

THINKING IN DARK TIMES

HANNAH ARENDT ON ETHICS AND POLITICS



Edited by
Roger Berkowitz,
Jeffrey Katz, and
Thomas Keenan

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Thinking in Dark Times



Preface

This book originates in an unusual conference that was held at Bard College to celebrate Hannah Arendt's one-hundredth birthday. For the conference, "Thinking in Dark Times: The Legacy of Hannah Arendt," we invited a wide range of public intellectuals, artists, journalists, and academics from across the disciplines to address the relevance of Arendt's thinking. The speakers were given particular questions to respond to, questions such as, "Is totalitarianism a present danger?" "What is the activity of democratic citizenship?" "What does it mean to think about politics?" In addition, we asked the participants to limit their remarks to ten minutes. The effort was to encourage talks that avoid the regalia of disciplinary posturing and specialized jargons and move straight to the provocative questions at the very heart of Arendt's project.

Looking over the transcripts after the conference, we quickly recognized that the talks not only spoke in a provocative and incisive way, but they also revealed the passionate and engaged embrace of political and ethical thinking that is too frequently lost among the layers of interpretation and scholarship that deadens much writing about Arendt. We therefore asked the participants to expand and polish their essays for publication. At the same time, we asked that they make an effort to preserve the style and form of the original oral presentations. The essays that follow are the result. They are as a whole shorter than typical academic essays, and they have fewer footnotes and scholarly trappings. Instead, they present efforts to think with and, at times, against Arendt in her call for thinking.

The book, like the conference that inspired it, is very much rooted in Bard College. Bard has a long and meaningful association with Hannah Arendt. Her husband, Heinrich Blücher, taught at Bard for seventeen years and was instrumental in designing Bard's common-course core curriculum. Arendt herself was a professor and friend of Bard's current president, Leon Botstein. Blücher and Arendt both are buried on the Bard campus, a short walk from Arendt's personal library, which is currently housed at Bard's Stevenson Library. In addition, Bard hosts the Hannah Arendt Center for Ethical and Political Thinking. To give a feel for Arendt's intellectual life and to offer to others a glimpse into world of her personal library, we include in this volume a

wide range of images taken from the books and manuscripts of the Hannah Arendt Library.

RB, JK, TK

Acknowledgments

This volume is a work of twenty-five contributors and three editors and would never have been finished without the assistance of many others. From the beginning, Bard's President Leon Botstein encouraged and supported our efforts. Funding for the conference, which also supported publication of this book, was generous and came from Michael Steinhardt, Richard Gilder, Wendy and Alex Bazelow, Barbara Dobkin, and the Center for Constitutional Rights.

In planning the original conference, we were assisted greatly by Debra Pemsstein and Mary Strieder. In addition, a number of Bard students—Alice Baker, Cassandra Cornell, Anthony Daniel, Noah Levine, and Elizabeth Snowden—assisted in preparing the manuscript for publication. Serena Randolph donated time and talents to photograph material from the Arendt Library. Cassandra Cornell took on the responsibility of organizing the index. Finally, we are deeply indebted to Helen Tartar, Thomas C. Lay, and Eric Newman at Fordham University Press.

This book is dedicated to Jenny Lyn Bader and Mary Katz.

Editors' Note

Hannah Arendt intentionally wrote *antisemitism*, *antisemitic*, and *antisemite* instead of *anti-Semitism*, *anti-Semitic*, and *anti-Semite* throughout her work. She did so for the simple reason that, as she wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, there is a difference between “Jew-hatred” on the one hand and “antisemitism” on the other. There is no such thing as a pro-Semitic “Semitism” that an “anti-Semitism” opposes, but only an ideological “antisemitism.” Following Arendt’s reasoning and her practice, the essays in this volume will speak of antisemitism, antisemitic persons and ideas, and antisemites.

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HERMANN BROCH
DIE SCHULDLOSEN

1951 — : warum maßt Du's dich?
Wen willst Du damit verpflichten?
Ach, in diesem Tal von Wüsten,
die ich lieber möcht verrichten
als im Bilde zu belichten,
gibt es Menschen äußerst pflichtlos
Kindersinnes, die mitnichten
je geneigt sind auf Geschichten,
wie sich's gehört, zu verzichten.
Freunde sind es, zwar perverse,
aber sie sind voll Verzeihen:
ihnen sollen die paar Verse
und dies Buch gewidmet sein.

Für Munnich und Mousien

Neujahr 1951

Hermann

Thinking in Dark Times

:: ROGER BERKOWITZ

In Bertold Brecht's poem "To Posterity," the poet laments:

Truly, I live in dark times!
An artless word is foolish. A smooth forehead
Points to insensitivity. He who laughs
Has not yet received
The terrible news.

What times are these, in which
A conversation about trees is almost a crime
For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!
And he who walks quietly across the street,
Passes out of the reach of his friends
Who are in danger?¹

Brecht's poem inspires the title of one of Hannah Arendt's less celebrated books, *Men in Dark Times*. For Arendt, dark times are not limited to the tragedies of the twentieth century; they are not even a rarity in the history of the world. Darkness, as she would have us understand it, does not name the genocides, purges, and hunger of a specific era. Instead, darkness refers to the way these horrors appear in public discourse and yet remain hidden. As Arendt observes, the tragedies to which Brecht's poem refers were not shrouded in secrecy and mystery, yet they were darkened by the "highly efficient talk and double-talk of nearly all official representatives who, without interruption and in many ingenious variations, explained away unpleasant facts and justified concerns."² Similarly today, the various outrages—environmental, economic, and governmental—that confront us daily are hidden in plain sight. Dark-

Facing: Inscription from Hermann Broch to Hannah Arendt on the half-title page of Broch's novel *Die Schuldlosen*. The inscription is a poem written to Arendt and Blücher dedicating the book to them. The poem reads: "1951—, Why must you write it?/Whom do you wish thus to bind?/Ah, in this valley of dwarfs,/Whom I would rather paint a clear picture of/Than destroy./There are men of an extremely simple/Childlike cast of mind, who are not at all/Inclined to do without stories,/as would be fitting./They are friends, though admittedly perverse,/But they are full of forgiveness:/These few verses/And this book are dedicated to them./For Hannah and Monsieur/New Years, 1951/Hermann." Courtesy of the Hannah Arendt Collection, Stevenson Library, Bard College.

ness, for Arendt, names the all-too-public invisibility of inconvenient facts, and not simply the horror of the facts themselves.

