

Hannah Arendt's Reception in Argentina

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Arendt's "Career" in Argentina

Last year many meetings, seminars and symposia were held in Europe and the United States in remembrance of Arendt's birthday centenary. In South America there were at least two major conferences in her honor in Argentina and Brazil. A number of researchers and scholars presented papers with great success at these conferences. Some of them were also printed in popular magazines. The current enthusiasm and interest in Latin America in Arendt's body of work is expressed by the many new translations into Spanish and Portuguese (W. Heuer, 2005). In addition, many of her books and essays on specific current topics have been included in many academic programs and curricula starting in the 1990's. That raises the question: What makes Arendt's work so relevant for us now in Latin American countries? What makes her a "classic" thinker to us?

In the following, I will begin with how Hannah Arendt became an intellectual and moral challenge to the Argentinean intelligentsia. Reading of a thinker of her stature who did not back down before the unspeakable crimes of her times, made some of us face the crimes of our own recent past with its lasting burden of pain and sorrow. I will follow what I call Arendt's "archeological layers" in her argentinean readership trying to recover some forgotten readers as well as writers, and non-recognized inheritors so to speak.

What we are faced with is a dialogue between popularizers, translators, members of cultural and academic think tanks, reviewers in literary and academic journals and more. It is not a one-way process influenced or driven by "central" cultural spaces towards "peripheral" ones. I believe this process had discontinuances in its themes and perspectives in Argentina, but was still very productive from its inception. With an examination of the following selected readings, I hope to demonstrate the quality of Arendt's work emphasizing high points such as: the agonistic core of political action, Arendt's critique of the nation state and its effects on the concept of citizenship, the perils of exceptionality, the thoughtlessness (*Gedankenlosigkeit*) of the masses as well as certain individual power wielders (Eichmann), and the problem of how violence and party politics affect revolutions.

Hannah Arendt's reception in Argentina was preceded by extremely helpful studies on Kant and Schmitt done by Jorge Dotti (1992; 2000), the works of Alejandro Blanco (2006) about the Frankfurt School's reception by leading Argentinean sociologist Gino Germani, and the outstanding work on Marx by Horacio Tarcus (2007). I will draw a map of and cover chronologically the principal Argentinean writers on Hannah Arendt and the major themes they covered and/or did not cover.

Worte eines deutschen jüdischen Philosophen

Hannah Arendt's thought was already known in Argentina before 1967, when *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *On Revolution* were translated into Spanish. But who were those first Argentinean readers? And what in Arendt's work did they read? I found that there existed translations of articles and chapters from her breakthrough book on totalitarianism in different periodicals and reviews published by the Jewish German community as well as dissident leftist intellectuals in Argentina as early as 1940. The periodicals and their editors in question, emphasized the internationalist character and relevance of Arendt's writings immediately after World War II. The common link of the editors and their periodicals, was the network of refugees and émigrés from Europe, artists, scientists, writers, philosophers and political and cultural activists. After 1941, there is the rise of Popular Fronts united by anti-fascism and anti-Nazism. Cultural reviews and periodicals were the fundamental channels of information for all these groups.

For Arendt's earliest introduction into Argentina there are publications dated between 1942 and 1952, the time of her exile in New York. This series is interesting, because even though she was, as yet, not well known as a philosopher or intellectual, these articles appeared in diverse Argentinean reviews and journals of the Jewish and anti-Nazi German communities in Argentina. The topics covered focused on the central and controversial issues such as the future creation of a Jewish nation state and the personal and political responsibility of the German people with what came to be called the *Shoá*.

It all began with the article "*Ein Mittel zur Versöhnung der Völker*," published by *Provenir: Zeitschrift für alle Fragen des jüdischen Lebens*, in 1942. This review was identified with the "Reigner Group" formed by Jewish German émigrés led by Karl Julius Riegner and Rabbi Günter Friedländer, who were associated with the Bund Deutsch-Jüdischer Jugend in Berlin. With roots in Buenos Aires, this group had organized a network for Jewish German youths in 1935 to facilitate their immigration to South American countries. The article by Arendt was an original version, but differed from others published during those years by her, in that it was also a political statement about the situation of Jews during the war (P. Pachet, 1989). She proclaimed the idea that Jews must defend their political existence as Jews, which meant that they had the right to form their own army in a war that included a campaign by Nazi Germany to kill all Jews. Arendt elaborated her later well-known viewpoint about the proper response to the Nazi persecution thusly: *Ein Mensch kann sich nur als das wehren, als was er angegriffen wird. Ein Jude kann seine Menschenwürde nur bewahren, wenn er als Jude Mensch sein kann* (128). This article also included sharp criticism of the Western nations' filojudaism, as for example was the case in England, which took in Jewish people as victims while not recognizing their right to self-defense, because as a people they did not represent a nation. This particular arendtian point, which went beyond the confines of Zionism, made it possible for her to publish in anti-Nazi German journals. Thus, the anti-Nazi German Argentinean journal *La otra Alemania/Das Andere Deutschland* published two of Arendt's articles in consecutive editions in 1945. The first of them, "Das deutsche Problem ist kein deutsches Problem", criticized the idea that the roots of Nazism were related to something like "German spirit", pointing out that the

