

Fragmente eines Buchs

Hannah Arendt, *The Modern Challenge to Tradition: Fragmente eines Buchs* (Hannah Arendt, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Druck und Digital*, hrsg. von Barbara Hahn, Hermann Kappelhoff, Patchen Markell, Ingeborg Nordmann und Thomas Wild, Bd. 6. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2018, 923 pp.)

The critical reception of most political theorists begins in earnest after their death. This is most certainly true of Hannah Arendt. Although she was well-known during her lifetime for her groundbreaking analysis of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and her (in)famous treatment of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Arendt only became a critical point of reference within political theory in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when a new generation of scholars started engaging with her work. In addition to the distance enabled by the passage of time from her death in 1975, this growing interest in her work was also driven by the publication of various collections of her writings, which had previously been difficult to access, such as *Essays in Understanding* (1994) and her *Jewish Writings* (2007). This, combined with the publication of her correspondence with various thinkers, most notably Karl Jaspers (1992) and Martin Heidegger (2003), allowed for a fuller appreciation of her work and how it fit into the history of twentieth century political thought.

In the last few years, this process of posthumous publication has moved into an even higher gear with the release of her notes and various unfinished writings. It started with the publication of her intellectual journal—her *Denktagebuch*—in 2002, and continues with the publication of *The Modern Challenge to Tradition* (2018). This latter volume, which is the focus of this review, is part of the burgeoning *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (critical collection of works), whose production definitively signals Arendt's entry into the canon of political theory. The fact that this collection is being prepared and produced in Germany is also a sign of her increasing acceptance in her homeland, which has trailed the reception of her work in the United States (as the editors point out, this lag dates back all the way to the publication of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, see p. 606).

Although this book is volume six in the critical edition, it is the first to appear in print. The second is volume three: *Sechs Essays: Die verborgene Tradition*, which was published in 2019, containing six essays addressed to the German public in the immediate aftermath of World War II. 15 more volumes are scheduled to appear in the coming years, starting with a new edition of *The Life of the Mind* based on the state of the manuscript at the time of Arendt's death (i.e., without the editorial interventions and "smoothing" introduced by Mary McCarthy). Free digital editions of the critical edition should become available online a year after their physical publication.

The 550 typed pages archivally preserved pages that are reprinted in *The Modern Challenge to Tradition* center on Arendt's reading of Karl Marx and the place of Marxism within the tradition of Western political thought, which was initially supposed to be entitled *Totalitarian Elements in Marxism*. The timely publication of this volume given

the revival of popular interest in Marxism reveals both Arendt's fascination with Marx and her horror at the break in the philosophical tradition that he introduces in switching the focus from the "animal rationale" of Plato and Socrates to the "homo laborans" of *Capital*.

Although Arendt was hugely productive in this period, which focuses 1951 through 1954, relatively little of what she wrote made it into print, even though this period accounts for the majority of the entries in her *Denktagebuch* (see p. 863). However, despite the fact that Arendt never completed her planned volume on Marxism, her reading of Marx, her understanding of the modern challenge to tradition and the relationship between action and thought, which form the backbone of this volume, are all preserved at a later stage of development and within a slightly different argumentative context in *The Human Condition*.

The significance of this volume lies in the insights it provides into both Arendt's way of working and the evolution of her thought after the publication of *Origins*. For example, in her lecture on "The Impact of Marx" (1952) she begins to distinguish between labor and fabrication, which she then further develops into her famous bifurcation of labor and work in her lectures on "Authority and Freedom" (1953). By adding in material she had worked out separately on "action and thought after the French Revolution" for a lecture on "Philosophy and Politics" (1954), Arendt was able to develop her famous theoretical triad of activities that define the human condition: labor, work and action.

Many other developmental tidbits and theoretical insights emerge from a close reading of the various texts collected within this volume. Instead of picking out some other substantive issues based on my own predilections, I would instead like to highlight an interesting feature that emerges from the editorial commentaries, namely the importance of analyzing the typescripts of the manuscripts (shape and characteristics of the letters and the state of the ink ribbon) as a way of determining where and when the various drafts were produced (see esp. 700-4). Additionally, it is interesting to learn that Arendt preferred typing to writing by hand (p. 722) and that in contrast to her correspondence, which she preserved in full, she usually threw away the manuscripts and galleys of her published works after they appeared in print (see p. 859).

In presenting the "Editorial Principles of the Edition," the editors note that the print version of *The Modern Challenge to Tradition* is "meant to provide reading texts" (p. 598). As a result, it does not contain all of the annotations, cancellations, insertions and transpositions that are visible in the original typescripts and manuscripts, and which will be more faithfully reproduced in the online edition. In line with this approach, the wonderfully helpful commentaries on each of Arendt's texts, which provide information about their origin, timing and context, are collected together at the back of the volume, in the same order as the original texts themselves appear in the front.

While this arguably may provide for greater readability for those who merely want to dive right into Arendt, it makes the task more difficult for readers who want to know what they are reading before they start. Thus, instead of placing all of the contextual information at the end, necessitating the flipping of hundreds of pages, this reader at least would have found it more helpful to place the editorial introductions before each of Arendt's primary source texts. The statement of editorial principles, which appears on pp.

598-600, would also have been more helpfully placed at the beginning of the volume, rather than being hidden smack dab in the middle of this 923-page tome. In fact, I would recommend that readers of this volume start with the aforementioned “Editorial Principles of the Edition” and read through the editorial commentaries to get a sense of the texts and the subjects they address. They can then dip into the actual material by Arendt published in the first half of the volume based on which of these descriptions piques their interest.

Another piece of advice (or rather, a warning): the reader should also be aware of the fact that this volume unequivocally assumes a bilingual audience. Arendt’s texts appear one after the other regardless of whether they were written in German or English. The same is true of the commentaries, some of which are written in English while others appear in German, although the editorial principles and afterword appear in both languages. Additionally, in their notes Barbara Hahn and James McFarland quote passages from Arendt’s text and various correspondence from both languages liberally and without translation.

In sum, this volume provides a treasure trove of information about the development of Arendt’s thinking from *Origins* to *The Human Condition*. While the individual essays can be repetitive at times, it is fascinating to see how she gradually sharpens her readings and hones her thoughts. In this sense, this volume reveals Arendt at her finest, not as a genius constructing unified, coherent philosophical insights in a form that is immediately prepared for publication, but as a political theorist engaged in the halting, difficult process of seeking to understand the world around her in the dangerous and unpredictable process she calls “thinking.”

Peter J. Verovšek

(Assistant Professor in Politics/International Relations at the University of Sheffield and author of *Memory and the Future of Europe: Rupture and Integration in the Wake of Total War*, Manchester University Press, 2020)