

A note regarding the first International Hannah Arendt Colloquium in Brazil

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With the crisis of Marxian paradigms, the Welfare State's bankruptcy, the loss of the sense of politics, the rebirth of political fundamentalism and the growth of violence in contemporary societies, Hannah Arendt's work has provoked an increased interest in the academic milieu throughout the world. The amplitude of her theoretical legacy can be observed in many social studies that nowadays claim to develop her contributions to contemporary political theory.

One of the most original aspects of her work has to do with the much actual question of the spread and banalization of violence in contemporary mass societies, which constituted the very theme of the International Congress devoted to questioning the actuality of Arendt's thinking at Universidade Federal do Paraná, located in Curitiba, Brazil. The event took place from October 14th to 18th 2002 and was organized by Professors André Duarte and Marion de Magalhães, respectively from the Graduate Programs of Philosophy and History of that University. It congregated 24 researchers and Arendt specialists from many Brazilian Universities and from abroad, such as Wolfgang Heuer (Freie Universität Berlin), Pierre Ansart (Paris VII) and Claudine Haroche (Paris I). The event also counted with the participation of Professor Celso Lafer (Law School, University of São Paulo), former Brazilian Minister for International Relations, which explained how Arendt's ideas of plurality and public debate inspired him as a political actor. The Seminar was marked by interdisciplinary approaches to Arendt's work, which stressed the political, philosophical, historical, ethical and juridical dimensions of her understanding of the phenomenon of violence. Due to the plurality of those critical assessments the Colloquium provided intense discussions and many debates that shall stimulate the increasing interest which Arendt's work has been provoking in Brazil since the early nineties. All her major works have already been translated into Portuguese and since the year 2000 there has been frequent academic Seminars whose results have been systematically published. As a matter of fact, the contributions to this International Seminar have already been published under the title of *A banalização da violência: a atualidade do pensamento de Hannah Arendt*, RJ, Relume Dumará, 2004.

The Colloquium focused on the question of violence and its many different forms of manifestation in the public sphere, which were analyzed by the participants according to their own theoretical interests. Many expositors stressed Arendt's contributions to the understanding of the phenomenon of contemporary violence in the context of mass societies, where public interest for the common shared world of stable political institutions has decayed with the ascension and promotion of the private and vital interests of the animal laborans, Arendt's well known notion to define man as a laboring-consuming living being. The main consequences of this change are the contemporary

distrust for politics as well as the increasing of the dangerous subordination of politics to economic rules and international stock-market impositions and threats. These transformations of the public sphere also imply a change in the nature of violence, which ceases to be an instrumental medium to achieve definite goals to become a constitutive element of political relations, especially when political interests are widely understood in terms of the preservation and the increase of the vital interests of the animal laborans of certain developed countries. It is under these harsh circumstances that Arendt's animal laborans begins to convert itself into that historical figure that Giorgio Agamben has defined as the "bare life" of the homo sacer, a theme that I have addressed in my own contribution. Other conferences also paid attention to Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism and the Eichmann case, assessing those subjects in their political, juridical and ethical implications. Arendt's analysis of totalitarian regimes challenges us to think and rethink the political, since they have inflicted contemporary public life with a disastrous inheritance. We live in a post-totalitarian world, but many of those social and political elements that once crystallized in totalitarianism are still alive in our present, such as the increasing superfluity of human masses with no common interest, no citizenship and no social occupation allowing them to retain their own dignity and to have a place of their own in the world. Another fundamental problem discussed by Arendt and retained by many expositors is the overshadowing of the public sphere in late modernity. The decadence of the public sphere as the political space for free association, action and the exchange of opinions becomes undeniable when it is invaded by sheer violence or by the machinations of political lobbies and cliques, i.e., by many forms of invisible government. The persistence of totalitarian elements in democratic regimes, the massification of culture and the rebirth of social movements inspired by dangerous, reactive political passions, such as hatred, envy or compassion, these are evident examples that the risks of new totalitarian configurations are not gone forever. The recent events of September 11th and the consequent changes in the US foreign policy were also discussed from the standpoints of political science and of international law, and these reflections also enforced the understanding that the "dark times" once denounced by Arendt still constitute our political legacy.

Another theme of debate was Arendt's discussions concerning the role of emotions and sentiments in the political domain and in political analysis. Historian Pierre Ansart, for instance, stressed the accuracy, actuality and relevance of Arendt's methodological utilization of a variety of different research data in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, a work in which sentiments and emotions are captured by means of her utilization of biographical, literary and poetic sources carefully accommodated amidst a huge amass of more traditional sources concerning economic and political changes which allowed Totalitarianism to arise in its Nazi and Stalinist forms. Finally, there were also philosophical approaches to Arendt's thinking which discussed her theoretical deconstruction of political philosophy, both inspired and directed against Heidegger's philosophy, among other themes.

These were some of the crucial problems that invited us to read and reread Arendt's work, aiming at a deeper discussion of the multifaceted dilemmas concerning the widespread of violence in our contemporary democratic societies. It is essential to

reconsider Arendt's work if we intend to understand the meaning of the economic, political and institutional changes that characterize our time, as well as the new dangers that surround the public sphere nowadays.

André Duarte, Christina Lopreato, Marion Brepohl de Magalhães (eds.), *A banalização da violência: a atualidade do pensamento de Hannah Arendt* [The Banalization of Violence: The Actuality of Hannah Arendt's Thought], Rio de Janeiro, Relume Dumará, 2004.

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