Book Review/ Compte rendu

Walsh, Philip, *Arendt Contra Sociology*. Surrey, UYK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015. 161pp., $109.95 hardcover (9781409438632)

Hannah Arendt continues to fascinate, her books continue to appear on the undergraduate curriculum and scholars continue to probe her ideas. In some ways this is a puzzle: her concern with some fundamental problems of philosophy notwithstanding, she was not highly regarded by the professionals; the reading lists she appears on tend to be in sociology, a discipline for which she had scant regard; and her writing can be as frustrating as it is interesting. Then again, her not fitting neatly into the familiar boxes doubtless makes her an attractive figure for an age that thinks it is interdisciplinary.

The latest to throw his hat in the ring is Philip Walsh. His doctoral supervisor at Warwick ("for a while" (2)) was Gillian Rose, like Arendt a magnetic figure and one who wrote on similar themes. The title of his book is an allusion to Rose's *Hegel contra Sociology*, though he suggests that Arendt's hostility to sociology should be taken with a pinch of salt, so much so that her work can be the basis for a rethink of social ontology (32). Here Walsh moves towards another powerful Warwick woman, Margaret Archer.

The standard interpretation of *The Human Condition* is that Arendt distinguished between three elements of what she called the vita activa, labouring, fabricating/working and acting, and in so doing saw the relationship between them as hierarchical: labouring is the least dignified, oriented to mere survival; fabricating/work is more elevated as it entails the creation of a world of enduring entities; acting – by which she means acting, and particularly speaking, in concert with others – is the most elevated, the most human activity of all. For Arendt it is in the public arena, in politics, that acting in common/speech finds its true locus, but in industrial societies an understanding of human conduct has come to prevail in which labouring has been granted more dignity than in previous societies. In so far as sociology emerges with the rise of industrial society it is complicit in this denigration both of work and of a properly political understanding of human conduct.

Rather than see this as the basis for another dismissal of sociology, in the first part of this two part study Walsh takes it as an invitation to rethink a topic unfashionable among sociologists, the constitution of

their own object of inquiry, society. He does so because while Arendt's account of the difference between political and non-political realms is persuasive – the realm of necessity in which tasks are fixed in advance versus the realm of freedom and spontaneity in which humans can keep "beginning" – she has a lot to say about labour and work as well. In addition, her account of action - acting in concert in a "space of appearance" free from the encumbrances of the role commitments we acquire as members of civil society - sounds less like an account of 'the political' than a lot like what many thinkers since the enlightenment have called simply sociability, or sociality. Once you see things that way you can try to do something with the concepts of labour, fabrication, and action and trace the changing configurations in which they have appeared in different societies. This isn't quite what Walsh himself does, rather he tries some reconstructive surgery on Arendt, widening these terms' horizons of implication to make them more compatible with other prominent theorists of the 'social' from Simmel and Mead to Schutz and Goffman and on to the critical realists, and pointing to the shortcomings of those – including Marx – who give priority to one of action's three dimensions at the expense of the others.

The second part suggests that Arendt can tell us important things about four topics of concern to contemporary sociology: reflexivity, power, knowledge and consumption. On reflexivity, Arendt's reflections in *The Life of the Mind* are seen as a corrective to both philosophical and sociological reductionism (the latter embodied by Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*); in particular, her distinction between thinking, willing and judging, and her elucidations of each of them, provide for an enriched conception of agency. This is more convincing than the account of Arendt on power; Walsh would like to say that sociology fails to make distinctions between power and violence, power and authority or power and morality, and that Arendt can help it do so, but it is not obvious that she is any more of a help - especially on power versus authority – than any number of political philosophers. On knowledge she is lined up against theorists of post-industrialism and the knowledge society, though here one wonders whether her sporadic forays into the relationship between science and society lead to conclusions that are that startling: science as technology was increasingly difficult to contain within the limits provided by law or morality (121). Walsh though rightly wants to say that her originality consists less in the conclusion than in the way she arrived at it: in saying that science has become more action (with its implied open-endedness) than fabrication, Arendt affords us a better sense of the significance of knowledge in contemporary society. Finally, Arendt can help us gauge the significance of consumption, not simply as an interesting phenomenon for sociologists to study, but as a "fundamental orienta-

tion" (131) which represents the triumph of labouring (in which objects lack any permanence) over fabrication, and a state of affairs in which individuals spend so much time caring for themselves that they cannot care for the world.

Walsh's book is brave and thoughtful, though I am not sure it always works. He is an assiduous reader of Arendt and had this been a study of her alone one might have asked for a more robust approach to intellectual history and how to do it. As it is, he does want to stress her usefulness to sociology, and here the reader is perhaps entitled to demand a clearer theoretical framework, one that transcends that of both Arendt and the writers with whose work hers is being compared (think of the theories of action that helped the early Parsons or late Habermas to write about others). The absence of such a framework is felt keenly because Arendt herself retained one of Heidegger's most irritating habits, that of trying to tell us what certain words really mean but managing to sound idiosyncratic in doing so. Walsh rather approves of this (36, 67, 86, 92); he admits that Arendt's primary value to sociology may be as a "socratic gadfly" (82), but does seem committed to her terminology as a route into the significance of what sociologists are often merely groping towards. It should be said that this is almost the exact opposite of Weber's mostly nominalistic strategy of seeing ideal types as tools to be used by other scholars.

In the end one would have liked a more head-on assessment of how Arendt's distinction between labouring, fabricating and acting stacks up as a comprehensive social ontology. Can I throw Walsh a bone here? Georges Dumézil once said that there is an implicit social ontology of Indo-European culture. It also involves a threefold distinction, between working, thinking and fighting, the activities of the farmer, the priest and the warrior, or in Ernest Gellner's terms, plough, book and sword. Given our current circumstances, given Arendt's own political experience, one wonders whether her agonistic concept of politics can help us better understand war. Somehow I doubt it, but that might be another area where she and sociology overlap.

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