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## Review

# Hannah Arendt, totalitarianism, and the social sciences

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Peter Baehr's *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences* is an exercise in thinking that teaches and provokes. Presenting conversations, direct and indirect, between Arendt's work on totalitarianism and the perspectives of other mass society critics who were her contemporaries, Baehr rescues her work and theirs from dismissal as *mere* mass society theory. He demonstrates past, enduring and new dilemmas of atomization in concert with mass mobilization, and makes the case for our need to revisit the mid-twentieth century in order to study the present majority tyrannies shaping twenty-first century politics. Baehr does so by telling the story of Arendt's engagement with the work of David Riesman, Raymond Aron and Jules Monnerot. Throughout these accounts, he explores her criticisms of the social sciences and her contention that modern totalitarianism in Europe was an outrage to common sense, unprecedented, and thus unpredictable. He thereby takes up the question, generally, of what it means to study political phenomena without precedent.

Arendt's complaints against the social sciences are many, but the preoccupation with predictability and the search for continuity are her principal targets. Baehr, himself a trained sociologist, struggles with this critique of the explanatory social sciences. He celebrates Arendt's willingness to study the unprecedented, to look for and try to comprehend that which 'on first and even second glance appeared simply outrageous' (Arendt, 1994, p. xiv). But Baehr remains respectful of the explanatory impulse of his training. The book's negotiation of this paradox of inquiry – that we must look for both the preceded and the unprecedented – is among its most important contributions. The chapters on Riesman, Aron and Monnerot are the book's most successful interpretations.

Baehr finds in the work of Arendt's contemporaries certain perspectives left out of, or under-theorized in, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* suggests she could have looked more closely at the psychology of individuals to understand the appearance of autonomy under conditions of totalitarian rule. Aron's *Democracy and Totalitarianism* is a more empirically detailed account of the party

system under Lenin and Stalin than Arendt presents. And Monnerot, in *The Psychology and Sociology of Totalitarianism*, takes the role of religion in politics more seriously than Arendt does by offering an account of totalitarianism as secular theology. There is much to joust with in each of these encounters, and Baehr helps the reader enter into these complications. Those who share the objections of Riesman, Aron and Monnerot to lacunae in her analyses will find support. But Baehr reminds us that Arendt often argues explicitly against these criticisms. She argues against psychologizing and moralizing focuses on the individual, like Riesman's, when she distinguishes totalitarian masses from classes in which actors are individuated but at the same time related to each other. To focus on the comportment of the self, rather than on the conditions of existence producing isolated individuals, is to ask the wrong question on her account. In response to Aron's empirical study of the party system, Baehr argues that Arendt's appreciation of the mysteries of totalitarianism better captures its reality. Her argument that modern antisemitism could only appear after the discovery of the nineteenth century 'other' of imperial power – to the east of Europe's west – is integral to the analysis across chapters of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Antisemitism for Arendt is a political, not religious, problem. And thus, the distinction she insists on between religious hatred of the Jews and post-imperialist antisemitism is in tension with Monnerot's concern with religion and his view of totalitarian movements as secular religions.

The rejoinders of Riesman and Monnerot, however, are given merit by recent world and domestic political phenomena: the growing pervasiveness of an empty neoliberal individualism in contemporary politics and the new insurrections of religion and religiosity across nation-states. These readings thus point to sources of our present mass, rather than class, politics that perhaps Arendt should not have ignored. A new look at fact and facticity *à la* Aron's approach is called for by these tensions. Moreover, the contrasts between her work and the other mass society critics set the distinctiveness of her perspective into relief.

Baehr finds Arendt's distinctiveness seductive. And throughout the central chapters on Riesman, Aron and Monnerot, the tension between interpretations of phenomena that are unprecedented, on one hand, and the drive to prediction and the explanation of continuity, on the other, is carefully foregrounded. The book culminates in a chapter that offers an interpretation of what Baehr names 'a new constellation of terror' (p. 124), 'the novelty of modern Islamist terror' (p. 139). He thinks Arendt 'would urge us to see' this novelty (p. 140). I disagree, and I do so for many reasons. But I am most interested in taking Baehr up on his own terms and thinking within the paradox he abandons in favor of a celebration of the *sui generis* in Arendt's work.

My lament is that Baehr does not take his own sociological perspective seriously enough. As scholars who inherit a canonical Arendt – she is not our contemporary, and our world is not her world – we may need to flirt ever so slightly with the social scientific as we read and think with her now. All I mean by this is that we should not



rule out explanation and precedent as a matter of methodological principle. What if there are continuities between her account of imperialism and our imperialism, between the production of modern anti-Semitism, and our constitutive fear of global, Islamic guerilla war?

Arendt drew a distinction between the occident and the orient, and perhaps she did so to a fault. But she knew modern imperialism, totalitarianism and antisemitism as formations of the west, and imperialism arguably remains so today. David Harvey suggests that ‘Arendt is correct ... to interpret the imperialism that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as “the first stage in political rule of the bourgeoisie rather than the last stage of capitalism”’ (Harvey, 2003, p. 127). What if we are at another stage of imperialism as she comprehends it? Or, to soften Harvey’s continuist phrasing into terms more appropriate to Arendt: what if the present moment is a reoccupation of the former, a restaged performance of the earlier tragedy? We wouldn’t want to miss a chance at prescience if she gives it to us – would we?

I ask these questions not to answer yes or no to them, but to maintain and restore the provocative tension between prediction and the unpredictable in Baehr’s interpretation. Baehr’s new eastern other may be caught up in a mass mobilization that can be illuminated by the lessons of the mass society theorists. Olivier Roy’s *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* is a recent mass society critique that takes this line of inquiry seriously (Roy, 2004, pp. 3, 38–40). Or the distinction between east and west may be a fiction that needs to be discarded. But the resolution of these possibilities should be pursued through empirical as well as theoretical study. Nothing could be less Arendtian than to routinize pursuit of the *sui generis*. At its best, this book gives us resources with which to avoid this misstep – resources with which to think and rethink that which is predicated and that which is not (to think the world as it presents itself to be thought).

## References

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