

BOOK REVIEW

Fatmagül Berktaş, *Dünyayı Bugünde Sevmek: Hannah Arendt'in Politika Anlayışı*, Metis Yayınları, İstanbul, 2016 (2nd ed.), 246 pp. ISBN 978-975-342-846-0.

Hannah Arendt remains to be one of the most influential figures of political theory in the 21st century. Arendt's approach to freedom is a silver lining in today's post-political world where human beings are no longer treated as ends in themselves, but as human resources that could easily be sacrificed to the project of macroeconomic growth. In the face of neoliberal policies that reduce politics to technical problem solving, and democracy to electoral processes, her conceptualization of 'authentic politics' reminds us that politics is for all of us, by virtue of our existential capacity for action. Fatmagül Berktaş, in her book *Dünyayı Bugünde Sevmek: Hannah Arendt'in Politika Anlayışı* [Loving the World in the Present: Hannah Arendt's Understanding of Politics] invites us to a journey to Arendt's world to think without banisters.

The opening chapter of the book: *Benim Hannah Arendt'im* [My Hannah Arendt], hints that Berktaş has no intention of reducing the complexities or correcting the inconsistencies in Arendt's works for academic concerns. Contra the scholarly efforts to systematize Arendt's writings in a totalistic theory, Berktaş honors such incompleteness as the *sine qua non* of critical theory. Such openness and equivocality that characterize Arendt's unique narration endow the opportunity to capture phenomena in their concreteness and heterogeneity. Arendt's poetic wording that rejects to end the debate by having the final say allows us to "comprehend the political, in the chaotic and inconsistent world that we live in, in its entire contingency and humanness" (Berktaş, 2016: 28) alongside giving rise to a plurality of meanings, which is the condition of 'real understanding'. Claiming that 'to understand is to resist indoctrination,' Berktaş formulates understanding as a form of political action that is inseparable from the lived experience of the actor, and that can only be conducted with others. Therefore, she underlines that her endeavor of understanding Arendt is nothing but an exercise of 'enlarged mentality'

that bears the limitations of her own political concerns, life experiences, and intellectual accumulation. She calls the reader to pay a visit to Arendt's *doxa* along with her, to critically reflect on our present from Arendt's point of view and to learn from her optimistic imagination a vision of 'what can be otherwise.'

In the first chapter, *Politika: Bir Özgürlük Vaadi* [Politics: A Promise of Freedom], in search of a transformative politics that starts from below, from the experience and the action of the citizen, Berktaş discusses the meaning of politics and the political. She claims that Arendt's life experience led her to define politics in a way that differs radically from conventional understanding. For Arendt, the source of politics is the public realm within which unique persons can act in concert. Berktaş claims that we need to understand Arendt's persistent reference to the *polis* as the ideal public realm, as a metaphor instead of a historical phenomenon since Arendt addresses historical facts for the sake of revealing their relevance to the present. That is, Arendt's defense of the *polis* does not result from nostalgia, but from her belief in that freedom can only manifest in a free public realm where citizens meet each other in an equal position and establish new relations without violence. In that, the metaphor of the *polis* symbolizes the highest form of community life because, in the face of the compulsory givenness of nature, the *polis* is a genuine human artifact. The *polis*' being composed of speech and action inherent to it, is what leads the Greek to equate living in the *polis* with being free, i.e., with isonomy. Isonomy is an attribute of the *polis* and not of human beings. It guarantees equality, not before the law, but in terms of the capacity to act and to speak. This formulation of freedom leans on the separation between the private area of the household (*oikos*), which refers to the natural world of necessity, and the political life of the *polis* (*bios*). The structure of the *polis* is based upon the organization of the relationship -in accordance with the division between *oikos* and *bios*- between three areas of human activity: labor, work, and action.

