TOTALITARIANISM AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES: REVISTING A "FORGOTTEN DEBATE"

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Hannah Arendt was an eclectic thinker, not only by virtue of her complex intellectual biography, but also because she did not refuse to confront her present by engaging in political debates that were not exactly 'academic'. One could even say that in all her political writings – from the analyses of totalitarianism to the critique of Zionism, from the Eichmann reportage to the interventions on American politics (the Vietnam war and the lies of the American government in the infamous case of the *Pentagon Papers,* the students' movement, the civil rights movement, etc.), Arendt was never timid nor 'neutral'. It was she, in fact, who in a conference at the College of Engineers of the University of Michigan in 1968 asserted that the supposedly objective Archimedean Point of scientific thinking was unattainable when analyzing and interpreting the field of the human and the political. Impartial we can be, contends Arendt, but not according to a detached, supposedly 'celestial' perspective (the "Archimedean point") that belies the wordly, terrestrial dimension in which even the researcher, the scholar and the philosopher are born. Our impartiality is always "situated", involved with the human events we try to understand (see Disch 1994, p.128).

As some Arendtian scholars have tried to argue, most of her intellectual production, albeit various, is in a way marked obsessively by

the need to deconstruct the legitimacy of the philosophical, speculative perspective, in favor of a situated, engaged, political one (Benhabib 1990, Disch 1994, Villa 1998, Kristeva 1999, Herzog 2000, 2001). What the tradition of Western philosophy never possessed, she claims in a letter to her mentor Karl Jaspers, was "a clear concept of what constitutes the political, and couldn't have one, because, by necessity, it spoke of man the individual and dealt with the fact of plurality tangentially" (Arendt 1985, p.166). The hostility of philosophy towards politics is, for Arendt, strictly related to philosophy's concern with the universal and politics' constitutive dependency on singularity and plurality. Politics has been, at least since Plato, systematically subdued by philosophy, by its mastering and domineering inclination, together with its constant undervaluation of "the sphere of human affairs". Our tradition is devoid of a theoretical tool able to understand the genuine experience of the *vita activa*. This is perhaps why Arendt often recurs to epic poetry, literature and drama to frame a certain non-philosophical way of understanding politics. Perhaps in a *nostalgia* for the ancient polis – where Sophocles' theatre could tell much more about the polis than Plato's *Republic* - perhaps in search for a language that could help in framing the experience of freedom without translating it into "behavior", Arendt's endeavor can appear unsettling, discomforting, wrong, if the standards are those of scientific academic style and methods. As a matter of fact, she did not want to be considered a philosopher, and preferred instead the title of "political theorist", and moreover her academic title remained, for all her life, that of a Doctor, not a Professor.

Hannah Arendt's legacy – after more than 35 years after her death – comprises a lively set of appropriations of her thought, so lively and multifaceted that the scholarship devoted to her work is by now difficult to map systematically. Yet one of the recurring themes of enquiry, when dealing with Arendt's legacy, has often to do with her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Groundbreaking at the time of its first appearance in 1951, the book has now reached the standard of a 'classic' and is often quoted in encyclopaedias and textbooks as the first comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon that shattered European history in the 20th century.

A recently published book by Peter Baehr, Professor of Social Theo-

ry at the University of Hong Kong - *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism and the Social Sciences* - is in fact devoted to re-examine, this time from the viewpoint of her turbulent *Auseinandersetzung* with the social sciences, Arendt's work on totalitarianism (Baehr 2010). Significantly enough, the author sympathizes with Arendt's attitude of refusing the *sine ira et studio* approach of academic scholarship in general and social sciences in particular when engaged in understanding totalitarianism. Rather, Peter Baehr's criticism on Arendt regards her being excessively abstract and conceptual in her formulations: her oversimplification of mass-society through the abstract concept of "the mob", the all too easy similitude between Nazism and Bolshevism, the perentorial statement that totalitarianism is "unprecedented", the rigidity of her category of ideology as "logical consistency", these are only some of the failures that Baehr envisages in Arendt's work. The author examines these failures, so to say, through the lens of Arendt's well-known idiosyncrasy towards what she generally named "the social sciences", which the author attempts to both analytically reconstruct and critically assess.

