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Hannah Arendt's sense of history

Wouter-Jan Oosten

Hannah Arendt wrote a biography of a Jewish woman who lived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Arendt wrote about totalitarianism and its roots in earlier history, and also about Ancient Athens and Rome. Usually, she did not provide for all the facts nor present a balanced image of the past. Arendt was not a historian but a political theorist. On the other hand, several political scientists thought that she was a hostage of (classical) history and out of touch with the present. They stated that Arendt held unrealistic views regarding current politics. What, then, was she doing? Arendt's sense of history is discussed in this article: why she made sense of history, how she made sense of history and what her sense of history was.

In the first section the question of how to study (historical/political) phenomena for history writing is briefly explored. Three approaches to historical research are distinguished: a systematic approach that makes history a positive science, an interpretative approach that makes history an art and an approach that mixes the two. Science has its merits, in particular if cause and effect have their way and if a large number of phenomena can be researched. An interpretative approach seeks to make sense of unique, complex, emergent and contingent phenomena. Arendt herself was concerned with totalitarianism and Shoah, and with the 'flaw' of modernity. That raises the question of how to study historical phenomena for contemporary politics. Arendt looked for meaning in history.

In the next sections Arendt's historical themes are discussed: the unfolding of modernity and its destructive side, Ancient political experience and the development of philosophy. In the concluding part Arendt's approach is held out to historians, emphasising that they bear responsibility to discuss what history means to the contemporary world.

A persistent question: how to study phenomena in history?

History became a *discipline* when German historians first developed the notion of critical examination of historical sources. During the nineteenth century this critical attitude gained ground. French historians were, perhaps, among the last to continue storytelling in disregard of systematic research in archives and the authenticity of documents. But Leopold von Ranke and his

followers, in spite of their critical and impartial intentions, were not without bias: historians still only focused on politics. Historical narrative featured kings and heroes, by which historians tended to reduce a society to its ruling elite. In the following century historians of many colours tried to address this bias. Karl Lamprecht and the *Annales* historians deserve much credit for the reorientation that shed light upon common folk and economics. They studied for instance patterns of land-use and population trends, material conditions and behaviour rather than ideas. This discipline of history requires aids such as statistics. Lamprecht and *Annales* historians added fuel to the existing debate concerning the nature or function of the historical discipline.¹ Do historians examine handed-down narratives, reaching deeper understanding by discursive means? Or do they gather facts; line up hypotheses to discover laws? Does history belong to the humanities or the sciences? We touch upon a persistent question: how do we study specific (political) phenomena for history?

If we conceive history as being a systematic discipline, we can state, as Robert Fruin did:

Indien wij met den aard van eenig mensch volkomen bekend waren en even volkomen met al de invloeden, elk in zijn juiste kracht, die op hem werken, wij zouden zijn handeling met evenveel zekerheid voorzien als wij een natuurverschijnsel voorzien, welks oorzaken wij volkomen kennen. Daaroever kan in onzen tijd geen twijfel bestaan. En wat waar is van een enkel mensch, is ook waar van een vereeniging van menschen, van de maatschappij. Het bestaan van wetten op dit gebied mag dus niet worden ontkend.²

Fruin himself admitted that research was slow to reveal the laws of history. However, he never drew the conclusion sketched by Chris Lorenz:

Nu kunnen positivisten nog een eeuw de historici en sociale wetenschappers aansporen om wetten te gaan zoeken, maar erg veel wervende kracht heeft zo'n aansporing vermoedelijk niet. De verklaring dat de historici en sociale wetenschappers zo weinig wetmatige verklaringen opstellen omdat hun wetenschappen

¹ H. Beliën en G.J. van Setten ed., *Geschiedschrijving in de twintigste eeuw. Discussie zonder eind* (Amsterdam 1996) 15-38, 107-114, 181-239.