Berktaş claims that these categories are formulated by Arendt as philosophical categories (rather than that of sociological) in that they point out the three conditions of human existence. Labor involves the repetitive cycles of the necessities of biological life. Labor is condemned to endless reproduction as it produces what is to be immediately consumed. Work, on the other hand, through its products, builds a stable and durable world for the mortals to bestow permanence to the fleeting character of human life. This stable and common world is the condition of plurality and action since it lies between people. Work binds people together while at the same time guaranteeing their distinction. It shares more in common, due to its durability and publicity, with action than with labor. Nevertheless, work is pragmatic, and it is a form of necessity because it depends on specific goals and precise rules. Freedom, therefore, is unique to action. Action is the only human

activity that deals with the establishment and preservation of political communities, and thence it is the condition of history. Hence, as opposed to labor and work, action takes its source from the network of relationships, and not from the individual self.

Freedom is *the* condition of action in that it is not only one among many political phenomena, such as justice or equality. It is the *raison d'etre* of politics. Freedom, for Arendt, is not merely the absence of constraint. Nor is it the subordination of bodily desires to an omnipotent will. Prior to all this negative and positive freedom, freedom is the disclosure of the unexpected in spontaneity. Freedom manifests itself in new outcomes and new relations that occur when people act together. What gives freedom reality, by protecting it from remaining as a metaphysical concept, is collective action. Plurality is the condition of action that intersects the equality/sameness of people as species, and the uniqueness/distinction of individuals. Plurality is potentially inherent in every human by virtue of their natality, but the actualization of this potential is possible only through acting in concert. It is only when people act together they transcend the position of sameness and reveal their singularity by establishing new relationships within a web of relations. Action, in that, is a miraculous faculty thanks to its capacity to start new relations and initiate new beginnings. The act of beginning is miraculous because it is autonomous as it carries its own principle within itself.

Without a politically guaranteed public realm, therefore, neither plurality nor action is possible as it is the very existence of this space that serves as the precondition of the common world (*koinon*), or in modern terms, of objectivity. As the same world opens up differently to everyone in accordance with their position in it (*doxai*), our perception of reality depends upon the perception of others. Therefore, the exchange of *doxai* in the political realm is not merely a means of reaching decisions. Such exchange is an end-in-itself; it is an existential necessity for even the physical experience of the given world depends upon intersubjective relations, i.e., upon common sense without which the particular senses would be unreliable. Similarly, action requires the presence of others, just as a theatrical performance requires spectators. For the sake of knowing 'who' we really are, we need to reveal our action/speech to spectators as only the spectator can narrate our unique story and the meaning of our actions. As long as our story is told, we have the opportunity to gain the fame that will lead us to immortality. Therefore, the political realm is also an organized space of remembrance. These two phenomenological dimensions of the public sphere, both as 'the common world' and as 'the space of appearance,' constitute the aspects of the human condition: natality and mortality, worldliness, and plurality. They are phenomenological in the sense that they define the limit conditions of human existence regardless of the socio-historical circumstances. Also, these conditions are not qualities of an

abstract, metaphysical human nature; they are the very essence of human's earthly condition (being-in-the-world-with). This is exactly why totalitarian regimes, first and foremost, try to annihilate the public realm to change human nature.

