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Understanding Political Modernity

Rereading Arendt and Adorno in Comparative Perspective

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Sapere aude: Unlikely Intellectual and Philosophical Encounters

Having experienced the fate of exile in the twentieth century, Hannah Arendt and Theodor W. Adorno reflected directly on that century's atrocities and wars, and they continue to bear ghostly witness to the twenty-first century's ensuing dislocations. Moving beyond typical disciplinary borders, few thinkers have had a more lasting influence on critical debates on the social and political dimensions of "modernity" and its myriad crises. Although they have had a highly fraught reception, there can be little doubt that Arendt's and Adorno's overall impact on the social sciences and the humanities, political and social philosophy in particular, is profound. They shared similar life experiences, intellectual origins, and even theoretical interests in light of the catastrophes they faced. Moreover, they were perhaps the most uncompromising, nonconformist public intellectuals of their day, engendering distinct modes of public criticism.

Shaped by the intellectual milieu of the Weimar Republic and their German Jewish backgrounds, both Arendt and Adorno were forced into exile by the Nazi regime and found refuge in the United States. Along with

Hugo von Hofmannstahl and Gershom Scholem, they were among the first to recognize the brilliance of Walter Benjamin. After Benjamin's terrible death in Portbou in Catalonia, both went on to edit landmark collections of his writings: Adorno edited Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* in German and Arendt the volume *Illuminations* for Schocken Books in English. They both returned to Germany a few years after the Holocaust. Arendt visited frequently thereafter, and Adorno, who first prepared his return in the immediate aftermath of the war, stayed for good as of 1949. Arendt and Adorno hence became critical observers of post-totalitarian Europe and engaged critically with its public discourse. In such public engagements, the Kantian spirit, its insistence on *sapere aude*, "daring to know" or the courage to think for oneself, is what pervades Adorno's and Arendt's activities as intellectuals. In contrast to Georg Lukács, for example, whose book on the intellectual roots of National Socialism, *The Destruction of Reason*, as Adorno remarked, confirmed little more than "the destruction of his own reason" at the behest of an ever more exacting Communist party line,¹ Adorno—like Arendt—insisted on political and intellectual independence. Indeed, at times Adorno seemed to insist upon independence from politics itself, which, understood dialectically, was not without political significance.² As a consequence, Adorno was attacked not just from the Right, but also from the Left—as he alludes to in the preface to his magnum opus, "The author is prepared for the attacks to which *Negative Dialectics* will expose him. He feels no rancour and does not begrudge the joy in those of either camp who will proclaim that they knew it all the time and now he was confessing."³ Adorno was, of course, also criticized for his supposedly mandarin attitude to popular culture, jazz in particular, and his less than sanguine estimation of the prospects for working-class politics—that is, his calling into question the "official optimism" of the Left. The quintessential dismissal of Adorno was, perhaps unsurprisingly, articulated by Lukács himself. The latter stated that insofar as they had placed any possible hope for social transformation in neither party nor class, but rather in what the Hungarian philosopher regarded as a "nihilistic" modernism, Horkheimer and Adorno had fatefully taken up residence in "Grand Hotel Abyss" which Lukács originally describes in *The Destruction of Reason* as "a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity. And the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered."⁴ From the Right, Adorno had to endure a scarcely

veiled antisemitism in Adenauerian Germany upon his return in 1949. And, of course, he was held directly responsible for the student uprisings of 1968, which is ironic given Adorno's undeniable ambivalence vis-à-vis the students' movement.⁵

Like Adorno, Arendt earned much scorn from Left and Right alike. The Left objected to Arendt's apparent glorification of an ancient conception of political action grounded in the fifth-century Athenian polis. More important, Arendt's distinction between "politics" and the "social"—and her undeniable preference for questions relating to the former and her devaluation of the latter⁶—did not sit comfortably with the Left. At the same time, the Right bridled at her critical diagnosis of actually existing liberal democracies as exemplifying the retreat of the political. By the same token, ironically, she was later on "appropriated" by both conservatives and the Left alike. But Arendt explicitly rejected such "friendly takeovers" by various camps.⁷ In addition, her account of the Eichmann trial, first serialized in the *New Yorker* and later published in book form, caused a huge public stir.⁸ As Anson Rabinbach suggested, the controversy surrounding *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, "was certainly the most bitter public dispute among intellectuals and scholars concerning the Holocaust that has ever taken place."⁹ She was vilified by Gershom Scholem and many others. Yet the book continues to influence debates on international law and international criminal justice and will most likely do so for decades to come.¹⁰