"Most studies of Arendt are composed by philosophers and political theorists. By disciplinary formation, they tend to share her antagonism to the social sciences, and sociology in particular. My approach is different" (Baehr 2010, p. 4). Baehr, who defines himself "a critical admirer of Arendt", reconstructs the theoretical and political contours of Arendt's vivacious exchanges with three major figures of 20th century sociology: David Riesman, author of *The Lonely Crowd*, "with whom Arendt corresponded in the 1940s about the limits of totalitarianism", Raymond Aron, the famous French thinker who reviewed *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1954 for the French journal *Critique* and later elaborated his own notion of what distingushes democracy from totalitarianism, and Jules Monnerot, the French sociologist who was a member, with Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois, of the short-lived Collège de sociologie (1937-39). Monnerot had discussed and polemized with Arendt in the 1950s in the columns of the journal *Confluence*, edited by Henry Kissinger.

Each of these authors entertained in depth critical discussions with Arendt in relation to her views on totalitarianism: Baehr vividly reconstructs them, by referring to both published material and unpublished

one, and the result is a capturing narrative that has the merit of retrieving debates that have been "largely forgotten". Yet the book has also another objective: Arendt considered totalitarianism as "unprecedented", and accordingly affirmed that the social sciences were "intrinsically unable to grasp unprecedented phenomena" (p. 5). Given this premise the book tackles these questions: "what 'unprecedented utterly means' […] How does one recognize things that are utterly strange?" (ib.). This "utterly Arendtian question" is eventually applied by the author to the phenomenon of radical islamism and in the last chapter all the different threads that compose the book are woven into the present, in order to interrogate contemporary jihadist violence and politics. Is there a possible link, asks Baehr, between totalitarianism and radical islamism? To this "utterly Arendtian question" the final chapter tries to give an answer.

2. Arendt, David Riesman and the sociological question

The first intellectual relationship the book examines is that with David Riesman, "with whom Arendt corresponded in the 1940s on the limits of totalitarianism" (ib.). Having developed a specific and documented notion of "mass society", Riesman disagreed with Arendt on the reductive notion she had of it. According to Baehr, she was never interested in the kind of sociology of everyday life that Riesman carried out, and this is why her theory of mass atomization under totalitarianism is not supported by any evidence, and "modern scholarship finds little support for it" (p. 52). Arendt's assessment of mass society under totalitarianism is reductionist, insofar as it creates a general category (that of the mass as an amorphous set of atomized, isolated individuals who had lost all kinds of social and private ties, thereby seeking refuge in totalitarian movement and party) that neglects to account for the complex nature of society and overlooks its multifaceted aspects. Baehr maintains that Arendt was perhaps aware of this situation but "unlike Riesman, she took little interest in it" (ib.). Had she, perhaps her theory would have been different. Yet Arendt did not want to integrate her political analysis with a more sociological one, and in this Baehr perceives "the triumph

of a certain kind of philosophy over sociology" (p. 53). Sociologists like Riesman, instead, were convinced that the reality of mass societies under totalitarian regimes exhibits features that cannot be oversimplified by the category of atomization and isolation. For example, they underlined how through a sociological analysis of society emerged the presence of social networks that had an impact in "mediating, refracting, and impeding the regime's goals" (p. 56). Social processes had, even under totalitarian regimes, a "relative autonomy", and this was precisely the field that Riesman, as early as the 1940s, sought to map out, "as a corrective to the oppressive weight of Arendtian categories [...] Ironically, it was Riesman, the social scientist ostensibly tainted by pseudo-universalistic theory, who was especially sensitive to individual cases and to evidence; and Arendt, supposedly the practitioner of phronesis, who constantly advanced arguments that the material could not bear" (p. 57).

