

Maria Robaszkiewicz

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Hannah Arendt: A Teacher with the Spirit of Socrates

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M. Gordon (ed.), *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing our Common World*, Westview Press 2001, pp. xii + 274.

Hannah Arendt wrote one essay devoted specifically to education and another closely related to the problem. She also referred to this issue in other works. This is not much. Yet *Hannah Arendt and Education* makes good use of what is available. The nine essays in this anthology present an overview of the problem of education seen from the various perspectives, proscribed by Hannah Arendt. The authors present an examination of her ideas and wider concepts relevant to this subject. Arendt's views on thinking and acting, judgment or the public space are applied in the context of a contemporary American educational situation. The variety of problems undertaken by the contributors shows the breadth of perspective in which her thought can be analyzed or critically reinterpreted within the context of the philosophy of education.

The book's general focus is on the problems of civic and democratic education. The way in which Arendtian concepts of authority or radical distinction between educational and political are applied, indicates a new approach towards relevant issues. As her thought opposes both to mainstream conservatism, as well as to radical theories, Hannah Arendt's theories give the possibility of avoiding mistakes of both paradigms. As Mordechai Gordon points out, problems such as multicultural education, engaged pedagogy or the relation between education and ideology, can profit from the use of Arendtian perspective (p. 2).

Hannah Arendt and Education puts philosopher's work in an American context. This could have been a weak point of the book, as this clear-cut position might have made it irrelevant to broader educational perspective. Yet contributors to this anthology successfully overcome this weakness. Although most of the

articles refer directly to American situations, they have ensured that sufficient background material is included. The issues addressed relate to general educational questions which are equally applicable in the US, and Europe. Of particular note is the problem of multiculturalism, which is dealt with in three of the essays, and is an issue, which is gaining in significance in Europe today.

Hannah Arendt's conservatism is very far from what mainstream followers of this paradigm normally understand by the term. In her view, it is not about introducing traditional moral or cultural values, but about the concept of "conservation" – preserving the world as it is for the means of education. By introducing children to their everyday world, the educator gives them a basis, which is seen as a necessary preparation for starting something new – the political task of their adult life¹. This attitude, implying radical division between educational and political realms, together with the view concerning the role of authority, was the reason for labeling Arendtian concept as controversial; however, it also keeps it open to the needs of democratic education.

The opening section of the book consists of the foreword written by Maxine Greene, Arendt's student and well-known authority on the American philosophy of education; and an introduction by Mordechai Gordon, editor of the anthology. Both texts give a good background to Arendtian view on education, as well as a deep insight into the impact her thought can have on educational theory. Gordon's introduction also includes a transparent overview of the basis of Arendt's opinions on the subject matter, which helps readers, not familiar with the problems, to gain a deeper understanding of the texts which follow.

In the first chapter, Natasha Levinson examines Hannah Arendt's concepts of natality and belatedness in respect of her attitude towards education. The author offers a bright analysis of the problem of social positioning and its consequences not only in school setting, but also in broader context. She uses an example of the relation between white students and the students of color, whose socio-cultural positions have been established before they, as individuals, came to the world. Levinson indicates that according to Arendt's thought we are all

¹ H. Arendt, *Crisis in Education*, [in]: *Between Past and Future*, Penguin 1993, p. 189.

belated – in terms of gender, racial identity or social marginalization/privilege. The challenge for teachers is to create “spaces in which students can confront their sense of belatedness without feeling immobilized by it. Ideally, such spaces enable students to live out of wonder of being newcomer to the earth [...] by reconfiguring [their social positioning] in a meaningful way” (p. 26). As the author points out, pedagogical work with respect to social transformation requires constantly renewed effort of teachers due to natality, which, according to Arendt, constitutes one of the elements of human condition².

The second chapter, written by Mordechai Gordon, undertakes the problem of authority, which is one of the most significant elements in Arendt’s view on education. However, authoritarianism turns out to be understood differently than in a mainstream conservative approach. For Hannah Arendt the fact that the teacher should be an authority implies primarily responsibility. What is more, responsibility of two kinds – both for the world as it is, when they introduce a child to it, saying: “this is *our* world” and for the children’s possibility of renewal and creativity. As Gordon emphasizes, Arendt is one of the unique thinkers who insist on conservatism in education for the sake of the new. Clearly written and introducing a broad context for Arendtian concept of authority, this chapter offers a deep insight into educational views of the philosopher.

The concept of judgment, which is the subject matter of the third chapter, is one of the problematic aspects of Arendt’s thought, as *Judging*, the last section of *The Life of the Mind*, remained unfinished. Stacy Smith reconstructs it on the basis of other philosopher’s writings, basically *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, as well as the secondary literature. Beginning with the notion of judgment, she applies it to analyze Arendtian distinction between politics and education. Challenging this concept, the author attempts to prove that the latter cannot be divorced from politics and introduces the idea of education for judgment. This project is regarded here as the ultimate aim of education when starting from Arendtian paradigm. Smith seems to apply a selective approach here, ignoring some of Arendt’s views in favor of others. That, however, results from the method

² H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press 1998, p. 247.

of thinking “with Arendt against Arendt” (p. 75), which she follows. This essay is, without any doubt, the most controversial one of the whole collection. Still, the author poses one good question, which doesn’t appear as a problem in other articles: how is the transition from authoritarian unequal relationships within the schooling system to egalitarian relationships based upon political equality in adult life possible? Smith’s answer to this question is introducing education for judgment.