At the intersection of their political and philosophical interventions, both Arendt and Adorno developed nuanced critiques of modernity. They sought to understand modernity's relationship to totalitarianism, and, though often with different intentions, developed their respective ideas through rigorous encounters with the German intellectual and philosophical tradition of figures such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Weber, Heidegger, and Walter Benjamin. Arendt and Adorno were shaped by this tradition, just as much as they have drawn attention to its blind spots, exclusions, and aporiae. Indeed, as much as they sought to initiate a break with this tradition of thought, both in their own ways also absorbed and critically reflected it. In particular, the philosophical conception of historical progress, which reached something of an apogee in the great tradition of German Idealism, had become suspect. For both, such a break was first and foremost necessitated by the caesura in Western civilization represented by Auschwitz. This amounted to the recognition that, as Benjamin had suggested in his final

writings on the philosophy of history, modern civilization was also inextricably tied to its opposite, barbarism.¹¹ For Arendt and Adorno—as for Benjamin himself—such recognition was more than an abstract idea. It was lived and experienced with painful concreteness in the form of expulsion, escape, homelessness, and exile. Such experiences shaped Adorno’s and Arendt’s thinking to an extraordinary degree, serving as a constant point of reference and enhancing a profound sensitivity to the fate of the individual under modern conditions. Against this background, it is especially surprising that Arendt and Adorno have not yet been placed under any substantial comparative scrutiny.

Embattled Legacies: Between Affinity and Aversion

This void may be attributed to several factors. First, on philosophical grounds, the gap may be attributed to the general conflict between critical theory and phenomenology, embodied in Adorno and Arendt respectively. In many ways, the phenomenology–critical theory divide embodied by Arendt and Adorno to some extent goes back to epistemological differences between Aristotle and Plato; the phenomenology of the former remained faithful to the world of appearances and its actualization, the latter was rather concerned with “true being” behind the appearances.¹² While Arendt and Adorno are both deeply indebted to, and work through, German philosophy and German Idealism in particular, their major theoretical anchors are obviously different—in Adorno’s case, Hegel, Freud, Kant, and Marx; in Arendt’s, Aristotle and the experiences of the ancient Greek polis, Kant,¹³ and Heidegger.¹⁴ Yet the conversation between critical theory and phenomenology has long begun at other places and through other venues too.¹⁵

The second obstacle has been the striking antipathy between these two thinkers. Strangely, despite (or perhaps because of) their apparent biographical, intellectual, theoretical, and even anti-fascist political affinities, they failed to acknowledge, let alone engage with, each other’s work. Arendt was never reluctant to express her own aversion, indeed hostility, to Adorno in letters and private conversations. In what has now become a fabled episode in German intellectual history, Arendt responded to the suggestion of her then husband Günther Stern (later Anders) that Adorno—Stern’s *Habilitation* (postdoctoral qualification) supervisor—be invited to dinner in no uncertain terms: “Der kommt uns nicht ins Haus!” (“That