In the second chapter, *Totalitarizmin Paradigması Olarak Toplama Kampı* [The Concentration Camp as the Paradigm of Totalitarianism], Berktaş appreciates Arendt's insistence of trying to understand and explain the experience of totalitarianism in the face of the difficulties that arise from the inability to accept a situation where 'everything is possible.' For Berktaş, Arendt manages to grasp the novelty of totalitarianism as she resists the tendency to explain the new with the traditional methods, or to reduce the unknown to what is known. Such novelty lies in the fact that she provides a historical and political explanation of the process of mass dehumanization in the concentration camps. In that, Arendt formulates totalitarianism as an unprecedented regime that finds its condition of possibility in the historical and technological developments of the 20th cc. The collapse of the relatively stable contexts in Europe with the Great Depression and the First World War deprives people of identity and the 'worldly in-between,' which further results in radical alienation, uprootedness, and loneliness. The annihilation of the '*interesse*' leads people to lose touch with reality and each other. In this context, the atomized bodies are withdrawn in the totalitarian ideologies that guarantee unconditional belonging. However, the principal value of the totalitarian ideology lies in its capacity to establish a fictitious world where the real and imaginary interlaces through consistent lying. Totalitarian lie remains to be plausible in the face of the facts and phenomena that can be raised against it, even without the need to conceal these facts. Counter-evidence or scientific facts cannot harm the totalitarian lie due to the tremendous ideological propaganda totalitarian regimes use to blur the perception of reality in an absolute way. In that, the main objective of the Nazi indoctrination is to ensure that "what is known as true today is considered to be wrong the next day" (Berktaş, 2016: 86). To this end, it strives to establish a sustainable mental structure, instead of imposing a specific content. The canonization of complete obedience as a virtue in itself leads masses to worship the person of the leader, instead of his deeds or words. Therefore, the leader becomes the single criterion of truth, and his will becomes the "categorical imperative" (Berktaş, 2016: 88) that overrules all objections of individual conscience. The individual is, thus, transformed into a prototype that gives specific reactions in line with the categorical imperative but can never act and initiate new beginnings. For Arendt, this is a radical violation of human condition that renders everyone equally superfluous.

The condition of possibility of the concentration camps emerges in connection with this system in which everyone is superfluous, homeless, and outlawed. The

first step of mass destruction, therefore, is to kill the juridical person by excluding certain categories of people from the protection of the law. The second step is the creation of a world of penalty in the concentration camp, which is totally outside the regular penal system. This world of penalty “inmates outside the normal judicial procedure in which a definite crime entails a predictable penalty” (Arendt 1973:447), and thence it represents the law of lawlessness. Such absolute arbitrariness is the *sine qua non* of totalitarian regimes because if there remains the slightest trace of a conceptual relationship between the punishment and the actions/crime of the punished, this means that the legal subject is still there. And as long as a trace of the legal subject is preserved, the use of unlimited power is prevented. The third step to the road to prepare living corpses is to kill the moral person, which is the unique identity of the individual, by annihilating the conditions that make moral action possible. Conscience is rendered superfluous in the camps as decisions that could be made are between evil and evil, not between good and evil. Lastly, the camps render death, itself, superfluous. For death is part of the systematical operation of the camps, and not of the individual, the human condition of mortality is replaced with the anonymous deaths in the ‘holes of oblivion.’ The fact that there remains no one alive in the camps to tell the story of the victims’ experiences indicates the absolute abolishment of the space of appearance. Such disposal of every trace of human dignity is what Arendt calls the ‘radical evil’ of totalitarianism that aims at showing that everything is possible.

Such hubris of the leader leans on his belief to have the capacity to execute the law of history (Stalin) or the law of nature (Hitler) in this world. Berktaý, in the third chapter of her book: “*Zamanımızın Tehlikeleri*”: *İdeoloji, Yalan, Hakikat* [“The Dangers of our Time”: Ideology, Lie, Truth] follows Arendt to find the origins of such determinism that renders necessity prior to facticity in Plato’s “radical idealism” (Berktaý, 2016: 121), which defines the object of Knowledge/Truth outside the material world¹. For Arendt, Plato’s tyranny of Truth results from his accrescent skepticism towards the validity of persuasion (*peithein*) after Socrates’ death. “The spectacle of seeing Socrates submit his own *doxa* to the irresponsible opinions of the Athenians and being outvoted by a majority made Plato despise opinions and yearn for absolute standards ...[and] to introduce absolute standards into the realm of human affairs, where, without such transcending standards,

