Totalitarianism, Social Science, and the Margins

Peter Baehr, *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, 248 pp. $US 55.00 hardcover (978-0-8047-5650-1)

We can always count on wide historical learning, deep theoretical insight, close textual reading, graceful writing and sensible judgments on contemporary political issues when encountering essays, articles and books by Peter Baehr. *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism and the Social Sciences* is certainly no exception. Organized around the engagement of sociologists David Riesman, Raymond Aron, and Jules Monnerot with Arendt's 1951 classic *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Baehr's concise, well-written book raises big questions about Nazism, Communism, social science and, in the final, speculative chapter, radical Islam. There are important questions about intellectual reputations, the social organization of knowledge and contemporary politics that he does not address. But when reviewing the work of a balanced scholar who deals with Arendt and her critics first and foremost on their own terms, we surely must begin with Baehr's own chosen goals for this scholarly treatise.

As the editor of *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (2000), Baehr possesses deep and wide knowledge of Arendt's life and career, broader political philosophy, and the literature on her work. This book, however, is focused on Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism, her views on the social sciences, and the contemporary implications of her argument that Nazism and Communism were "unprecedented" political calamities that cannot be compared to earlier dictatorships. Baehr organizes his book around the debates and dialogues between Arendt and three critics: the famous American public intellectual David Riesman, French sociologist and major intellectual statesman Raymond Aron, and the relatively obscure Jules Monnerot, one of the founding members of the College of Sociology in France. Each of these three core chapters offers differ-

ent lessons about Arendt's political and theoretical legacy, and it is thus worth examining them one by one.

Riesman, of course, is known to sociologists for his classic academic best-seller *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and for being credited by Orlando Patterson as American sociology's last public intellectual. Along with C. Wright Mills and W.E.B. Du Bois, David Riesman represents one of the major 20th century templates for what Michael Burawoy now calls the "public sociologist." The literature on Riesman's work, however, has not emphasized how his writings were deeply concerned with Nazism and Communism, which brought him into direct dialogue with Arendt's own analysis of totalitarianism. The dialogue between the two thinkers began in 1947 through a series of letters stimulated by Arendt's writings in *Partisan Review*. On the eve of the emergence of both thinkers as major public intellectual and scholarly figures in the United States, their private dialogue and later published debates gives Baehr an excellent foil with which to discuss theoretical and political issues we struggle with today.

As always, Baehr begins with Arendt and Riesman, not our present dilemmas or his own theoretical preoccupations. Both secularized liberal Jews critical of a unitary Israeli state, Arendt and Riesman shared what Baehr describes as an ambivalence towards "aggressive secularism" and a preoccupation with theorizing totalitarianism. But it was their differences, of course, that make the dialogue interesting and useful to us today. A very American thinker rooted in a pragmatic sensibility and a disciplined engagement with empirical social science, Riesman was skeptical of Arendt's grand theoretical pronouncements on the unprecedented and all-consuming nature of the Nazi and Communist regimes. Riesman preferred instead to emphasize social networks and social relationships that limited the ability of these antidemocratic movements to transform society in their ideological image. And as a protégé of German psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, Riesman emphasized the social psychological roots of what Fromm called the totalitarian "escape from freedom," while few contemporary social theorists were as militantly antipsychological as Arendt. In the end, Riesman could not match Arendt's philosophical and theoretical sophistication, but his concern with qualitative methods, social science evidence, and preference for particularism on the ground over broad generalizations combined with old fashioned good sense allowed Riesman to raise important objections to Arendt's theory of totalitarianism. This is a dialogue well worth reproducing as carefully as Baehr does, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, something which would not have surprised Riesman, but which raises questions about Arendt's theory.

If Riesman and Arendt were roughly peers who came to know each other in America in the 1940s, the relationship with French sociologist, journalist and political figure Raymond Aron goes back to the 1930s and was asymmetrical in a couple of different ways. First, Aron helped numerous Jewish intellectual refugees in France, including Arendt as she fled the Nazi terror. Arendt, we learn from Baehr, was a very loyal person, and she tended not to publicly criticize people who had helped her before she became famous and influential. And Aron was more open in his admiration for Arendt than was Riesman, despite sharp intellectual differences. Aron reviewed *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in the journal *Critique*, recognizing its importance immediately. Riesman was more skeptical.

As a consequence of these differences, the chapter "Raymond Aron versus Hannah Arendt" is not, as the Riesman chapter was, a two-way debate, but is largely a discussion of Aron's critique of Arendt's theoretical model of totalitarianism. Arendt did not respond vigorously to Aron's ideas, even though he did have useful and important things to say about the limitations of Arendt's theoretical analysis: her history is often thin, and not always accurate, her analysis of political parties incomplete, her understanding of anti-Semitism so subtle as to draw attention away from the obvious, and her emphasis on Stalin to the neglect of Lenin and Bolshevism historically short-sighted. Aron also wrote a powerful critique of "Ideology and Terror," one of Arendt's most well-read essays, where her overly theoretical and inadequately empirical analysis is outlined in its purest form. In addition, as a great Weberian interpreter and scholar himself, Aron defends Max Weber's general approach against Arendt's harsh critique, as well as showing in his own writings that Arendt's disdain for social science was excessive and rooted partly in her own prejudice and ignorance of the best work being done in political sociology.

