation of a democratic community." They place faith in the existence of a "common educational project" based on trust and "some kind of shared beliefs" in the value of democratic community over *laissez-faire* individualism. But is this faith misplaced?

Allow me to end this response with several questions. How might we reconcile Arendt's troubling critique of modernity with her injunction to present the world *as it is* and not *as it should be*? That is, how does an Arendtian educator prepare students for emancipation in a fragmented society marked by world-alienation, powerful market forces, and a general thoughtlessness? Can teacher authority be made compatible with cultural pluralism? Is there a replacement for tradition that doesn't lead to the proliferation of an authority that is nameless, blind, and shallow?

In order to rehabilitate authority, perhaps we need to place our faith either in the ability of people to *think* and *do* something completely new and unexpected (a miracle), or in the hope that Arendt's bleak diagnosis is mistaken; that a Protean

tradition will survive by absorbing new cultures and will continue to provide depth for thought and action.

On the crisis of metaphysics, Arendt remarked that when we say “God is dead” we do not mean “that God has ‘died’ - an obvious absurdity in every respect - but that the way God has been thought of for thousands of years is no longer convincing.”<sup>9</sup> Might we say the same about tradition and authority?

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1. Hannah Arendt, “What is Authority?,” in *Portable Hannah Arendt* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 463.
  2. Hannah Arendt, “A Response to Gershom Scholem,” in *Portable Hannah Arendt* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 396.
  3. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 189.
  4. “What is Authority?,” 464.
  5. Bruce Lincoln, *Authority* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.
  6. *Ibid.*, 6.
  7. *Ibid.*, 11.
  8. *Ibid.*, 11.
  9. Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” *Social Research* 38, no. 3 (1971): 417-446, 420.