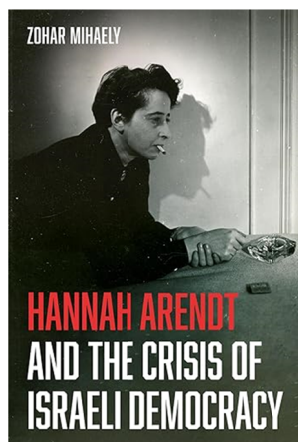


Zohar Mihaely. *Hannah Arendt and the Crisis of Israeli Democracy*. Eugene, Oregon, USA: Pickwick Publications, 2022, 98 pp., paperback. ISBN: 978-1-6667-9769-5.

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The interest in and fascination with the Jewish German-American humanist thinker and political theorist Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) has not subsided in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This is evidenced by the establishment of American academic entities and publications such as the following:

- Hannah Arendt Center (est. 2000) at The New School (New York City) where Arendt taught from 1967 until her death eight years later;
 - Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities (est. 2006) and its *HA: The Journal of the HACPH* (est. 2013) at Bard College where Arendt is buried in the Bard College Cemetery (Annandale-On-Hudson, New York);
 - Hannah Arendt Prize in Critical Theory and Creative Research (est. 2012) by the Pacific Northwest College of Art but now sponsored (since 2014) by the non-profit Oregon Institute for Creative Research (Portland, Oregon); and
 - *Arendt Studies: A Journal for Research on the Life, Work, and Legacy of Hannah Arendt* (est. 2017) published by the Philosophy Documentation Center (Charlottesville, Virginia) and edited by Indiana University Southeast (New Albany, Indiana).
- The following list in Arendt's native Western Europe is even more extensive and impressive, and includes online discussion groups:
- Hannah Arendt Institute for Totalitarianism Studies (est. 1993) at the Dresden University of Technology (Germany);
 - Hannah Arendt Award for Political Thought (est. 1995) where the winner is endowed with 10,000 euros and is awarded by an international jury by the co-sponsoring Heinrich Boll Foundation and the State of Bremen (Germany);

- Hannah Arendt Centre (est. 1999) at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg (Germany);
- *HannahArendt.net: Journal for Political Thinking* (est. 2004) online-only annual periodical by the Berlin Arendt Networking Group (Germany), with funding from the German Research Foundation;
- Hannah Arendt Center for Political Studies (est. 2016) at the University of Verona (Italy);
- Hannah Arendt Promotion by the College of Europe (Bruges, Belgium and Warsaw, Poland) which chose Arendt as their “patron” for the 2019–2020 academic year (Donald Tusk, Prime Minister of Poland, 2007–2014, delivered the school year’s opening ceremony lecture);
- Hannah Arendt Institute for Diversity, Urbanity, and Citizenship (est. 2020), a joint initiative by the University of Antwerp and the Free University of Brussels (Belgium) and supported by a variety of governmental agencies;
- Hannah Arendt Network, an online-only group (website and public Facebook page) created in February 2021 that is “A project to connect Arendtians for research and exchange. A platform for news and promotion of events on Hannah Arendt and her legacy” (Berlin, Germany; see <https://hannaharendt.substack.com>; Facebook page has 320 followers so far); and
- Hannah Arendt Study Group, an online-only private Facebook Group page created in March 2021 in order “to bring together individuals interested in discussing more of Arendt’s work in greater detail. . . . [These] informal discussions will start with an introduction on the text in question and will be followed by extensive time for discussion” (U.K., 272 members so far).

From new translators of her works, to scholarly writings (theses, articles, books) and lectures at international conferences, to online discussion groups, to in-person frontline political activism. A simple online search will reveal that Arendt’s writings, print and video interviews, and legacy are alive and well in the U.S., U.K., Europe, Middle East, Brazil, Cuba, Japan (Japan Arendt Research Society, est. 2015), Venezuela, and other areas around the globe.

According to the independent scholar and freelance lecturer and writer Zohar Mihaely (Ph.D., Bar Ilan University), Arendt’s humanistic political thought—especially in her four-essay late work *Crises of the Republic* (1972)—can be applied to understand and improve the current political situation in Israel.

