
The Feminism of Hannah Arendt

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BOOK REVIEWED:

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*.
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982.

Hannah Arendt seems an unlikely model for either political actors in general or feminists in particular. Yet Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* encourages a revised view that does associate Arendt with activist politics.

This is not a critical biography. Young-Bruehl makes her purpose explicit:

It has not been my intention . . . to be either definitive or definitively critical. . . . I have taken only what my project, a philosophical biography, required. . . . [M]y primary task . . . has been contextual; I have tried to show how she came to her concerns, her subjects, how she went about making—and remaking—her books, and how she thought her way from one book to the next.

Indeed, criticism is consistently replaced by “contextualization.” Where one might expect a sustained inquiry into the contradictions in Arendt’s work or the controversies that surrounded it, Young-Bruehl explains, elaborates, and justifies. Clearly, she writes this book for love of Arendt. The project aims to recount the life in the order it was lived and reinterpret the writings according to the foundational experiences of Arendt’s early years. Young-Bruehl indicates that even *The Life of the Mind* follows through on the political and moral questions raised for Arendt in her experience of Jewish culture, Zionism, and totalitarianism. Although Young-Bruehl is seldom willing to make explicit judgments

about Arendt's work, she traces suggestive themes throughout the corpus of her writings, perhaps not leading us forward beyond Arendt but usefully pointing us back to the original conditions, questions, and sources of Arendt's concerns.

Despite the limitations of Arendt as a biographical model for feminists or, in fact, her limitations as an exemplary political actor for men as well as women, her writings—when put into context in the way shown us by Young-Bruehl—form a rich set of resources for thinking through the meaning, potential, and dangers inherent in social movements. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's biography is an important guide for identifying those resources.

We see in the biography that Hannah Arendt was shy about public appearances, unable to assume leadership, and, after 1948, unwilling to be politically active. "I am not qualified for any direct political work," Arendt states. "I do not enjoy to be confronted with the mob, am much too easily disgusted, have not enough patience for maneuvering, and not enough intelligence to maintain a certain necessary aloofness." Not merely a reluctant political actor, she seemed particularly uneasy in perceiving herself as a woman in public activities. Young-Bruehl explains that she "was suspicious of women 'who gave orders,' skeptical about whether women should be political leaders, and steadfastly opposed to the social dimensions of Women's Liberation." In this regard, her posturing so long with Heidegger, pretending for his gratification to be a "none-too-bright female," is especially striking. Young-Bruehl quotes Arendt from 1961: "I have really fibbed to him about myself all the while [since my student days] . . . as if I, so to speak, could not count to three, except when it came to giving an interpretation of his own things. . . ." There is no little irony in such a stance coming from the woman who could write *The Human Condition*, a book in praise of courage and action.

Having gained considerable recognition, Arendt resented invitations and honors that stressed that she was the "first woman" to be so singled out. She did not want to stand as the token or exceptional woman, as on the occasion when she was invited to present the Gauss lectures at Princeton. But Young-Bruehl points out the ambivalence behind her objections:

What she wanted for women and from women was attention paid to questions about political and legal discrimination. . . . Her reaction to the Princeton appointment was not, however, political; instead of questioning why the university had never before appointed a woman to a full professorship, she emphasized the psychological dimension. "I am not disturbed at all about being a woman professor . . . because I am quite used to being a woman."

The ambivalence recurs in Arendt's studies of the two women with whom she most closely identified: Rahel Varnhagen and Rosa Luxemburg. In the pref-

ace to *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, Arendt claimed that the "Woman Problem . . . the discrepancy between what men expected of women 'in general' and what women could give or wanted in their turn, was already established by the conditions of the era and represented a gap that virtually could not be closed. I could touch upon such matters only in so far as they were absolutely essential to the facts of Rahel's biography and could not consider them in any general way."

About Luxemburg, Arendt points out that her self-consciousness about being a woman made her as much an outsider as did the fact that she was a Polish Jew. Interestingly, this discussion immediately leads into a consideration of Luxemburg's lover, Jogiches, not to an elaboration of the implications of women's marginalization. Doubtless, Arendt thought the point too well established to warrant development. But as Young-Bruehl demonstrates, Arendt was in many ways ready to overlook the gender conditioning of her own era and accept as inevitable the gap between male expectations and female needs.

