

## Critical Assessment of the Writings of Hannah Arendt

**Veranstalter:** Hannah Arendt Institute for Research on Totalitarianism at the Technical University in Dresden (HAIT), German Department of Baylor University in Waco, Texas (USA)

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On the 24th of July, 2006 the Hannah Arendt Institute for Research on Totalitarianism at the Technical University in Dresden (HAIT) convened a four day workshop, „Critical Assessment of the Writings of Hannah Arendt.“ The workshop, which took place in Dresden, was organized in cooperation with the German Department of Baylor University in Waco, Texas (USA).

The workshop was designed to facilitate the presentation and discussion of various analyses of the works of the publicist and scholar of German-Jewish descent, Hannah Arendt. Particular attention was paid to connections between the path her life took and the changes in her thinking as expressed not only in works she intended for a wider audience, but especially in the extensive collection of correspondence with those closest to her.

The conference began with the keynote address of Julia Schulze Wessel of the University of Dresden, whose lecture was entitled „Hannah Arendt – her work and life.“ The lecture helped not only familiarize workshop participants with the works that Hannah Arendt spent her life creating but also with the twists and turns of her life that inspired her to adjust her thinking and challenge earlier beliefs. Schulze Wessel's lecture focused specifically on the degree to which Hannah Arendt's thinking was influenced by Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers as well as the philosophical questions inspired by this early education, which remained objects of contemplation Arendt would revisit throughout her life.

Schulze Wessel's lecture was followed by that of Scott H. Moore of Baylor University, Waco, Texas, entitled „Hannah Arendt among the Philosophers: Her Status as a Twentieth-Century Philosopher.“ Moore's lecture drew the attention of workshop participants to the fact that although Hannah Arendt is well regarded and often cited in the fields of sociology and political science, she remains obscure in the realm of philosophy. The lecture was divided into three parts. The first one analyzed the frequency with which Hannah Arendt's

works were analyzed within the community of philosophers. This section was followed by Moore's assertions as to why her works were neglected by this community as well as by a section detailing his suggestions regarding promising works that may contribute to a greater appreciation of her work by philosophers in the future.

The conference proceeded the next day with a series of lectures by students from Baylor University. Amanda King spoke about Hannah Arendt's lecture, „Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship“ from the book *Responsibility and Judgment*. King's lecture incorporated Arendt's thoughts about the moral phenomenon of „coordination“ into a discussion about the myths found in the national ethos of both the Germans and the American people and suggested that an understanding of these myths might aid in the prevention of totalitarianism's development in the future. King also drew attention not only to the ability of citizens of democratic countries to act in ways that promote a strengthening of democracy, but also drew attention to the fact that citizens of democracies also have a responsibility, based on the works of Arendt, to act in a way that shows that they are civic-minded people.

On the heels of this discussion came Tom Just's lecture, „The Totalitarian Movement“, which focused on Arendt's theory of totalitarian propaganda found in *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Just described the many aspects of totalitarian propaganda, which included the use of science to prove its assertions about mankind as well as a reliance on consistency, inclusiveness, and thorough organization to lead citizens to believe the complicated system of beliefs constructed by the totalitarian regime. He also made it clear that Arendt's theory of propaganda in the totalitarian state left no room for dissent or independent thought, which made it necessary for totalitarian systems to continue expanding until it encompassed all lands, which otherwise threatened to expose the fallacies of the entire totalitarian system.

The next lecture was given by Jennifer L. Good of Baylor University. Good's presentation, called „Consent of the governed in Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem and 'Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,'“ explored Arendt's view of the ability of those who live under totalitarian systems to maintain their political agency. Using Arendt's thoughts from *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

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and „Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,“ she focused specifically on possibilities that citizens had not only to act in ways that can only be considered courageous but also more broadly on the maintenance of an inner dialogue consolidating beliefs and action, without which the greatest evils become possible. She concluded her lecture with profiles of two men mentioned in Eichmann in Jerusalem, who managed to maintain their political agency under the totalitarian regime.