¹ For Berktaý, there is a close affinity between Arendt’s endeavor to define politics phenomenologically and her aversion to conventional political philosophy. By the phenomenological method, she refers to Arendt’s effort to understand the conditions and the fundamental political structures by giving priority to the experiential and the factual quality of human life, as opposed to the conventional political philosophy that prioritizes ideal structures over experience. In that, one has to take into account the tension in Arendt’s texts that results, on the one hand, from her deep skepticism towards philosophy and, on the other, her strict commitment to it (2016:115–16).

everything remains relative” (Arendt, 1990: 74-75). As a result, Plato arrives at his concept of *episteme* which is the very opposite of *doxa*: *doxa* is temporary and subject to change, *episteme* is eternal; *doxa* originates from a particular perspective, *episteme* is universally valid; *doxa* corresponds to the factual forms of reality; *episteme* refers to their essence; *doxa* depends on dialogue and persuasion, *episteme* is reached through contemplation; *doxa* is necessarily plural, *episteme* is singular; *doxa* is limited to time and space, *episteme* is transcendent. For Plato, philosophy is the pursuit of the transcendent, absolute, and universally valid Truth. As Truth can only be achieved through contemplation in solitude, *vita contemplativa* is the highest form of life. Since this is the way of life of the Philosopher, it is evident that the rule of the Philosopher-King is the best for everyone. For Arendt, not only did Plato draw the most anti-Socratic conclusion from Socrates’ trial, but also he reduced politics to the problem of sovereignty by separating thought/knowledge (*archein*) from action (*prattein*), and the ruler from the ruled. This claim to absolute knowledge and to rule is what Arendt calls *hubris* that prepares the ground for totalitarianism.

The experience of totalitarianism represents the ‘enormous risks of action’ that arises from the hubris of the leader’s claim to re-build the world in accordance with his own will, which he takes to be the Law. For Arendt, we must prevent such risks of action, first and foremost because, action’s irreversibility can lead to the annihilation of the condition of possibility of action. In this context, she emphasizes the importance of constitutionalism and stable political institutions for the sake of preserving the conditions of political action. Following Montesquieu, she claims that power cannot be limited by restrictive and prohibitive laws that remain external to the monopolized power of the tyrant, as “only power arrests power...without destroying it, without putting impotence in the place of power” (Arendt, 1990a: 151). This becomes possible because Montesquieu defines law (the Roman understanding of *lex*) in relational terms. Law is what relates, “so that religious-law is what relates man to God and human law what relates men to their fellow men”(Arendt, 1990a: 302). This conceptualization of *lex* reveals that law is not necessarily the commandment of a higher authority. Instead, law establishes relations between people on a horizontal plane. Thus, the basis of law is the treaties between people, not obedience to the laws of nature, history, or leaders. This shows that the tension between the spontaneity of the miraculous beginning and the need to preserve the constitutive principle for the sake of securing political action can be resolved with law, the source of which is inherent to action itself. In other words, equality inherent in action, and authority inherent in the protection of its constitutive principle can be reconciled if only if law is conceived as a relationship establishing norm between human beings. In this way, it becomes possible to overcome the

dichotomy of law and politics by embedding the source of law within the political sphere, and prove that the constituting act rests in speech and mutual promises, rather than violence. According to Berktaý, this is how Arendt glorifies the virtue of remaining within limits as an attitude of *humanitas* against *hubris*.

