Democracy and Cultural Equality in the Work of Hannah Arendt

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Introduction

In the early 1960s, Hannah Arendt published "Society and Culture" in the review *Daedelus*.[1] In 1961, this contribution was included under the title "The Crisis in Culture" in her book *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press), which was translated into French in 1972 for Gallimard under the title *La crise de la culture*. The *Daedelus* article became the overall title for a work that dealt with tradition in the modern age, the concept of history, the concept of authority, freedom, and the relations between truth and politics.

To come to terms with this German philosopher's analyses on culture necessitates that one immerse oneself in the arguments contained in the "Crisis of Culture" article. The sources of Arendt's reflections on culture are to found in prior works, including *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which appeared in 1951, and *The Human Condition*, which appeared in 1958. This requires one to take a look at her later works, such as *The Life of the Mind*, which appeared two years after her death.

Culture as Political Object

As a thinker of the political sphere [*du politique*], Arendt asks herself about the political role culture plays in the modernization of Western societies. Her questioning takes on meaning in her biography of Rahel Varnhagen, which was completed before 1933 but published only in 1959.[2] In this *Life of a Jewess* during the Romantic age, the philosopher begins with the distinction between the objective status of cultural objects—the sum total of works that offer meaningful testimony to the efforts of humankind—and their social uses—the stakes involved in their appropriation. In order to become integrated into German society and to gain recognition from those around her, Varnhagen renounced her Jewishness by changing her name and being baptized. Her attempt at integration ended in failure inasmuch as she became aware of the impossibility of any form of renunciation *as regards* a society that, beyond the level of appearances, treated assimilated Jews as Jews who were still considered outside society.[3]

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[1]Hannah Arendt, "Society and Culture," *Daedalus*, 89 (1960): 278-87.
[2]*Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* (1959), ed. Liliane Weissberg; trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
[3]Ibid., pp. 226ff.

This study of the life of Rahel Varnhagen sets the question and place of culture within the political perspective of collective action. In a November 1947 article, "Creating a Cultural Atmosphere,"[4] Arendt offered confirmation for an analysis that stated that the concept of *culture* refers us back to the dissolution of historical values, a legacy of the Enlightenment. "Culture is, by definition, secular," she recalls.[5] It is organized according to the postulate that "the thread of tradition is broken, and we must discover the past for ourselves—that is, read its authors as though nobody had ever read them before."[6]

The philosopher interprets culture as a fragile commitment to civilization on the part of men of good will. But culture, when buffeted about by the political sphere, can also be transformed into a sort of ideologically-controlled artefact. Thus, culture, while possibly menaced, can also itself be a menace.

The bonds set up between society, politics, and culture are the fodder for her work on *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The first part, *Antisemitism*, offers testimony to the fact that the process of emancipation of European Jews had resulted in assimilation on the educational level, which led, paradoxically, to their acquiring the status of social pariah. In the loss of their cultural traditions, what in reality played out was social discrimination and then antisemitism.[7]

In the third volume, devoted to *Totalitarianism*, Arendt recalls that the totalitarian experience is to be defined as the abandonment of class organization in favor of mass organization. Her analysis projects us into the negation of the concept of culture. Would culture be a rampart against totalitarianism? Arendt objects to that point of view. The bourgeois and liberal elites under Germany's Weimar Republic are described as being subject to the same phenomena of atomization and individualization as the other social classes and as bearers of the same logics of abnegation as German society as a whole.

In the processes leading to the buildup of totalitarianism, Arendt grants a major role to the antibourgeois liberal culture of the twentieth century. She opposes the commonly accepted view of the bankruptcy of political elites—that is, the claim that it was the *temporary alliance between the populace and the elite* that conditioned the construction of the various forms of totalitarianism. The former, guided by its cultural impoverishment, gave in to the lure of a discourse that was disconnected from the real world, while the latter, through its hatred of and feelings of disgust toward bourgeois society, flaunted its rejection of culture. Also, according to Arendt, who borrows here Julien Benda's message about *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals* [*La trahision des Clercs*], intellectuals had, on their own authority/unhesitatingly/authoritatively*, given up defending the cultural values of humanism and liberalism so as to express their

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[4]Hannah Arendt, "Creating a Cultural Atmosphere," reprinted in *The Jew as Pariah: Jewish Identity and Politics in the Modern Age* (New York: Grove Press, 1978), p. 91-95 and in *The Jewish Writings*, Jerome Kahn and Ron H. Feldman, eds (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 298-302. First published in *Commentary*, 4 (November 1947): 424-26.

[5]"Creating a Cultural Atmosphere," *The Jewish Writings*, p. 299.

[6]"The Crisis in Culture," *Between Past and Future*, p. 204.

[7]*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New Edition with Prefaces (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), pp. 56ff.

empathy for the vulgarity and the falsehoods of the new mass mind-set.

The Cultural Aporias of Modernity or How is One to Rethink Culture?

Arendt moves appreciably away from the theses of Wilhelm Reich on *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, a book that appeared in German in 1933, as well as those of Elias Canetti in *Crowds and Power*, which appeared in 1960, both of whom postulate the comprehensive role *the masses* play in the definition of collective behavior as a merging of the individual into a massified social body. For Arendt, the peril of mass society resides not in the existence of a mass but much more in the alteration of culture a massified society represents in its own modes of operation.