It is important to note that at the time of writing his English-language *Hannah Arendt and the Crisis of Israeli Democracy*, the Rehovot, Israel-based Jewish author of the Hebrew-language *Sacred Anarchy: John Caputo and the Challenge of Religions Today* (2020) was living in the midst of a major sociopolitical crisis.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, mass protests were occurring against Prime Minister Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu (ix, 28, 46–51, 72). Included among the protest sites were

major roadway intersections and bridges throughout Israel, and outside of the Prime Minister's official residence (Heb. Beit Aghion or Beit Rosh HaMemshala) at the corner of Balfour Street and Smolenskin Street, near the parliament building (Knesset) in Jerusalem. As Netanyahu was completing his second stint as Prime Minister (2009–2021) he was on trial for deception, breach of trust, and receiving bribes. It was an intense and unstable time in Israel's recent history and one that later saw the controversial, yet still popular, Netanyahu begin his third stint as Prime Minister on December 29, 2022. As the author noted, "Similar to America . . . a large segment of the [Israeli] public is convinced that Netanyahu's election was stolen by a conspiracy" (73–74).

The slim and succinct 98-page volume consists of an Introduction, five chapters, 43 footnotes, and a Bibliography. Mihaely opens the Introduction by asking a series of questions in light of the 2020 anti-Netanyahu protests:

Is this protest a revolution, and what is its chance of success? What is the legal status of the protesters? Are they rebels, rioters, or even traitors? . . . Were the public's indifference and passivity due to the understanding that unprecedented violence pervaded Israeli politics, or was it a lack of understanding that the future of democracy was in danger? . . . What is to be done? (ix)

He then goes on to state his "attempt to think about this [sociopolitical] reality through the prism" of Arendt whose intellectual tradition "is not satisfied with writing for itself but turns to reality to change it" (x); and that asserts "political action has no theoretical shortcuts" (xi). Therefore—and minus only chapter one ("The Essentials of Arendt's Political Theory")—the political *theorist* Mihaely becomes the political *practitioner* Mihaely by ending each chapter with modern-day application that is specific to the Jewish founded and now 75-year-old democratic country. He labels his closing thoughts "Discussion" (chapter 2–4) and "Conclusion" (chapter 5).

In the Introduction, Mihaely also provides the reason behind his focusing mainly on Arendt's *Crises of the Republic*. For those being exposed to Arendtian thought for the first time, he believes her *Crises of the Republic* is the place to begin because it is less philosophical, contains less historical commentary, and is more manageable to comprehend. Published just three years before the habitual smoker's death by heart attack at age 69 in Manhattan's Upper West Side, he also briefly provides the context of Arendt's interconnected four-essay work—namely, the contemporary American political scene of which included vehement protests against the Vietnam War—and compares it to some of her other works.

Mihaely's goal is simply to present the main arguments and discuss in general each of the four essays—"Lying in Politics," "Civil Disobedience," "On Violence," and "Thoughts on Politics and Revolution"—and then make present-day application to Israeli politics. With the even greater complexity that is today's Israeli politics because of the pandemic and resultant economic ramifications, this is a difficult task. Mihaely seems aware of this and is likely why he humbly uses the word "attempt" (x, xiv) in his effort to demonstrate

“that Arendt spoke from her time to our time and is essential for today’s public sphere discourse in Israeli democracy” (xiv).

As the title states, chapter one provides “The Essentials of Arendt’s Political Theory.” In its brief three pages, it is learned that Arendt’s political principles were rooted in and informed by her studies in philosophy, religion (especially Christianity), and world history. Though not mentioned, in the mid-1920’s at the University of Marburg the Linden-Mitte, Hanover, Germany-born Arendt studied Protestant theology under Rudolf Bultmann and philosophy under the existentialist Martin Heidegger. (As has been well documented by surviving letters from both individuals, she also had a passionate and secret four-year love affair with the married Heidegger while she was a student, ages 18 to 22, and he in his mid-30’s.) And, in 1929, her Ph.D. dissertation “Love and Saint Augustine” was supervised by the existentialist Karl Jaspers at the University of Heidelberg.

In regard to how history influenced her politics, Mihaely shows how Arendt read widely. Her studies included writings from such major figures as Homer, Plato, Socrates, and Marx, and about major political events like the American Revolution and French Revolution. In 1963, her *On Revolution* was published. The work compared the late eighteenth-century’s American and French Revolutions. Mihaely states Arendt “was excited” about America’s successful fight for independence from England because it was similar to “the first Greek political tradition—namely the adoration of greatness (Homeric), action as the foundation of a new beginning (Roman), and the ability to keep promises and act as forgiveness (Christian)” (3).

Chapter two, “Lying in Modern Politics,” summarizes and examines the first of Arendt’s four essays in her *Crises of the Republic*. Mihaely does so by means of his four sub-headings entitled “The Advantage of the Liar,” “Attack Against Reality” (publicity tactics, problem-solvers, ideologists), “The Intelligence Community,” and “Built-In De-Factualization.” He shows how Arendt used as a case study the Pentagon Papers (“Report of the Office of the Secretary of Defense Vietnam Task Force”), the top secret classified document published in 1971 by the United States Department of Defense and that was leaked to the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. The 47-volume document presented the history of U.S. political and military involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967. The Pentagon Papers exposed “a new kind of political lie. While traditionally lying in politics was aimed at the enemy, it is now aimed at the people and Congress, namely: self-deception” (4).

