

# Hannah Arendt

*That all authority in the last analysis rests on opinion is never more forcefully demonstrated than when, suddenly and unexpectedly, a universal refusal to obey initiates what then turns into a revolution. To be sure, this moment – perhaps the most dramatic moment in history – opens the doors wide to demagogues of all sorts and colours, but what else does even revolutionary demagogy testify if not to the necessity of all regimes, old and new, 'to rest on opinion'? Unlike human reason, human power is not only 'timid and cautious when left alone', it is simply non-existent unless it can rely on others; the most powerful king and the least scrupulous of all tyrants are helpless if no one obeys them, that is, supports them through obedience; for, in politics, obedience and support are the same.*

- Hannah Arendt (1963) On Revolution (p. 228)



**Johanna "Hannah" Arendt (October 14, 1906 – December 4, 1975)** was a German American political theorist. She has often been described as a philosopher, although she refused that label on the grounds that philosophy is concerned with "man in the singular." She described herself instead as a political theorist because her work centres on the fact that "*men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world*". Arendt's work deals with the nature of power, and the subjects of politics, authority, and totalitarianism.

Arendt was born into a family of secular German Jews in the city of Linden (now part of Hanover), and grew up in Königsberg (the birthplace of Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant, renamed as Kaliningrad and annexed to the Soviet Union in 1946) and Berlin.

At the University of Marburg, she studied philosophy with Martin Heidegger. According to Hans Jonas, her only German-Jewish classmate, Arendt embarked on a long and stormy romantic relationship with Heidegger, for which she was later criticized because of Heidegger's support for the Nazi party when he was rector of Freiburg University. In the wake of one of their breakups, Arendt moved to Heidelberg, where she wrote her dissertation, under the existentialist philosopher-psychologist Karl Jaspers, on the concept of love in the thought of Saint Augustine. In 1929, in Berlin, she married Günther Stern, later known as Günther Anders; they divorced in 1937.

The dissertation was published in 1929. Because she was Jewish, Arendt was prevented from habilitating, a prerequisite for teaching in German universities. She researched anti-Semitism for some time before being interrogated by the Gestapo. Thereupon Arendt fled Germany for Paris. There she befriended the Marxist literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin, her first husband's cousin. While in France, Arendt worked to

support and aid Jewish refugees. She was imprisoned in Camp Gurs but able to escape after a few weeks.

With the German military occupation of northern France during World War II and the deportation of Jews to Nazi concentration camps even by the Vichy collaborator regime in the unoccupied south, Arendt was compelled to leave France. In 1940, she married the German poet and Marxist philosopher Heinrich Blücher, by then a former member of the Communist Party.

In 1941, Arendt escaped with her husband and her mother to the United States. They relied on the life-saving visas, illegally issued by the American diplomat Hiram Bingham IV, who aided in this way approximately 2,500 other Jewish refugees. Another American, Varian Fry, paid for their travels and helped in securing the aforementioned visas. Upon arrival to New York, Arendt became active in the German-Jewish community. From 1941 to 1945, she wrote a column for the German-language Jewish newspaper, *Aufbau*. From 1944, she directed research for the Commission of European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction and travelled frequently to Germany in this capacity. After World War II she returned to Germany and worked for Youth Aliyah, an organization that had saved thousands of children from the Holocaust. She became a close friend of Karl Jaspers and his Jewish wife, developing a deep intellectual friendship with him. She began corresponding with Mary McCarthy.

In 1950, she became a naturalized citizen of the United States. Arendt served as a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, Princeton University and Northwestern University. In the spring of 1959, she became the first woman lecturer at Princeton. Arendt also taught at the University of Chicago, where she was a member of the Committee on Social Thought; The New School in New York City; Yale University, where she was a fellow; and, the Center for Advanced Studies at Wesleyan University (1961–1962, 1962–1963). Arendt was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1962 and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1964.



She died in 1975, at age 69, of a heart attack and was buried at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, where her husband taught for many years.

## Works

Arendt theorizes freedom as public, performative and associative, drawing for illustration on the Greek "Polis", American townships, the Paris Commune, the civil rights movements of the 1960s, and the 1956 Hungarian uprising. She posits that freedom does not pre-exist the organised community but is rather constructed there, as the common space whereto its equal members bring their own uniqueness and "natality", and create something of lasting value such as a state. This natality signs the contingent, indeterminate and so political future that we don't know anything about.

## The Origins of Totalitarianism

Arendt's first major book was *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), which traced the roots of Stalinist Communism and Nazism in both anti-Semitism and imperialism. The book was opposed by the Left on the grounds that it presented the two movements as equally tyrannical. She further contends that Jewry was not the operative factor in the Holocaust but merely a convenient proxy. Totalitarianism in Germany was in the end about megalomania and consistency, not eradicating Jews.

