

Books

Crises of the Republic by Hannah Arendt

(Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovitch; 240 pp.; \$6.95)

Alan Emdin

Q: ". . . Do you consider the student protest movement in general a historically positive force?"

A: ". . . I don't know what you mean by positive. I assume you mean am I for it or against it."

Q: "Marxist intellectuals often emphasize that socialism, in spite of alienation, is always capable of regeneration through its own strength."

A: "What you just said in your first sentence really shocked me. To call Stalin's rule an 'alienation' seems to me a euphemism used to sweep under the rug not only facts, but the most hair-raising crimes as well. I say this to you simply to call your attention to how very much this jargon has already twisted the facts: To call something 'alienation'—that is no less than a crime."

Drawn from "Thoughts on Politics and Revolution," an interview with Adolph Reif included in *Crises of the Republic*, these responses reveal the respect for "factuality" that illuminates so much of Hannah Arendt's writing. It is especially welcome now, for discussion of the questions which events force us to recognize as "relevant" is often no more than the permutation of clichés presently *de rigueur*.

Like many intellectuals today, Arendt's thought is largely a "*ménage à trois* of Hegel, Heidegger and Marx," but in her case the last name is deceptive. Her Marxism is of the caustic, domestic variety, generally propounded by a cigar-smoking comic who leers behind his moustache. The bracing effects this manner has on discussion has long been the de-

light of late-movie enthusiasts.

Arendt's treatment of "factuality" is intriguing. The political world is of a dual nature. Its features must be seen for what they are; their factuality cannot be denied. Yet they are amenable to change through human action. Indeed, the revelation of his being which a man makes to his fellows when he joins them in political action is, for Arendt, the highest form of human activity, apparently surpassing even contemplation in dignity.

Respect for facts and the necessity of action for a fully human life are the themes around which the essays in *Crises* are organized. "Lying in Politics," Arendt's reflections on the Pentagon Papers, begins with an elucidation of the similarity between lying and politics. In order to change the world, those who engage in political action must be able to conceive of it as being different than it is. Like liars, they must affirm the existence of the not (as yet) extant. But like any right-thinking Hegelian, they must use this idea to transform what they recognize as the present state of things and not confuse what may come to be with things as they are. It is the inability to distinguish one's ideas for changing reality from the as-yet-unchanged reality that Arendt points to as the cause of America's Vietnamese quagmire. American action there was dictated by two sets of policy-makers: public relations men and problem solvers. The former neglect facts by their concentration on appearance and

image, the latter by dealing only with what can be subsumed within a formula, neglecting the innovative qualities of political action. Their use of such words as "scenario" illustrates a theatrical quality of mind, and Arendt's criticisms of this mode of thought ought to be read by all who wax theoretic on "politics as art."

When men feel the dissipation of their ability to act effectively they are likely to protest, often by breaking laws which they feel unable to change by other means. In "Civil Disobedience," Arendt delves into the problems this raises. Like a great river, the essay winds along its course, dispensing here interpretations of Plato's *Apology* and *Crito*, there a theory of cultural change reminiscent of Henry Adams. By its close one finds that civil disobedience has been divorced from its traditional mentors, Socrates and Thoreau, and that Arendt has made a proposal for regularizing civil disobedience more reminiscent of Calhoun.

One of the most refreshing features of "Civil Disobedience" is Arendt's cautiously stated criticism of the liberal argument that civil disobedience ought to be permitted because, being nonviolent, it accepts legal restriction. All political action, Arendt reiterates, attempts to change the extant order and thus does it violence—whether psychic or physical. The crucial difference between civil disobedience and the sort of violence which ought generally to be prevented is that, like action, only disobedience takes place in public and that its success depends upon the number of men who choose to participate, not upon how much damage they can inflict.

Even violence has its place. As Arendt argues in "On Violence" (reprinted in this volume), when no forum for political action exists men may try to create one, by violent means if necessary. In such cases the use of violence is a rational means to a desirable end. It is an imperfect means, due to the unpredictability of its effects, and thus, contrary to the school of thought founded on Sartre's interpretation of Fanon, it

is not a fit cathartic for even politically caused neuroses. But it is a means nonetheless; attempts to ignore this by treating violence as an ethnographic artifact or as the result of economic "relative deprivation" deny dignity to men and to politics.

