

Reciprocities between Political Thought and Political Culture: Hannah Arendt and America

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Abstract:

In *Arendt and America*, Richard H. King examines the fascinating relationship between the political theory of Hannah Arendt and the country to which she, as a German Jew, immigrated in 1941. King argues that Arendt left important traces on the political culture of the USA, and that America, in turn, influenced Arendt profoundly. Among others, the author addresses Arendt's stances on racial inequality in the US, the American Revolution, and her polarizing report *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the subsequent controversy over it. In his densely written study, King presupposes his reader's knowledge of the history and the contents of the American, but also the European, traditions of thought, as well as of Hannah Arendt's political theory in general.

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Many reviews of current studies on Hannah Arendt and her oeuvre begin thus: with the observation that an almost overwhelming number of scholarly studies on the Arendtian theory has been published recently. And, indeed, this is very true. But still there are many opportunities to interpret Hannah Arendt's writings from new angles, with different foci, and with innovative research interests. One of the recent books on Arendt's political theory offers just such, a still rather unique perspective – Richard H. King's *Arendt and America*.

In his book, King aims at filling an important research gap – he attempts to reconstruct the reciprocal relationship between Arendt's thought and the political and social culture of the country into which Arendt had immigrated (as a Jew, having fled Nazi-Germany and being detained in an internment camp in Gurs, France, she, her husband, and her mother arrived in the US in 1941). The author argues "the United States was not just where she lived and where her thought was first published. It was a crucial theme and concern of [emphasis in original, AKW] her thought" (p. 4). This crucial theme still seems rather under-researched – this might change due to King's extensive study. The Emeritus Professor of American and Canadian Studies at the University of Nottingham seeks to offer an extensive account on the matter, which encompasses analyses of many of Arendt's most well-known books and essays, details on their genesis and their reception, as well as some biographical facts. All this he has assembled and examined with regard to the specific US-American historical, contemporary, and, up to a point, even current context. Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *On Revolution*, as well as some essays published during different periods of her professional life are at the center of King's analysis.

In these publications, Arendt's ideas and arguments illustrate very well that which King thinks is essential concerning her life and her academic and journalistic accomplishments: "[S]he was more deeply involved than most émigré intellectuals in the political, intellectual, and cultural life of America in her time" (p. 5). King argues that Arendt's theoretical engagement with US politics (and also her interest in American history and historical political thought) also led to the fact that some of her theories served as guidelines for and were put into practice in political as well as judiciary decision-making, for example her verdict in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that it is essential to have "the right to have rights".

But not only does the author explain how Arendt had influenced America, and America had influenced her, but he also describes the reciprocal nature of Arendt's arguments and positions with those of her US-American contemporaries, such as Dwight Macdonald and David Riesman. In contrast, the influences that historical European political thought and philosophy had on Arendt's oeuvre (such as the theories of Marx, Tocqueville, Rousseau, to only name a few) are only rather briefly mentioned. Maybe this is due to the fact that there is, according to the author, a "historical tension between American and German thought" (p. 127), which King's account seems to further fuel to a certain degree.

Here, it becomes clear that the book is directed at those who know the American context of political thought that King at the same time references, and that he expects his readers to know. Explanations of specific lines of thought, such as the American tradition of pragmatism, are in some cases too scarcely dispersed throughout a chapter. This leaves readers who are not familiar with these debates unable to grasp the full scope and the depth of what King singles out as an essential factor in reviewing Arendt's work: that is the differences between the respective intellectual histories and traditions, and the way Arendt maneuvered between these two worlds of thought.

On the other hand, King offers a very detailed and balanced account of some of the polarizing topics in Arendt's political theory – such as her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann and the subsequent controversy, or her treatment of race and racial inequalities in the United States. Regarding the latter, King acknowledges that "Arendt always found it difficult to find the right register in speaking about race in America" (p. 278). Here, the author's profound knowledge of political thought and critiques of race and racism is of vital importance. For example, King offers some much needed insight into the much debated Arendtian essay "Reflections on Little Rock", in which Arendt criticised the fact that nine African-American students were sent to a previously all-white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas, as a result of a court ruling to end segregation in public schools (one of her main arguments was that it had been unfair to expose the children to this hostile situation). King argues that Arendt sometimes showed a lack of sensitivity for "America's deceptively complex culture" (p. 8), as well as a certain arrogance, which the author seems to attribute many contemporary intellectual émigrés from Europe.

Due to the sheer magnitude of the topic at hand, King's study on the mutual influences of Arendt and the United States is very densely written – which can be challenging at times. Also, inevitably, his focus on the American point-of-view cuts short more variable interpretations of Arendt's political thinking. However, the study as such, with its ingenious intention of gathering and analyzing information on the fascinating relationship between Arendt and America, is a real treat for those already avidly interested in Arendt's work.