

THE STONE

The Illuminations of Hannah Arendt

By Richard J. Bernstein

Mr. Bernstein is a professor of philosophy at The New School for Social Research.

June 20, 2018

In the preface to her 1968 collection of essays, “Men in Dark Times,” Hannah Arendt wrote: “Even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination.” Today, in our own dark time, Arendt’s work is being read with a new urgency, precisely because it provides such illumination.

Born in Germany in 1906, Arendt studied with prominent philosophers of her time, but fled the country in 1933, living for a time in Paris, and later, in the United States. She is best known for her major works, including “The Human Condition,” “On Violence,” “Truth and Politics,” “The Origins of Totalitarianism” and especially “Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil,” which grew out of her coverage of the trial of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann for *The New Yorker*.

She was remarkably perceptive about some of the deepest problems, perplexities and dangerous tendencies in modern political life, many of them still with us today. When she speaks of “dark times” and warns of the “exhortations, moral and otherwise, that under the pretext of upholding old truths degrade all truth in meaningless triviality” we can hear not only a critique of the horrors of 20th-century totalitarianism, but also a warning about forces pervading the politics of the United States and Europe today.

Arendt was one of the first major political thinkers to warn that the ever-increasing numbers of stateless persons and refugees would continue to be an intractable problem. One of Arendt’s early articles, the 1943 essay “We Refugees,” based on her personal experiences of statelessness, raises fundamental questions. In it, she graphically describes what it means to lose one’s home, one’s language and one’s occupation, and concludes with a more general claim about the political consequences of the new mass phenomenon — the “creation” of masses of people forced to leave their homes and their country: “Refugees driven from country to county represent the new vanguard of their peoples ... The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted.”

When Arendt wrote this she could scarcely have realized how relevant her observations would be in 2018. Almost every significant political event during the past 100 years has resulted in the multiplication of new categories of refugees, and there appears to be no end in sight. There are now millions of people in refugee camps with little hope that they will be able to return to their homes or ever find a new one.

In her 1951 work, “The Origins of Totalitarianism,” Arendt wrote of refugees: “The calamity of the rightless is not that they are deprived of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion, but that they no longer belonged to any community whatsoever.” The loss of community has the consequence of expelling a people from humanity itself. Appeals to abstract human rights are meaningless unless there are effective institutions to guarantee these rights. The most fundamental right is the “right to have rights.”

By dwelling on the horrors of totalitarianism, and grasping that the aim of total domination is to destroy human spontaneity, individuality and plurality, Arendt probed what it means fully to live a human life in a political community and begin something new — what she called natality. She also sought to probe the threats to the dignity of politics — the type of politics in which individuals confront each other as political equals, deliberate and act together — a politics in which empowerment can grow and public freedom thrive without violence.

Her essay “Truth and Politics,” published in 1967, might have been written yesterday. Her analysis of systematic lying and the danger it presents to factual truths is urgently relevant. Because factual truths are contingent and consequently might have been otherwise, it is all too easy to destroy factual truth and substitute “alternative facts.”

In “Truth and Politics,” she wrote: “Freedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute.” Unfortunately one of the most successful techniques for blurring the distinction between factual truth and falsehood is to claim that any so-called factual truth is just another opinion — something we hear almost every day from the Trump administration. What happened so blatantly in totalitarian regimes is being practiced today by leading politicians with great success — creating a fictional world of “alternative facts.”

According to Arendt, there is an even greater danger: “The result of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth, and the truth defamed as lies, but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world — and the category of truth vs. falsehood is among the mental means to this end — is being destroyed.” The possibilities for lying become boundless and frequently meet with little resistance.

Many liberals are perplexed that when their fact-checking clearly and definitively shows that a lie is a lie, people seem unconcerned and indifferent. But Arendt understood how propaganda really works. “What convinces masses are not facts, not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably a part.”

People who feel that they have been neglected and forgotten yearn for a narrative — even an invented fictional one — that will make sense of the anxiety they are experiencing, and promises some sort of redemption. An authoritarian leader has enormous advantages by exploiting anxieties and creating a fiction that people want to believe. A fictional story that promises to solve one’s problems is much more appealing than facts and “reasonable” arguments.

Arendt was not a doomsayer. To counter her warnings about political dangers, she elaborated a detailed conception of the dignity of politics. Because of our natality, our capacity to act, we can always begin something new. The deepest theme in Arendt is the need to take responsibility for our political lives.

She warned against being seduced by nihilism, cynicism or indifference. She was bold in her description of the lying, deception, self-deception, image-making and the attempt of those in power to destroy the very distinction between truth and falsehood.

Her defense of the dignity of politics provides a critical standard for judging the situation many of us find ourselves in today, where the opportunity to participate, to act in concert and to engage in genuine debate with our peers is being diminished. We must resist the temptation to opt out of politics and to assume that nothing can be done in face of all the current ugliness, deception and corruption. Arendt's lifelong project was to honestly confront and comprehend the darkness of our times, without losing sight of the possibility of transcendence, and illumination. It should be our project, too.

Richard Bernstein is a professor of philosophy at The New School for Social Research and the author of the forthcoming "Why Read Hannah Arendt Now."

Now in print: "Modern Ethics in 77 Arguments," and "The Stone Reader: Modern Philosophy in 133 Arguments," with essays from the series, edited by Peter Catapano and Simon Critchley, published by Liveright Books.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter, and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.