one's not coming into our house!"). Arendt came to hold Adorno directly responsible for Stern's ultimately failed attempt to receive his *Habilitation* in the philosophy of music at the University of Frankfurt in 1930, which ended Stern's academic career in Germany. Moreover, early on in her French exile, Arendt accused Adorno and his colleagues at the Institute for Social Research of betraying Benjamin—who, coincidentally, was Anders's cousin—by failing to supply him with sufficient material support at his hour of greatest need. In the end, Arendt held Adorno and his colleagues personally responsible for Benjamin's suicide, which clinched her judgment on Adorno and his work.¹⁶ She affirmed this harsh criticism several times during the postwar years. Arendt was especially forceful in a letter to Karl Jaspers, written in response to rumors about a positive article Adorno had written on Nazi music before his emigration.¹⁷ Here Arendt accuses him of nothing less than participating in the Nazis' attempt at total coordination and forcing into line of state and society, or *Gleichschaltung*.¹⁸ Moreover, in a letter in which she defends her former teacher and lover Martin Heidegger against Adorno's acerbic criticisms, she goes so far as to call the latter a "half-Jew and one of the most disgusting people that I know."¹⁹ And she accuses Adorno of being the "string-puller" behind campaigns against Heidegger, who, in one of the most infamous episodes of twentieth-century intellectual history, had declared his open support for the Nazi movement in his notorious *Rektoratsrede* (rector's address) as rector of Freiburg University from 1933 to 1934.²⁰ Arendt also attacked Adorno and Horkheimer by suggesting that "they accused anyone of antisemitism who opposed them in Germany, or threatened to do so."²¹ In the only correspondence between Arendt and Adorno, she contacted him three times in the late 1960s in connection with editing Benjamin's work. The correspondence is respectful, though cool and somewhat passively aggressive on Arendt's side. Adorno, for his part, responded in a more friendly way, but still maintained considerable distance.²² Hence, lack of interest and indifference on Adorno's side are matched by an abiding and cultivated animosity to Adorno on Arendt's.

The third reason for the striking absence of comparative analyses can be said to follow from the second: it is not uncommon that such deep-seated personal antipathies have a profound impact on the subsequent reception of the writers in question. Their celebrated personal animosities have been reproduced in myriad ways by their followers over the years. For instance, Dagmar Barnouw contrasted Arendt's presumed assimilation into American society to Adorno's alleged "autocratic snobbism" and "paranoid

resentment.”²³ In turn, critical theorists in the Frankfurt School tradition largely either ignored Arendt or rejected her “non-dialectical” theorizing and her robust opposition to Marx and Hegel. Thus far, such differences seem to have prevented theoretical dialogue between the contributions of Arendt and Adorno. An exception is, of course, Jürgen Habermas who has sought almost from the beginning of his career to instigate a shift from the relation of subject and object to intersubjectivity, from the paradigm of consciousness philosophy to that of communicative action.²⁴ Significantly, Habermas argues that his own Frankfurt predecessors (and Adorno in particular) represent the final aporia of the philosophy of consciousness.²⁵ That is, the argument of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* gets caught within the snares of a performative contradiction insofar as it presupposes the very form of reason that it denies in its substantive claims. Crucially, this shift of paradigm—one that has been taken over and deepened by Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition—is underwritten not only by the speech-act theory of Austin and Searle but also by Arendt’s crucial differentiation of the *vita activa* into labor, work, and action in her book *The Human Condition* (1958). Habermas has appropriated both Adorno and Arendt in his own way. Be that as it may, this book breaks with the dominant tradition of disrespect and indifference. Initiating a theoretical conversation between these two distinctive thinkers, who shaped critical thinking about the twentieth century and the modern condition as few others have, is a worthwhile and timely endeavor, we argue.

Deconstructing Arendt and Adorno

In our view, the stand-off between Arendt and Adorno, reproduced by myriad followers, represents a false either/or. This stark opposition may have served different intellectual and political needs in the latter half of the twentieth century, but it now appears well and truly obsolete. The time has come, therefore, for a rethinking of the affinities between these two traditions and their theoretical relevance.²⁶ Only in North America has this dichotomy occasionally been challenged or deconstructed by some prominent theorists for some time.²⁷ Yet this has not led to more systematic comparative investigations that fully engage with the relationship between their theoretical concepts. As will be suggested in what follows, we think that the systematic comparison of central aspects of their work undertaken

should include, though should not be limited to, a contribution to intellectual history.²⁸ In addition, however, Arendt's and Adorno's writings should also be taken seriously as theoretical, philosophical, and indeed political enterprises with striking contemporaneity in our own "post-metaphysical" global age.