If Arendt was hesitant to respond to Aron's critiques, she had no inhibitions in attacking the "secular religion" thesis of French sociologist Jules Monnerot. Monnerot's *Sociology and Psychology of Communism* (1953) (originally *Sociologie du communism*, 1949) articulated a rival theory of totalitarianism similar to the perspectives of Eric Voegelin, Jacob Talmon, and Aron himself that had been in circulation since the 1930s. Arendt did not see Monnerot as a heavy-weight intellectual competitor, instead viewing him as the personification of much that she detested about sociology, and thus her critique held nothing back. She considered Monnerot's interpretation of communism anachronistic, his analysis of communist ideology as a religion repugnant and naïve, his use of ideal types simplistic and his neglect of the content of the ideas of political actors in favour of some sort of sociological functionalism

appalling. Monnerot responded to Arendt's attacks, but while Baehr uses Riesman and Aron as a foil to modify and nuance Arendt's model of totalitarianism, he brings Monnerot on stage to buttress Arendt's critique of sociological theories that explain Communism and Nazism as secular religions. Even here, Baehr is far too sophisticated to accept Arendt's theories uncritically, particularly with regards to how her excessively abstract and disembodied notion of the logic of totalitarianism fails to capture the "interdictions, foci of attention, modes of interaction and emotional energy that inspire the faithful." In the end, however, while political sociologists are right to emphasize how all politics is ritualized, Baehr argues that there is no purpose to be served by "identifying ritual interaction, the delineation of insiders and outsiders, and the feelings of respect and repugnance as thereby 'religious'." For all the limitations of Arendt's analysis, Baehr insists that her focus on the content of totalitarian ideas is essential, as is her skepticism of sociological functionalism and elements of the sociology of knowledge. Ideas matter.

Baehr's use of Riesman, Aron, and Monnerot as foils for Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism is worth the price of admission, but the ultimate contribution of *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences* comes from how Baehr addresses two larger issues. What is the value of the social sciences in dealing with "unprecedented" evils such as Nazism and Communism? And in light of Baehr's reflections on these general questions of the nature of unprecedented evil and social science methodology and theory, what are we dealing with today when we try to understand radical Islam? It is at this point that the limitations of Baehr's otherwise excellent book must be highlighted.

Two major problems in the book come from Baehr's methodological decision to organize his analysis around three intellectual foils. What other perspectives and ideas must we confront, as we think about Arendt's theory of totalitarianism today? One obvious omission in the analysis is a range of literatures that flow from Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941), the authoritarian personality debate, and a large body of scholarship in contemporary social psychology. Baehr rightly points out that Arendt's critique of sociology, while valid and useful in many ways, was based on very minimal knowledge of what sociologists actually do and think. If this is true, and I fear it is, then Arendt's hostility to social psychological explanations is even more inadequate and verges on just plain silly. While Baehr's discussion of Riesman's social psychology is competent and useful, the roots of the social psychology in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and *Faces in the Crowd* (1952) are in the work of Fromm's revised psychoanalysis. If Arendt's dismissal of social psychology is to be defended, then her conclusions and analysis must

be put up against the best of contemporary work, as Baehr does when he cites Richard Hamilton and Michael Mann on the cross-class (not purely lower middle class, but not classless either as Arendt asserted) and Protestant religious patterns (something Arendt also denied) in the support for the Nazi movement. Baehr is surely right that it is pedantic to critique Arendt's work from the 1950s based on contemporary sources, but it is also arrogant to make the case for Arendt's brilliance, as some of her contemporary followers tend to do, without reference to what scholars actually know today about the phenomena under study. Moreover, scholars existed in Arendt's time who correctly emphasized parts of the story that she ignored, such as Theodore Abel's *Why Hitler Came to Power* (1938), an important book that emphasized confession, geography, and economic sector in ways that prefigure recent findings. Arendt ignored Abel, and was dismissive of Fromm. While *Escape from Freedom* and Fromm's other works have their limitations, Baehr's selection of Arendt's critics presumes rather than argues for the validity of Arendt's extreme antipsychological bias. And dealing with Riesman's social psychology, while ignoring Fromm, lets Arendt off easy.

Ironically, this is a case where Baehr forgets about one of his most important insights. In an important 2002 *ASR* article, "Identifying the Unprecedented: Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism and the Critique of Sociology," Baehr makes the case that sociologists must guard against excessive abstractions, overgeneralizations, and inattention to the unique and the particular as well as a moral blindness that can come from excessive focus on general theory and methodological rigour. These flaws are indeed part of the sociological habitus, at least to some extent, but so is our tendency to dismiss the intersubjective and depth psychological dimensions of human evil and violence. This is a flaw for which Arendt should not be excused simply because the psychological perspective is so often abused in popular psychology and the mass media.

