

## ***Guest Editor's Preface***

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1. A special issue of *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics* devoted to Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) in a period of heavy inflation of secondary literature and memorial celebrations might appear both pretentious and superfluous. Of course, we hope it is not. Yet, a condition must be met, i.e. to resist the temptation of setting out an immediate, simple answer to the question of how much of Arendt's thought and work is still alive today. Partly, since fame — something the author of *Vita activa* certainly does not lack — is often a deceptive mirror, as Arendt herself was well aware of. And partly, since an immediate answer would imply the resort to such concepts as *Zeitgemässigkeit* and *Unzeitgemässigkeit* which, despite their glorious nitschean echoes, seem too vague and obscure to be really useful in the present case.

The title of this monographic issue tries to suggest something that might be worth noting. That is, if we are able to focus a tension that dwells in the core of Arendt's work, then we are also in a better position to appreciate the controversial nature of her influence on contemporary debates. Besides, all of this may also be useful in order to understand why an interdisciplinary approach is something more than one possible editorial choice among many other available options. Most of recent scholarly literature on Hannah Arendt clearly shows that an interaction of different competences has become increasingly necessary, if we are to grasp the many facets of a thought that cannot be simply labelled as 'political theory' anymore. Needless to say, we do not mean to deny, nor to retrench the political quality of Arendt's biographical and intellectual itinerary. Just the opposite. In order to make the most of it, as well as in order to bring into discussion some of its features far from being thoroughly convincing, an enquiry on the theoretical and cultural background lying behind her political thought is requested.

2. A peculiar tension between past and present shapes, first of all, the way Arendt confronts the history of philosophy. Philosophical and political thinking seems to be possible for her only through an ceaseless dialogue with some classical *auctores* who have nurtured her youthful years and, at the same time, provided that the *auctores* in question do not change in overwhelming *auctoritates*. In other words, according to Arendt western cultural past deserves to be explored only to the extent it casts a light on the present, and not as a place where a deeper, higher, truth is kept.

The first of the essays presented here, by Giovanni Catapano, makes sense of this point by discussing Arendt's reading of Augustine. As for many other Heidegger's disciples, the bishop of Hippo crosses Arendt's intellectual horizon from the very beginning to the end of her career. Along the lines of a rigorous philological approach, Catapano compares chapter 6 of Arendt's *The Life of the Mind* with Hans Jonas's *Augustine and the Pauline Problem of Freedom*. The analysis focuses on a theme, the will and its antinomies, whose importance in the general economy of Arendt's political philosophy hardly needs to be remarked. Catapano underlines the fact that, while Jonas thinks Augustine loses the pauline antinomical structure of the will during the pelagian controversy, Arendt emphasises the augustinian philosophical illustration of the split that paralyzes the will. A genuine theoretical interest in a possible solution to the dialectics left open by Augustine's *Confessiones* makes Arendt's attention shift towards *De Trinitate*, where the will, once turned into charity, becomes a cohesive force capable of sustaining the claims of action. Another important difference between Jonas and Arendt concerns the concept of freedom: according to Jonas, the genuine nature of the question is missed by Augustine since the bishop of Hippo develops it within a compatibilistic framework. Arendt, instead, finds in Augustine's *De civitate Dei* some elements closely related to her concept of freedom as natality; in a way, its pre-history. But natality as primary source of action, in Catapano's view, is an original arendtian concept that cannot be really found in Augustine.

This kind of manipulation of the augustinian texts could raise the impression that Arendt's philosophical and political ideas tend to evolve at the expense of a genuine understanding of her *auctores*. Beyond any doubt, Arendt is a deliberately malicious historian of philosophy. Given the premises previously outlined, this is not amazing at all. Nevertheless, to consider Arendt as a victim of a resounding misunderstanding would be completely

out of place, according to Deborah Ardilli, as far as her reading of Kant is concerned. Surely, Arendt's insistence on a kantian «unwritten political philosophy» — i.e. a political philosophy that has to be found in his whole work and not just in the few essays that are usually collected under this rubric — overcomes orthodox scholarly perspectives. But it would be misleading to draw the conclusion that her unusual point of view involves a forgery. To put it simply: in accordance with the broad sense of the term 'politics' she adopts, Arendt aims at exploring the political meaning of criticism as a whole. Along the way, she finds in kantian cosmopolitical philosophy, inclusive of a new pragmatistical approach to anthropology, an ally in her engagement against her former mentor Martin Heidegger. Moreover, the role played by Kant in the making of Arendt's philosophy can be fully appreciated if related to the problem of Modernity. On the one hand, in fact, criticism as a whole is *the* theoretical expression of Modernity; on the other hand, Modernity is a field of historical and political contradictions that Arendt faces provided with a critical framework that differentiates her from conservative detractors of Modernity, as well as from post-modern theorists.