The first reason for a new interest in both thinkers, and indeed a posthumous theoretical dialogue between them, is the recovery of the substance of their work, on which a comparative perspective may shed new light. In so doing, the implications of their work for present-day social and political philosophy should be reconsidered beyond the canonical, often superficial and at times stereotypical receptions of each thinker. Adorno, for example, has been portrayed, in reference to his collaboration on Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus*, as the Mephistophelean representative of Arnold Schoenberg's "emancipation of dissonance," as the figure who threatened to "take back" Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (Lyotard); or he has been characterized as a "dark," "melancholic," and, above all, "apolitical"²⁹ theorist of a "gloomy cultural pessimism"³⁰ and the inexorable implosion of Enlightenment. In contrast, Arendt has often been portrayed as the theorist of "civil society" par excellence, of the capacity of men and women to engage in genuine political action and, therefore, as the one political theorist who most inspired the revolutions of 1989. To be sure, recent scholarly work has led to first fissures in this hegemonic intellectual and public view. As Russell A. Berman and Alex Demirovic have shown, Adorno was a far cry from the image of the isolated *Flaschenpost* (message in a bottle) thinker that many followers and critics like to uphold. Upon his return from exile, for instance, Adorno was tirelessly engaged in attempts to reform the hierarchical structures of the German university from within. He participated in radio and television lectures and discussions, intervened in public debates, and dedicated much time to a series of public lectures on issues pertaining to "working through the past" and educational reform. While Adorno himself refuted the charge of cultural pessimism that has repeatedly been launched against him, Arendt, sounding a pessimistic note, was herself deeply concerned about the fate or "decline" of culture. Therefore she lamented the loss of the meaningful resources of what she called "the world"—a secure, diverse public realm in which people appear, speak, and enact their identities—in the face of the ever-more gargantuan appetites of the "entertainment industry." Furthermore, as Claude Lefort points out, Arendt has always approached modern representative democracy from a critical distance,³¹ sharing Adorno's

radical democratic intentions. In particular, she diagnoses the “lost treasure” of modern American democracy³² and the decline of the modern republic, most radically so in her critical discussion of the Pentagon Papers.³³

Arendt and Adorno’s approaches are premised upon some significantly different philosophical assumptions and presuppositions, which should not be downplayed here. Their different epistemologies and interests structure the authors’ critical investigations in distinctive ways. We can contrast Arendt’s existentialism and political republicanism, highly critical of Hegel and Marx, with Adorno’s materialism and dialectical thinking. We may emphasize their very different relationship to the *sensus communis* (in Kant’s sense of an understanding shared by all) and to common sense—both of which are important reference points for Arendt and the object of scathing criticism for Adorno. Or we may point out their opposing notions of (political) power: whereas Adorno accepts Weber’s modern instrumental understanding of power, Arendt distinguishes power conceptually from domination *over* someone. For her, power is shaped in the plural, based on cooperation, agreement, and mutual recognition between distinct actors who recognize their equality. Thus she separates power from authority, force, coercion, and violence. In an anti-Weberian turn and at odds, not only with Adorno, who understands power in a continuum of domination, coercion, and (structural) violence, but with much of the tradition of political thought (most strikingly with Carl Schmitt’s antagonistic concept of the political),³⁴ for Arendt power corresponds to “the human ability not just to act but to act in concert”; in fact, it springs up “wherever people get together and act in concert.”³⁵ Adorno, in turn, shares and expands Arendt’s critique of violence. Yet he provides only a rudimentary concept of the political, and hardly any developed political theory that invests much theoretical interest in the act of political founding and the institutions that protect freedom. He does point, however, to some general parameters. These prominently include his relentless support for a free, democratic public sphere. In it, universalistic commitments are considered genuinely universal when they are critical and do not efface the nonidentical.³⁶

