

# The Political Thought of Hannah Arendt

## by Margaret Canovan

(Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 136 pp.; \$6.50)

Peter P. Witoski

Hannah Arendt is not easy to place. Her achievement as a popular savant defies the kind of facile categorization that contemporary reviewers and their professorial colleagues thrive on. She is too vague for the scholars, too specific for mass-man. Her preternatural love of controversy is offset only by her fear of contradiction. She is not a journalist, although she has received both fame and fortune, along with a healthy share of notoriety, for her occasional lapses into the more fashionable confines of Grub Street. She is not an ideologist, although she has ideologized all over the political spectrum—from the Far Right to the New Left, from the conservative *Review of Politics* to *The New York Review of Books*—pontificating on the latest trends in the *Zeitgeist*. She is not an historian, nor even an historian of ideas, although on occasion she has been known to succumb to Clio's blandishments, all the while pulling the Muse's venerable locks. She is not philosopher, economist, theologian, or political scientist. She is not even a sociologist, although she knows of the jargon and the *Ceflügelte Worte* that are the stuff of that arcane discipline.

"Woman-of-Letters" might suffice, for all its antediluvian connotations, were it not that Professor Arendt has lingered so long in the academic groves, acquiring that mordant sense of *Weltschmerz* and lugubriousness that has come to personify her work. She is simply too Germanic—in the comic sense—to be placed in the belletristic tradition. I would prefer to call her a *philosophe*, in the Enlightenment sense, were it not that the term has lost much of its precision in our time, and can even be used for pejorative purposes instead of intelligent taxonomy. So, while I find Professor Arendt to be both

something of a Woman-of-Letters and something of a *philosophe*, neither appellation is adequate.

In Germany, where her reputation is even greater than in America, she is associated, in the popular literary press, with the phenomenological school of philosophy and with the thinking of her old mentor Karl Jaspers. While she studied under philosophers trained in the phenomenological tradition, I find nothing of that tradition's method in her writings; and, intellectually speaking, she is not in Jaspers's league, although her recent political pronouncements bear the imprint of the aged Jaspers when he had given up serious philosophy for political journalism. She has more in common with the de-Marxified Marxism of the Frankfurt School—particularly with Lukács (who adumbrated that school), Adorno, Habermas, the early Horkheimer, and her old friend Walter Benjamin—than with the school of Jaspers. One of the younger members of the Frankfurt School has compared her to Karl August Wittfogel—adding that she lacks Wittfogel's rigorous sense of scholarship. But this, I think, is a mistake. Even in his present ideological incarnation Wittfogel has nothing in common with Professor Arendt—save for a German accent.

One is tempted to say of her work what Scaliger said of Casaubon's classical commentaries: "*La sauce vaut mieux que le poisson.*" The controversy and criticism engendered by Professor Arendt's books and articles may be more interesting than her work and certainly helps to explain why she is so difficult to categorize. She is neither the great genius of American political philosophy, as her many aficionados would have it, nor the ignorant hack her critics have made her out to be; she

is *ni ange, ni bête*. Stripped of all the controversy, both pro and con, Hannah Arendt emerges as nothing more or less than a genuine *philodoxer*, a lover of opinion.

Aristotle, it will be recalled, spoke of the philodoxers as a distinct "class" of intellectual, having nothing in common with philosophy or philosophers. He did not use the term in a polemical or pejorative sense. The true philodoxer, he hoped, would opt for the love of good and true opinion (*orthodoxa*), eschewing the kind of false opinion to be found in modern ideologies. But, as Aristotle knew, a philodoxer may mouth either true or false opinion, and when he lapses into the quagmire of false opinion he ought to be corrected by the philosophers. Professor Arendt has, to be sure, descended on occasion, like the rest of us, into the mire of false opinion. But it is as an advocate and expounder of *orthodoxa* that she has earned her position as one of the most important philodoxers of our age. Indeed, her major works—*The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and *On Revolution*—are classic examples of how sound opinion can transcend even faulty facts and unsound arguments.

Like most philodoxers, much of what Professor Arendt has written, when divested of its labored erudition, is of an ephemeral nature; but the universality of sound opinion can even add luster to ephemera, and this Professor Arendt does with rare skill. In her ability to comment upon ephemera with learning and profundity, she must be placed in the front rank of America's philodoxers. At her best she reminds one of the young Walter Lippmann; more often she suggests such writers as James Reston, Joseph Alsop, and William F. Buckley Jr. (not of course that she shares all their political views). She herself has often spoken of her deep respect for the most gifted of modern philodoxers, G.K. Chesterton, although there is little of Chesterton to be found in Professor Arendt's *Vernunft und Wissenschaft*.

