



Politics and Passions

by Chantal Mouffe

In recent decades categories like 'human nature', 'universal reason' and 'rational autonomous subject' have increasingly been questioned. A variety of thinkers has criticised the notions of universal human nature, of a universal canon of rationality through which that human nature could be known, as well as the possibility of an unconditional universal truth. This critique of Enlightenment universalism and rationalism - sometimes referred to as 'postmodern' - has been presented by some authors, for example Jürgen Habermas, as posing a threat to the modern democratic project. In defending the opposite thesis, I argue that only with a political theory that takes account of the critique of essentialism is it possible to formulate a radical democratic politics.

Liberal democracy, understood as a regime, is the symbolic ordering of social relations, not a mere 'form of government'. Thus the difference between ancient and modern democracy is not one of size but of nature. The crucial difference lies in that which is constitutive of modern liberal democracy, namely, the acceptance of pluralism. By pluralism I mean the end of a substantive idea of the good life, what Claude Lefort calls 'the dissolution of the markers of certainty'. Such a recognition of pluralism implies a profound transformation in the symbolic ordering of social relations.

This point is totally missed when one refers, as John Rawls does, merely to the fact of pluralism - to the

diversity of conceptions of the good to be found in a liberal society. The important difference is not at the empirical but at the symbolic level. What is at stake is the legitimization of conflict and division, the emergence of individual liberty and the assertion of equal liberty for all.

Once pluralism is recognised as the defining feature of modern democracy, we can enquire into how best to conceive a pluralist democratic politics. My contention is that only in the context of a perspective in which *differance* is construed as the condition of being can a radical democratic project informed by pluralism be adequately formulated. I submit that all forms of pluralism that depend on a logic of the social that implies the idea of 'being as presence', and see 'objectivity' as belonging to the 'things themselves', necessarily lead to the reduction of plurality and its ultimate negation. This is the case with the main forms of liberal pluralism, which generally start by stressing 'the fact of pluralism', and then proceed to find ways of dealing with differences with the two-fold aim of actually making these differences irrelevant and of relegating pluralism to the sphere of the private.

Such an approach suggests a reconciled society where pluralism has been superseded: pluralist democracy becomes a 'self-refuting ideal' because the very moment of its realisation would coincide with its disintegration. To reveal that such a consensus is a conceptual impossibility does not put in jeopardy the democratic ideal, as some argue. On the contrary, it protects pluralist democracy against any attempts at closure.

To clarify my approach, I distinguish between 'the political' and 'politics'. By 'the political', I refer to the dimension of hostility and antagonism that takes many forms and emerge in diverse social relations. 'Politics', on the other hand, refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organise human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of the political. This crucial

distinction, which tries to keep together the meanings of *polemos* and *polis*, allows us to pose the fundamental question for democratic politics: not how to arrive at a rational consensus without exclusion, in other words, how to construct an 'us' without a corresponding 'them' - this is impossible because without a 'them' there can be no 'us' - but how to establish the us/them distinction in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy.

A pluralist democratic politics must bring the traces of power and exclusion to the fore - not erase them - so that they can enter the terrain of contestation. That this must be envisaged as an unending process should not cause despair. On the contrary, in a democratic polity conflicts and confrontations, far from being signs of imperfection, are the guarantee that democracy is alive and informed by pluralism.

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Understanding Arendt

by Bridget Cotter

Hannah Arendt
Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954
 Edited by Jerome Kohn
 Harcourt Brace and Company 1994

'It is a curse to live in interesting times'. So begins the introduction of Jerome Kohn's collection of previously unpublished and uncollected works of Hannah Arendt, one of the twentieth century's greatest political thinkers. Behind the flippancy and humour of this favoured saying of Arendt lay a penchant for taking the curse very seriously indeed.

Arendt believed that modern thinkers had a responsibility to reflect on their times and always to remember to 'think what we are doing'. She herself fulfilled the responsibility prolifically. With one exception, the pieces in this volume stretch from her earliest work in the early 1930s - translated from German - to book reviews, articles, essays and lectures written in 1954. Unpublished pieces which sat in the Library of Congress after Arendt's death in 1975, and many short articles published throughout the 1940s in disparate journals in America, appear here. By bringing these works together Jerome Kohn (Arendt's research assistant) has done a great service in terms of conserving original manuscripts and of making accessible her early works to readers worldwide. The volume is a useful and sensitively-edited addition to Arendtian scholarship.

There are gaps in the book, notably Arendt's Jewish writings, though there are two essays on the nineteenth-century Berlin salons. Kohn promises at least two more volumes, one of which will contain 'writings on specifically Jewish themes'. Other volumes will cover later periods of her work, including an important 1953 lecture series on Marx and the tradition of Western political thought. There is also an eleven-year gap in the present

volume: from 1933, when she left her native Germany to become a Jewish refugee in Paris, until 1944, three years after she emigrated to America. While writings do exist from the early 1940s this gap is mainly accounted for by the fact that any writings there might have been from the Paris period have been lost.

The title of the volume is drawn from one of the essays assembled, but its significance for Arendt is made clear in the one inclusion from a later period: the interview conducted by Günter Gaus, the West German politician and journalist, in October 1964. Commenting on why she wrote, Arendt claims that she never did so with the intention of influencing others: 'What is important for me is to understand. For me writing is a matter of seeking this understanding, part of the process of understanding. ... If I had a good enough memory to really retain everything that I think, I doubt very much that I would have written anything - I know my own laziness. What is important for me is the thought process itself. . . . Working out her own thoughts was Arendt's way of reconciling herself to the 'dark times' in which she lived.

When pressed by Gaus to talk about the effect of her work on others, she replied: 'If I may wax ironical, this is a masculine question. Men always want to be terribly influential, but I see that as somewhat external. . . I want to understand. And if others understand - in the same sense that I have understood - that gives me a sense of satisfaction, like feeling at home.' Feeling at home was another of Hannah Arendt's great concerns. She had experienced the uprootedness of 'the stateless people', as she referred to the refugees of the Second World War. Having left Germany because of her Jewishness, after six years in Paris she was interned briefly as an 'enemy alien' because of her 'Germanness'. For fourteen years she lived without citizenship until it was finally granted to her in America.

But being at home in the world was also of philosophical concern to Arendt, who believed that what

makes us most human is our ability to create and participate in a commonly-constructed world. We create this world not only through the physical and intellectual construction of objects which help us to carve out a space for ourselves, but also through political action: that is, through the co-operative establishment of institutions which provide a framework for our shared, our 'plural', existence. To allow such institutions to rot, to relinquish our ability to act creatively to someone else, and to trade our ability to think new thoughts for an ideology which will tell us what to think, is to make ourselves homeless. These are the crimes and perils of modern life.

This volume helpfully enriches our picture of Hannah Arendt. It shows us something of the development of her thought and career, from her early concerns with philosophy and the influence of existentialism, to her later concerns with current affairs; it reveals the foundations of her mature political thought; and, best of all, it gives us food for thought about how to build and to understand our common world.

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CSD?

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