Such ready acceptance is the basis for Adrienne Rich's disappointment in Arendt. In particular, Rich is distressed by Arendt's priority of public values and political action, which appear to demean the "private" world of women and their non-public values and labor. She speaks of Arendt's denigration of that work readily identifiable as women's and reproaches her for ignoring the writings of female activists, such as Olive Schreiner, Emma Goldman, and Jane Addams. Rich argues further that the "withholding of women from participation in the *vita activa*, the 'common world,' and the connection of this with reproductivity, is something from which she does not so much turn her eyes as stare straight through unseeing."¹

For Rich, Arendt is a tough, "male"-oriented thinker, oblivious to the everyday conditions of women's lives, rigidly separating private and public, production and action, social and political. Yet there is a paradox here, for the "tough" male critics of Arendt accuse her of political irrelevancy—a victim of "revolutionary nostalgia," living a "hopeless, helpless, vicarious life," and "grossly over-rated." For them, she is too soft, too "tender," unable to live up to her rhetoric of political action and unable to distinguish fact and fantasy.²

The paradox is illuminated—if not resolved—by the biography, for Young-Bruehl forcefully reminds us that Arendt's self-consciousness as a thinker, writer, and actor involved her Jewish heritage. Until that fact is understood, most judgments of her will be off the mark. Importantly, this is the background

1 Adrienne Rich, "Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women," *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979), p. 212.

2 See, for example, Peter Berger, "A Woman of This Century," *New York Times Book Review*, April 25, 1982; Robert Asahina, "Who Was That Mass Man, Anyway?" *Harper's*, September 1982; Ernest Gellner, "Accounting for the Horror," *Times Literary Supplement*, August 6, 1982; Martin Jay, "Hannah Arendt: Opposing Views," *Partisan Review* 45, no. 3 (1978).

that Arendt shared with Varnhagen and Luxemburg. As Arendt says of Varnhagen, she “walked down all the roads that could lead her into the alien world, and upon all these roads she left her track, had converted them into Jewish roads, pariah roads; ultimately her whole life had become a segment of Jewish history.” Arendt similarly traces Luxemburg’s unique perspective on socialism back to her “excellent relations with her family. . . none of whom ever showed the slightest inclination to socialist convictions or revolutionary activities, yet who did everything they could for her. . . . [This] gives us a glimpse [into her] Jewish family background without which the emergence of the ethical code of the peer group would be nearly incomprehensible. This milieu and never the German Party, was [her] home.”³

Focusing our attention on the importance of Arendt’s background of Jewish cultural and political experience allows us to see the relevancy of her work for feminist theory and action. It would be valuable for feminists to reexamine her earliest works where the themes of plurality, dialogue, and process were meant literally, described vividly, and are therefore accessible to those who have immediate, worldly concerns. To focus on the *Life of the Mind* or other later pieces and omit the journal essays lends credibility to the charges of vicarious living, revolutionary nostalgia, and exaggeration of the value of her work. Young-Bruehl’s treatment supports the contention that Arendt’s Zionist experience was foundational and thus must be taken into account when attempting to place her in an epoch, a tradition, a politics, or a school of thought. “What Hannah Arendt wanted to emphasize . . . was that she came to her political awakening and to her resistance . . . as a Jew.”

Arendt was drawn into the Zionist cause while still in Germany; much of her early journalism after immigrating to America is directed at the movement and the refounding of Israel. She wished to help provide a “new theoretical basis” for Jewish politics within a critical Zionist framework, but her questions to Zionists always assumed that the movement would have to evolve its own direction from within. She could not direct others in how to alter the movement; rather as its “conscious pariah” member, she was obligated to state that which could not be left out of consideration in choosing a direction. Thus, in her conception, the relation of theorist to movement is necessarily oblique. The purpose of criticism is to aid the autonomous life of the movement, to help it become conscious of itself as a continuing process, and to sustain that self-creation.

Arendt’s theory of action teaches that members of a community—even newly emergent in a movement—must be allowed to create their own ways of development. The inventive process of building, sustaining, and rebuilding a community

3 *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), pp. xviii, 222; “Rosa Luxemburg: 1871-1919,” *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 41, 44-45.

must not be subsumed into a concern for finding a correct ideology or reaching a fixed goal. The process, or the "performance," should remain ultimate in importance. The Zionists, Arendt charged, early lost their focus on the need to continue "performing" and instead became absorbed with analyzing the world about them into simple ideological opposites (of anti-Semites and Jews) and constructing for themselves an already outmoded nation-state as protection from the misidentified enemy.