² Citation from a speech reproduced in: G. Harmsen, *Inleiding tot de geschiedenis* (Baarn 1968) 109.

kennelijk fundamenteel van de exacte wetenschappen verschillen wint in de loop van de tijd aan overtuigingskracht.³

Historical sources do not allow much scientific experimentation because they are limited in number, disorganised (contaminated) and fragile. Political scientist Paul Valkenburgh was aware of this:

Veelal immers worden alle gegevens die van één of ander historisch gebeuren beschikbaar zijn, volledig benut om van dat gebeuren een geschiedenisbeeld te ontwerpen. Mogelijkheden tot verifiëring van dat beeld blijven er zodoende niet over, want al het materiaal is gebruikt. Hoogstens kan er nog sprake zijn van een hergroepering van de gegevens doch een dergelijke nieuwe poging tot reconstructie van het verleden berust dikwijls meer op het vermogen tot literaire vormgeving, psychologische invoeling en esthetische waardering van de desbetreffende historicus dan op objectiverende en exacte wetenschappelijke maatstaven. Goede en duidelijke criteria voor de juistheid van een geschiedenisbeeld ontbreken daardoor. De *Einmaligkeit* van de historische gebeurtenissen plaatst ons voor interessante methodische problemen.⁴

Another political scientist, Jan van Putten, explained that historians study change and conflict whilst political scientists study order.⁵ Does such a distinction help to decide how to study totalitarianism and Shoah? The horrors would indeed be for storytellers to relate, for historians to study. For their part, social scientists would for instance study the Second World War as a stage in the development of military technology, or as a phase in international relations. In social science, phenomena can be seen either as functional elements or ignored and left to other disciplines because they do not fit into the larger picture.

Could a phenomenon as Shoah be studied within the frame of social science at all? Zygmunt Bauman blamed sociologists for not taking into account the consequences of Shoah for civilisation and for other

³ C. Lorenz, *De constructie van het verleden. Een inleiding in de theorie van de geschiedenis* (Amsterdam 1987) 72.

⁴ P. Valkenburgh, *Inleiding tot de politicologie. Problemen van maatschappij en macht* (Amsterdam 1968) 65.

⁵ J. van Putten, *Politiek. Een realistische visie* (Utrecht 1994) 20.

conceptions dear to them.⁶ Sociologists, like political scientists, labelled the horrors of Nazism ‘aberrations’ but failed to rethink modernity. These social scientists consider themselves ‘engineers of society’ and dislike others pointing out flaws in ‘their’ society. Beyond giving an extended description, what could political scientists and Bauman’s sociologists say next? How could researchers hope to fit phenomena that are unique, complex, emergent and contingent into a system? Bauman, however, did recognize that some historians and theologians did start to reflect upon their common heritage.

If we draw the conclusion that systematic history is unfruitful, we can conceive history as an interpretative discipline. Such an approach also follows from Johan Huizinga’s definition of history as ‘(...) de geestelijke vorm, waarin een cultuur zich rekenschap geeft van haar verleden.’⁷ One wonders what Huizinga would have thought of postmodernist approaches to history that reveal patterns of domination and produce ‘micro-stories’. To avoid the extremes of either positivism or relativism we can also conceive of history as a double-edged discipline: ‘Disinterested intellectual curiosity is the life-blood of real civilisation. (...) Truth is the criterion of historical study; but its impelling motive is poetic. Its poetry consists in its being true. There we find the synthesis of the scientific and literary views of history.’⁸

If the peculiarity of historical objects obstructs science, what are historians to do except practise themselves in exegesis? With that approach they have partners outside their discipline: in theology, law and philosophy. Interpretative history may be based on the epistemological claim that phenomena as unique and complex as totalitarianism and Shoah cannot be analysed with existing categories, a claim that can be a reason as much as an *ex post facto* justification.⁹ That claim does not exclude that positive science is suitable for other, more ordinary phenomena. Interpretative history may also be based on the ontological claim that history is not a system in which laws have it their way. Hannah Arendt, to whom this article now turns, read philosophy and theology and called herself a ‘political theorist’. She was

⁶ Z. Bauman, ‘Sociology after the Holocaust’, *The British journal of sociology* 39-4 (1988) 469-497.