If it is true, as Ardilli suggests, that Kant's *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* is an important source of inspiration for the Jewish philosopher, then we should not be surprised that experts in twentieth century German philosophical anthropology have felt deeply solicited by Arendt's work. One of them, Maria Teresa Pansera, offers a detailed reconstruction of Arendt's idea of *human condition*. As the Italian scholar points out, Arendt tries to achieve a definition of what being in the world means based neither on scientific knowledge, nor on pure philosophical elaborations as proposed by Husserl or by Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Rather, by focusing on the problems raised by the question "*who* is man?", Arendt deliberately rejects the question of *what* man is. This is the reason why her theory of human action can be considered one the major premises of her political thought. And this is the reason why, as Pansera puts it, Arnold Gehlen was both interested in and critical of Arendt's theory of human action. As a matter of fact, on the one hand Gehlen highlights those features of Arendt's analysis of technical-scientific civilization that come closest to his concept of man. On the other hand, Gehlen's biological interpretation of action as a means for human survival and institutional stabilization makes him highly suspicious towards Arendt's "utopian" connection between action, freedom and public realm.

Whether utopian or not, it is out of question that Arendt's view of human condition contrasts with any kind — biological or cultural — of essentialist reductionism. Seen in the light of its historical effects, reductionism is the logical step that has preceded a mass production of human *superfluity*, as the suggestive portrait of Arendt as post-totalitarian thinker outlined by Antonella Argenio goes to show. Related to the conflicts involved in a post-totalitarian world, the special emphasis the Jewish philosopher lays on the relational status of freedom and action can be read, as it is explained by Davide Sparti, as a «non identitary theory of identity». The consequence of all this is that not only do Arendt's notions of action and human plurality outgrow a vision of collective and individual identity as an exogenous, isolated, motionless object ontologically preceding concrete social intercourses. They cast a different light on the concept of *Anerkennung* as well. Sparti underlines this aspect by setting Arendt's theory of human action against Charles Taylor's and Axel Honneth's identity politics of recognition. That is, if we take seriously the idea of plurality, then we should be able to see some of the shortcomings that affect current normative theories of recognition. A fully accomplished recognition, according to Sparti, is a dangerous goal to be pursued, since it might become the premise for a reductionist view deaf to a basilar element of human freedom: the unforeseeable, and consequently unprojectable, outcomes of recognition. This is just what Taylor and Honneth seem to forget: to recognize a once for all shaped identity means to recognize something that concrete human beings are not — and should not aim at being.

Did Hannah Arendt herself take seriously the concept of plurality? Does her vision of political power fit in with plurality? These are the challenging questions raised by Ferdinando Menga in the last of the essays presented here. According to Menga, Arendt's political thought rests on an *intransitive* understanding of power, which can be fully grasped if compared with Max Weber's *transitive* interpretation of the same phenomenon. Otherwise said, while a weberian understanding of political power is open to individual initiatives *within* the community, Arendt's view of "acting in concert" seems to suggest that the qualified subject of power is always and only the community *as a whole*. This is the reason why she opposes to political representation and opts for direct democracy, betraying along this path her vision of plurality. Is there any remedy for this outcome? In Menga's opinion, by retrieving the concept of political representation and by

rethinking its theoretical structure, we could also recover the irreducible dimension of plurality.

3. Let's bring to an end these introductory remarks. Past and present, unity and plurality, the individual and the world, identity and difference, freedom and its limitations: Hannah Arendt has had the venture, which she considered a privilege, to reflect upon all these contradictions in a period when their politicization was not a stain to be removed from philosophical work. Present days are for many respects quite different. Certainly, conflicts are still on the scene; what seems to be more and more difficult is articulating a *form* through which they can be made visible and intelligible. Arendt used to call "acosmism" this lack of mediation, where the common world seems to disappear from our sight and plurality just stops to make sense. Moreover, she knew that however mediation was to be redefined in the future, it could no longer be on the old terms. Deciding whether Hannah Arendt is our contemporary or not, and in case to what extent, is completely up to the reader. Being the question still worth arising, is what the following pages try to show.