

Editor's Introduction

Understanding . . . is an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world.

— Arendt, "Understanding and Politics"

BY MOST ACCOUNTS, more people are reading Arendt's work today than ever before. Why now? Surely it is not because we live in a more dangerous time than Arendt did herself. After all, almost everything she published while alive was written during the Second World War and the Cold War. Are our times more dangerous than hers? If so, how can that be? Perhaps it is because the political and intellectual traditions she warned were tattered and broken have fallen in even that much more disrepair and disrepute in the last fifty years. More radically, one could argue that the social and political methodologies we have adopted in lieu of these shattered traditions have themselves proven increasingly unproductive. Perhaps we look to her writings because we are perplexed by the rapidly changing world in which we now find ourselves, and because so much of her work represents an effort to decipher the perplexities of her own time. And perhaps her perplexities are our perplexities insofar as we are still concerned with how best to live in a world that does not seem hospitable to us and for which we are nonetheless responsible. One has only to scan the great number of books, essays, and articles that have been published on the many areas of Arendt's writings in the last ten years to gain a sense of the ways in which Arendt's questions continue to be our questions, that her concerns resonate with our concerns about the world in which we live.

Of course, those who turn to Arendt to find specific answers to the perplexing conditions of our times will be disappointed, for Arendt was always reticent to offer solutions to our fundamental political difficulties. According to her, these pressing matters must be decided by public deliberation rather than by experts of any kind. For Arendt, like her hero Socrates, it was only in the pursuit of the right questions, of digging deeper than the ordinary line of thought (or sometimes not quite as deep if the line of thinking became excessively metaphysical) that we could make some progress in addressing the perplexities of our shared public existence. The questions must be asked

in the right way, in the way that begins and ends with factual reality, and the questions must bear on our shared life. Only by a collaborative facing up to our confusions and delusions can we be prepared to act effectively in addressing such difficulties. And we must be prepared to engage in this shared work over and over again. There are no permanent solutions to living together in the world, but only the chance to try again when what we have planned fails to achieve our goals.

Perhaps this is why Arendt is read so much by so many people in so many places these days. Many of us have grown tired of canned recipes and stock phrases offered as solutions to our most chronic and repetitive social and political crises. Indeed, these worn out political poses and habits represent an additional source of many of the crises that confront us. We need a fresh outlook that challenges the depleted categories that have been bequeathed to us. On matters as diverse as human rights, consumerism, racial identity, and populist uprisings, Arendt's work provides new openings for thinking and acting. Such openings offer us new possibilities as we try to figure out how best to live our common shared life. Perhaps we are now prepared to talk to one another honestly and openly about the troubles of our world, and then to act on these conversations. And perhaps we recognize that our actions should be collectively thoughtful, because we want to avoid as much as possible the sort of unintended consequences that only exacerbate our puzzlement.

The diversity of concerns and outlooks of those who are reading Arendt is staggering. From human rights activists to legal scholars to community organizers to playwrights, the range of issues that Arendt's work continues to address helps to explain why she is read more now than ever. It is against the backdrop of these broadly held concerns for our world in these extremely challenging times that *Arendt Studies* was created. We seek to create a forum that will promote open and honest discussion of the many political and social perplexities that confront us in our rapidly changing world. Arendt's work still speaks to the political, social, and cultural struggles of our time. The scope of her work serves as a set of very effective jumping off points as we strive to articulate the challenges we face, in part because Arendt refused to accept disciplinary boundaries as limiting factors in pursuing any given question. Traditional disciplinary arenas, such as philosophy, history, political theory, and the like, may still serve as effective pathways for interrogating our world and its ways, but Arendt's example shows that sometimes we have to work between or even behind disciplines to gain a clearer understanding of the nature and depth of our perplexities.

Arendt's questions are our questions because they are about living in a world that needs us if it is to be a properly human world. While we should be alert to the possibility of the emergence of the "unprecedented," the major challenges we face today are in fact variations on the themes that

Arendt worried over again and again. The blurring of facts and opinions in public discourse, the rise of reactionary populism in the United States and Europe, the ever growing influence of global economic imperialism and the corresponding failure of stabilizing political structures, and the loss of place that seems to drive each new refugee crisis, all couched in terms of an age of endless war: all of these contemporary problems and events resonate with questions that Arendt pursued. The fact that several decades divide Arendt's worries that our world is built on increasingly shaky foundations from the events we now face is an indication of the persistence rather than permanence of these challenges. Now more than ever we need to adopt Arendt's standard for honest collective exchange, a standard enunciated quite clearly in the "Nation-State and Democracy" radio address, published in this inaugural issue of *Arendt Studies*:

Just as today in foreign policy we are everywhere confronted with the question of how we can organize relations between states to eliminate from them the possibility of war as an *ultima ratio*, so in domestic policy we are everywhere confronted with the problem of how we can reorganize and split up modern mass society to allow for the free formation of opinion, a sensible exchange of opinions, and thus to the individual taking active responsibility for public affairs.

From Cold War to endless war, much has changed in the fifty years since Arendt wrote this text. And yet the question still remains, can we find a way beyond endless war, so that we can connect with the many countries we have identified as our enemies in a non-violent and productive manner? In this short quotation, Arendt points to a fundamental relationship between international conflict and national impotence, between the problem of war between sovereign states and the problem of an ongoing war of words between us and our fellow citizens. How are we to connect with our neighbors in a non-violent and productive manner? Like Arendt, we live in a time when forces of separation and expropriation threaten our capacity to address the common dangers we face. Arendt's concerns are our concerns because rather than solving the problems of division that have plagued us for the last fifty years, the gulfs which divide us have grown wider and deeper. Perhaps if we extend and deepen the lines of questioning that Arendt broached, we may begin to bridge these gulfs, and in so doing begin to find new ways to connect so that we can render our one and only world more livable.

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James Barry