

**Personal Dilemma or Intellectual Influence?  
The Relationship between Hannah Arendt and Max Weber\***

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Tuija Parvikko contends that Weber had a significant impact on Arendt's thought. I suggest that this view is problematic on at least two counts. The first is specific and concerns Arendt's negative attitude towards the ideal type. The second is general: by focusing on a couple of vague family resemblances between the ideas of Weber and Arendt, Dr Parvikko ignores the host of antinomies that are far more conspicuous and significant. In fact, Arendt was anti-Weberian on all vital political axes of her thought. Before I briefly examine these issues, it is worth clarifying Arendt's complex relationship to her mentor Karl Jaspers.

*Tangled up in blue: Arendt, Jaspers, Weber*

Tuija Parvikko says that 'Arendt's debt to Weber can best be traced' from her correspondence with Jaspers. 'But alas, it does not tell us anything precise of the dimensions of Weber's thinking that inspired her the most, giving us only a general impression that Jaspers repeatedly encouraged Arendt to read Weber' (p. 236). But that assumes the very point Parvikko wishes to establish: that Arendt was indeed 'inspired' by Weber. A close reading of the Arendt-Jaspers correspondence shows something quite different. It is well known that Jaspers was awe-struck by Weber as both scholar and man of integrity (at least, that is, until he found out about Weber's sexual relationship with Else Jaffé). On numerous instances, he sought to press Weber's ideas on Arendt. How did she respond? Arendt never doubted that Weber was a forceful patriot and a brilliant 'historian'. But she faced a dilemma. On the one hand, her political project and reflexes were entirely different from Weber's. So, too, was her ontology, which was phenomenological in the strong sense and a far cry from neo-Kantianism. On the other hand, she knew that Jaspers' emotional invest-

\* A Rejoinder to Tuija Parvikko's 'A Note on Max Weber's Impact on Hannah Arendt's Thought', *Max Weber Studies* 4.2 (July 2004), 235-52.

ment in Weber was beyond negotiation. For Jaspers, Weber was not only a great existentialist thinker. He was also a condensed symbol of that other Germany – patriotic but European, rational, liberal and humane – that had been destroyed with the coming of the Third Reich. Weber, in short, was the embodiment of the true ‘German essence’.<sup>1</sup> To confront Jaspers on Weber directly, to show that in the areas that most mattered to her Weber’s thought was either repugnant or irrelevant, would have strained a friendship that Arendt held dear. She would not risk this. As I have detailed at length elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> Arendt had every reason to believe that even the smallest criticism would provoke a volcanic response. Here let me give only one example. In a footnote to chapter 6 of *The Human Condition*, Arendt observed that ‘despite some errors in detail which by now have been corrected’, Weber was ‘the only historian’ to have raised ‘with the depth and relevance corresponding to its importance’ the implications of the loss of the *certitudo salutis* for modern humanity.<sup>3</sup> Arendt was praising Weber. Yet in a letter to her of 1 December, 1960, congratulating Arendt on the German publication of the *Vita Activa*, Jaspers homes in on this footnote – and devotes almost half the letter to its implications. He is incredulous about Arendt’s remarks on Weber’s ‘errors in detail’ and responds:

The point is not unimportant to me, because what is involved here is the essence of Max Weber’s scholarly achievement. Max Weber may be subject to correction in many other works, if one cares to express it that way, and I have my objections to raise with him, too, as I did during his lifetime. But in this one work (and this is not the case with his other volumes on the sociology of religion) one has to point up the error after total immersion and after following Max Weber step by step in his cognitive process.<sup>4</sup>

The message is clear. Don’t speak, Hannah, about things of which you are plainly ignorant. Weber is my territory. Arendt got the point. But she had then to square her own radically anti-Weberian ideas (see below)

1. Karl Jaspers, *Max Weber: Deutsches Wesen im politischen Denken, im Forschen, und Philosophieren* (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1932).

2. Peter Baehr, ‘The Grammar of Prudence: Arendt, Jaspers, and the Appraisal of Max Weber’, in Steven Aschheim (ed.), *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 306–24. On Arendt’s antipathy towards the social sciences, see Baehr, ‘Identifying the Unprecedented: Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Critique of Sociology’, *American Sociological Review* 67.6 (2002), 804–31.

3. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 277–78 n. 34.

4. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds.), *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926–1969* (trans. Robert and Rita Kimber; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1992), 407–408.

with her wish to avoid offending Jaspers. How did she do it? First, when Jaspers enjoins her, in the correspondence, to take up an ideal-type analysis, she deflects the issue by ignoring him and changing the subject. Second, where Arendt feels bound to tackle a Weberian idea – such as charisma – she criticizes the use of it rather than the idea itself.<sup>5</sup> A variant of this tactic is to fault a Weberian notion yet simultaneously to weaken the blow by subsuming it under a list of similar misapprehensions; that is her approach to Weber's concept of power. Criticism is diluted by inserting Weber into a morass that spans other usages from Voltaire to Bertrand de Jouvenel.<sup>6</sup> In such wise, it is a tradition, rather than an individual thinker, that is the objective of her rebuttal. Third, she rejects a Weberian idea without mentioning Weber: hence she uses a reply to Eric Voegelin to criticize the 'tradition of *sine ira et studio*'. That tradition, she declares, is simply unable to cope with the death camps because clinical 'objectivity' cannot capture their horror or adequately confront evil. As she remarks, 'I think that a description of the camps as Hell on earth is more "objective", that is, more adequate to their essence than statements of a purely sociological or psychological nature'.<sup>7</sup>

### *The ideal type*

Parvikko asserts an 'unquestionable, but rarely recognized, methodological debt of Arendt to Weber in terms of ideal-types' (p. 250). Ostensibly, this debt is especially evident in Arendt's characterization of Jewish pariahdom and in her theory of totalitarianism. I will skip Arendt's depiction of representative pariah figures such as Bernard Lazare because, as Parvikko herself points out, Arendt invoked them in 'in a normative way that was by no means characteristic of Weber' (p. 240). Instead, let me focus on Arendt's theory of totalitarianism.

Arendt may have been a great admirer of Kant's moral philosophy but she was no neo-Kantian. On her account 'totalitarianism' is not a 'utopian' heuristic; it is a term and concept that delineates something essential – something really real. The 'elements' of totalitarianism consist of imperialism, racism, statelessness, and the alliance between capital and the 'mob'. Each reinforced the other. In Germany, anti-Semitism was an element of totalitarianism and also the amalgamator of the other

5. See Arendt's criticism of Hans Gerth's use of the concept of charisma, in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973 [1951]), 361-62 n. 57. (The criticism is dropped in the German version of *Origins*.)

6. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970).

7. Hannah Arendt, 'A Reply to Eric Voegelin' [1953] in Peter Baehr (ed.), *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 159.

elements (imperialism, etc.), 'crystallizing' them into the Nazi movement and regime. As Margaret Canovan puts it:

It is clear...that when [Arendt] uses the general term 'totalitarianism', it does not indicate an abstract Weberian ideal-type used simply to aid research into particular cases. Instead she is engaged in an explicit attempt to recognize and understand a new phenomenon that has appeared in the world, manifested in certain aspects and activities of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes.<sup>8</sup>

More than this, Arendt is robustly critical of attempts to use Weberian ideal-types to explain totalitarianism. Ideal-types such as 'bureaucracy' and 'charisma', she claimed, radically misdescribed what was in fact the administrative anarchy and the vacuous leadership evinced by totalitarian regimes. Worse, such models analytically domesticated totalitarianism by transmuting it into an extreme variant of something that was already known. But that was nonsense. Totalitarianism was an unprecedented episode, a rupture with illegitimate regimes of the past (Caesarist, Bonapartist, usurpatory, dictatorial etc.). As such, it required a dramatic reappraisal of modern political categories.

