

Evil: Richard Bernstein Transcript

Samantha Rose Hill: (00:13)

This is Hannah Arendt: Between Worlds, a podcast co-produced by the Goethe-Institut and Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. I'm your host, Samantha Rose Hill.

Samantha Rose Hill: (01:05)

In 1963, Hannah Arendt published *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. It remains one of her most controversial works. When Arendt heard that Adolf Eichmann, Hitler's chief logician had been captured in Argentina by agents of the Mossad and taken back to Israel to stand trial for crimes against humanity. She wrote to the *New Yorker* immediately and asked if she could cover the trial. She said that she wanted to see evil face to face, in the flesh. But after the first day of proceedings, she was in shock. She wrote to, or her husband Heinrich Blücher and said, the whole damn thing is banal.

Richard Bernstein: (01:48)

You know, the Woody Allen movie *Zelig*? I think Eichmann is more like a *Zelig* figure. And what I mean by that is, when you are to act like a vicious Nazi, that's what you do. When you are to act as a responsible person answering questions in a court, that's what you do.

Samantha Rose Hill: (02:09)

From her reportage on *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. She coined one of her most famous concepts, "the banality of evil." Within the world of Arendt studies, the banality of evil is often read as a contradiction to the concept of "radical evil" that Arendt comes to at the end of the origins of totalitarianism, which she had published in 1951. At the end of *Origins*, Arendt argues that radical evil had appeared on earth with the Holocaust stripping humans of their humanity, rendering them superfluous. So I wanted to talk with the philosopher Richard Bernstein about his work on Arendt and evil because unlike many readers, Richard Bernstein has done a lot of work to show how these two concepts – radical evil and the banality of evil – are actually complementary to one another.

Richard Bernstein: (03:09)

This talk about Arendt's theory of this, Arendt's theory that. Doesn't really understand, I think that she was a person of thought trains. She followed certain thought trains that would sometimes interweave and interconnect. And that's the way at which I think she thought about evil today.

Samantha Rose Hill: (03:29)

So in this episode, we talk about the relationship between radical evil, the banality of evil and how we can think about evil in our world today with Hannah Arendt now. Richard Bernstein is an American philosopher who teaches at the New School for Social Research in New York City. He has written extensively on American pragmatism, the Frankfurt school and political philosophy. He's the author of *Why Read Hannah Arendt Now?* Please join me in welcoming Dick Bernstein to *Between Worlds*.

Samantha Rose Hill: (04:19)

It's a pleasure to be talking with you about Hannah Arendt and there's so many things that I wanna talk with you about evil, judgment, Arendt on Marx, what she got wrong, what she got right. But I wanna start by just acknowledging that we're talking on March 15th, 2022, and we're in a kind of pivotal political moment. And one of the things that I have been thinking a lot about for the past two weeks is that Hannah Arendt's conception of radical evil and the banality of evil are compatible with one another. And that sent me to your work on radical evil. And I was just wondering if you could talk to us a bit about how you think about

Arendt on evil today, and what you've been thinking about for the past 20 days as Putin invaded Ukraine?

Richard Bernstein: (05:16)

Okay. Uh, should I talk a little bit about the concept of radical evil and, uh?

Samantha Rose Hill: (05:22)

You can talk about whatever you want.

Richard Bernstein: (05:25)

I still think what the few remarks that she makes about the radical evil and absolute evil in *The Origins* are very relevant and very important. As we all know, she's most famous because of the cult of the banality of evil. And there is a famous letter in an exchange of letters that she heard with Gershom Sholem in which she says something interesting towards the end, that the one topic that we could have really talked about is evil. And she says, I no longer think of evil as radical, only as extreme. Now, many people interpret that, that somehow she rejected the concept of radical evil in *The Origins* itself. I don't agree with that. I think that she's talking in two different registers. I mean, there, she's talking systematically about what's going on in totalitarianism and she's making this important point, which she makes in *The Origins* about making people superfluous.

Richard Bernstein: (06:42)

And she says, she confesses, and she actually reiterates this in an exchange with Jaspers, I don't quite know what radical evil is, but it has to do with making human beings superfluous as human beings. Now that's an extremely telling remark in *The Origins* because it's a major theme. It's a theme that goes all the way back to, uh, thinking about refugees. But my view has always been that one of the things that Arendt took to be the distinctive about totalitarianism in particularly the Nazis is that it wasn't the number of people they killed. It. Isn't the 6 million. It isn't massacres. It's the fact that in the end that they systematically try to change human beings into something they are not. They systematically attempted to make them superfluous. It's got a lot of other rich themes to it. Now, if we come now to the banality of evil, then what, there she's dealing with a very different phenomenon.

Richard Bernstein: (07:55)

She really is dealing with the evil of an individual person. There's a complex issue, which we can discuss, but I won't bring it up right now. Does she have Eichmann right? I think she doesn't quite have him right. But the main point that she's trying to make is that his, as, uh, to paraphrase something she says, the deeds were monstrous, but the man was a monster. And that makes sense in terms of the Eichmann trial, because clearly the prosecutors and people thought that if anybody could do these deeds, he must be a monster. He must be sadistic. He must be vicious. He must be antisemitic. And I think Arendt's great claim is that it's simply not true. That he seemed to be more interested in advancing his career than in doing now. The reason I think this is so important is because with that Arendt opens up the issue that human beings can do evil, even though they're relatively normal so that anybody can be guilty of the banality of evil and this and that.