The following chapter presents Arendtian model of education as a correction of the utopian paradigm rooted in John Dewey’s thought, which gains popularity among many educational scholars nowadays. Applying the concept of public space, elaborated in *The Human Condition*³, Aaron Schutz discusses possible paths of democratic education development. He takes the project of Public Achievement, an experiment introduced in Minnesota, as an example of such democratically-oriented, civic education to examine what theoretical background is assumed in this kind of enterprises. Although this chapter presents very detailed analyses, the answer to the problem established by Schutz (contesting utopianism) seems not to find clear explication. The essay is not conclusive. According to the author, no ultimate synthesis of different views on democratic education can be found, yet the dialogic interaction between various approaches is very productive.

Chapters five and six focus on the problem of multiculturalism in education, yet from different perspectives. In her essay, Kimberley Curtis analyzes Arendtian distinction between the political and the educational in light of a multiculturalist approach. She affirmatively answers the question whether “preposterous” ideas of the philosopher can have any interesting input into current discussions on this issue. Introducing a wide range of examples, the author brilliantly shows how Arendtian model of conservative education can help teachers to take an appropriate approach when faced with the challenges of multiculturalism.

³ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, ed. cit., p. 50-58.

Anne Lane presents a more practical approach. Her article is a critical report on the course she has held on Hannah Arendt and American political culture. Attendees of the seminar had extremely varied political, cultural and social backgrounds. The author discusses her students' reception of Arendt's political thought and their ways of interpreting and applying these ideas to their own activities. Lane's article is more practically pedagogical than other papers in the anthology. Taking a different approach to the matter, she makes a notable contribution to the general view on the impact of Arendtian thought on philosophy of education that emerges from the book.

In the seventh chapter, Peter Euben once again takes up the problem of the distinction between the political and educational realm, this time in the context of politicizing the university as institution. Criticizing both canonic and multicultural approaches towards the question of curriculum construction, the author indicates, that one of the tasks higher education performs is political education of democratic citizens, yet many of its important aspects occur outside of schooling. What Arendt has written about thinking, Socrates and Socratic dialogue is used here to merge what she has divided. Although Arendt condemns politicizing of childhood and education⁴, Euben uses Arendtian framework to develop a model far from what the philosopher herself established. Surprisingly, this new view corresponds with many requirements Arendt sets. The chapter offers an interesting project of an Arendtian-based democratic education, responding to the challenges that contemporarily arise in this respect.

Chapter eight concentrates more on the Arendtian concept of thinking. Giving a transparent explanation of the distinction between acting and thinking, Eduardo Duarte applies clearly philosophical depiction attributed to the latter as a basis for a critique of pedagogical models that seek to create communities of learning. The author rejects a conviction, held by advocates of cooperative learning, that people learn most efficiently in a group and points out that this approach leads to the "eclipse of thinking". No space is left for reflection, thinking,

⁴ J. Bethke Elshtain, *Political Children*, [in]: B. Honig (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, p. 271.

which in Arendtian terms means withdrawal from the company of others, based on the inner dialogue of soul with itself. Criticizing supporters of cooperative learning, Duarte introduces the project of Arendtian-inspired pedagogy of contemplation, which aim is to teach students to stop and think for themselves in Socratic terms. The author concentrates on the problem of teaching to think, vital in contemporary age of information and training. He offers a deep insight into this matter, settled on firm philosophical foundations. In the latter aspect, reflection presented in this chapter is one of the most interesting sections of the anthology.

The last chapter has a form of an epistolary essay and is a record of an exchange of letters between Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Arendt's biographer, and Jerome Kohn, who is a director of Hannah Arendt Center and Archive in New School University. They are the only two authors of this collection who were Hannah Arendt's students and knew her as a teacher. Indeed, the main contribution this article makes to the anthology is presenting a vivid image of Arendt as an educator. The authors show how she put her thought into pedagogical practice and how she inspired her students to rethink and re-discuss certain questions again and again. As "a teacher who embodied the spirit of Socrates" (p. 131), Hannah Arendt involved a live stream of thought rather than holding to a set theory. This essay reflects the inspiration Young-Bruehl and Kohn drew from studying with the philosopher and the impact her pedagogical method had on students – how she taught them to stop and think. Although the chapter doesn't provide a theoretical analysis of Arendtian educational discourse, it poses a brilliant complement of the previous essays.

Despite the increasing interest on Hannah Arendt's thought which has taken place in recent years, the bibliography concerning her reflections on educational philosophy is relatively limited. The book in question although published a few years ago, remains the only anthology discussing this issue. It was meant as an initial response to the lack of research in this field and due to its successful reception (winner of the 2002 AESA Critics Choice Award) it usefully fulfils this role.

Examining her philosophical view on education, authors place Hannah Arendt in the American context. Furthermore, she is treated as an American thinker. This is understandable with respect to the character of American society – a society of immigrants, which Arendt also acknowledged, when she wrote that immigrants are American source of renewal⁵. However, as her origins were more complex and the story of her life was rich in dramatic turns, she may just as well be considered to be European thinker, deeply rooted in Western philosophical and cultural tradition. That is why *Hannah Arendt and Education* is worthwhile taken outside its American context.

The question arises, if a thinker who treated a question of education as minor within her work can be recognized as an authority on this matter, or if she has a contribution to make present-day discussions on this theme. Contributors to *Hannah Arendt and Education* answer this question affirmatively. Essays in this collection provide a new look at the problems undertaken in contemporary discourse on philosophy of education – a look through the lens of Arendtian thought. Written by many authors with various professional and philosophical backgrounds, the articles present diverse possibilities of Arendt's philosophy reception in respect of education. Not only are her writings inspiring for modern educators, but also her pedagogical method and attitude as a teacher can provide a valuable input into their work. It may be that simply because Arendt was not an educational theorist, her point of view is so refreshing.

⁵ H. Arendt, *Crisis in Education*, ed. cit., p. 174.