The connection instituted between the individual and the totalitarian system leads Arendt to work out an audacious link with the establishment of concentration camps. She published a first article on that subject in 1948.[8] Three years later, the final section of the final chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* incorporated a second article about the camps, which had been published the previous year.[9]

As "laboratories in the experiment of total domination *part 1, p. 134*,"*extermination/concentration* camps anticipate the changes that will take place in mass society in the 1950s. Arendt brings out points of convergence between the two sets of arrangements. In consumer society, economics, having beat out politics, makes of the vacantness the sole reality. The wealth being produced no longer enriches the common world and relegates man to the condition of "human superfluity." On the model of the prisoner who is walled up alive in a camp, modern man becomes unnecessary and interchangeable according to the laws of the market. Without a common world, the troublesome man would become one man too many.

Mass man is really the paragon of the man of mass society. Like his older predecessor, the latter is to be defined, first of all, by his lack of restraint, his excitability and his lack of criteria, his aptitude for consumption, his inability to judge, his egocentrism, and his alienation from the world. In this way, "mass culture, logically and inevitably, is the culture of mass society."[10] According to Arendt, mass society and consumer society are synonymous. They signal the general decline of the concept of culture. In a mass society, culture is but a consumer object that destroys any sort of creative process. From there, Arendt was able to apply herself to an analysis of the agents of this decline, which she defines with the help of the concept of the *philistine*. This word had been employed by German students in the nineteenth century in order to denounce a vulgar materialistic and pragmatic bourgeois mind-set that is impervious to the

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[8]Hannah Arendt, "The Concentration Camp," *Partisan Review*, 15:7 (July 1948): 743-63; "Konzentrationsläger," *Die Wandlung*, 3:4 (1948): 309-30.
[9]Hannah Arendt, "Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentrations Camps," *Jewish Social Studies*, 12:1 (1950): 49-64.
[10]"The Crisis of Culture," p. 197.

beauty of Art and thought. In the part on *Antisemitism*, Arendt had already made express reference to this word that was employed by the Romantic poet Clemens Brentano in a way meant to liken the Jew to the philistine.[11] Two types of philistines are condemned.[12] The first type, the enlightened or bourgeois philistine, is the older of the two positions described. A bourgeois of the century of the Industrial Revolution who was concerned with finding in works of art the means to gain recognition for himself, the educated philistine has *instrumentalized* culture into a form of social utility meant solely for self-promotion. By way of contrast, the mass philistine symbolizes the completion of the process of cultural destruction begun beforehand by the educated philistine. With him, the artistic object no longer edifies the human world. It no longer exists in itself. And it becomes a pure product of consumer society; and, on account of that, it is subject to the vagaries of a bulimic process of continual digestion and rejection.

Arendt is distrustful of any form of readymade thought [*prêt-à-penser*]. She rejects any kind of immediate response that would pertain solely to what is the commonly-held opinion:

> What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears. This, obviously, is a matter of thought, and thoughtlessness—the heedless recklessness or hopeless confusion or complacent repetition of "truths" which have become trivial and empty—seems to me among the outstanding characteristics of our time. What I propose, therefore, is very simple: it is nothing more than to think what we are doing.[13]

Rethinking culture would require one to be able to go back in time and *take up again the meaning/resume the direction* of history at the point *where* the thread of tradition was broken. This impossible return explains that the answer could not be sought just on the side of culture.

The sole possible answer for Arendt resides in the reactivation of the democratic sphere. If it can be said that *The Human Condition* and *The Crisis of Culture* constitute a critical survey of the upheavals brought about by our modernity, one must turn toward Arendt's final posthumous work, *The Life of the Mind*, to find therein her initial answers.[14] To respond to the challenges of *succeeding in thinking what we are doing*, the philosopher reexamines the stakes involved in the necessary reconciliation between speech and action. The public space requires dialogue, a dialogue that cannot take on meaning without the expression of the *plurality* of viewpoints. Such viewpoints operate like so many *presence*s* to the world* that are liable to maintain and nourish democratic exchange. The restoration of the plurality of thought reconciled with action thus is to be interpreted as the mode *par excellence* for the reactivation of the freedom of the public domain. While Arendt had doubts about people's aptitude to liberate themselves "from the own subjectivity of their own singular experience,"[15] she no less concedes

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[11]Hannah Arendt, *Origins* . . . , pp. 61-62.
[12]Michel Dias, *Hannah Arendt. Culture et politique* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), pp. 62-84.
[13]Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 5.
[14] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 2 vols. (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1978).
[15]*The Human Condition*, p. 58.

that action through freedom would be up to the task of destroying the bonds of servitude.[16]

Conclusion

In fighting back against what alienates him, man makes it possible to redefine the place and the role of culture. He can be helped by the artist who does not cease to be an artist even beyond the process of cooptation and commercial appropriation of his work. According to Arendt, the salvation of culture owes as much to the man of action or to future generations as to the artist who will never cease to set himself at a critical distance from society. The irreducible nature of the work of art and of the mission of the artist makes it/them* an element of *the public world* in its/their* own right. In this way, it* can thenceforth bring political activity and artistic activity closer together so as to underscore that they both share the concern to question our reality in order to promote another world. Subversion and a desire for change are at the foundation of politics and of creative action as art and work.

[16] *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), p. 217.