problem was instead the political failure to react to the European nation states' decadence following World War I. In the second article, "Organisierte Schuld", Arendt tackled the relationship between collective guilt and personal responsibility and the question over the German collaboration with the Nazi regime. The journal identified her as a "regular contributor", but those were the only two of her articles it published. The journal itself had an irregular existence. It was labeled as "the organ of the democratic Germans", *La Otra Alemania*, but discontinued in 1949, when its editor, August Siemens, a former SDP Legislator until the rise of the Nazis, returned to Germany. Moreover, with Juan Peron seizing power in 1945, the term "democratic" came to be associated with anti-Peronist factions, who were systematically suppressed.

The first Spanish translation, "Reseña de *El Libro negro* de World Jewish Congress et. al., y de *Hitler's Professors* de Max Weinreich", appeared in 1946 in the Jewish Review *Davar* taken from American Magazine *Commentary*. Here Arendt reviewed some of the recent publications on the Nazi regime. The editors outlined and stressed Arendt's particular viewpoint about the implications of the creation of a "Jewish nation state" in a post-war context. The review also dealt critically with the place and role of German intellectuals during the Nazi regime, keeping in mind the problematical association of concept pairs such as virtue-innocence and evil-guilt as they relate to politics. Topics referring to political movements like fascism and totalitarianism were profusely assessed in the cultural review section of *Davar* during the 1950's. There was an effort made to comprehend the phenomenon of Peronism from a sociological and psycho-social perspective. Even though Arendt's works on Nazi totalitarianism were already known, albeit only in small English editions, she was not mentioned as commonly as other contemporary philosophers and sociologists writing on those subjects such as Erich Fromm or Herbert Marcuse. Therefore, one can say that to the Argentinean intellectuals Arendt was foremost a Jewish author, talking about Jewish questions of interest mostly to the Jewish community in Argentina and with few if any other connections to local subjects.

This makes all the more remarkable the positive reception received by *Babel*, the quarterly magazine edited by Argentinean Samuel Glusberg, an associate of anti-fascist and local leftist groups from Santiago de Chile. The magazine had a surprisingly wide distribution. It tried to resist the cultural and political persecution during Peronism by proffering an internationalist spirit rooted in the diffusion of the Jewish-German and Latin-American cultures, and adding a mix of non-dogmatic anti-Stalinist radical tradition. Glusberg edited two of Arendt's articles almost concurrently with those edited by *Davar*: "En torno al Estado de Israel" and "Franz Kafka: una reevaluación," in 1949 and 1950 respectively. In the 1949 editorial, Glusman gave a clear reference to Arendt's background: She is presented as the "disciple of Karl Jaspers in pre-Hitler Germany" and "author of a book about Saint Augustine, published in the United States." For the 1950 article about Kafka, Glusberg pointed out an "express authorization" from Arendt. Those articles show a "philosopher" closest to her already well-known critic of Nazi and Stalinist totalitarianism and that before her book on that topic appeared in its original English version. *Babel* illustrates the connections in the international net of Argentinean leftist activism. Its pages are full of articles from German émigrés like Thomas Mann, and from

the editors of *Partisan Review*, to which Arendt contributed regularly, such as art critic Clement Greenberg, Dwight MacDonald and William Phillips. This philosophical ascription wasn't readily accepted by the philosophical establishment, even though her notorious teachers, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, were well known and had been translated widely since the 1930's.

After all this, *Davar* returned to Arendt in 1952 with a newly translated article, *Relectura de Herzl: 'El Estado Judío'*, in which she sharply criticized not only Herzl's ideas, but also the Zionist vision of a newborn Jewish state. The *Davar* editors reminded readers that Arendt had studied with Jaspers and Heidegger and made reference to her first book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. They also made clear that they disagreed with Arendt on Herzl's role in Jewish history, anticipating the furor her outspoken criticism of this touchy subject would create. In the same volume, reviewing the recent edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Pedro Weil reported on her review of Leon Poliakov's major work, *Brévaire de la Haine: Le IIIe Reich et les Juifs*, published by *Commentary* the same year. Weil pointed out the recall Arendt had made to Poliakov's criticism of the role the *Judenräte* had played in the Nazi's extermination plan and its execution.