Kimberly Maslin-Wicks of Hendricks College in Conway, Arkansas gave a lecture entitled „Isolation and Loneliness in the Work of Hannah Arendt.“ In her lecture, Maslin-Wicks draws attention to the ideas of isolation and loneliness in Arendt's work. From the readings, Maslin-Wicks makes the assertion that isolation was used by Arendt to mean that a person had been cast out by society because their inner dialogue had led them to act in ways that were incommensurate with the beliefs of society in general. She also suggested a possible definition for the idea of loneliness in Arendt's works as the most troubling phenomenon, in which a person becomes alienated from themselves because they no longer conduct an inner dialogue. Maslin-Wicks also asserted that these ideas remain pertinent to understanding the implications of Arendt's political theories and their applications to modern life.

Avner Dinur, doctoral student from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, gave a lecture entitled „Arendt's 'Council System' and Israel as a 'State of all its Citizens.'“ Dinur's lecture related Arendt's thoughts about the nation-state in general as well as her specific thoughts regarding the Jewish nation-state. Dinur advocated Arendt's „council system“ as a possible solution to the current conflict, a solution which would work on a local level where councils would be established. Here, people would cooperate to harmonize interests on a micro-level, which would allow for a greater consensus on the macro-level. Dinur suggested the „council system“ as a promising third way, distinct from the approach of Israel as a nation-state, and different also from the conception of Israel as a „state of all its citizens.“

The evening speech, called “Über das Denken nachdenken“ or „Hannah Arendt: Contemplating Thought“ was given by Ingeborg Gleichauf. Gleichauf's lecture explained the development over time of Arendt's thoughts on the act of thinking, specifically addressing the following areas:

what makes people think, the place of thinking, thinking and acting, and thinking and language. Gleichauf emphasized the connection Arendt had found between thoughtlessness and evil and the question of whether, by the same token, it is possible to avoid the greatest evils by having a constant dialogue with oneself.

The third day of the workshop opened with presentations by students from Baylor University, beginning with Jessica Jerabeck's presentation, entitled „The Public and the Private Realms in Arendt's The Human Condition.“ In her presentation, Jerabeck explained Arendt's separation of all human activity into three categories, including labor, work, and action. She went on to explain Arendt's distinctions between the private and the public realms, the first being the sphere of the household, and the second the sphere of the political. Jerabeck also included an explanation of the steadily-growing social realm, which Arendt believed should be guarded carefully, lest it fall into the wrong hands.

Student presentations continued with Katie Gilchrist's presentation called „The Life of the Mind: Language as the bridge between solitary and pluralist selves.“ Gilchrist began by presenting the idea of the individual, someone who must use words to describe the world around him, who then moves to putting those words together to form language. Gilchrist went on to explain that language is what allows him to communicate with his fellow man and to share common experiences but emphasized Arendt's contention that it is only metaphor, a relation between the abstract and the concrete, which truly allows man to communicate inner abstract feelings to other men.

The workshop continued with the presentation entitled „Reconciliation in Hannah Arendt's Thought and Praxis,“ by Birgit Maier-Katkin and Daniel Maier-Katkin, both of Florida State University. The presentation traced Hannah Arendt's thoughts on love, betrayal and reconciliation especially in regard to her relationship with philosopher, Martin Heidegger. Drawing to a great degree on personal correspondence, the Maier-Katkins sought to examine Arendt's path of thought on reconciliation, which began with her early American essays and progressed through her later writings on human nature, totalitarianism, judgment, the banality of evil, and the possibilities inherent in new beginnings.

Daniela Heitzmann of the University of Dres-

den then gave her lecture, entitled „Indignation and Misunderstanding: The Dispute on ‘A Report on the Banality of Evil.’“ Heitzmann began by relating how the debate, which took place primarily in New York, arose over Arendt’s book in the early 1960s and by briefly outlining the assertions of Arendt’s critics. She talked about the categories most of the criticisms fell into, including problems with the nature of the title, Arendt’s assertion that Jews were responsible for their own deaths, her harsh portrayal of the state attorney, and a personal attack on Arendt for simply being heartless in her writing. Heitzmann concluded by summarizing Arendt’s response to her critics as well as by including some of her own conclusions about the controversy.

