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Council Democracy – a Tradition yet to be Understood

Shmuel Lederman, *Hannah Arendt and Participatory Democracy: A People's Utopia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). xii + 254 pp.

In *Hannah Arendt and Participatory Democracy*, a revised version of his doctoral dissertation, Shmuel Lederman, a political theorist based at the University of Haifa, undertakes to read Arendt's political philosophy through the lens of the idea of participatory democracy, specifically council democracy. For a reader like me, this is an obviously fruitful perspective on Arendt, yet it is surprisingly rare in the scholarly literature, and Lederman's book is hence a welcome addition to it.

Lederman stays very close to Arendt's texts, arguing by means of quotations and references. This is both the strength and weakness of his book. Lederman makes it clear what Arendt has said concerning the topics he brings up for discussion, but not as clear why she has said it or how it should better be understood. The latter two questions cannot always be answered just by quoting Arendt, but require one to think with (and sometimes against) her. I will give some examples of that.

To my mind, the two first chapters in the book are the most interesting ones. In the first chapter, Lederman connects Arendt's support for council democracy to her discussion of the origins of totalitarianism. One factor behind the rise of totalitarianism is the political passivity of citizens, and since the passivity is a result of the centralisation of the state, the answer to the rise of totalitarianism is the internal federalisation and decentralisation of the state, the most thorough form of which would be council democracy.

In the next chapter, Lederman goes on to discuss another background to participatory democracy in Arendt's thought. The space of appearances presupposes direct interaction between citizens, and in order for self-disclosure to come about, a public space of the kind that the councils provide is thus necessary, without which there would be no face-to-face encounters. However, the chapter would, as I see it, have benefitted from a more critical discussion of Arendt's emphasis on the desire for distinction, which Lederman more or less accepts as it is, without seeing that the points Arendt makes as concerns the space of appearances are possible to hold on to even if the desire for distinction is not seen as central, indeed would be even stronger if that idea is given up. The space of appearances is closely connected to plurality: here I express my experiences and ideas and listen to others expressing theirs, experiences and ideas that will not remain stable in that process, and thus we will not remain stable either, a process which is therefore partly painful and conflictual. Consequently, plurality is not dependent on a struggle for distinction; on the contrary, desiring distinction can be seen as not taking plurality seriously, for if my sole motivation is such a desire (which, by the way, would mean that what I am doing would lose one of the characteristics of action, as it would then be governed by an instrumental logic), I spare myself the pain of rethinking

myself and challenging others, for that would require me (and us) to have the common world in view, in contrast to having one's own possible distinction in view.

Chapter 4 (“Philosophy, Politics, and Participatory Democracy in Arendt”) can be understood as a continuation of the previous two chapters – it contains Arendt's most explicit discussions of participatory democracy and the councils, and Lederman specifically connects them to her critique of the concept of rule – but the chapters that follow have a different focus. Here, Lederman answers various possible objections to his take on Arendt. At least to me these chapters are of less interest than the rest of the book: they concern details of interpretation without Lederman always making it clear what hangs on them.

Chapter 5 (“The Actor Does not Judge: Arendt's Theory of Judgment”) concerns Arendt's theory of judgment, specifically whether Arendt ever had an actor's theory of judgment and whether the spectator's judgments are necessarily made from a position outside the public sphere. Particularly the latter issue is of importance to Lederman, for a positive answer could be understood as an indication of Arendt having given up her belief in council democracy. Lederman wants to show that judgments in Arendt's writings are always spectators' judgments, and that spectators belong to the public sphere as Arendt understands it.

Chapter 6 (“Facing the Banality of Evil: Arendt's Political Response to Eichmann”) discusses a similar issue, here in relation to the Eichmann trial: whether the response to the banality of evil is critical thinking outside the public sphere, a question the positive answer to which could, again, be understood as an indication of Arendt having given up her belief in council democracy. Lederman wants to show that this was not the only response on Arendt's part, but that she also emphasised the need for critical thinking and judgment in the public sphere with our fellow citizens.

Chapter 7 (“The Social and the Political”) has a similar structure, but would have benefitted from approaching the issue also from another direction. The topic of the chapter is Arendt's concept of the social, which, critics have argued, shows a lack of concern for socio-economic justice on Arendt's part and means that the relevance of her thought for democratic politics is highly limited, among other reasons because politics, disengaged from all social issues, would be devoid of any real content. While conceding that this criticism is not entirely unfounded, Lederman still wants to show that there are many examples in Arendt's writings of her recognising the importance of social-economic justice, also for politics, and that Arendtian politics is not at all devoid of content. Even though I find Lederman's criticism of the critics mostly to the point, the chapter nonetheless leaves me unsatisfied, for two reasons. First, Lederman does not discuss in any detail what Arendt was trying to achieve when she created the concept of the social, what problem it is a response to. Having done that, he might very well have come to see that the concept is not at all as strange as many commentators have taken it to be – that is anyhow my own take on the debate. This would however have required him not to read Arendt in a way that stays so close to the text, a way of reading which here prevents one from acquiring a deeper understanding. Second, and related to that, the questions that Arendt is here trying to address are obviously closely connected to her support for participatory democracy: the main difficulty for political life in the world of today, as

Arendt sees it, is the role of labour and consumption in it, a difficulty that however also shows the importance of such a participatory political life, as such a life would, by its very existence, counteract the spread of “the social.” This is, as I see it, just as important as the rise of totalitarianism (emphasised by Lederman) as a background to Arendt’s support for council democracy (see especially *Vita activa*, sec. 30).

The final two chapters of the book give a brief history of the council movement and present some recent experiments in participatory democracy.

All in all, the book is a good read. Approached with the right expectations – Lederman’s book is not a deep systematic analysis of Arendt’s thought on the issue of participatory and council democracy, nor a philosophical discussion of such issues with the help of Arendt, but a thorough presentation of what she has said concerning them – anyone who are interested in Arendt and council democracy will benefit from reading it.

Understanding is however dependent on experience. Many of us no doubt have some experience of participatory democracy, but one requirement for a better understanding of the tradition of council democracy thus necessarily lies outside any book: a world in which it were central in our life together.

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