In *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt responds to what she, borrowing from Martin Heidegger, calls the light of the public that obscures everything. The black light of the public realm is, of course, the chatter and talk that drown the reality of life in “incomprehensible triviality.” It is the vapid clichés that mar speech on TV news channels and by the water cooler. For Arendt, as for Heidegger, “everything that is real or authentic is assaulted by the overwhelming power of ‘mere talk’ that irresistibly arises out of the public realm.”³ And yet, Arendt, unlike Heidegger, resists the philosophical withdrawal from the public world into a realm of philosophical contemplation.

Instead of world-weary withdrawal, Arendt writes with the conviction that “we have the right to expect some illumination.” The darkness of the public spotlight is, she insists, not inevitable. On the contrary, it is possible and even necessary that darkness cede to light.

In seeking light in the public realm, Arendt shuns the embrace of rationality, democracy, and universal values that are the source of the optimism driving much of political thinking in modern times. Al Gore, for example, has recently argued that the crisis facing the nation and the world has been allowed to flourish because reason is under attack. In his book *The Assault on Reason*, Gore argues that a “faith in the power of reason—the belief that free citizens can govern themselves wisely and fairly by resorting to logical debate on the basis of the best evidence available, instead of raw power—was and remains the central premise of American democracy.” That faith, he writes, is under assault. He blames TV, advertising, and the corporatization of press—all of which have undermined what Gore, citing Jürgen Habermas, calls “the structure of the public forum.”⁴ In the face of the dangers posed by dictators and environmental disaster, Gore embraces Habermas’s claim that reasoned deliberation can yield rational and thus decent decisions.⁵ For Gore, as for Habermas, dark times demand the light of reason.

The faith in reason that animates both Gore and Habermas is seductive. It speaks to the pride of man: that we, as rational beings, can come together and dispassionately and rationally move ourselves—fitfully at times—toward a better world. Our faith speaks to our scientific age, in which we believe that we can understand and improve both the natural and the political worlds. And our conviction reflects the fundamental claim of enlightenment: that our reason will set us free.

For Arendt, however, to reassert our rationalist tradition in the face of its rampant violation is to ignore the facts of our times. If the last hundred years have taught us anything, it is that “the subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition.”⁶ It is questionable whether any universal affirmation of the values of human reason and human dignity can offer a meaningful bulwark against the temptations of evil-doing. The pressing need for rationally decipherable

human values—let no one deny the need is pressing—does not, alas, render those values actual. Mature thought requires, Arendt implores us repeatedly, that we trade the fantasies of wish fulfillment for the honest work of thoughtful comprehension.

To comprehend the failure of rationality as the guarantor of a peaceful and prosperous life is not merely to recognize the limits of reason's universal knowability. Beyond the charge of relativism, Arendt insists that we face squarely the possibility that the claims of rationality itself offer no protection against the very horrors that Gore and Habermas enlist it to oppose. On the contrary, all too often the arguments in favor of genocide, torture, and terror are made in the voice of reason. Arendt reveals how the totalitarian and dictatorial regimes of the twentieth century counted upon and received popular support. Today, suicide bombers rationalize their use of terror as the most efficient way to address their political claims even as democratic governments rationalize their use of torture in their elusive pursuit of security. Indeed, the normalization of terror and torture shows how ordinary men can reason themselves into justifying what ought to be unthinkable. Reason, Arendt warns, risks fitting "man into the iron band of terror."⁷ Reason, she insists, reasons, it does not think.

If reason risks descending into the justifications and rationalizations that spread darkness in our times, Arendt argues that the only reliable source of light in dark times is found in the activity of thinking. From the beginning to the end of her writing life, Arendt situates herself as a thinker even as she warns against the dangers of reason. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, her grand inquiry into the roots of totalitarianism in rootlessness, loneliness, and thoughtlessness, Arendt frames her inquiry as an effort of comprehension, by which she means "the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality—whatever it may be." In *The Human Condition*, she explains her project as a "matter of thought" that opposes the thoughtlessness that "seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time." And in her engagement with what she saw as the thoughtlessness behind Adolf Eichmann's evil deeds, she asks: "Could the activity of thinking as such be among the conditions that make men abstain from evil-doing or even actually 'condition' them against it?"⁸ Thinking, Arendt suggests, is the only reliable safety net against the increasingly totalitarian or even bureaucratic temptations to evil that threaten the modern world.

By thinking Arendt means something quite specific, namely the silent dialogue with oneself that Socrates describes in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Only one who speaks with oneself will worry that in acting unethically he or she will have to live with a criminal. It is Socrates' habit of thinking with his other self, his *daimon*, that Arendt argues stands behind Socrates' moral claim that "it would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I direct were out of tune and loud with discord, and that most men should not agree with me and contradict me, rather than that I, being one, should be out of tune with *myself* and contradict *myself*."⁹ Arendt repeatedly returns to this line of Socrates' and highlights his