⁷ J. Huizinga, *Cultuurhistorische verkenningen* (Haarlem 1929) 166.

⁸ G. Macaulay Trevelyan, *English social history. A survey of six centuries* (London 1986) 10 and 12 respectively.

⁹ J.G. Gunnell, ‘Interpretation and the history of political theory. Apology and Epistemology’, *The American political science review* 76-2 (1982) 317-27.

certainly not systematic, if that implies determinism. In her view, people create their world and its history, and they bear responsibility for it. In Arendt's work, the historians' persistent question finds a mirror image in the question 'How to study historical phenomena for contemporary politics?' Let it be clear that she looked for meaning, not causality.

Hannah Arendt's historical themes

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) studied philosophy with Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. She chose Augustine's conception of love as the topic of her PhD thesis. In 1933 she left her native country Germany as it became dangerous for her mother and herself: they were Jews and had associated themselves with the political left. Arendt stayed in Paris for a while until she got the chance to go to New York. From 1941 onward she lived in the United States. In her work Arendt coped with totalitarian government and Shoah. She did not write a history of Nazism nor process the Second World



Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)

War into fiction, but made it her mission to understand the rise of Nazism and to formulate and promote the principle of an alternative regime. That principle is not the worn-out concept of freedom, but political action that is original and generative.

Three historical themes can be distinguished in Arendt's writing. In *The origins of totalitarianism*, published in 1951, and in *The human condition*, published in 1958, she discussed the unfolding of modernity. In her 1958 masterpiece she returned to the political experience of Ancient Athens and Rome. That experience can and must regenerate our present society, Arendt thought. She used

classical history as the source for a durable modern existence. There is a third theme throughout Arendt's work. She criticized philosophy for having turned its back on the here and now. These themes are further discussed in the next sections.

Classical history and totalitarianism

For Arendt, the Ancient political experience was an antidote to totalitarianism. Inspired by the models of *oikos* and *polis* she distinguished between the private and public realm.¹⁰ The metabolism of man and nature, human procreation and emotions are set in the private realm. Political action takes place in the public realm. The public realm is like a stage upon which men show and pronounce themselves to their fellows and where deliberation occurs. Action characterizes free men: by action men establish and confirm their freedom and in action men feel their power. Action preserves the framework that makes free action possible: the play defines the stage. Dialogue between men starts from the diversity amongst them and accommodates that diversity. By their actions men create history, as words and deeds are remembered. By acting in concert man creates a world that is more lasting than the products of the working artisan or the labouring peasant. And yet, acting men cannot create the world according to their own design. The results of action are unpredictable. Uncertainty is compensated by the human capacities of promise and forgiveness. The plurality of society and the unknown future are consequences of *natality*, by which Arendt means the continuous entry of new people into the world, human initiative and ingenuity.

Arendt has been reproached for the alien and one-sided history she allegedly wrote. Ancient Athenians and Roman republicans cannot be used as our model, because we live in an incomparable age. Although George Kateb shared Arendt's ideal of politics, he questioned the necessity of history to recover that ideal because elements of it are alive in our time as well.¹¹ Moreover, Arendt seemed to pass over the fact that the society of free Greeks lived off women and slaves and that the Roman legislators were also militaristic oppressors of both West and East. How she retold Ancient history is a stuffy scholastic issue compared to her contemporary studies that became the subject of political controversy.

In *The origins of totalitarianism* Arendt left, from a historical or sociological point of view, the straight and narrow. If she did not irritate her readers, she at least puzzled them. How relevant was British imperialism to the rise of fascism? Could she not have studied the position of Jews in the

¹⁰ R.T. Tsao, 'Arendt against Athens. Rereading *The human condition*', *Political theory* 30-1 (2002) 97-123.

¹¹ G. Kateb, *Hannah Arendt. Politics, conscience, evil* (Oxford 1984) 2.

