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Richard H. King, Dan Stone, eds. *Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History: Imperialism, Nationalism, Race and Genocide.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2007. 312 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-361-9.

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Hannah Arendt as a Historical Thinker

Hannah Arendt and the Uses of History is a very important contribution to Arendt studies. Especially in the post-totalitarian world that is marked with genocides in Srebrenica and Rwanda, this collection offers a brilliant illustration of the richness of Arendt's thinking and its relevance to our present political world. The collection deals particularly with the often neglected dimension of Arendt's political theory: the "boomerang" thesis according to which colonialism and imperialism had supplemented totalitarianism with its cultural and political foundations.

Arendt has come to be known as a difficult thinker, but as Jerome Kohen notes, this is primarily so because of the difficulty of the issues she sought to understand. Her understanding was an indispensable element of being human, a uniquely human way of reconciling oneself with reality. It was a way to break free from frozen thoughts and memorized knowledge, and a way to shield oneself from indoctrination. The most original aspect of her account of understanding is the claim that one can understand even the most despicable evil, particularly totalitarianism. In fact, for Arendt understanding political evil, such as totalitarianism, was the only way of fighting it.[1] This collection certainly does justice to Arendt's genuine attempt to understand totalitarian evil and its elements. Most importantly, by bravely working their way through "the empirical gaps and causal imprecision" in Arendt's work, the authors take upon themselves the challenge of making Arendt's *Origins* relevant to what we call today postcolonial studies (p. 70).

The book is divided into three main parts. "Imperialism and Colonialism" explores the strengths and shortcomings of the unique way through which Arendt depicted the relationship among colonialism, imperialism, and totalitarianism. "Nation and Race" deals with Arendt's stance on violence; the role she assigned to the bourgeoisie in the rise of nationalism; and the post-totalitarian elements in today's world, particularly in former Yugoslavia. "Intellectual Genealogies and Legacies" focuses on the broader theoretical structure and the narration of Arendt's argument. Among the issues dealt in this section are Arendt's humanism, her concept of history, the Heideggerian influence in her work, and the elements of bio-politics in her analysis of totalitarianism.

One of the questions that the collection leaves hanging is whether the authors, as the editors Richard H. King and Dan Stone state in the very beginning of the introduction, succeed in shifting "attention away from Arendt the political philosopher and towards Arendt the historical thinker" (p. 1). I believe that, with the exception of a few essays, the collection reads mostly as a bridge between Arendt the political thinker and Arendt the historical thinker. This in my opinion is clearly, intentionally or unintentionally, one of the strengths of the volume. However, the insistence to portray Arendt solely as a historical thinker creates two problems that could have been avoided if the authors had supplemented their writing with some of Arendt's more political works.

First is the argument that Arendt's "own racial views added a problematic element to the whole debate about the boomerang thesis" (p. 10). This argument is addressed by the editors in the introduction and in Kathyrn T. Gines's essay. They argue that Arendt shared some of the colonizers' "racial attitudes" toward the African population. The issue is addressed effectively in these essays and also elsewhere by such scholars as Margaret Canovan, Shiraz Dossa, and George Kateb. However, I would like to suggest here that this argument cannot be fully addressed in a satisfactory manner without taking into account Arendt the political theorist and her distinction between natural versus political, and the problems she ascribed to the rise of the social.

The second problem occurs in Richard Shorten's ex-

cellent essay. Shorten argues that Arendt "fails to give due weight to the significance of the crimes committees during the imperialist period," and he fairly attributes this attitude to Arendt's idiosyncratic understanding of human political world, which according to Arendt was missing in "the Dark Continent" (pp. 184, 184-185). Shorten's intention is clearly not to claim that Arendt did not care about the massacres that occurred during colonialism and imperialism. Instead he claims that this impression is given by the style of narrative that Arendt used, which according to Shorten has moral implications. Again the problem here is to see Arendt as a political thinker who tried to understand the phenomenon of totalitarianism and its origins, and nothing more. For Arendt the resemblance between colonialism and imperialism was merely instrumental. As Kateb notes, both phenomena illustrate "the readiness of European peoples to think in racist and imperialist categories, to accept the normality of, sympathize with, or embrace ardently such modes of response and half-thought."[2] This, Arendt argued, was the same distorted mentality that was later adopted on European terrain. Hence, instead of ignoring the pain of others, Arendt was trying to enhance our understanding of the genealogy of totalitarian mentality that was well entrenched in the experiences of colonialism and imperialism.

All in all, this collection is a must read for everyone who is interested in Arendt's thought, especially in her views on such issues as totalitarianism, nationalism, genocide, and race.

Notes

[1]. Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics (The Difficulties in Understanding)," in *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 307.

[2]. George Kateb, *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld), 56.

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