

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Lars Rensmann** and **Samir Gandesha**, eds., *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations*. Stanford University Press, 2012, 352 pp., \$25.18 paperback, (978-0-8047-7539-7)

**A***rendt and Adorno* offers its readers a timely and sophisticated collection of essays evaluating the historical, political, and theoretical proximity of these two important 20th century thinkers. The premise of the collection is that even if the personal relationship between Hannah Arendt and Theodor W. Adorno was a strained one, bordering on open hostility (at least on Arendt's part), this by no means should be allowed to become a judgment on the interconnections between their respective bodies of work. On the contrary, as Gandesha points out in his introduction to the collection, there are significant commonalities between these thinkers' personal circumstances that also no doubt draw the content of their respective work into proximity and dialogue. Adorno and Arendt each lived through the rise and fall of Nazi Germany, both were of German-Jewish heritage, both were involuntarily exiled to the United States throughout this period — although unlike Adorno, Arendt opted to remain in the United States after the war — and both maintained common friendships with other prominent intellectuals of the time. As one might expect, such historico-biographical affinities left deep and lasting traces on their respective bodies of work, the similarities and differences of which this collection does an admirable job of putting into relief and dialogue.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first broadly canvasses the views of Adorno and Arendt on modernity's relationship to philosophy and political philosophy, while the second examines their often parallel understandings of Nazi totalitarianism, its relationship to the fate of Europe's Jews, and — although this theme is more implied than discussed outright — the implications of this fate for the viability of cosmopolitanism and the paradigm of human rights. The final section takes up the experience of exile common to both thinkers in order to consider its ramifications for the exiled intellectuals' attempted theorization of an unfamiliar social and cultural environment. The pieces in this collection are strong without exception, and several are written by established scholars who will be familiar to readers working in contem-

porary social theory, such as Seyla Benhabib, J.M. Bernstein, and Dieter Thoma, among others.

The book's first section features essays broadly focused on the relation between modernity and modern philosophy in Adorno and Arendt's writing. Taking up the influence of Walter Benjamin on both Arendt and Adorno, Seyla Benhabib argues that this influence accounts for the centrality of Kant's concept of reflective judgment in both thinkers' respective works, representing a form of aesthetically derived resistance to the categories of the reified modern world. While for Benhabib, Adorno, here unlike Arendt, neglects the communicative potentials of the aesthetic, J.M. Bernstein's contribution offers something of a counter-weight to Benhabib's view with its argument that Arendt's account of civil disobedience should be read as a philosophical transcription of Adorno's aesthetic theory into the domain of politics. Such transcription contests the Habermasian line that Adorno's aesthetics retreat into a subjective utopia, since on Bernstein's reading Arendt's notion of civil disobedience requires the reactivation of the normative promise of founding deeds, and so constitutes a form of political communication across time and between generations. In contrast to these pieces that assay the commonality between Arendt and Adorno, Dana Villa's essay lays out the differences between Adorno and Arendt's theories of society and politics. By following closely Weber's theory of bureaucratic domination Adorno is led to retreat into the increasingly compromised sphere of private individuality; such a retreat is contrasted to Arendt's attitude toward politics: while sharing to some extent Adorno's critique of the liberal individual, she ultimately believes that political action in the public sphere is still possible. Dieter Thoma's complicated intervention, closing out this first section, reads Arendt's early theory of subjective action against her later articulations, showing that the early accounts are too simple, unable to do justice to the subject's own nonidentity, its internal complexity that makes it irreducible to the requirements of external action. Although Arendt's later accounts compensate for these earlier shortcomings, Thoma argues that Adorno's account of subjective nonidentity in the midst of modern society can usefully supplement Arendt's discussion, bringing both theorists into a closer dialogue than one might initially expect.

The next section moves away from the overtly philosophical concerns of the previous one, toward a comparison of Arendt and Adorno on the place of human rights in a post-Holocaust world (the essays by Rensmann and Fine), and then takes up the problem of Jewishness and anti-Semitism (the essays by Judaken and by Wessel and Rensmann). Rensmann, whose argument moves parallel to that of Fine, takes up Adorno and Arendt as unlikely interlocutors for cosmopolitan theory.

Even though both are marginal to cosmopolitan literature, the author believes Arendt and Adorno offer a broadly supportive critique; both affirm cosmopolitanism as a response to the Holocaust, even while providing a critical appraisal of the ways that that response is compromised by formal legal-bureaucratic imperatives that undermine its aspirations. For his part, Robert Fine takes up Arendt and Adorno as critics of the idea of “right” as it informs cosmopolitanism, arguing that whereas radical critics (Agamben is cited here) are out to “trash” human rights, Adorno and Arendt, despite their criticisms, ultimately support the humanistic aims behind the paradigm of human rights. While this last claim is undoubtedly correct, one wonders if it can be taken as a defense of existing human rights in anything like the way Fine hopes, since both Arendt and Adorno view the current regime of human rights as a fundamental mismatch between the formalism of legal doctrine and the substantive ends of human dignity and flourishing. Fine tacitly admits this with his concluding remarks that “we should not ignore the generative capacities of the idea of right to inspire action” (p. 172). Jonathan Judaken’s piece argues that both Adorno and Arendt, in different ways, rehabilitate Jewish stereotypes in their attempted diagnosis of the fate of the Jews in European modernity in the form of the “conceptual Jew,” a hypostatized figure of Jewishness whose position is less descriptive than functional. In apparent contrast to Judaken’s argument, Wessel and Rensmann’s essay examines how anti-Semitic social categories placed Jews in an impossible situation in European modernization, hopelessly caught between embracing the promise of equality and the cynical manipulation of this very equality in order to scapegoat Jews as sinister “others.”

The final section of the book turns to a discussion of the fact and impact of exile for the writings of the two authors. Auer’s piece is a thoughtful and timely meditation on the changing role of the intellectual in contemporary society as prefigured by the condition of homelessness experienced by Arendt and Adorno. Both understood their exile as the loss of cultural familiarity, and as a result it prefigured the contemporary intellectual’s loss of public authority. Yet as Auer goes on to argue, neither believes the role of the intellectual to be simply outmoded. Rather, the loss of cultural comfort provides the intellectual-in-exile an uncanny perceptiveness. In keeping with this line of argument, Gandesha’s essay, appropriately titled “Homeless Philosophy,” posits an inner connection between Arendt’s and Adorno’s philosophical concept of experience and the experience of exile. Here he locates a basic affinity between the devastating loss of the *Heimat*, through which the lifeworld becomes reduced to disenchanting surfaces, and the epistemological reduction of experience to standardized objects in positivism. For both theorists,

such epistemological impoverishment is the symbol of a modernization whose break with tradition remains incomplete, but whose incompleteness presents itself as an opportunity and a task.

Overall, this collection presents ground-breaking, generally fascinating, and thought-provoking work. It will prove a useful collection for graduate students and faculty undertaking research in the fields of social theory, political theory, human rights, and cosmopolitanism, as well as those with more specialized theoretical interests in either Arendt or Adorno. This collection will prove an important reference point for many years to come.

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