## The Human Condition

Arguably, her most influential work, *The Human Condition* (1958), distinguishes between the concepts of political and social, labour and work, various forms of action, and explores implications of those distinctions. Her theory of political action, corresponding to the existence of a public realm, is extensively developed in this work. Arendt argues that, while human life always evolves within societies, the social-being part of human nature, political life, was intentionally constructed by only a few of these societies as a space for individuals to achieve freedom through the construction of a common world. These categories, which attempt to bridge the gap between ontological and sociological structures, are sharply delineated. While Arendt relegates labour and work to the realm of the "social," she favours the human condition of action as the "political" that is both existential and aesthetic.

## Men in Dark Times

Her collection of essays *Men in Dark Times* presents intellectual biographies of some creative and moral figures of the 20th century, such as Walter Benjamin, Karl Jaspers, Rosa Luxemburg, Hermann Broch, Pope John XXIII, and Isak Dinesen.

## Adolf Eichmann Trial

In her reporting of the Eichmann trial for *The New Yorker*, which evolved into *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), she coined the phrase "*the banality of evil*" to describe Eichmann. She raised the question of whether evil is radical or simply a function of thoughtlessness, a tendency of ordinary people to obey orders and conform to mass opinion without a critical evaluation of the consequences of their actions and inaction.

Arendt was sharply critical of the way the trial was conducted in Israel. She was also critical of the way that some Jewish leaders, notably M. C. Rumkowski, acted during the Holocaust. This caused a considerable controversy and even animosity toward Arendt in the Jewish community. Her friend Gershom Scholem, a major scholar of Jewish mysticism, broke off relations with her. Arendt was criticized by many Jewish public figures, who charged her with coldness and lack of sympathy for the victims of the Shoah/Holocaust. Due to this lingering criticism, her book has only recently been translated into Hebrew. Arendt ended the book with:

*Just as you [Eichmann] supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations – as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world – we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang.*

## On Revolution



Arendt published another book in the same year, *On Revolution*. In this analysis of the two major revolutions of the 18th century, Arendt went against the grain of Marxist and leftist thought by contending that the American Revolution was a successful revolution, whereas the French Revolution was not. When the masses of France gained the sympathy of revolutionaries, the French Revolution turned away from the legal stability of a constitutional government toward the lawless satisfaction of the constantly regenerating economic needs of these masses. Some saw in this argument a post-Holocaust anti-French sentiment. Nevertheless, it was inveterate in the history of political philosophy, echoing that of Edmund Burke.

Arendt also argued that the revolutionary spirit endemic to the founding fathers had not been preserved in America because the majority of people had no role to play in politics other than voting. She admired Thomas Jefferson's idea of dividing counties into townships. Arendt's interest in such a "council system", which she saw as the only alternative to the state, continued all her life.

## On Violence Essay

Arendt's essay "On Violence" distinguishes violence and power. She maintains that, although theorists of both the Left and Right regard violence as an extreme manifestation of power, the two concepts are in fact antithetical. Power comes from the collective will and does not need violence to achieve any of its goals since voluntary compliance takes its place. As governments start losing their legitimacy, violence becomes an artificial means towards the same ends and is therefore found only in the absence of Power. Bureaucracies then become the ideal birthplaces of violence since they are defined as the "rule by no-one", with whom to argue against and therefore re-create the missing link with the people it rules over.

## The Life of the Mind

Her posthumous book, *The Life of the Mind* (1978, edited by Mary McCarthy), remained incomplete. Stemming from her Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, it focuses on the mental faculties of thinking and willing, in a sense moving beyond her previous work concerning the *vita activa*. In her discussion of thinking, she focuses mainly on Socrates and his notion of thinking as a solitary dialogue between Me and Myself. This appropriation of Socrates leads her to introduce novel concepts of conscience (which gives no positive prescriptions but instead tells me what I cannot do if I would remain friends with myself when I re-enter the two-in-one of thought where I must render an account of my actions to myself) and morality (an entirely negative enterprise concerned with non-participation in certain actions for the sake of remaining friends with one's self). In her volume on Willing, Arendt, relying heavily on Augustine's notion of the will, discusses the will as an absolutely free mental faculty that makes new beginnings possible.

## Legacy

In the third volume, Arendt was planning to engage the faculty of judgement by appropriating Kant's *Critique of Judgement*; however, she did not live to write it. Nevertheless, although her notion of judging remains unknown, Arendt did leave manuscripts ("Thinking and Moral Considerations", "Some Questions on Moral Philosophy,") and lectures (Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy) concerning her thoughts on this mental faculty. The first two articles were edited and published by Jerome Kohn, an assistant of Arendt and a director of Hannah Arendt Center at The New School, and the last was edited and published by Ronald Beiner, professor of political science at the University of Toronto.