In a work so aware of the flaws of contemporary thought it is surprising to find the signs of interest-group pluralism and of philosophic liberalism which emerge. Yet Arendt argues that America, like Rome, is a regime where power is traditionally delegated to authorities by universal popular consensus and that therefore America can deal with civil disobedience by institutionalizing it, by having groups of disobedients register as congressional lobbies. One calls to mind Louis Hartz's reflections on the difficulty for Americans of invoking tradition as a value. One also wonders how Arendt can be so sanguine about the effects it has for innovative groups, as recently portrayed in Theodore Lowi's *Politics of Disorder* (to say nothing of the now classic work of Robert Michels). Does her conjunction of Rome and America in the same category not betray the same neglect of primordial ties which is characteristic of modern political thought? Roman political consensus was based on a shared ancestry and civic religion, while American consensus never was. To equate the two is to ignore the significance of such factors for man's political life. It is certainly to misunderstand the classical *polis*. And insofar as Arendt takes her false image of the *polis* as a model for what politics ought to be, her work is defective.

These are not trivial faults. But at a time when political theory shows few signs of life, let alone perfection, Arendt's faults are dwarfed by her virtues. She is a rare theorist, one who can move between Plato and contemporary civil disobedience without becoming entangled in either pedantry or ideology, making each topic shed light on the other. If philosophic immortality demands something more, surely most of our contemporaries offer far less.

SDS by Alan Adelson

(Charles Scribner's Sons; 276 pp.; \$10.00)

Peter Henner

References to SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) usually mean the SDS that emerged from the old League for Industrial Democracy, worked to build a radical, humanistic ideology and organized the 1965 March on Washington against the war. That SDS grew to a membership of a hundred thousand in 1968, and died in 1969. Since then, the Progressive Labor Party, a self-styled Maoist group which played a major role in disrupting the old SDS, has tried without much success to build a new organization around the old name. It is this posthumous SDS that Adelson writes about; his book is not the story of an organization but a description of a political zombie.

The book might have been titled "Young Radicals I Have Known," for it is basically a collection of anecdotes. Moreover, most of Adelson's stories refer to SDS at Columbia, and Columbia is far from a representative campus. The Midwest is ignored and the Boston area (where Progressive Labor is strongest) hardly mentioned, nor are we told anything about the efforts of the surviving SDS to organize campuses such as the community colleges in New York City.

While Adelson glorifies Progressive Labor and SDS, that is not as troubling as is the absence of thoughtful analysis. He omits embarrassing facts, distorts others, and spices his stories with one or two outright lies.

Among the more blatant inaccuracies is Adelson's assertion that in the 1969 SDS convention, which brought about the final schism in the old organization, "RYM [Revolutionary Youth Movement, a faction of SDS] was already on the run. It was apparent that after three years of indefatigable organizing, political

persuasion, and leadership in SDS's biggest battles at Columbia, Harvard and San Francisco State, Progressive Labor had brought a majority faction to an SDS convention." Aside from the questionable claim that RYM was "on the run," the statement errs in several ways. P.L. did have a leadership role at Harvard, though its "political persuasion" only succeeded in alienating most of the members of SDS who were not members of P.L.; it had a questionable role at San Francisco State; it had no leadership role at Columbia whatsoever. More important, it is simply untrue to say that P.L. had a "majority faction" at the convention. About a third of those present were nonaligned, while the remainder divided evenly between RYM and P.L. But that the P.L. faction was "brought" to the convention is a fact. About a hundred members of P.L. chartered a plane from California (many of us at the convention used to say—only partly tongue-in-cheek—that they probably chartered because they were too old for the youth fare).

Whatever his sources may be, and Adelson does not say, he commits too many errors to have been there himself. Adelson seems supremely indifferent to facts, however, and would no doubt dismiss these remarks as carping.

The faction of SDS described by Adelson is the only one which still has a formal existence. Although it is a substantially smaller movement than the Campus Crusade for Christ, it has convinced Adelson, a journalist formerly with the *Wall Street Journal*, that it is capable of organizing workers and students into a revolutionary alliance. Their ability to persuade a member of the Establishment might suggest that P.L.'s SDS should be able to convince also some