

Hannah Arendt on Civil Rights (1964)

Two Handwritten Documents from Her Papers at the Library of Congress

U.Ludz, ed.

Introduction

During the first months of 1964, the Congressional agenda in the USA was dominated by the Civil Rights Act. In February, the bill passed the House of Representatives with a clear majority (290 v. 130 votes), after which the political battle in the Senate began with its filibustering. This period lasted into June. Finally, the Civil Rights Act was signed by President Johnson on July 2nd.

In the spring of 1964, Hannah Arendt, having finished her first term at the University of Chicago, went on a lecture tour that also brought her to Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, for the 1964 Walter Turner Candler Lectures. She gave two lectures, one on "Truth and Politics" (April 30th), the other on "Bertolt Brecht" (May 4th). Apparently, while a guest at Emory, she was invited to take part in another event for which she prepared an outline entitled "Civil Rights," noting the date as May 1, 1964. The document is published here for the first time with another as yet unpublished document: six handwritten pages also headed "Civil Rights" but undated, which she may have used on the same occasion. Although the occasion as such is not documented in her papers, it was presumably related to the proceedings in Washington.

Both documents overlap but are structured differently. While all points in the notes can be found in the outline, the outline itself is more extensive; missing in the notes are the "visibility" argument, the references to "Asiatic nations" and "India," and what is summarized under Point 4 ("Priorities ...").

The documents, as presented here, are transcriptions of the handwritten originals. No editorial corrections or changes have been made. Underlining is by Hannah Arendt, additions in brackets and the introduction and notes by the editor kindly assisted by Thomas Wild.

Document 1: Civil Rights

–Handwritten Outline¹–

Civil Rights

What is involved?

- 1) Unfinished business of Rev.[Revolution] and Civil War: Voting and Marriage Laws

The coincidence of race and Social Question

The poor man is never seen: Visibility² achieved in revolutions: Slavery prevented Social Question: Negroes did not appear.

- 2) National emancipation movement or emancipation from poverty as citizens.
 - a) National em.[emancipation]: Furthered by Africa--but no liberal past and no real connection. Only the physical diff.[difference]

Compare with Asiatic nations. Things don't go well in Africa.
 - b) Social emancipation as citizens: Advantage: Prosperity;

Disadvantage: Structural unemployment.
- 3) Nation dedicated to Equality: Equal circumstances make inequalities stick out more. The danger of Honor classes³ for white children.

1 The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress / Speeches and Writings File / "Civil Rights," image 7, displayed offsite. One handwritten page on writing pad paper with inscription "Emory University, 5/1/64." The outline corresponds to "Civil Rights: Handwritten Notes," cf. second document, also for corresponding editorial notes.

2 Cf. Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock" (1959), reprinted in idem, *Responsibility and Judgment*, edited and with an introduction by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), pp. 193-213, p. 199: "In all parts of the country, in the East and North with its host of nationalities no less than in the more homogeneous South, the Negroes stand out because of their 'visibility.' They are not the only 'visible minority,' but they are the most visible one". For the difference between Arendt and Ralph Ellison's understanding of "visibility," cf. Richard H. King, *Arendt and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 185f.

3 Highly selective classes for elite students of a year or field of study.

- 4) Priorities: Discrimination by Society becomes persecution if backed up by law.

Example: Legal equality was prior to social equality and felt to be meaningless: Anatole France⁴.

But Fact: Economic equality claimed after legal.

- 5) Present Fight: Political in the South but under protection of Federal government.

Non-Violence: You can defeat us only with violence, we dare you to do that: Boomerang effect. Change of government. (India)

Document 2: Civil Rights

–Handwritten Notes⁵–

Civil Rights:

A: Success of Am. Rev.[American Revolution] was due to absence of Social Question. SQ [Social Question] was hidden thru Slavery--incidentally the worst kind known. Slavery is a political institution which makes it impossible f.[for] social question to arise. Social question: a political equality that is meaningless because of poverty, but historical fact that economic equality was claimed after legal equality had been achieved. The emancipation of the working class--or the people--

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makes poverty a political problem.

B. Present Civil Rights Fight:

⁴ Arendt is probably alluding here to Anatole France's "famous quip, 'If I am accused of stealing the towers of Notre Dame, I can only flee the country.'" As she notes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, France's observation "has assumed a horrible reality. Jurists are so used to thinking of law in terms of punishment, which indeed always deprives us of certain rights, that they may find it even more difficult than the layman to recognize the deprivation of legality, i.e., of *all* rights, no longer has a connection with specific crimes." (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, new edition with added prefaces (San Diego etc.: A Harvest/HBJ Book. 1979), p. 295.

⁵ The Hannah Arendt Papers in the Library of Congress / Speeches and Writings File / "Civil Rights," images 1-6, displayed offsite. Six handwritten pages on shorthand pad.

a) political in the South, under the protection of Federal Gvt[Government]—quote Maroon⁶.

To repeal laws and ordinances. A certain hidden violence: We fight with non-violence, you can defeat us only with means of violence. We dare you to do that: it would mean a change in the form of government. Boomerang-effect—British imperialism the classic example.

This fight has gone well though one may wish that more emphasis were laid on the repeal of discriminatory legislation—

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not only the voting decrees, but also the marriage laws.

Completion of Am.Rev.[American Revolution].

b) The fight has spread to the States without discriminatory legislation where the Negro question⁷ is a question of poverty—a social question.

Not only is the fight more bitter, those of the white population—liberal middle class, intellectuals—are on the point of either withdrawing or being thrown out. They are not radical enough—it is a social question, which concerns their very lives: education of children, slums, that is, the spreading of, etc.

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c) The urban fight in the North is different and it is questionable if same methods should be used. The danger here is not that State violence crushes non-violence, but that violence breaks out in the midst of society—a kind of civil war, or civil unrest.

To clear up slums areas, to provide decent schools has an absol.[absolute] priority. It is not a question even open to political debate. It is a necessity.

The good fortune is Prosperity. We could <*an undecipherable word*> poverty—not absolutely and not forever, but still. But woe us

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6 Arendt probably refers to an article on Civil Rights by M. Stevens in *Chicago Maroon*, 9/27/63, cf. Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch* (ed. by Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann, 2 vols., München, Berlin, Zürich: Piper, 2002), notebook XXIV, no. 23, p. 628.

7 The word “negro” was common usage in the United States until the end of the 1960s and thereafter condemned as discriminatory and replaced by “blacks” or “African Americans.” The “Negro question,” a term echoing the “Jewish question,” is discussed in the recent book by Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014).

if we don't, if this becomes a political issue.

The solution of either ignorance or poverty cannot, and need not be, to equalize down to the lowest common denominator. (The danger of white children in black schools: the parents will take them out or, worse, you'll find them as a solid majority in honor-classes. Utterly unfair.

C. Finally: Much of Am.[American] impetus due to the emancipation of Africa. Things don't go well at all. Majorities are dictatorships without constitutional gov.[government] (The question is not Parliament and parties)

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If this ends as the reconstruction period⁸ ended after the Civil War, the consequences would be extremely grave.

⁸ The Reconstruction period typically refers to the years 1865-1877 following the end of the Civil War, during which political (federal), economic (Freedman's Bureau) and racial relationships were "reconstructed;" the goal of political freedom, economic equality and racial justice for all Americans, however, largely failed.