

Meeting about Hannah Arendt at the University of São Paulo

by Vanessa Sievers de Almeida

On October 1st and 2nd last year the meeting “Hannah Arendt: Education and the Modern World” (Hannah Arendt: educação e o mundo moderno) took place at the School of Education at the University of São Paulo. The event was organized by a team of graduate and undergraduate students engaged in a group dedicated to contemporary philosophy and educational studies (Grupo de Estudos Educação e Pensamento Contemporâneo), led by Professor Dr. José Sérgio Carvalho.

During the two-day meeting, approximately 150 participants came together to hear about and discuss the work of the philosopher and its possible meanings for an education that has a commitment to the common world. The organizers were positively surprised by the great interest that the event aroused, which brought together graduate and post-graduate students, professors and teachers, and people from different areas.

It should be noted that there is an increasing interest in the work of Hannah Arendt in the field of education, in the responsibility to educate the “new ones” to take part in a world that we share with others and in the question whether this is still possible when “time is out of joint”. These questions certainly stand in opposition to the prevailing educational concerns, for instance the contribution of education to technical and economical development. The emphasis that Hannah Arendt puts on concepts such as “tradition” and “authority”, generally frowned on by educators, also opens new and provocative perspectives for the discussion. Perhaps this is the reason why a small-scale meeting became a public discussion of much larger proportions.

One central theme of the meeting was the relationship between politics and education. If Arendt, on one hand, resolutely separates the two realms, on the other hand she understands the purpose of education to be the introduction of the “new ones” into a common world – a world that depends on our political action. In a similar way, concepts like “natality”, “authority”, “tradition” and the love for the world that, according to Arendt, are related to education have an essentially political meaning.

Prof. Dr. André Duarte (Universidade Federal do Paraná) delivered the opening conference “Hannah Arendt and the Interwovenness of the Concepts: the Fine Art of Distinguishing and Establishing Relations”. As the title indicates, he approached a fundamental theme for the readers of Arendt’s work: the distinctions which the author draws between politics and social issues, the private and the public, liberty and necessity, etc. According to Duarte each distinction cannot be taken as an immovable borderline, but between the opposites exists a kind of relationship, an intersection or some communication. Distinguishing and establishing relations between them is a never-ending task and it depends on the effort of every historic period to define again which

issues are, for instance, political ones, i.e. concerns to be discussed and judged by a plurality of people involving different points of view.

Prof. Dr. Maria de Fátima Simões Francisco (Universidade de São Paulo) dealt with two fundamental concepts in the work of Arendt: thinking and acting, considering the way in which Arendt tried to understand these activities referring to the Greek experience.

More directly concerned with education, Prof. Dr. Adriano Correia (Universidade Federal de Goiânia) emphasized the relevance of the “amor mundi” for education, speaking about “Natalidade and amor mundi: about the Tense Relation between Education and Politics in the Work of Hannah Arendt”. How can we invite the young people to love the world, when being an “animal laborans” is not any more just an unavoidable dimension of our existence, but has become the dominant mentality – anti-political in its essence?

Prof. Dr. Vanessa Sievers de Almeida (Grupo de Estudos Educação e Pensamento Contemporâneo) poses the question how to arouse in students an appreciation of the world and how to encourage them to find their place in it in a moment in which meaninglessness and the preoccupation with survival are present, so that any commitment to the common seems to be an out of place or anachronistic request. Nevertheless, education in Arendt’s sense is not possible if we do not try, ever again and despite of all, to reconcile ourselves with the human world.

The concept of “natalidade” represents an important interface between education and politics. Prof. Ana Miriam Wuensch (Universidade de Brasília) exposed an approach between two philosophers who she called “thinkers of the birth or natalidade”: Hannah Arendt and María Zambrano. She pointed out the coincidence of themes and concepts in the works of these contemporaneous authors – birth or natalidade, the crises of the modern world, and its reflexes on the education realm –, although their reflections point at different directions.

Prof. Dr. José Sérgio Carvalho (Universidade de São Paulo) asked in which way the writings of Walter Benjamin which deal with the impoverishment of experience – an experience that can be transformed into a narrative and so be shared with others – can help us understand the crises in education the way Arendt analyses it. Education requires the choice of past experiences we wish to transmit. This choice involves political decisions, even though education as a whole cannot be understood as political in Arendt’s sense.

Prof. Dr. Vandrê Gomes da Silva (Grupo de Estudos Educação e Pensamento Contemporâneo) used Arendt’s concept of the public in order to analyse the current discussion about “quality” in education. He pointed out that educational perspectives which are concerned about “quality” generally forget the public dimension of education – impossible to be evaluated by means of “quality indicators”.

The presentation of the research projects of the post-graduate and graduate students of the group (that organized the meeting) and by Lizandra Andrade Nascimento (Universidade Regional Integrada do Alto Uruguai e das Missões) revealed a rich spectrum of themes. The latter speaker approached the relation between education and politics; Erica Benvenuti deepened the concept of politics in Arendt’s work; Crislei Custódio considered the place of public virtues in education; Iris Moser discussed the

institutional crisis in education related to the question of authority; Lia Raquel Amaral Teixeira presented an Arendtian reading of “The First Man” by Camus; Anyelle Giacomalli Lamas dealt with the crisis in education in the context of a consumer society; and Ariam J. F. de Castilho Cury discussed the way education is offered in web-sites of private schools in São Paulo, mostly being treated as a merchandise.

Some of the works presented at the event will be published in “Education and Research” (Educação e Pesquisa), a journal of the School of Education, University of São Paulo. The article “Pedagogical Discourse and the Vanishing of an Ethical-Political Meaning of Education” by Prof. Dr. José Sérgio Carvalho can be read on this site.

Finally, it should be noted that the organizing group was very pleased with the various contributions and the rich discussions about a theme which its members have been dealing with and discussing during its weekly meetings in the School of Education. The event not only revealed the increasing interest that the reading of Arendt has achieved in the education realm, but also the rising attention that the author’s reflections on education has attracted among the scholars who study her work. Those are the reasons why there will certainly be more events like this one in the future.