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Serena Parekh. *Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity: A Phenomenology of Human Rights.* New York: Routledge, 2008. xiv + 220 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-96108-0.

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Hannah Arendt and the Phenomenology of Human Rights

In a world where human rights are put to the test everyday, the defense of human dignity has become a difficult, if not impossible, venture. Our pessimism seems to originate from the conviction that what we call human rights has failed so many times to protect the lives and the well-being of those who have been denied political rights and protection by their states. Ironically, from Auschwitz to Srebrenica, Darfur to Rwanda, Gaza to Abu Ghraib, the mere humanness of the victims, instead of providing legal and political reasons for protection, had stood in the way of the implementation of these rights. Given the dimness of the situation, how can we defend human rights and restore human dignity in the twenty-first century?

In *Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity*, Serena Parekh successfully argues that Hannah Arendt's "phenomenological rehabilitation of the common world" offers a compelling answer to this question (p. 5). In a cohesive and persuasive manner, Parekh shows how Arendt's unorthodox treatment of human rights can be employed to overcome the problem of justification. For Arendt, human rights, contrary to our beliefs and aspirations, have always been implicated in citizen rights; they have never been beyond and above legal and political rights. This fact has become most apparent in the phenomenon of the stateless person, i.e., the refugee. The stateless person, the person who was deprived from a public personality, could hardly find a place in the political or legal framework of another community. Moreover, since the refugee poses a challenge to the "unity" of the new country, her existence becomes confined within the public realm. To avoid this predicament, Arendt suggests that human rights should refer first and foremost to the most basic right that ensures one's membership to a political community. She calls this right "the right to have rights."[1] The strength of Parekh's interpretation of this argument lays in her success in situating it in the larger context of Arendt's political theory, more specifically, her critique of modern human condition. Parekh shows that modernity, for Arendt, is synonymous with the notion of world alienation that presents itself politically as loss of common reality and commonsense, and disappearance of the public realm.

The social and economic conditions of modern age not only led to individuals' obsession with utility, technology, and mastering necessity, but also have overshadowed the desire for public happiness. These developments constituted what Parekh calls the "ethos" of modernity: "the distinctive character of the modern era insofar as it is experienced in attitudes, habits, and beliefs" that had eventually undermined human dignity (p. 43). The merit of Arendt's understanding, according to Parekh, lays in her placing human dignity in human community itself and neither on transcendental or cold realistic assumptions. Parekh, by stressing the intersubjective component of Arendt's understanding of human rights, reveals its phenomenological character. Only creating a common space where we can act together and exchange opinions can provide us with a plausible way of affirming and reaffirming human dignity.

But what happens during the dark times when the world fails to provide us with a common reality and when our moral systems fail to provide us with guidance?- Parekh reads Arendt to say that "in times of moral crisis, conscience is a better safeguard against human rights violations than moral norms" (p. 150). Although Parekh makes it clear that she is aware of the subjective quality of the conscience, she believes that conscience when combined with judgment can serve as the basis of human rights. I believe Arendt's distinction between the good person and the good citizen to be of significance here. In line with Parekh's argument, Arendt argues that good persons become manifest only in emergencies.[2] However, Arendt adds that the good person, or the per-

son of conscience, is a member of the social realm and not the political realm. She also states that "although we know that human beings are capable of thinking–of having intercourse with themselves–we do not know how many indulge in this rather profitless enterprise."[3] Indeed, despite our knowledge of massacres and atrocities that take place every day around the world, only a few of us are willing to step forward and take action. Does this make the rest of us evil, or does this say anything about our judging or thinking abilities? Hardly so. Hence, as Arendt argues in her essay "Civil Disobedience," despite its intersubjective references, "the councils of conscience are not only unpolitial; they are always expressed in purely subjective statements."[4] For Arendt, the conscience becomes "politically significant when a number of consciences happen to coincide, and the conscientious objectors decide to enter the market place and make their voices heard in public."[5] But then, as Arendt says, we are no longer dealing with individuals and the concept of conscience, but citizens and the concept of opinion. In that sense, Parekh is right to recognize a tiny spark that might compel one to say "I cannot" and perhaps take part in a collective action, but this spark is simply never strong enough to crate a change, never mind constitute a safeguard against human rights violations. Only when citizens, regardless of their goodness, are with other citizens can we talk of intersubjectivity in the Arendtian sense.

Despite this petite theoretical flaw, Parekh does an excellent job in providing a solid and systematic narrative of Arendt's unsystematic work. Hence, I strongly believe that this book will serve as a guide for not only those scholars and students who are interested in Arendt's reflections on human rights, but also those who are intrigued by Arendt's political theory in general.

Notes

[1]. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951; New York: Harvest Book, Harcourt, 1986), 296-297.

[2]. Hannah Arendt, "Civil Disobedience," in *Crisis of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Company, 1972), 65.

[3]. Ibid.

[4]. Ibid., 62.

[5]. Ibid., 67.

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