Next came the presentation of Piotr Szymeczko of the University of Cracow, „The Perception of Hannah Arendt in Poland.“ Szymeczko’s presentation began by emphasizing the degree to which the Polish Solidarity movement was influenced by Hannah Arendt’s concepts of freedom and liberty under totalitarian regimes. He went on to explain how much *Origins of Totalitarianism* interested the people of Poland, who were living under some of the conditions described in Arendt’s work. After the fall of communism, Szymeczko points out, although Arendt’s major works were translated into Polish, they lost popular appeal and their circulation became restricted mostly to academic circles.

The third day of the workshop was concluded with a presentation on „Fascism and Communism in Romania from 1938 to 1989“ by Gerhard Besier, Director of the Hannah Arendt Institute for Research on Totalitarianism at the Technical University in Dresden. Besier’s lecture began by covering the years leading up to the Second World War and covered Romanian domestic and international politics as the country’s fascist regime allied itself with the National Socialists, the country’s territory was divided in the secret agreement with the Soviets, and tried to maintain some semblance of sovereignty by maintaining contact with the west through the end of the war when it fell under Soviet control. The lecture continued as Besier described the rule of the communists and the dictators and ended with the only execution to take place during the peaceful revolution. After Gerhard Besier’s lecture, an exhibition of the same name was opened to allow workshop participants to view some representations of history presented in the lecture.

The last day of the workshop began with a lecture entitled „Trials and Tragedies: Arendtian Modes of Judgment in Jerusalem,“ which was given by Robert Pirro of Georgia Southern University. Pirro began his lecture by pointing out the fact that many German intellectuals drew parallels between the issues of their own days and those encountered and written about by the Greeks. He included Arendt in this long-standing tradition and focused his presentation on pointing out that Arendt never painted the holocaust as a tragedy in the strictest definition of the word, but instead sought to portray the story of Eichmann as a tragedy, an approach which painted Eichmann’s criminality in a new light as well as suggests the continuing relevance of tragic thought in modern discourse.

The next presentation was given by Nikolaus Gatter, president of the Varnhagen Society in Cologne, and was called „Hannah Arendt about Rahel Varnhagen.“ In his presentation, Gatter discussed Hannah Arendt’s book, *Rahel Varnhagen. The Life of a Jewess*, which was devoid of a methodical proof of her thesis, that Varnhagen had only had one aim in life, which was to escape her Jewishness. Gatter’s presentation went on to suggest that since the book was not accurate as a historical portrayal of Varnhagen, it might find a better use as a novelization, more useful in understanding Arendt’s own life.

Dominik Trutkowski, student at the University of Heidelberg gave the next lecture, „Theories of Totalitarianism.“ Trutkowski’s presentation began with an overview of the classical theories of totalitarianism, the theory of political religions, and the theory of modern dictatorships. He included the strengths of each theory as well as the ways in which each of the theories have been criticised in the past. Trutkowski’s presentation concluded as he made connections between the different methodologies of historians and their propensity to prefer one theory over another.

The last lecture of the conference, „Desk Murderers or Dr. Lucas: Hannah Arendt on Culpability in ‘Auschwitz on Trial,’“ was given by Andrew Wisely of Baylor University. The focus of Wisely’s presentation was the story of Franz Lucas, a man who, against his will, worked on the reception ramp at Auschwitz, choosing who was fit to work and who was sent directly to the gas chambers while also going out of his way to give the living souls in the camp decent care, often at his own peril. Wisely drew attention to the stark con-

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trast between a man who was willing to continue living and working according to the Hippocratic Oath and those who simply acclimated themselves to working in a regime in which all lawful actions became criminal and all criminal actions lawful. He left the other workshop participants with the question of whether Lucas should have been punished for his complicity with the regime or whether the obviously heavy weight of his own conscience would suffice to punish him for the remainder of his life.

The goal of the workshop was not so much a preoccupation with Hannah Arendt's theory of totalitarianism, but rather an analysis of the writings of the philosopher from a cultural-philosophical perspective. The examination of correspondence showed how close the connection between Hannah Arendt's works and her personal life was, specifically in relation to her experience as one who was haunted as well as in her relationships with friends and acquaintances. The volume, in which the problems addressed at the workshop will be analysed, is currently being prepared.

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