To say that Arendt's *Origins* is a text that ignores reality or oversimplifies it is at least imprecise. First of all because the book is a massive, often contradictory work on many aspects of the totalitarian phenomenon, which, as she tried to recount, was a complex amalgam of elements that eventually crystallized in a novel political form. These elements – imperialism, anti-semitism, racism – are assembled in a narrative form that often recurs to literature to shed new light on how the amalgam came to crystallize (see Disch 1994, pp. 121-125, Benhabib 1990, pp. 184-189). Of the way in which Arendt combined history, politics, literature, anecdotes and facts to assess the complexity – and novelty – of modern racism under imperialism, or modern anti-semitism, Baehr does not say, and it is too bad. He concentrates exclusively on the category of "Totalitarian Regime", its ideology, its actual functioning, neglecting to assess that the parts of Arendt's book dedicated to totalitarianism itself are just the conclusive steps of a tortuos path. In that tortuosity Arendt was for sure imprecise, sometimes contradictory, but not at all "philosophical". Her dismissal of the social sciences in fact has not to do with a refusal to see the complexity of the phenomenon, but on the contrary with the need to forge an understanding of it that would not justify, nor pretend nothing epochal had happened. Her reconstrucion, as a whole, is principled, critical, perhaps biased. It is so because she sought to find ways to judge *politically* the phenomenon: the need to formu-

late a possible political judgment - the judgment which, for example, she accused Adolf Eichmann to be incapable of (Arendt 1963, see also Parvikko 1996, 2008) – on a phenomenon that could not be inserted in the uninterrupted flow of history neither in the *normal* functioning of modern society.

It is surprising that a book that deals with totalitarianism and sociology neglects to take into account one of the most influential works on the matter, namely Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman 1988). In it, the author (a sociologist himself) shows how the rationality which produced gas chambers and implemented genocide is, more or less, the same rationality that is employed in sociology and empirical analysis today (Bauman 1988: 2-3). Therefore, claims Bauman, to understand the history of state genocides means to question the very rationality which is the foundation of the modern state. To understand the history of bureaucratic mass murder also means to criticize bureaucratic rationality. He affirms that no matter how the Holocaust has been interpreted, it has always been inserted within familiar frames of reference, "shunted into the familiar stream of history [...] One way or the other, the bomb is defused; no major revision of our social theory is really necessary; our visions of modernity, of its unrevealed yet all-too-present potential, its historical tendency, do not require another hard look, as the methods and concepts accumulated by sociology are fully adequate to handle this challenge – to 'explain it', to 'make sense of it', to understand. The overall result is theoretical complacency" (2-3). Sociology, claims Bauman, pretended that "nothing really happened to justify another critique of the model of modern society that has served so well as the theoretical framework and the pragmatic legitimation of sociological practice" (3). Significantly, Baehr's book reports several sociological pioneering attempts at analyzing totalitarianism and the Shoah – the works of H.G. Adler, Hans Gerth, Theodore Abel and Talcott Parsons among others – and his analyses of those early mainstream sociology works seem to confirm Bauman's position: they were reductive, refused to describe totalitarianism as 'novel', preferred to rely on familiar sociological categories. Bauman's vision of the social sciences is in this case crucial insofar as it formulates, in an explicit methodological frame what, in Arendt's indictment of the social sciences, often remained implicit or poorly expressed. It is a pity that Baehr did not consider it.

3. Arendt and Raymond Aron

Raymond Aron reviewed both *The origins of Totalitarianism* and *Ideology and Terror* (which constitutes Arendt's coda to the book and was added to the 1958 and subsequent editions) and while recognizing the book's importance he criticized its style, which portrayed a "bleak landscape" that reminded Aron of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Arendt's book seemed to be replete of "hasty, tendentious and factually incorrect" statements (p. 66). Aron also criticized Arendt's *Ideology and Terror* essay harshly: in it she defined ideology and terror as the two elements constituing the "principle and essence" of totalitarian government but did not provide any empirical data for them and thus ended up generalizing excessively the phenomenon, in a philosophical impetus that sociology could not bear. He disagreed on the fact that this combination of violence and ideas was utterly new, since for him, as later expressed in *Démocratie et Totalitarisme* (Aron 1965), both elements were amplifications of revolutionary phenomena. Totalitarianism, in other words, could be understood, claims Aron, as an exacerbation of the revolution, a typical trait of modern politics since the late 18th century. The contrast with Arendt related also to the notion of ideology: for Aron ideology was not, as Arendt maintained, simply the "logic of an idea" that would coherently follow from a given premise. Ideology was for Arendt the triumph of logical consistency, which offered atomized individuals the artificial safe haven of sense in an apparently senseless world. For Aron, instead, ideology had nothing to do with logical consistency but with faith and belief and this is why he coined the term: "secular religion".