Habsburg Empire more than she did the Dreyfus affair? Was she truly unable to write the companion volume on communism? And if her book was not an ordinary study of history, why did she bother with all those references to letters, speeches and diaries? When she discussed the fate of Jews under German occupation, her ideas concerning Jewish councils were perhaps phrased rather blunt. The 'banality of evil' she spoke of in her newspaper reports on the trial against a Nazi kidnapped by the Israelis and in her book afterwards, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, was easily misunderstood and perhaps unfair to the prosecution.¹² Arendt's views concerning the case of Palestine were unrealistic as she promoted the cohabitation of Jews and Arabs. During the Jewish immigration and the first years of the state of Israel, however, the Arabs were unwilling to recognise an organised Jewish community. Even if nowadays the state of Israel and the Palestinian authority communicate, developments within the Jewish community make it unlikely that Arendt's general ideal of politics will ever be realised: Israel moved away from participatory democracy and secularism.¹³ Beside offering faulty history and unseasoned analyses of current politics, Arendt was an alien even at a personal level: like most European refugees who came to the U.S. during the Second World War she was too traumatised to perceive American society with an open mind. Those refugees never fully settled there.¹⁴

In letters to her husband and other intimate writings, Arendt showed herself to be very critical of others and somewhat aggressive. A lack of consideration for other people's feelings may have harmed her work and its reception. As a political theorist Arendt too often insufficiently explained herself. The epistemology behind *The origins of totalitarianism* was not presented with the book, but can be found in drafts, memos and letters.¹⁵ In the 1950 preface to the first edition she did state the following:

The conviction that everything that happens on earth must be comprehensible to man can lead to interpreting history by

¹² S. Benhabib, 'Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem' in: D. Villa ed., *The Cambridge companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge 2000) 65-85.

¹³ U. Ben-Eliezer, 'The meaning of political participation in a nonliberal democracy. The Israeli experience', *Comparative politics* 25-4 (1993) 397-412.

¹⁴ W. Laqueur, 'The Arendt cult: Hannah Arendt as political commentator', *Journal of contemporary history* 33-4 (1998) 483-496.

¹⁵ L.J. Disch, 'More truth than fact. Storytelling as critical understanding in the writings of Hannah Arendt', *Political theory* 21-4 (1993) 665-694.

commonplaces. Comprehension does not mean denying the outrageous, deducing the unprecedented from precedents, or explaining phenomena by such analogies and generalities that the impact of reality and the shock of experience are no longer felt. It means, rather, examining and bearing consciously the burden, which our century has placed on us – neither denying its existence nor submitting meekly to its weight. Comprehension, in short, means the unpremeditated, attentive facing up to, and resisting of, reality – whatever it may be. (...) We can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load, which by itself time will bury in oblivion. The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition. This is the reality in which we live. And this is why all efforts to escape from the grimness of the present into nostalgia for a still intact past, or into the anticipated oblivion of a better future, are vain.¹⁶

Totalitarianism and Shoah were unprecedented, how could they be analysed along the lines of familiar categories? According to Arendt, the Third Reich succeeded to change reality until reality suited Nazi mythology, no matter the inconsistencies of the various myths. Jews were feeble misfits, who nevertheless posed a grave danger because they conspired against and infiltrated decent society in order to gain world domination. Jews were vermin and the conditions under which they lived in the ghettos proved it. To remove them was not murder but sanitation. In a sense, they were not even killed since no citizen was a witness to that and the camps where the Jews were sent were called ‘work camps’. Also, the category of ‘murder’ refers to an individual victim. Shoah was not just a quantitative leap from murder, it was qualitatively different. Jewish individuals and identities had been erased, no Jew had a biography: he was a Jew and no more. Jews were not even recognised as having committed a particular crime, even if the accusation would have been false. The Nazi regime undermined fact to such a degree that even today some ideologists deny the six million Jewish dead.