Oblivion and Radical Readings: 1952-1972

This series is characterized by chronological discontinuity and original affiliations made between her works and local political issues and/or standpoints. During these two decades, some of Arendt's major works were translated such as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *A Report on the Banality of Evil* and *On Revolution*, both first published in 1963 and rendered into Spanish in 1967. A partial first translation of *Men in Dark Times* was made in 1971. As mentioned before, while her works were already circulating widely in their original language editions, and some had been translated into Spanish, too, there was little productive response between 1952 and 1963. The awkwardness of her statements may have prevented her being mentioned or commented on more widely, even though totalitarianism was, by then, an ordinary topic to analyze Perón's government. Part of this had to do with the military coup against him in 1955, approving draconian measures against its supporters and the most derogatory critics of his regime.

It was not until February, 1963, that the first extended comment appeared on Arendt's *The Human Condition* in the review *Cristianismo y Sociedad*, "Reflexiones sobre el sentido de la acción cristiana en América Latina. A propósito de un libro de Hannah Arendt", presented by Methodist theologian Julio de Santa Ana. It was a quarterly review belonging to the *rioplatense* Methodists connected to the Latin American Liberation Theology, which did, however, reject the use of armed guerilla tactics as a legitimate way to bring about a socialist society in the region. De Santa Ana's report on Arendt's book, brought to light her critical link to Marxist theory, the influence of Jaspers' existentialism, as well as connections to protestant theologians Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. In addition, De Santa Ana acknowledged Arendt's phenomenological approach to human activities and conveyed an original reading on this subject by way of a mundane "Christian option" for mankind and there, particularly, for the poor against the alienating capitalist consumerism culture. This interpretation of *The Human Condition* is certainly a

reflection of the time it was made: Those were the days in Argentina of radicalized political stances, social violence and state repression. Arendt's call for strengthening the political space, was then out of the question for the intellectuals as well as the masses.

Interest in Arendt re-awakened in Jewish reviews after the Spanish rendering of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and *On Revolution*, both in 1967. The review *Indice* published a special section headed "Bibliographical Reports," in 1968 with a complete report on the 7th American edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The following year, *Cuadernos de Indice* presented "Las ideas raciales antes del racismo", a translated version of Chapter VII from the 2nd part of that same book but without its footnotes, noting that it "can irritate but leads by force to reflection." Arendt's aim was the links between racism and the European imperialism in the beginning of the 19th Century, bringing to the surface the multiple political implications existing in Western European thought. Even though one could have doubts about this alleged "irritation" of the readers, it seemed clear to the editorial staff of *Cuadernos* that this possibility was cause sufficient not to publish her again thereafter. This same quote is used in an article by the Israeli writer Israel Gutman entitled "Eichmann en Jerusalém" in *Indice*, in which he reassesses the debates about Arendt's book in terms closer to Zionism and also recollecting some of the well-known Gershom Scholem arguments. Gutman made the common mistake in reading and interpreting Arendt's comments on the role of the *Judenräte*, but does not mention Poliakov's book from which Arendt had taken some of her ideas on the matter. Rather, he accused her, as so many others did, of being almost as racist as the Nazis had been. Within the Jewish Argentinean cultural circles this all but closed an open debate on the controversy and a more clearly anti-Arendt point of view took hold of the interpretations of the recent Jewish past.

At the end of this series, there is another out-of-its-time editorial development: In 1972, the Editorial Proceso published *El desafío de Rosa Luxemburg*, a compilation of writings on the Spartacist politician, including Arendt's "Una heroína de la revolución", a translation of her account on the John Peter Nettel's biography of Luxemburg, taken from the French review *Preuves* but originally published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1966. Without any explanation about how the contributions to this compilation were selected, Arendt's piece is stuck in-between a series of articles by renowned Marxist intellectuals such as Daniel Bensaid, Michel Loewy (sic), Paul Sweezy and, even more obviously, pieces by Lenin and Trotsky. Some of the authors' contributions were lifted from the French Marxist revue *Partisans*, published during the 1960's by the legendary editor François Maspéro. Arendt's article, which had already appeared in Spanish with a different heading in 1971, focused on Luxemburg's critical viewpoint of the conservative role of revolutionary political parties, adding Arendt's analysis of the instrumental use of violence within revolutions. The anti-Stalinist association of the radical French thought and the liberal pro-American position gave the readings an impossible edge: Arendt was purportedly leftist enough to be admitted by critical Marxism, but could not be taken seriously by the great Argentinean Marxist intellectuals. During the 1970's, and especially after the return of Perón to power in 1973, the radicalization of the political and cultural discourse in Argentina made her thought unthinkable even to liberal intellectuals.