Aron was also convinced that the main difference between democratic regimes and totalitarian ones had to do with the role of political parties: for him the most important features of the totalitarian regime – its internal "logic" – could be inferred from the variable of the single party, as opposed to the many parties of democratic pluralist systems. His distinctions are typical of the political scientist, or the political sociologist, and very distant from Arendt's talentuous narrative. Baehr, in this respect, seems to be much more sympathetic with Arendt's work than with Aron's: he maintains that Aron's detached analysis of totalitarianism as determined by the "chief variable" of the political party

"leaves us enlightened but dissatisfied" since it "falls short of explaining the grotesque texture of the totalitarian world" (p. 87). "No theorist has better captured that nightmare quality, or registered the extent of totalitarianism's rupture with quotidian standards of judgement and even quotidian crimes than Hannah Arendt" (p. 88). In spite of the fact that perhaps Arendt and Aron sought different aims in their analyses of totalitarianism, a sentence like this is far more just to Arendt's work than the critiques Baehr moved to her in earlier parts of the book, when he pictured Arendt's theory as "advancing arguments that the material could not bear"(p. 56).

The reader finds it hard, at this point, to grasp or summarize the author's perspective on Arendt's work: critical and sympathetic at once, Baehr's book dwells among the theoretical and ethical dilemmas that have haunted interpreters of totalitarianism for many years, without solving any of them. Yet this lack of onesidedness, the undecidability Baehr himself displays in his book, is testimony of the fact that those dilemmas are, to some extent, unsolvable, even by the social sciences' dissecting analytical tools.

4. Arendt and Jules Monnerot

French Sociologist Jules Monnerot was convinced that the notion of "secular religion" was useful in higlighting certain features of totalitarianism. Baehr describes his positions as follows: "[totalitarian movements] were gripped by sectarian apocalyptic fervor that, in a highly distorted fashion, was reminiscent of medieval millenarism, the warrior culture of Islam, and the zeal of the Protestant Reformation. On the other hand, totalitarian movements aimed not at supernatural transcendence but at immanent redemption. Hannah Arendt recognized these properties. But she was highly averse to decribing them in the language of religion or confusing so-called secular religion with ideology" (p. 94).

Monnerot was convinced that, in order to understand modern society, sociology had to recover a sense of "the sacred" and study "all manifestations of social existence where the active presence of the sacred is

clear" (p. 95). In his *Sociology and Psychology of Communism* he claimed that totalitarian believers were "victims of collective passion…sustained by frequent communion, inflamed by periodic rites, such as meetings, processions and demonstrations, and fed each morning by newspaper and radio" (Monnerot [1949]1960, p. 135, quoted by Baehr, p. 95). In such religious dimension lurks an element of delusion, characterized as it is by "exclusiveness and monomania" (Monnerot [1949]1960, p. 142, quoted by Baehr, p. 96).

To a reader familiar with Arendt's texts this analysis would not appear strange: the language is perhaps different, but the quality of the message convoyed essentially in line with Arendt's depiction of totalitarian movement and ideology. Yet Baehr maintains that "this sort of psychological framework was anathema to Arendt" (ib.). In spite of an apparent "confluence" of the two authors on the perverse nature of totalitarianism, Arendt and Monnerot disagreed fiercely exactly on the use of the term "religion" applied to totalitarian ideology. Arendt, in her essay *Religion and Politics* quotes in a footnote Monnerot's book as a typical social science work that applies the disorienting method of reading totalitarian ideology as a "secular religion" (Arendt [1953] 1994, p. 388, n. 22).

Baehr reconstructs the exchange of opinions between Arendt and Monnerot that eventually occurred in the journal *Confluence* and conclusively affirms: "One can delineate the singularity of both ideology and religion while acknowledging that, under certain conditions, they may be hybridized. Significantly, Arendt seems to have recognized this point without, however, clarifying it or developing its implications" (p. 115). Baehr in fact maintains that in *Origins* Arendt referred to totalitarian propaganda and its style as religious in tones and modes, since it announced "political intentions in the form of prophecy"; or again, she referred to Nazi and Bolshevik rituals as "idolatric" (Arendt 1951, p. 349 and p. 377, quoted by Baehr, p. 115). The most strinking contradiction, according to Baehr, in Arendt's critique of the concept of secular religion is given by the fact that she referred to concentration camps and their different levels of annihilation by recurring to the medieval notions of Hades, Purgatory and Hell (p. 116). Basically Arendt used many religious expressions when referring to totalitarianism in its

many aspects, but refused, Baehr maintains, to substantiate it, to explicitate her method.