Arendt thought that if regular social science or history were at all possible regarding this regime, it would still not succeed to denounce it. What marks totalitarianism is its meaning for humanity and that cannot be

¹⁶ H. Arendt, *The origins of totalitarianism* (San Diego 1979; revised third edition of the text originally published in 1951) viii and ix respectively.

explained in an objective way, even if such objectivity had not been shattered. Therefore she did not report the events but related a story that engaged the critical faculties of her audience.

Modernity

The unfolding of modernity, another historical theme in Arendt's work, keeps men busy but discourages action. As the Roman Empire declined, life became more parochial. Grand politics ceased to exist; men no longer cared for their world and its politics. Village communities and agricultural economics slowly gave way to towns and trade, eventually to cities and industry. Feudal regimes were originally based on personal ties but soon became systems of landed interest. The fact that property was at the basis of political rule did not change after the Middle Ages. An urban business class took over state power and served its own interests. Modern citizens did not revive the Ancient notion of politics for sake of fame and for sake of politics itself. The labour movement may have put forward legitimate claims, but changes in the allocation of wealth do not change the character of politics. For Arendt, the noble art of political action had been lost. The private realm had been expanded to the social realm, the world had, in essence, become one big *oikos*. The one thing set apart from everyday life, according to Arendt, was religion. Christianity could by its very nature not function like the public realm, it taught not love for the world but love (if not fear) for God. As Arendt explained in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, he who dutifully does his work in the social realm and who is a loving father privately may yet neglect his responsibility for the world and facilitate evil. Individual citizens should not congregate only to promote their material interest and to put their mind at rest. They should care for the public good, question their own opinions and excel in free action. Citizens should not abandon action to professional politicians. As early as in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville observed how vulnerable an affluent society of equal and free people actually is.¹⁷ Liberty is easily sacrificed to bourgeois indulgence. Karl-Heinz Breier indeed includes Arendt's argument in his own objections

¹⁷ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (London 1994; an Everyman's Library reprint of the unabridged English translation prepared by Phillips Bradley for Alfred A. Knopf's edition of 1945; the two parts of the original *De la démocratie en Amérique* were published consecutively in the 1830s).

to our present consumerism.¹⁸ Arendt not only warned citizens and consumers, she also reproached philosophers sharply.

Stray philosophy

The development of philosophy, a third historical theme in Arendt's work, brought with it an attitude of unworldliness. The main body of philosophy had not concerned itself much with the human world. Metaphysic works such as Georg Hegel's *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* or works of logic such as Gottlob Frege's *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik* are not the most obvious ways to recognise and maintain the human world, according to Arendt. Thinkers positioned themselves as monastics of sorts, seeking eternal or universal truths. They enjoyed their *Kultur* but did not take up responsibility for the world. If thinkers were not actively guilty, their indifference was accessory to terror. Too many intellectuals from Germany's conservative and liberal elites adjusted to Nazi rule. Of those philosophers who, throughout modern history did analyse the external world and prescribed policies for its betterment, many were ideologists. They sought to impose a foreign idea upon the world and did not respect the plurality of the public realm. The (often violent) means of imposing foreign ideas on a varied population have made many victims throughout history. For instance in communism, to paraphrase George Orwell, the beasts of every land and clime had been promised the golden future time. What communism provided, however, was the idea that 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.'¹⁹ Arendt was disappointed by the anti-political character of Karl Marx' work which focuses more on anonymous socio-economic structures than on the political actions of free men.

The anti-political attitude perhaps started with Plato's aversion to political men who sentenced and killed Socrates. In Plato's ideal system of government philosophers would rule.²⁰ Their rule would see to it that the population abstains from wrong acts and thoughts. Plato failed to understand that if man is so constricted that he cannot err, man is also

¹⁸ K.H. Breier, *Arendt* (Rotterdam 2002; a translation by H. Daalder of the text originally published in 2001 as *Hannah Arendt zur Einführung*) 30-51.

¹⁹ G. Orwell, *Animal farm. A fairy story* (Groningen 1993; a Wolters-Noordhoff reprint of the text originally published in 1945) 99.