A study of Professor Arendt's po-

litical thought has long been overdue, and Dr. Margaret Canovan's slender volume is a worthy beginning in that it provides—in the style of a good term paper by a dedicated graduate student—an excellent survey of Hannah Arendt's main works. The book unfortunately dwells mainly on her most controversial works, ignoring many of the early papers and reviews which, in my opinion, shed much light on Professor Arendt's mature work. There is no reason, for example, to publish only a select bibliography when a complete bibliography of Professor Arendt's *opera omnia* would be both helpful and relevant to students. But this is a minor objection to an otherwise scholarly and judicious work.

Dr. Canovan's estimation of Professor Arendt's position in the scheme of things is higher than mine. She rates Professor Arendt with Eric Voegelin, Simone Weil, Bertrand de Jouvenel, and Michael Oakeshott. What they have in common with Professor Arendt, she maintains, is their reflective manner of approach to politics, their ability to write well, and their common opposition to academic orthodoxy. But this could be said of many writers, including such figures as Willmoore Kendall, Friedrich A. Hayek, and John Pocock. In fact Voegelin, Weil, de Jouvenel, and Oakeshott are all political and philosophical conservatives and all are political philosophers of the first rank, whose views are dramatically different from Hannah Arendt's. The comparison is not original with Dr. Canovan. Other writers have compared Professor Arendt to the same group of political philosophers, usually substituting the late Leo Strauss—perhaps the most gifted political theorist of our century—for Simone Weil. In fact the only thing Hannah Arendt has in common with these writers is her general interest in political theory and her opposition to certain trends in contemporary political science. Voegelin's brilliant review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which receives only passing mention in Dr. Canovan's book, personifies the differences between him and Professor

Arendt. It is the difference between a man striving to revive the classical *episteme politike* and a mere philodoxer.

There remains much of value in Hannah Arendt's work, particularly her early studies of the *vita activa*, totalitarianism, and revolution. One could go through those books with a red pencil, correcting mistakes and disagreeing with interpretations, but they remain solid contributions to our understanding of the twentieth century. Since the death of her husband, Heinrich Blücher—to whom she dedicated *The Origins of Totali-*

*tarianism* and who greatly influenced her best work—her work has taken an even more ephemeral, journalistic turn. The leftist effusions lately contributed to *The New York Review of Books* are very much below the quality of her earlier work. Many readers of Dr. Canovan's book would have been interested to learn the extent of Heinrich Blücher's influence on his wife's work, but Blücher is not even mentioned. Still Dr. Canovan has written the only and therefore the best introduction to Hannah Arendt's political thought, and she is to be thanked.

## Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy by Ernest R. May

(Oxford University Press; 220 pp.; \$6.95)

Thomas N. Thompson

Professor May has written a useful and disturbing book about history's influence on American decision-makers. It is useful because of the author's well-known command of history. It is disturbing because of the lack of any satisfying analysis. The book, well written, is divided into two parts: "How the past has been used," and "How the past might be used." The "lessons" which make up part of the book's title suggest the author's primary focus of interest: historical analogy.

We all seek reassurance from the past. That is, we all try to comfort ourselves in the uncertain, problematical present by believing that every new experience is anchored in identity with, or even similarity with, past events. Reasoning by analogy is one way we achieve this sense of security. Analogies by their nature promise order and control. Analogies also seem to be self-evident, related to something readily familiar so as easily to avoid exhaustive description and analysis. Thus their frequent appearance in Washington.

Actually both policy-makers and scholars employ analogies as either tools of analysis or levers of advocacy. But, as Professor May ably demonstrates, a useful concept which offers a promising way of marshaling and organizing the data of experience is all too often used to prostitute history. Too much certainty in describing parallel situations hinders more than it helps. Sometimes the effort to obfuscate is intentional.

Of the unintentional type, Professor May shows that plans for dealing with Germany in the post-World War II world were made so as to avoid the alleged mistakes of the earlier war. During World War II, in contradistinction to World War I, there were no precise war aims on the part of the United States. Roosevelt clearly felt that during the First War the Germans had not felt the full consequences of losing the war. This time arrangements were made for the trial of German as well as Japanese leaders, no matter that both sides were guilty of various