Arendt at first seemed to many Jews an obstructionist, then with the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, a traitor. She never offered practical policies, and her concerns for the possibilities of human interaction rested too heavily on political movements for her to be merely "sympathetic" or supportive without criticism. She believed that the tendency of the human condition is to retreat from the risks and pains of acting with others and to prefer the easier tasks of constructing and following out a ready-made blueprint for the future. Political action, she acknowledged, is dangerous: it produces uncertain, irreversible, and unpredictable results. But for Arendt, collective life—determined together—is the only fully human life; whatever impedes that must be relentlessly questioned.

Arendt's judgment of the Zionist movement may seem harsh, overdrawn, and deeply disturbing. But, as Young-Bruehl indicates, her work stands as a jeremiad, an exhortation, a calling to account. Arendt tells the story of a movement from the perspective of a pariah member. The catastrophe for Jews from the external view is the story of the Holocaust. The catastrophe from within is the failure of the inner power of Zionism. It is essential, she believes, to relate both catastrophes. The horror of the former cannot be permitted to eclipse the need to tell also the story of the failure of the Jews. The reemergence of the action and freedom of a community are at stake, and fundamental to taking responsibility for one's destiny is a recognition of one's collusion.

If Arendt's jeremiad were adapted for feminism, it would address not the violence against women but their unwitting cooperation in their subordination. The story of the physical-psychological oppression and social-political inequities perpetrated against women tells the crucial external view. The story of the interior concerns the failure, collusion, and abandonment of power by women themselves.

Seen from the perspective of Arendt's intentions, what appear as liabilities in her work—rigid separations between private and public, social and political, making and doing—are not arbitrary hierarchies but distinctions necessary to sustaining a movement. To call Arendt "male" or "hard" assumes that she buys into mainstream ideologies of dominance and subordination, but the jeremiad form undercuts such a simplified view of her ideas. At least in the works on Zionism and Jewish experience, Arendt speaks to peers and calls for a community of equals; in fact, she strongly expresses the "hunger for equals" that Rich identifies as the heart of the feminist impulse.

Arendt too understands that the passion to dominate and institute

hierarchies is characteristic of corruption. In response to this, counter associations are born, impelled, according to Arendt, by the true political passion, "the desire to *act* among one's equals." While a corrupt notion of power assumes mastery over the will of others, real power depends upon the "ability to agree on a common course of action in unconstrained communication."⁴ In this view, power moves horizontally rather than hierarchically. Such associations which spring up in response to a corrupt milieu contain the standard for a new and better political model.

Even if she is not a feminist, Arendt's political theory shares much with those who are, as Adrienne Rich unintentionally demonstrates:

[Feminism] is a question of the community we are reaching for . . . who we envision as our hearers, or co-creators, our challengers; who will urge us to take our work further, more seriously than we had dared. . . . Women have done these things for each other, sought each other. . . . Denied space in the universities, the scientific laboratories, the professions, we have devised our networks. We must not be tempted to trade the possibility of enlarging and strengthening those networks, and of extending them to more . . . women, for the illusion of power and success as "exceptional" or "privileged" women in the professions.⁵

Even as she turns from Arendt, Rich identifies substantially the same issues for feminism that Arendt highlighted for Zionism: the quality of life as an outsider; the implicit tradition of identity for the pariah that provides resources for recreating collectivity; the social experiments that are models for the whole community. I will discuss briefly the potential value of these points of contact for feminist theory.

First, the conscious pariah: How is one to comprehend the political nature of those systematically excluded from political life? This is Arendt's underlying question in addressing Jewish identity. She sees that Jewish history has been that of the "exile" or outsider with regard to Western Europe. Jews, however, stand as the vanguard of homelessness and worldlessness. Their lack of political place foreshadowed the loss of a political center for all Europeans. To escape pariah status, Jews turned in one of two opposed directions. Some became assimilationists, trying to forget their Jewish heritage and move to the

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, "Hannah Arendt's Communications Concept of Power," *Social Research* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 3, 18.

⁵ Rich, "Conditions for Work," p. 214.

center of bourgeois, cosmopolitan society. Others, isolationists, sought identity within a separatist Jewish enclave. Thus, both parvenus and chauvinists tried to negate their pariah condition either by denying that society had set boundaries against them or by believing in a utopian space safe from other peoples.

Arendt argues that Jews held a unique position in Europe, potentially able to see the universal implications of their exclusion from political participation. They were a living standard by which to judge Western culture. Extraordinary individuals (such as Bernard Lazare, Franz Kafka, and members of the Ihud party) did become such "conscious pariahs," refusing to relinquish their special insight into both European and Jewish cultures. She argues further that the Jews as a whole had the opportunity, though unfortunately failed, to become a self-consciously pariah people who could politically educate others through their historical experience and by their political example.