Needless to say, this opacity in Arendt's methods, her very free and inventive use of language are hardly acceptable according to the social science standards of international academia. The use of metaphors or other figures of speech in order to describe the unimaginable phenomenon of the extermination camps was, for Arendt, probably the only 'methodology' she could envisage in her pioneering work on them. Yet the question is more complex, and it would deserve more space than a book review can allow. For sure Arendt's language is full of religious elements: after all it was she who dared to call totalitarianism a "radical evil". Is there a more religious expression than that? It was she, though, who after several years modified her hypothesis and re-described evil as "banal": Arendt did not renounce to use the religious-moral word "evil" in order to describe what she discovered was another aspect of totalitarianism. This perhaps means that she relied on the strong rhetorical impact of religious language in order to describe what secular knowledge (be it juridical, sociological, psychological or politological) failed to grasp in its horrible, unprecedented novelty. Yet Arendt contested to Monnerot the systematic, methodological use of the notion of "secular religion" in order ot understand communist totalitarianism, since she believed that religion was something much more complex than simply a functional category for understanding social behavior. There could be, in other words, no "confluence" between a social theorist who expected society – any society – to become transparent to the eye of the researcher and a political thinker who sought to deconstruct the idea that society had its own mechanistic functioning and that men were simply parts of the mechanism itself. The social science language and methods strongly contrasted with Arendt's *Bildung* – one in which the language of philosophy, literature, religion and ancient culture were strictly interwoven to each other and constituted a very rich background from which to draw in order to build paths of interpretation. In the essay *Religion and Politics* Arendt in fact refers amply to Homer, Plato, Tertullian, Dante, medieval religious mentality and its difference with modern religion under secularization, in order to question the use of the term "secular religion" to interpret totalitarian ideology. Her

insights in the problem bring together historical, philosophical, etymological elements in order to contest an oversimplification in the use of the "religious" by the social sciences.

Baehr, following Monnerot, maintains that the concept of "secular religion" is very interesting for a sociologist, since it "alerts us on the hybrid character of its subject matter", namely the fact that social phenomena retain an element of "sacred" that especially under totalitarian regimes expressed themselves vividly through rituals, symbols, beliefs and organization (p. 122). In fact these devices played a crucial role under totalitarianism, since they managed to "enthuse a mass constituency" and Arendt herself did not deny it at all, recongizing and discussing at length, as mentioned above, totalitarian propaganda. Yet in her essay on religion and politics there is, apart form the critique she moves to Monnerot and the social sciences, a crucial political reason why she did not like to abuse of the word 'religion' when speaking of communism as opposed to the free world[1]. Her fear was that by interpreting the contraposition in religious terms not only one denied the specifically doubtful nature of modern religion after secularization (an aspect she very well explains in her essay by recurring to Pascal, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche), not only evaded the true novelty of totalitarian ideology (its being a "scientific" rather than religious ideology), but mostly it risked transforming "our fight against totalitarianism into a fanaticism that is totally extraneous to the essence of liberty" (Arendt [1953]1994, p. 390). This Arendtian sentence is revealing also today, and it tells a lot of those attempts – in which Baehr himself embarks, in the conclusive chapter of his book – to read the contemporary contraposition between the West and Islamist ideology in terms of religion[2]. It should finally be left to the reader to find out for herself if and to which extent Peter Baehr's interesting and challenging book succeeds, in his closing remarks, to offer a satisfactory reading of the contemporary issue of the nature of Jihadist violence and politics, its relationship with possible totalitarian elements, the political response the West should give to it.

1 Arendt's essay *Religion and Politics* was the result of a paper she gave at a Harvard Conference entitled "Is the Struggle Between the Free World and Communism Basically Religious?".

2 For an insightful reading of Arendt's notion of totalitarian terror and its impossible application to contemporary Islamic terrorism, see D. Villa 2008.

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