The fourth chapter: *Dünyaya Minnet Duymak* [Feeling Gratitude for the World], leans over this attitude with reference to Arendt's concept of *amor mundi*; i.e., to love the world with its limitations. Berktaý asserts that Arendt criticizes modernity due to its *contemptus mundi*. Arendt shares Heidegger's criticism of modern metaphysics as the 'subjectification of the real.' For Heidegger, the obsession of the moderns with being able to calculate and master the world results from the fact that they posit the human subject as the center of the real/ Being. Modern philosophy reduces ontology to the generic category of subjective experience (*Erlebnis*). Arendt agrees with Heidegger that subjectification of the real is the source of 'existential resentment.' For her, the modern reduction of freedom to will, or to the property of the laboring subject; and the reduction of the phenomenal world to the mental constructs of the knowing subject serve to alienate humanity both from the natural earth and human world (as species we inhabit the *earth*, and as plurality, we dwell in the *world*). The modern mind does not understand that freedom is an 'objective' state of human existence, or that *koinon* has its ground outside the human mind itself. Modern theory's reduction of freedom and the phenomenal world to subjective capacities results from this existential resentment, which creates the delusion that humanity can master, remake, or even get rid of the world. So, for Arendt, the defining characteristic of modernity is alienation from the world: the desire to escape the limitations of the earth. Overcoming this alienation can be possible only with an attitude that accepts the givenness of the world with gratitude. As humans do not merely live in the world, but they are *in and of* the world, this gratitude is nothing but the embracement of our existential worldliness. Hence, it is only such an existential gratitude that can dissuade the modern mind from seeing the earth as a prison and finitude as lack.

This strong emphasis on gratitude results from the responsibility Arendt feels towards the world. World, in itself, is contingent, meaningless, and futile. What creates meaning is the human condition of being in the world with others. Yet, the public space, which is both the precondition and the product of this existential condition, is also contingent and vulnerable, as the experience of Nazism once proved. Totalitarianism is not a thing of the past for that every act that has once made its appearance in the world stays as a potentiality that can be actualized in the future. And it is our responsibility to take care of the world and sustain it for the next generations as we share it not only with our contemporaries, but also with the past and future generations. In this sense, as opposed to what social contract theories

suggest, we do not bear the burden of getting involved in politics due to our fear of the others and our concordant need for security; but simply due to our love towards the others and the world. This conceptualization of *amor mundi* is the worldly ground of her political ethics. However, this ‘*amor*’ should not be confused with *philia* or the sentiment of love since, due to their potency to annihilate the distinction between individuals, they cannot belong in the public sphere. Sentiments are anti-political because they are bound to the self, and they get stuck in their particular experiences. Rather, it is solidarity that can unite people around an *inter-esse* in the public sphere. Solidarity, by virtue of being based on facts and principles, instead of sentiments, constitutes the principle that guides and inspires action.

In the last chapter of her book: *Kadınların Arendt'i* [Women’s Arendt], Berktaş attempts to offer a feminist interpretation of Arendt’s theory by leaning on this conceptualization of solidarity. Berktaş starts with addressing the most prevalent feminist criticism directed towards Arendt. According to this criticism, Arendt’s conceptual distinction between *oikos* and *bios* cannot be reconciled with feminism’s primary concern of politicizing the household. In their view, Arendt’s theory naturalizes the socio-historical and sexist division of labor that condemns women and slaves to the household; and her masculine/heroic view that grounds politics in search of immortality underestimate their invisible labor. For Berktaş, the logic of this criticism is haunted by the same dualistic methodology that it intends to criticize, for it keeps identifying politics and power with masculinity; and love, affection and care with femininity. Therefore, this feminist argument simply turns the sexist dichotomy upside down and keeps imprisoning women in a cage of univocal sexist/biological interpretations. For Berktaş, Arendt’s theory can overcome this criticism and be reconciled with feminist and identity politics.

First, Berktaş argues that Arendt’s distinction between *oikos-bios* and the three human categories of *vita activa* are not gender-blind for the simple reason that they are philosophical categories, not sociological. This means that the category of labor refers, not to a factual and empirical activity, but to a particular form of relationship between people and the world. Therefore, *animal laborans* refer neither to the proletariat of the modern age; nor to the slaves and women of Ancient Greece. Labor, by virtue of fulfilling the bodily needs of human beings and maintaining life, is an indispensable part of the human condition. Yet, the problem starts when this activity of labor exceeds the borders of the *oikos* -the space of production and reproduction- and penetrates the public sphere in the modern era. As labor invades the public space, which is the area of human interaction and plurality, every activity begins to be aimed at the fulfillment of private interests and needs, and consumption. The ‘rise of the social,’ therefore, refers to the modern society that is organized around the goal of meeting the private needs of atomized individuals, and for the