Feminists have also recognized their own pariah condition. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of Other."⁶ And the patterns of assimilation and isolation repeat themselves as women too attempt to escape their status. Female parvenus work their way into the professions, into government, into the center of Western culture, even if it means their success is built on the unacknowledged labor of other women. They are women in private and "men" in public. They believe that equality for all women is won by the rise to prominence of pioneer exceptions like themselves. Female isolationists route themselves into the opposite extreme, believing in the necessity of radical separation from men and from women who consort with men. These self-designated pariahs must sever themselves from the corrupt (and corrupting) male culture by creating their own total culture, making a new home.

Wholesale rejection or wholesale acceptance of the dominant culture are the temptations of movements. Either extreme gives a false sense of home or place, precluding vital questions not only about the contemporary "worldlessness" of women *and* men but also about important differences of class and ethnicity. Both extremes fatally assume the dominant culture as their standard of reference. As Arendt exhorted the Zionists, feminists also must think on the edge between male-dominated society and women's culture. The "logos" or "coherent speech" of feminism can no more emerge from assimilation or isolation for them than it could for the Zionists. The position of conscious marginality alone can allow for the dual vision with which to make just claims, that is, claims

6 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p. xxix.

that articulate the view of the excluded but also speak to the good of the whole population.

The second point of contact between feminism and Zionism involves their hidden traditions. The Zionists came to foster a new imperialism, even as they believed they were liberating themselves. While it seems obvious that those who have been victimized so severely for so long deserve for that very reason to have their own homeland and power of self-determination, Arendt warns that such an assumption is dangerous. As Adrienne Rich has also stated, the "mere sharing of oppression does not constitute a common world." Arendt believed that power arises from collective self-confidence in a people's capacity to act, to move, to change conditions, for the benefit of the whole population. The outrage that springs from victimization may produce violent reactions that are entirely understandable, but in Arendt's view, only the moral authority that springs from the assumption of one's responsibility to act with others in "unconstrained, nonviolent communication" can justify and sustain a common world.

European Jews collectively, if unconsciously, inherited a tradition of exile that, Arendt explains, might have become the grounding for a truly responsible stance toward other peoples. Hidden within the tradition of exile was a forceful moral claim: not that the Jews had always been victims, but that as exiles, they had never been imperialists. Thus, she understood that latent within an enforced tradition of exclusion was a positive experience that could be made the underlying principle of a whole way of life. Arendt insists that Jews could have made the refusal to extend homelessness and exclusion to others the ethical basis of Israel. Instead, the redivision of the world by Zionists into Jews and anti-Semites demonstrated their failure to act responsibly and their collusion with peoples destructive of freedom.

Arendt elaborates her theory of action in *The Human Condition*, where she draws the distinction between making and doing. Characteristic of making is the requirement to break, destroy, or tear down in order to construct, build, or produce. Birth, however, brings something new into the world without destroying its origins. Hence, she uses the metaphor of natality to articulate the idea of doing or acting. To consider political action as giving birth rather than constructing an object conceives of the world in ways that are radically different from conventional assumptions (of state building, for example), but ways that are convergent with the hidden tradition of women.

As many feminists point out, women have traditionally been involved with giving birth and midwifery, childrearing, caring for the sick and infirm, and tending the aged. Iris Young finds that women have constituted their "world through being involved with life rather than projects." She argues that "we need not follow the paradigm of making and achieving in order to think of a world. We can conceive a set of meaningful assignments arising not from activities of making,

planning, calculating, and achieving, but rather from concerned dealings with processes of life and death.”⁷

The content of women’s traditional activities, therefore, does not inherently involve the world-making, technocratic impulse central to Western culture. It is, however, part of the oppression of women that they have been restricted to such assignments as childrearing, preparing food, and nursing. And as women leave such traditional activities, they do not automatically carry with them an imperative to “act” rather than to “make.” Women who go into politics or the professions, in fact, appear to be just as prone as men to organize themselves into hierarchies. One cannot make a persuasive argument that women naturally carry with them the proper virtues into public life any more than one can make a convincing argument that urges women to remain engaged exclusively in domestic tasks. Both are equally regressive.

Arendt’s warnings about the consequences of losing the opportunity to enrich oneself and others through bringing a pariah tradition into the public speaks as well to the feminist movement. Women must maintain their “pre-emancipation” tradition of activities and interaction without clinging to the specific, oppressive forms from which their experience of community arose. Their “concernful” way of life must be translated into the form of other activities.