²⁰ Plato, *The republic* (Harmondsworth 1987; a Penguin revised second edition of the English translation by Desmond Lee originally published in 1955).

unable to leap forward into the future. Surprise and innovation are essential to the quality of human life.²¹ Mediaeval Christian doctrine turned the mind of man to his afterlife, accepting misery on earth. Sure enough, modernisation with its trade and industry increased wealth. But the improvement of life was material and superficial. The twentieth century wars showed how unstable and dangerous the modern condition is and how thoughtless and vulnerable it makes mankind.

Arendt criticised what she called 'stray' philosophers, thinkers who, in her view, had no eyes for their immediate surroundings. She contrasted unworldliness with the ancient notion of glory.²² A Greek hero on the battlefield or a Roman legislator was not obsessed by another world, be it the afterlife with God or the system of the universe. The Ancients wanted to excel here and now so that their fellow citizens would see and respect them, so that their society would remember them. To aspire to the remembrance of one's deeds or words, fame amongst humans, is very different from craving for eternity with God. The point is that in order to gain fame amongst men, there has to be a society in which people act and speak in concert. Public aspiration maintains the body politic.

Arendt was certainly not the only one to criticise mainstream philosophy or culture. Ernst Jünger, a conservative revolutionary since his First World War experience, also favoured human deeds to rational abstractions. Martin Heidegger also recognised man's immediate surroundings.²³ These thinkers generally turned to aesthetics and destruction, in sharp contrast with Arendt's ethics and human creation. Their ideal of battlefield heroes or *Sein-zum-Ende* would not deter Plato. We might say that Arendt did not want to erase or cleanse modern society, she wanted to heal it.

From Nietzsche to Jünger and then Goebbels, the modernist credo was the triumph of spirit and will over reason and the subsequent fusion of this will to an aesthetic mode. If aesthetic experience alone justifies life, morality is suspended and desire has no limits. (...) As

²¹ M. Verhoeven, *Boreling en beginner. Nataliteit bij Hannah Arendt* (Zoetermeer 2003).

²² H. Arendt, *The human condition* (Chicago 1998; a reprint of the text originally published in 1958, now with an introduction by M. Canovan) 17-21, 56. H. Arendt, *Between past and future. Six exercises in political thought* (London 1961; first edition) 41-90. H. Arendt, *On violence* (San Diego 1970; first edition) 68.

²³ M. Heidegger, *Over denken, bouwen, wonen* (Nijmegen 1991; a translation by H.M. Berghs of the text originally published in 1954 as *Vorträge und Aufsätze*).

aesthetic standards replaced moral norms, modernism indulged a fascination for horror and violence as a welcome relief to bourgeois boredom and decadence.²⁴

Conclusions

Hannah Arendt, although not a historian, collected historical material and sketched images of history. Her approach was not scientific in the sense of collecting facts and fitting those into a system of known categories, thereby tuning the system. Nazism had ridiculed historical facts and cultural certainties. In a way, Adolf Eichmann was not guilty of murder. Modernity, the meta-system of analysis, is flawed. Arendt told a story to make people understand that modernity has led to a passive and vulnerable society. She also told a story of how an Ancient conception of politics vitalises society. Active citizens confirm their own identities and maintain the world for future generations by means of speech. This requires a public realm where deliberation takes place, where the plurality of society can be expressed. Arendt could tell her stories and inspire a public thanks to her historical imagination. Historians may follow her lead. They can feed the historical imagination and enrich public debate with ideas from the past. If there are no laws of history that we can learn to live by, we need an open mind to explore and discuss possible futures. If philosophers keep aloof, it is all the more urgent that historians take up some responsibility for the world we share. Historical research is, and should be more than a machine that runs on to produce historical facts, just like people should not - like Eichman - unthinkingly follow orders by the powers that be just because 'Befehl ist Befehl'. After they have straightened out their 'facts', historians should proceed to wonder and to discuss what that history means to the contemporary world.

²⁴ J. Herf, *Reactionary modernism. Technology, culture, and politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge 1984) 12.