The selection bias goes even deeper in Baehr's book. *Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism and the Social Sciences* does an excellent job of showing how Riesman, Aron, and Monnerot are not generally guilty of the intellectual crimes Arendt accuses sociology of, but he does not confront the fact that he has selected relatively marginal figures to represent the discipline as a whole. Riesman, in particular, is what I would call an optimally marginal figure. Riesman taught at Harvard and the University of Chicago, to be sure, and was the first sociologist to appear on the cover of *Time*. But he did not have a PhD in sociology, never published much in the core journals, and was not involved centrally in graduate training in the discipline. Riesman was not guilty of some of the excesses of mainstream sociologists precisely because he was never

one in the first place. Aron was more central to the discipline in France, but his public intellectual role and relationship to journalism and power politics meant that he really cannot be used to represent the mainstream sociology that would have to be defended to provide evidence against Arendt's argument.

The larger issue here is that Baehr's own optimally marginal position to mainstream sociology shapes his selection of Arendt's critics for the book, and thus he ignores the relative marginality of the Arendt critics he discusses. Born in Malaysia to a Canadian father and English mother, Baehr had an boarding school education, was educated in sociology at Leicester (a central institution in British sociology) but ended up teaching at Memorial Univerity in Newfoundland for the decade of the 1990s. He now has a research chair and serves as Dean at Lingman University, a liberal arts school in Hong Kong. Baehr is both very British and raised outside England itself, just as he publishes in top journals and writes impressive books while having taught only at institutions on the relative margins of the academic and sociological establishment. Assuming we all generally agree with Baehr's powerful critique of the excesses of mainstream sociology that he developed out of an engagement with Arendt's work, what kind of relationship to mainstream professional research can allow us to use the methods and the rigour that are forged within modern social sciences while avoiding the moral complacency and obsession with methods and theory over substance that plagues sociology? Baehr has written brilliantly about sociological canons in his *Founders, Classics, Canons: Modern Disputes over the Origins and Appraisal of Sociology's Heritage* (2002), but his new book never really comes back full circle to questions about intellectual reputations and the social organization of knowledge that were raised in his earlier analysis. But if it is the scholars at the core of the discipline that are most likely to exhibit the pathologies Arendt accuses the discipline of, and if it is scholars on the relative margins who avoid some of these tendencies, then what are the implications for how the discipline should be organized? Baehr makes a good argument for the value of Riesman's analysis, but who today reads *The Lonely Crowd* in sociology?

Finally there is the question of radical Islam. The most important theme in Baehr's book is the section where he critically discusses Arendt's analysis of the totalitarianism as something not linked to Western history and culture, but instead representing an unprecedented and new radical evil. Is it useful to think about radical Islam in this way? Moreover, critically reviewing the literature on radical Islam and the politics of the Middle East, Baehr provocatively asks whether traditional historical and social science accounts of radical Islam are adequate. He further

asks whether our focus on the "core" problems in the region allegedly involving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and extremist Islam capture the "plural, entrenched collisions" involving "Arab-Persian competition, Sunni and Shia rivalry, the Kurdish 'awakening' that frays at the borders of Turkey, Iran, and Syria, and inter-Arab disputes (e.g attempted annexations of Kuwait, Yemen and Lebanon by, respectively, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria)."

This last point is compelling, but raises two fundamental questions about Arendt's whole project and Baehr's scholarly and disciplined attempt to respect the integrity of her "texts," while using the ideas in helpful ways today. If we want to understand the conflicts in the regions, can we usefully do so without a serious engagement with the legacy of colonialism and empire, something largely downplayed in the work of Arendt and the critics Baehr has chosen? Clearly we do not want to replace Baehr's nuanced, scholarly, and politically reasonable analysis with a simplistic neo-Marxist anti-American or anti-imperialist rant. But is there not a way to combine the insights of anticolonial and anti-imperialist literatures with more mainstream political sociological work, in the same way Baehr works with Arendt in this compelling little book? And if Baehr is right that the specific conflicts discussed above are the central issues in the region, what does this say, in the final analysis, about the utility of Arendt's highly philosophical, and largely abstract and ahistorical analysis of totalitarianism? Can we really understand 20th century Nazism and Communism through a logic of totalitarianism, a rhetoric that helped wake us up to radical evil but which may not be as intellectually as useful as Arendt's interpreters have often suggested? Why do history and local conflicts matter so much in the Middle East today, but not in mid-century Europe? This is the ultimate big question that I do not believe Baehr has succeeded in answering in this otherwise beautifully written and provocative book.

McMaster University Neil McLaughlin

Neil McLaughlin teaches sociological theory at McMaster University. He is working on "The Public Intellectual Debate in Canada" with Eleanor Townsley and a series of pieces on the claims to authority of op-ed writers in Canada with John McLevey. His review essay on *Measuring the Mosaic: An Intellectual Biography of John Porter* by Rick Helmes-Hayes appeared in the *Literary Review of Canada* (Jan/Feb 2010).
nmclaugh@mcmaster.ca