An obvious response to Arendt would be to say that ideal-types are designed precisely to measure unique events. But she seems to have thought that the bowdlerization of Weberian categories was evidence of the inherent incapacity of Weberian concept formation itself. Perhaps the source of that prejudice was her husband Heinrich Blücher who took a certain pleasure in ridiculing the ideal type. These 'sociological typology-experiments', he remarked, 'are more of a new ritual that failed priests are trying to introduce than an advancement of reason'.<sup>9</sup>

### *The nature of politics*

Arendt was above all a political thinker. If Weber really did have an impact on Arendt's thought we should expect to locate it in the relationship between his political ideas and hers. Parvikko finds some stray resemblances between their notions of political judgment. I can mention

8. Margaret Canovan, 'Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism: A Reassessment', in Dana Villa (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 47.

9. Lotte Kohler (ed.), *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936-1968* (trans. Peter Constantine; New York: Harcourt Brace, 2000), 62. The specific target of his lampoon is Albert Salomon who was attempting, in a series of articles for *Social Research*, to convey Weber's ideas to an American audience.

more. Both Weber and Arendt – and Carl Schmitt too! – attacked emanationist philosophies of history, were critical of the concept of ‘progress’, and believed that politics was a sphere *sui generis*. But these are similarities, not evidence of influence or ‘impact’ which would have to be textually demonstrated. Moreover, once one returns to *specifics*, the weight of Arendtian categories falls entirely the other way. Here, briefly, are some of the more salient contrasts between a pronounced German patriot and a refugee Jew whose attachment to Germany derived principally from its language and philosophy.

- For Weber, politics is defined in terms of leadership, especially leadership of the state. Since the state is based on a monopoly of violence, it follows that politics has a close affinity to physical coercion. For Arendt, politics is the public space of formal equality, to be distinguished from the ‘private’ and the ‘social’ realms. The vital condition of politics is not a ‘mass’ to rule over, but the opportunities afforded by citizenship and ‘plurality’: ‘the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world’.<sup>10</sup>
- Moreover, while Weber adapts the concept of *Herrschaft* to embrace voluntary obedience, Arendt’s formulation paints it in the bleakest, most ominous, colours: hence the title *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (her preferred German rendering of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*). For Arendt, the concept of ‘domination’ suggests that politics is a sphere of fabrication, of making, in which individuals are to be shaped and manipulated like items in nature – by violent activity. But, on her account, that was the antithesis of politics in its republican, participatory and discursive sense.
- For Weber, ‘power’ is the ability of a person in a social relationship to prevail over another individual. For Arendt, power is never an individual’s possession; it is a form of collective agency in pursuit of a common project, and is to be sharply distinguished from ‘strength’ and ‘violence’.
- For Weber, political ethics requires the agent being aware of the many instances in which the pursuit of ‘good’ ends will require the employment of morally dubious means. For Arendt, on the contrary, every ‘good action for the sake of a bad end actually adds to the world a portion of goodness; every bad action for the sake of a good end actually adds to the world a portion of badness. In other words, whereas for doing and producing ends are totally dominant over means, just the opposite is true for acting:

10. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

the means are always the decisive factor'.<sup>11</sup> It follows that for Arendt, 'bad' means are not an acceptable part of politics, whereas for Weber they are inevitable.

- For Weber, 'action' is a category of sociology, a mode of conduct that typically falls under the means-end relationship. For Arendt, action is a category of politics. It is *inherently* intersubjective; accordingly, the distinction between 'action' and 'social action' makes no sense. Furthermore, action in her view is not principally a result of motive, and certainly not of causes, but is the corollary of 'natality': birth brings into the world a creature with the faculty for making a new beginning, for interrupting the routines and means-ends chains of everyday life, for breaking down ossified structures, for thus bringing unpredictability and uncertainty into the world.

In sum: Weber was a personal issue for Arendt because of her relationship to Jaspers. But Weber did not significantly influence Arendt, if by 'influence' one means that she reflected seriously on his work and then applied it to her own. Faced with the prospect of endangering a friendship over a man (Weber) for whom she did not care one jot, Arendt chose discretion. She knew that transparency in a deep friendship is neither possible nor even desirable. There are some things we must hide to remain human. Loyalty must on occasion take precedence over sincerity, affection over truth, inconsistency over honesty. That, of course, is also the message of Weber's gods and demons. But Arendt did not need Weber's instruction to know that preserving a friendship is more important than winning an argument.

11. Hannah Arendt, 'Herman Broch' [1955], in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 148.