Be that as it may, the often constructed, seemingly stark oppositions between Arendt and Adorno are, at best, only part of the story. For a start, they overlook that Arendt and Adorno are also driven by similar or overlapping critical paradigms and critiques of modern culture and the social sciences: from the critique of the “administered world” (Adorno) to the critique of government turned into “administration” (Arendt); from Adorno’s diagnosis of the reification of memory and a modern “barbaric lack of

relations” in modernity to Arendt’s understanding of the modern “collapse of worldliness and the accompanying erosion of individual and collective memory”;³⁷ from Adorno’s critique of capitalist domination permeating all spheres of life to Arendt’s critique of a laboring society that extinguishes politics, freedom, and the public sphere; and from the critique of “romanticist” identity politics and sovereign willpower to the critique of liberal notions of self-interest and what Adorno calls “blind particularism.” In fact, the aforementioned antagonistic readings have—for too long, as we argue—obscured perspectives on intriguing shared motives, theoretical undercurrents, and implications of their work, which are grounded in common concerns for politically transformative human solidarity, difference, spontaneity, and plurality. Some of them this book seeks to uncover.

The Revival of Critical Political Theory

The project of exploring bridges between Arendt’s and Adorno’s respective bodies of work may be ripe for a second, and in our view especially compelling, reason, the social “untimeliness” of such an enterprise in critical political theory notwithstanding.³⁸ It is a shared yet distinct quality that both theorists critically and productively engage with political modernity’s ambivalences, antinomies, and paradoxes. For a start, they echo Edmund Husserl’s *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, in which he argues that under the spell of modern progress, humanity has made great leaps in knowing how things work. But we no longer know what things mean because we have lost touch with human experience. For Arendt and Adorno, then, the loss of experience and the false abstraction from particulars—and their meaning—is a constitutive motive of their critique of modernity. However, Arendt’s and Adorno’s reflections about the modern condition point far beyond Husserl’s lament. Conceiving the modern condition in terms of historical dangers and possibilities that are difficult to disentangle, they offer philosophical and theoretical responses to modern conundrums. But they do not give in to the temptation to postulate comprehensive authoritative political or legal solutions. Furthermore, their critique is driven by claims to freedom that are seen through a self-critical and distinctly modern and egalitarian lens, and they reconstruct the philosophical tradition accordingly. But they are also thoroughly critical of modernity’s false universals, and acutely aware of its contradictions, violence, and potential abyss.

After the “cultural turn” and the predominance of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism—with their critiques of what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls totalizing “meta-narratives” and the attack on the very idea of political subjectivity—interest in what has been defamed as “grand theory,” namely, theorizing that is critically organized by a notion of totality and seeks to understand the constitutive features of society as a whole, appears to be reviving.³⁹ We argue that Arendt and Adorno offer some key theoretical resources for such a revival in light of contemporary conditions. Indeed, the implosion of the Soviet Bloc and the process of postindustrial globalization have prompted Perry Anderson to suggest that capitalism’s “ideological triumph appeared to vindicate just the kind of legitimating narrative whose obituary Lyotard had sought to write.”⁴⁰ Instead of “only” subverting objectifications expressed in narratives of fixed cultures, identity, or the nation-state (as important as this philosophical project is), Arendt’s and Adorno’s anti-essentialism moves beyond such endeavors and takes it in a political direction.

Both thinkers illuminate the ‘dark side’ of modernity in intriguing ways. Yet they also staunchly defend the possibility of human action, subjectivity, and political transformation. Arendt and Adorno aim at understanding the complexities of modern society with its ever-present potential for, on the one hand, genuine forms of democratic “non-domination”⁴¹ and the transformative exercise of freedom that may enable human plurality and universalism;⁴² and on the other hand, the drive toward forced homogeneity, objectification, exclusion, and identity politics.⁴³ Much of Arendt’s and Adorno’s work reflects these paradoxes and challenges of the modern condition, which, one may argue, dramatically resurface in new ways in the context of globalization.⁴⁴ However, they also provide significant theoretical groundwork to rehabilitate distinctively “modern” claims to universal freedom *and* diversity in politics and society. At the same time, they suggest that such claims are often entangled in modern forms of heteronomy, disempowerment, and “thoughtlessness.” Taking a fresh look at their theoretical genesis and output, the focus that inspires this book is therefore as much on the differences and similarities of Arendt’s and Adorno’s work as it is on their relevance for reconstructing political theory and social philosophy today.