Hannah Arendt in Argentina Today

On December 7th, 1975, two days after Arendt's death, a brief obituary appeared in *La Prensa*, one of the most popular Argentinean papers at the moment. Taken from the Universal Press News Agency, it was quite accurate in providing the latest data of her books, including a reference to the first section of *The Life of the Mind*, as yet not published. So, three years following the last reference of her books, had Arendt now become popular among Argentinean readers?

To begin with, the 1970's were years of a kind of renaissance for the Spanish publishing industry. Spain's dictatorial nightmare was ending. Political restraints were loosening. Some of its most important editors were returning home after long years of exile in Argentina and Mexico. By contrast, in Argentina the publishing industry lost its Latin American market, in part because of the resurging Spanish competition, but mostly because of the continuous political and economic breakdowns at home. Argentinean publishers redirected their energies into expanding their internal editorial market (de Diego, 2006). The most published works by Arendt in Spanish during those years were the already mentioned Mexican edition of *Sobre la Violencia* (1970) and its re-issuing of *Crisis de la República* (1973, 1974) by the Spanish Taurus; the incomplete volume preceding *Men in Dark Times* published by Anagrama in 1971; her two major works, *La Condición Humana* by Seix Barral and *Los Orígenes del Totalitarismo* by Taurus, both translated in 1974, and the last one re-published by Alianza in three volumes between 1982 and 1987.

The matter of circulation of these books in Argentina is still an open question. So far, I have only been able to ascertain one short report of January 15, 1976 in *Clarín*, the foremost national paper in Argentina. That report was about the Spanish edition of *The Human Condition* (1974). Here Arendt is mentioned as having "a deeply rooted humanist inclination", and part of the foreword is quoted as "a framework for reading." After that, there is silence. This is not surprising, if one takes into consideration that on March 24, 1976, one of the most brutal *coups d'état* in Argentine history took place ushering in a reign of terror that lasted until December 1983. Even if her works in Spanish translation had been in circulation, few people would have risked buying or borrowing them. It is much to the exiled intellectuals credit, mostly in Paris, Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela, that there is a renewed interest in Arendt's books.

As I have said at the beginning, Arendt's readership in Argentina has followed closely the nation's political and cultural developments. The "silence" surrounding her person and her books between 1976 and 1983 came to an end with the beginning of the so-called democratization process. Indeed, this seemed to be a proper time to read *Origins of Totalitarianism*, as well as *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, her two books that, over time, had generated almost all the attention until the 1990's. Then first commentaries appeared in newspaper reviews, along with first "uses" of her concept of politics and the effects of totalitarianism on it. It was mostly related to Argentinean circumstances. This was made clear in two of the most important political-cultural reviews published during the 1980's: *La Ciudad Futura* and *Punto de Vista*, in articles written by Chilean Norbert Lechner, Héctor Leis, Hugo Vezzetti, and Jorge Dotti. Then the return of democracy with its

institutional challenges enclosed almost all further interpretations of Arendt's major works, giving them near canonical status. Since the 1990, renowned intellectuals have translated some of her hitherto unknown pieces. So did, for example, José Szabón in 1993 with the first three conferences of the *Lectres on Kant's Political Philosophy*, published in English ten years earlier. Others tried to produce creative critical perspectives on Argentina's recent political past, referring to Arendt's concept of political change and revolutionary movements. Here we find such writers as Claudia Hilb, Héctor Schmucler, and Pilar Calveiro, to name a few.

It would be of much interest to explore next what is going on at the present, as there is a plethora of transactions and new reviews, commentaries and critiques being published world wide. For instance: How is Hannah Arendt's body of work, her thinking, her "philosophy" if you wish, being disseminated throughout academia? In graduate and post-graduate programs? Conferences? I also think that a profound study of the post-dictatorship reception of Arendt and her relevance to Argentina's current problems should be *de rigueur*.

In this paper I have tried to show how Hannah Arendt and her body of work were received in Argentina over time and changing circumstances and events. In summary: We have witnessed a perceptual metamorphosis from Jewish Philosopher to political theorist to eccentric leftist thinker and acerbic commentator of current events. This is the endlessly challenging legacy of one of the great thinkers of the 20th Century.

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