

Hannah Arendt Was Wrong

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Hanna Arendt (1906–1975), the German-born American political theorist, was regarded as a major influential thinker. In her day, she was the symbol of liberal intellectuality, lionized in academic circles. She is now largely out of fashion, because her ideology does not fit into today's dogmatic and prejudiced liberal, academic world.

I admit my bias against her. She was once the mistress of Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger, who supported the party, ejected Jewish philosophers from German universities, and never recanted or apologized. Arendt continued to defend him, against all logic and justice. Typical of those who allow intellectuality to ignore morality ("the higher the brow, the lower the loins").

Arendt is known to Jewish audiences mainly through her book on the Eichmann trial, [*Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*](#), in which she used the expression "the banality of evil" to say that evil is not a radical deviation but rather thoughtlessness, a tendency of ordinary people to obey orders and conform to mass opinion without a critical evaluation of the consequences of their actions and inaction.

She thought the trial was more show than a legitimate judicial procedure. She was highly critical of the way that some Jewish leaders acted during the Holocaust. She even tried to compare the thoughtless obedience of some Jewish community leaders to that of Eichmann, which remains a blot on her memory. She had no sense of membership in, or sympathy for the Jewish people.

Even so, in the end she wrote "Just as you [Eichmann] supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations—as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world—we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang." (Interestingly, my late father was against hanging Eichmann. But that is another issue for another time.)

I find reading books about the Holocaust exceedingly painful and emotionally disturbing. But every now and again I do to catch up on the latest orthodoxies and theories. I have just read [*Why?: Explaining the Holocaust*](#), by Peter Hayes. In it he points out the fact that Arendt was completely gulled by Eichmann. Diaries and conversations we now have from his time in Argentina prove without doubt that he knew full well what he was doing, volunteered for it, and had a long record of anti-Semitism. He was an instigator, not a pen-pushing bureaucrat. No serious historian now believes Hanna Arendt on the Holocaust.

In a similar example of being blinded by prejudice, the leader of the neo-

Nazi party in Germany that has won seats in the new Bundestag, claims that Germans should be proud of their wartime soldiers, because it was only the SS and their subordinates who were the genocidal murderers. Hayes offers documentary evidence to prove that ordinary German soldiers and officers in the Wehrmacht delighted in mass murder at every opportunity and as a matter of norm, rather than exception.

Arendt is the last person I would turn to on any issues relating to Judaism and Jews. But her rationalism still has something to offer. She emphasized individual choice and freedom, as against ideologies like Marxism that tried to impose themselves on everyone. Just look at the horrors socialist regimes have visited on Russians, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Cubans, and now Venezuelans.

In her book [*The Human Condition*](#), she argued that human life always evolves within societies, but that only a few of these societies, mainly western democracies, allow for individuals to achieve freedom through the construction of a voluntary common worldview. The failure of government to balance the rights of its citizens, to accept different narratives without insisting there is only one, invariably leads to chaos and violence. Only by accepting different cultures, narratives and religions can one hope for a truly open, tolerant society. But this works, and this is where particularly European societies have failed, if the incoming minorities are willing to accept the values of the host societies, or at the very least are unwilling to try to overturn them against the majority will. This is Islam's greatest challenge. How can it accept suppressing its specific value system in order to integrate into a freer more secular west.

The massive problem the world now faces with migration has raised issues of how a society can, and whether it should, try to protect its internal culture and values against the different values of migrants. Arendt presents a philosophical case for caution, and that of course is why she is no longer popular.

Arendt's primary criticism of human rights is that their enforcement is often in conflict with national sovereignty. Since there is no political authority above that of sovereign nations, state governments have little incentive to respect human rights when such policies conflict with national interests. Of course this could just as well be a criticism of nationalism as of human rights. But either way, the European Union bureaucracy is an example of a supranational government trying to impose its ideology on its members, which is why it is having so much trouble keeping itself together.

State governments in the past, particularly religious ones, have tended to emphasize national interests and winning elections over doing the right thing. This explains why Jews were turned away by almost every country when fleeing Nazism. And why even today Jews require a national state of their own for cultural integrity and protection.

Attempts at naturalizing and assimilating refugees in the modern era has largely failed. Partly because nowadays because refugees themselves have resisted assimilation and attempted to maintain their own ethnic and national

identities. Retaining loyalty to the regressive regimes and ideologies they came from and can easily return to. But also because of the failure of host societies to integrate them, because they tended to see the refugees as undesirables who threatened their national identity.

Arendt, following Heidegger's emphasis on national identity, contended that states have a primary obligation to protect national identities. Which is why modern critics claim that Arendt is implicitly defending racism and religious discrimination. She does not say discrimination is morally right. She does say the state should allow its citizens to be different, so long as they accept the primacy of the state. She rightly predicted the problem of integrating those who ideologically cannot accept the values of societies they move to and try to impose themselves on others.

Hannah Arendt was an intellectual dinosaur who was wrong about so much. Which is precisely why intellectual fashions are so unreliable and fallible. But of course, that has never stopped fools, however well-meaning (and that can be even more dangerous), from trying to impose them on others. Philosophy by nature looks for the theoretical solution and politics the practical one. Sometimes a balance of conflicting ideologies is preferable.