From an Arendtian perspective, the feminist movement has an extraordinary regenerative potential for the entire culture. For her, the real power of feminists would involve the self-conscious development of their own latent tradition. In their long, enforced exile from public and productive activities, women can make the moral claim that they have never been architects of the modern capitalist and technological state.

The third similarity between Zionism and feminism lies in the nature of their respective social experiments. Arendt believed that the kibbutz, as a social experiment, drew on the positive potential of the Jews’ latent tradition of exile. It fostered new forms of ownership, farming, family organization, and child education, which exemplified participation within a humanly scaled world, neither bourgeois, nor nationalist, nor imperialist. On the contrary, the kibbutz offered a unique prototype for cooperation and extension of the pariah legacy to Arabs. Israelis were, in Arendtian terms, creating a “space of appearances,” a community in which members discussed and decided upon what they should value and what

⁷ Iris Marion Young, “Is There a Woman’s World? Some Reflections on the Struggle for Our Bodies” (paper presented at “The Second Sex—30 Years Later Conference” at New York University, cosponsored by the New York Institute for Humanities and the Helena Rubinstein Foundation (September 27–29, 1979), p. 45; “Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual Systems Theory,” *Socialist Review* 10, nos. 2–3 (March–June 1980): 176.

they should do together. They were inventing not only specific ways to live, but a whole new way of life itself.

Therefore, Arendt proposed that the early Zionists in Israel had the moral and material basis on which to ally with other progressives. They were in a position to achieve freedom responsibly without dichotomizing the world into categories and falling back on the archaic political form of the nation-state. While Jews and Arabs were able to work together on the activities of production and consumption, such social and economic cooperation was not politicized into a joint, federalist homeland. The Zionists, she believed, were on the verge of bringing something new into the world but retreated from the difficult birth process. Instead, they furthered the growing homelessness by displacing the Palestinians.

Just as the kibbutz experiment failed to be politicized, and thereby was lost as a way of life for Israel that might have been nonimperialist, so it may be that the collectives created by feminists to provide health care, safety, education, dignity, and self-worth will not be politicized. The small, voluntary groups that cope with the problems caused by the domination of women may unfortunately be superseded by the supposedly greater project (whether liberal or socialist) of mastering society and nature. And to lose the principle of free association would also be to lose the meaning of women's hidden tradition: their legacy of doing rather than making.

To prevent further reproduction of the present conditions of worldlessness and imperialism, feminists must engage with other women and men on the political grounds that have been discovered in their collectives. Their values—the insistence on shared speech, inclusiveness, inter-individual responsibility, and accountability—should be incorporated into larger political enterprises. In becoming aware of the permanent value of collective assembly and determination, feminists put themselves forward as civic beings ready to cooperate with equals. Neither the dualistic view of the world as divided into sexist and oppressed nor the claim that women are universally oppressed will sustain the movement. “There are dangers,” Iris Young has written, “in representing male domination as universal in form. This can lead to serious cultural, ethnic, racial, and class biases in the account of the allegedly common structures of patriarchy.” Commonalities, even among women themselves, must be “found” rather than presupposed.

Shlomo Avineri has described Zionism, at its best, as the revolution against the “drift” of Jewish life, against the “accommodation” that enabled survival in powerlessness, against personal ease, bourgeois comfort, and the good life of the individual.⁸ A movement that shares Zionism's care for the public, the

⁸ Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 226.

communitarian, and the social requires a recognition of its latent power. Such a movement equally requires the kind of belief in regeneration expressed by Arendt.

Under the present pressures to conform, worship fiscal conservatism, "save the family," produce children, and just plain survive, many feminists have lost their certainty, sense of urgency, and energy. The perception of social possibilities is rapidly narrowing throughout America, which means that there is a strong temptation for the movement to succumb to the belief that significant political transformations are impossible and public action is futile.

Viewed abstractly, Arendt's assertion of natality seems utopian. Seen within the context of reactionary times, however, it stands as a warning against drift, accommodation, and submission. Her insistence on new beginnings is the necessary precondition for altering human affairs. It is interesting that much the same criticism has been leveled at feminists as at Arendt: they too are accused of not confronting the power of the state or comprehending the realities of power struggles. Sheila Rowbotham contends, nonetheless, that the necessary starting point for confronting the state is "self-activity," challenging "self-subordination" and "discovering in public the capacity to survive and not be frightened by political opponents."⁹ Without the birth of such a civic personality, women will find themselves subordinated once again in any regime, whether or not it claims to act on their behalf. Feminists and Arendt share the understanding, although they may diverge on many other issues, that radical politics involve nothing less than full and direct participation as equals.

⁹ Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal, and Hilary Wainwright, *Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981), p. 250.