As noted, Mihaely closes chapters two to five with a “Discussion” or “Conclusion” in which he provides application of the chapter’s content to contemporary Israeli politics. For example, and as a sample, a portion of his first paragraph to chapter two’s “Discussion” about Arendt’s essay “Lying in Politics” reads,

[Claiming] that America is the land of democracy is an intentional falsehood. It was never this way before. The most dangerous falsehood, according to Arendt, is when we not only imagine something but also strive to leave reality through mental structures and theories, and we stop seeing and hearing what is true. It is critical to

state that, like America, Israel advocates for democracy, but it is equally critical not to conceal or misrepresent the fact that we are not there yet. Because we are so confident that we live in a democracy, we disregard signs of bigotry, coercion, and violence, dismissing them as minor or irrelevant. That is, we de-factualize reality, and our deception becomes an idea that we are attempting to superimpose on reality rather than an action. (14)

“Civil Disobedience in the 1960s and Its Significance Today” is Mihaely’s title for chapter three. The title is borrowed from Arendt’s second essay “Civil Disobedience” in her *Crises of the Republic*. The chapter looks into Arendt’s “most obvious democratic manifesto,” specifically, “the phenomenon of civil disobedience in anti-Vietnam War movements” (17). In order to show what civil disobedience is and is not, Mihaely explains how Arendt leaned on the historical writings of Hobbes, Kant, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Socrates, Tocqueville, and others, as well as the U.S. Constitution and America’s legal system, “consent society,” and voluntary associations.

In brief, Mihaely understands Arendt to mean that civil disobedience “appears when a large number of people believe that the traditional channels for change are no longer functioning and that their complaints will go unheard and unanswered” (20). It differs from revolution because “it advocates nonviolence” and “it accepts the framework of the establishment and the principled legitimacy of the laws” (20).

“Violence and Its Instruments,” “Power and Its Relation to Violence,” “Further Clarification of the Reasons for Violence,” and the usual “Discussion” are the four subheadings for chapter four. Titled “The Phenomenon of the Praise of Violence in the 1960s,” the book’s second-longest chapter investigates Arendt’s third essay “On Violence” in her *Crises of the Republic*. We learn from Mihaely that the essay was “popular and massively quoted” because of “its discussion on power and violence, which was innovative at the time” (30). Among the many Arendtian insights presented, three more noteworthy ones include the fact that the German-American humanist claimed foreign policy “is a problem with no solution, at least as long as nation-states exist” (31); she learned, “to her surprise, that both the right and left agree that violence is the blatant use of force and that effective power is ultimately the muzzle of the gun” (36); and “that violence is legitimate in a particular context of revolutions, but not when it is in the hands of governments” (45).

The book’s longest chapter and the one that has the most footnotes (27 of total 43) is chapter five. Titled “Reflections on Politics and Revolution in Light of the Student Uprising in the 1960s,” it surveys the fourth and last essay in *Crises of the Republic*. Arendt’s essay “Thoughts on Politics and Revolution” acted as “an extension and interpretation of the previous article on violence” (52) and is really an oral interview put into print form. Conducted in German by journalist Edelbert Reif, the interview occurred in 1970. The seven subheadings—“The Criticism Against the University,” “Capitalism and Socialism,” “Welfare State,” “Towards More Humane Socialism?,” “Working-Class Support for Military Intervention in Vietnam,” “Arendt’s Own Analysis of the Existing Situation,”

and “The Federal Principle and Council System”—form the basis of how Mihaely chose to explain this particular Arendt writing.

Chapter five ends with a lengthy, 13-page “Conclusion.” Mihaely’s final chapter remarks—that begin with the statement, “The main problem today is centralism”—also serve as his final remarks to the entire book. After making application of the chapter content and giving personal reflections under his subheadings entitled “A Life of Politics That Has Ceased to Be Politics,” “The Public Sphere,” and “The Future of Political Life in Israel,” the Israeli independent scholar and political practitioner closes his second published work by asserting,

Arendt inspires future Israeli revolutionaries to start something new, namely, to generate power outside of parliament (small councils with self-government) that will significantly oppose politicians [like Prime Minister Netanyahu] with authoritarian tendencies, bureaucratization disease, distortion of representation, governmental centralization, education system impotence, and all of this in a state of violence and the behaviorism of a mass society that backs the king over the republic, and the absence of a constitution that would protect civil disobedience. (81)

The weaknesses of *Hannah Arendt and the Crisis of Israeli Democracy* are few and the strengths are many.

