Arendt’s Struggle with the Heritage of Radical Conservatism:
Arendt, Heidegger, and the Concept of the ‘World’

Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen
University of Jyväskylä
arhyvone@jyu.fi

1. INTRODUCTION

Classifying Hannah Arendt’s political thought has always been extremely difficult. In an oft-cited exchange Arendt was pushed by her friend Hans Morgenthau on her self-identification within the “contemporary possibilities”, to which she famously replied:

“I don’t know. I really don’t know and I’ve never known. I suppose I never had any such position. You know the left think that I am a conservative, and the conservatives sometimes think I am left or I am a maverick or God knows what. And I must say I couldn’t care less. I don’t think that the real questions of this century will get any kind of illumination by this kind of thing.”

Given this ambiguity, it is no wonder that one comes across all kinds of definitions of Arendt’s political stance. One of these is characterizations is “radical conservative”, the title of a recent book by the late Irving Horowitz. And indeed, there are interesting and significant overlaps in Arendt’s thought with conservative thinking. As Margaret Canovan has also argued, despite Arendt’s prevailing contemporary reception being strongly bent towards a ‘radical’ reading of her thought, “earlier suspicions of her conservatism were not just expressions of Marxists prejudice. Interwoven with the radical elements in her thought are strands that are indeed deeply conservative”².

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Horowitz, Arendt “belongs in the unusual category of a revolutionary conservative”, critical of Robespierrianism and yet favorable of a “self-appointed” revolutionary elite. In this paper, I will examine this strand of Arendt’s thinking, with a particular reference to the ‘radical conservatism’ represented by Heidegger, Schmitt, Nietzsche, and the like. Interestingly, this is a relatively scarcely covered topic in Arendt studies. While, on the one hand, her relationship with conservatism has been examined by Horowitz and Canovan – the latter with reference to British conservatism and the former without any specific concentration – and, on the other, the influence of Heidegger is quite broadly covered area of research, there has been few, if any, attempt to trace Arendt’s struggle with Heideggerian concepts in the context of radical conservatism of the continental or specifically German strand. Moreover, the focus has, understandably, been mostly with Heidegger’s Nazism. Here, however, I intend to move beyond this somewhat narrow horizon, and treat Heidegger’s thought as a strand of radical cultural conservatism, a ‘metapolitical’ ethos compatible with, but not by any means the same as, Nazism. In a sense, then, my approach is somewhat analogous to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s in “The Spirit of National Socialism and its Destiny”, where he makes a distinction between Heidegger as “a Nazi (which, nonetheless, he also was, albeit briefly)” and Heidegger as “the thinker of National Socialism, of that which he simultaneously acknowledged and disguised” (note the difference between a Nazi and the thinker of National Socialism) – and notes that the politics of the latter of the two Heidegger’s is mainly “behind-the-political”.

The Heidegger of radical cultural conservatism belongs to a group of writers who despite their differences believe that the Western liberal democracies can only be saved by means that are both radical and anti-communist. Arendt shares with these writers several themes. For purposes of orientation, let me mention a few of those. First, Arendt, like Nietzsche, like Schmitt, and like Heidegger, is fiercely critical of liberalism. Comparing her to Schmitt, Andrea

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Kalyvas notes: “Surprisingly enough, there are moments when Arendt’s critique of liberalism is more vigorous than Schmitt’s”, mainly because Arendt saw liberalism as a greater threat than Schmitt. Second, Arendt, like the radical conservatives, was critical not only of liberalism, but of modernity per se. This critique, together with distrust of “normal” parliamentary politics as opposed to an agonistic conception of politics, sets Arendt in the same camp with the radical conservatives. Yet her political answers diverge significantly from theirs. Hence the ‘positive’ aspects of Arendtian political theorizing can be read as arising from the critical dialogue with the radical conservative heritage. The paper will particularly discuss Arendt’s interpretation of the revolutionary tradition as a secular and non-violent alternative to the radical conservative solutions.

It is not surprising that it is with Heidegger that Arendt both shares most and with whom she engages most with – both in appropriation and in fundamental criticism, implicit and explicit. After all, it was from Heidegger that Arendt – according to her own report – learned what thinking is. In a speech prepared for Heidegger’s eightieth birthday, she recalls a rumor that “travelled all over Germany like the rumor of the hidden king” in the 1920s. And the “rumor about Heidegger put it quite simply: Thinking has come to life again… There exists a teacher; one can perhaps learn to think. The hidden king reigned therefore in the realm of thinking”.

Arendt entered this realm when she studied philosophy with Heidegger at the University of Marburg. Subsequently, the impact of his thinking remained present in Arendt’s work throughout her career. Having said this, however, it is important to note that early on Arendt’s thinking was not a mere application of Heidegger’s, but was instead often set against certain strands in his philosophy. It is therefore plausible to characterize the relationship of Arendt’s thought to Heidegger’s philosophy as a struggle of a sort.

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In the present paper, I analyze this struggle particularly with reference to the concept of the 'world' in Heidegger and Arendt (hence, a lot of other relevant themes – such as Arendt’s and Heidegger’s respective critiques of modernity and technology and their approaches to the Western tradition – are simply omitted due to lack of space). The concept of the world was central for both of these thinkers, and Arendt’s concept is in many ways indebted to the early Heidegger. Indeed, in an early essay, Arendt notes that ‘the world’ and the definition of human beings as ‘being-in-the-world’ are the most important Heideggerian conceptual contributions to philosophy. The ‘world’ is also illuminative when it comes to Arendt’s criticism of the radical conservative (as well as metaphysical) strands in Heidegger’s thought. Arendt’s concept of the world is an essential part of the remedy she envisioned against the problems that she thought were corruptive in modern politics – an analysis she shared with Heidegger and other radical conservatives. It is also a concept that is heavily indebted to Heidegger. It is, nevertheless, a concept that sets Arendt fundamentally apart from the radical conservative thinking. Arendt’s conception of the world is directed not only against the maladies of liberal-capitalist societies, but also against the dangers of radical-romanticist conservatism of Heidegger and others.

In developing this argument, I first present a reading of the early Heidegger’s concept of the world, paying special attention to the early (1924) Marburg seminar Plato’s Sophist, the magnum opus Being and Time, and the lecture course An Introduction to Metaphysics. Heidegger’s later works will not be considered for the twofold reason that, firstly, following the Kehre in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Heidegger’s thinking, also on politics, took a decisive turnabout; and secondly, it is the early Heidegger that had most impact on the categories of Arendt’s thinking. With particular importance is the Plato’s Sophist seminar, which anticipates many themes of Being and Time. In these works, Heidegger discusses the immediate environment of human beings as a totality of equipment, and analyzes the phenomena of world-disclosure and resoluteness as an authentic way of being-in-the-world. In the thirties,

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Heidegger develops these concepts into openly political directions.Having laid out the basic tenets of Heidegger’s world concept, I then turn to Arendt’s criticism of it. As Canovan has pointed out, Arendt’s world-concept is built against, *inter alia*, the romantic ideals of a tight community, whether right or left. For her, the world is essentially an in-between that not only bring people together, but also separates them from each other, hence making way for a perspectivist debate on the common issues⁸.