attainment of financial comfort and luxury. This causes the vast majority of the population to become unsatisfied, and isolated from each other as they spend their time producing and consuming commodities in a world where participation in public life loses meaning. Such expansion of the society indicates the birth of biopolitics as this “curious and somewhat hybrid realm which the modern age interjected between the older and more genuine realms of the public...and the private” (Arendt, 1990a: 122), is the intersection of political administration and the fulfillment of biological needs. So, Arendt’s sharp criticism towards the penetration of labor into other activities does not result from her ignorance of women’s invisible labor. Instead, it arises from the existential importance she attaches to human action in its capacity to go beyond the repetitive cycle of production-consumption-reproduction, by starting something new. After all, the three components of *vita activa* are not gendered; they are the basic conditions under which life has been given to all humanity. Furthermore, Berktaý claims that Arendt’s distinction between *oikos* and *bios* does not refer to a strict institutional distinction, but to different attitudes. Whereas the private and social refers to the attitude concerning the self and its sheer survival, the political refers to the attitude concerning the public. The process of political encounter transforms the attitude of narrow self-interest into common interest. In that, the domestication of women and their invisible labor can be a matter of political struggle. In fact, for Berktaý, this is what Arendt strived to do in her book on Rahel Varnhagen (see Arendt 1974).

It is known that Arendt is against identity politics that imprisons the uniqueness of the individual to an ideal type and excludes the participation of the ones that do not belong to that specific identity. Identity, by virtue of its sheer givenness and inalterability, is something anti-political that we can only feel gratitude towards. Identity, in that, cannot be a matter of political action or public discussion unless it is under attack. If a particular identity is politicized by means of demonization, assimilation or exclusion, like in the case of the Jewish and woman identity, then it must be embraced and protected, because only in such cases that politicizes the particular identity at stake, there arises the opportunity to change its definition and meaning. So, what Arendt suggests is not to act with the given identity that tells us ‘what’ we are in all circumstances, but to protect our identities when they are under attack; or rather, when such identity can be the subject of political action in the public sphere. In such cases, identities do not refer to essentialist categories that imply biological sameness. Instead, they turn into an opportunity to create political solidarity, a space for the political action of the oppressed against oppression. It is only this form of action based upon the principle of solidarity that embraces the dialectics of equality and difference. Arendt’s conceptualization of solidarity, Berktaý claims, is essential for the feminist theory thanks to its capacity

to show that it is possible to recognize differences and act together despite differences.

As opposed to the communities of sisterhood that ground solidarity in the notion of shared sentiments; and the second-wave feminists that ground solidarity in the notion of a shared identity, Arendt conceptualizes solidarity as a product of shared commitments, promises, and action. Arendt's solidarity is not based on a pre-given, fixed category predicated on inherent sameness; instead, it is a modality of power that arises out of action in concert and binds the members of the action together. For Berktaý, this form of volunteer solidarity paves the way to form non-repressive and non-exclusionary identities and to build coalitions with other oppressed groups. Such coalitions enrich plurality not only because they render the political struggle at stake stronger and durable, but also because they serve to enlarge our mentality.

Overall, Berktaý's book provides us with a profound reading of Arendt enriched with her own concerns regarding the 'inauthentic' politics in Turkey. The book, more often than not, underlines the inherent relations between liberal democracies and totalitarianism, and thus cautions us against the threat of the present and future political regimes. Following Arendt, Berktaý seeks to replace such inauthenticity, which is based on discourses of necessity, security, and technical expertise, with authentic politics that canonize freedom, human agency, contingency and *amor mundi*. She reveals the importance of thinking, speaking, and acting together, formulating a new way of loving this world in the present. She shows us why Arendt's optimistic vision is still needed for all kinds of emancipatory politics, including feminism.

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