Though it would have added a few pages to its commendable slenderness and therefore may have jeopardized its affordability, one wishes the volume had an index and a biographical timeline of Arendt in the back matter. In an appendix accompanying the timeline or maybe in the Introduction, a simple biographical sketch and a glossary with key Arendtian concepts and terms would also have proven helpful. With the author’s stated desire to introduce readers to the at-times complex Arendtian political theories—and, again, the reason he intentionally chose to focus on her more simpler *Crises of the Republic* (xiii)—learning about the European-American’s difficult and pre-1941 semi-nomadic Western European life would have informed those new to Arendt about the colorful and controversial woman behind the theories. Via Lisbon, Portugal, on the *SS Guine* and with her (second) husband Heinrich Blucher, the then non-English speaking refugee Arendt arrived on May 22, 1941, at Ellis Island’s immigrant inspection and processing station in New York City, USA.

For instance, and semi-understandably, in no place does Mihaely mention that the Jewish Arendt lived during the rise of the Nazi Party before coming to the U.S. The fact that she was born and resided in Germany (1906–1933), and then lived in exile in France (1933–1941, yet during times of Nazi occupation), must have had an influence on her political thinking. Nor is comment made, in passing or otherwise, about her being a pioneer in an academic world dominated by men before and during the Women’s Liberation Movement. For example, and though she did not consider herself a feminist (nor a philosopher), Arendt was Princeton University’s first female full professor.

However long or brief, it would have added yet even greater value to the work to have read some remarks by the native Israeli and politically-minded Jewish author concerning why the Jewish intellectual Arendt has been, and remains, shunned by many in the Jewish world. No doubt, Arendt's controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) had, and continues to have, a lot to do with it.

Furthermore, a comment or two about Arendt's views on Zionism, anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, the State of Israel, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and interaction with recent writings on Arendt in relation to these five topics—e.g., Susie Linfield, *The Lions' Den: Zionism and the Left from Hannah Arendt to Noam Chomsky* (Yale University Press, 2019), and Michal Aharony, "Why Does Hannah Arendt's 'Banality of Evil' Still Anger Israelis?" *HaAretz.com*, May 11, 2019—would likewise have benefited the reader.

Despite these observations about what is *not* included in the compact, 98-page book (but maybe will be included in a future expanded second edition some day?), the content that *is* included is highly informative, keenly insightful, hugely relevant, well written, plainspokenly clear, skillfully organized, passionately opinionated ("in my opinion," 27, 28, 29; "I think," 47) yet humble, fair, friendly, realistic/non-utopian, and non-hagiographical.

Despite some over-lengthy sentences and footnotes, the Hebrew-speaking, Israel-born Israeli (Heb. sabra or tzabar) author is to be commended for his first book in English. May it not be his last. Because *Hannah Arendt and the Crisis of Israeli Democracy* is unique and was produced by a well-established American publisher with a marketing department the work should reach a wider audience than his first book.

It is obvious Mihaely has a solid understanding of both the at-times intellectually challenging Arendtian political theories and of the complexities of modern-day Israeli politics. Though he focuses on her late *Crises of the Republic* (1972)—that "in a sense is the second volume of her earlier book *Between Past and Future* (1961)" and whose eight articles (in the second edition) "are important and brilliant" (xiii)—he interacts at some level with all of Arendt's major works, most notably, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958), and *On Revolution* (1968). And all of the major concepts and terms one would expect in a book about Arendt's bottom-up (not top-down) political perspective are mentioned. These include the notions of "the banality of evil," horizontal power, active citizenship, public sphere, council democracy, natality, defactualization, freedom, power, violence, and plurality.

Hannah Arendt and the Crisis of Israeli Democracy is ideal for anyone concerned about today's tense political situation in Israel. For the undergraduate or graduate student, or the frontline political practitioner/activist whose citizenship is with a Western democracy, Mihaely's work provides an instructive and impressive example of how to study someone's theories—in this case, Arendtian political theories—and then seek to apply them to his or her specific cultural context. Indeed, "The book is groundbreaking in its field and its descent from the academic ivory tower, placing Arendt's questions and concepts in the context of contemporary life in Israel today" (back cover, Yoav Ashkeazy,

Shalom Hartman Institute, Jerusalem). Also, for the person who wants a short and affordable introduction to Arendt's political theories by means of a succinct explanation, analysis, and contemporary application of her less complex *Crises of the Republic*, this is the book to get. Highly recommended.

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