Richard Bernstein: (09:15)

I, so in some of my writings about Arendt, I talk about, make this distinction, the historical distinction about whether she had Eichmann absolutely right. And we can talk a little bit about whether that is the case. But the conceptual issue, what was she really trying to conceptually bring forth with the banality evil? And that concept strikes me as relevant today as it was when she wrote it. And the interpretation I give to the claim, I no longer speak about radical evil, I speak about evil being extreme. Arendt was extraordinarily sensitive to language. When she uses the term radical, she's referring to the Latin *radix*, that it has

roots. And the point that she really wants to emphasize in later writings, it has no depth, it's on the surf and it can spread like our virus. So that there is no depth to evil it's there and it can spread around.

Richard Bernstein: (10:24)

Okay. Now you wanted me to speak about the relevance. I think in general that people will speak about her theory of evil, her theory of radical evil, her theory of banality of evil. I think these are, that's a misleading way of speaking about her. I don't think she had a theory of radical evil, and I don't think she had a theory of the banality of evil. I think what is really interesting, and this is something particularly if we read the [inaudible] book, the other, it was on her mind all the way through her life. I mean, after I think the war and that what she was doing is over and over again, rethinking, you know, the nuances of what evil is and that I think you have to the end of her life. So this talk about Arendt's theory of this, Arendt's theory of that, doesn't really understand, I think, and I think you bring this out beautifully in your own book, that she was a person of thought trains.

Richard Bernstein: (11:30)

She followed certain thought trains that would sometimes interweave and interconnect. And that's the way I, which I think she thought about or evil today. It has one significant consequence for thinking about the contemporary situation. I'm, I'm sure she would think of, I mean, she would, uh, be extremely critical of Putin and I think she would have no hesitation in saying that what he's doing is evil, but strictly speaking the concept of radical evil and the concept of banality evil cannot be imposed upon this. And this again is for me, characteristic of what I think is that one of the deepest themes in Arendt, is that Arendt really did believe that with totalitarianism there was a break in tradition. And one of the things that that break in tradition meant was you couldn't simply rely on traditional categories to analyze situations. You had to rethink them. So I don't think that people who would automatically say, oh, this is an exemplification of a radical evil, this is an example... That's very un-Arendtian. I think that she would say that, look, we have to think exactly. And there are things that are of course of Putin that are common to totalitarianism, but things that are different. And our task would be to try to illuminate what's distinctive about the evil that, uh, he's engaged in. That's a long answer to a short question.

Samantha Rose Hill: (13:12)

It's, it's, it's a, it's a wonderful answer. And you are bringing up many different, you know, I think aspects of Arendt's work perhaps first and foremost, importantly, the idea that Arendt's work is not a procrustean frame through which to analyze our contemporary political situation. But we can think with Arendt and the way that she talks about radical evil, extreme evil, the banality of evil, and try to illuminate what it is that we are witnessing today. Arendt..

Richard Bernstein: (13:45)

And that's what you would see as our task. Yes. You know, uh, I mean, you know, uh, I think you probably have noticed this in writing a biography, that there are certain terms that are favorite terms of Arendt. And one term that keeps reappearing is "perplexity." Perplexity. She talks about perplexity and connection with the rights of, uh, the right to have rights. And she has a beautiful statement in the, uh, essay "On Thinking and Moral Considerations" where she says, how do you teach thinking? You teach thinking by trying to infect others with your own perplexities. And that's what I think Arendt really wanted to accomplish. She was not interested in "Arendtians." She was not interested in followers. She certainly would've abhorred the idea that you could take her ideas and simply apply 'em to a situation, but it was a call to us, the readers, to face up to the perplexities which she's bringing forth.

Samantha Rose Hill: (14:58)

And there's

Richard Bernstein: (14:58)

And that includes the complexities about evil. Yeah.

Samantha Rose Hill: (15:01)

Yeah, no, I was just gonna say that that's beautiful and it it's picking up on, I think part of what, what drove Arendt to thinking from this place of curiosity and desire to understand. Perplexity comes, and you can correct me. Perplexity comes from the Latin perplexus, which means to be entangled, to be confused, to have doubts. It's related to both the kind of the tanglement, but also the questioning.

Richard Bernstein: (15:29)

I think that's right on. And that to, to try to get the reader to share in that experience, because if the reader shares in that experience, that is the stimulus for, for the real thinking.

Samantha Rose Hill: (15:43)

So we have evil and perplexity. And Arendt thinks about evil, as you said, throughout the course of her life. She comes to it, I imagine, as a young student, first as a theological problem, when she's studying in Berlin and then, and Heidelberg with Jaspers. But evil is often entangled with thinking and trying to think about thinking in her work as well. So evil comes from a failure to think. What he lacked was the ability to imagine the world from the perspective of another. How do you think about the relationship, or I'm gonna go with entanglement now instead of the perplexity, between evil and thinking throughout the body of Arendt's work?

Richard Bernstein: (16:30)

First, let me introduce an aside, which

Samantha Rose Hill: (16:33)

I, yes, please.

Richard Bernstein: (16:34)

I think it's relevant. Um, we know about her marvelous correspondence. And one of the great correspondences with Jaspers, okay. I mean, the early days where they reunited writing again. And Arendt at that point was talking about a crime which is greater than anything else. And Jasper tries her. He says, if you begin talking about that in that way you are mystifying the concept. And she concedes that point. She makes the point that I don't really wanna mystify the idea. And that's in his interchange, which I, I I'm so perplexed that people don't always pick it up, he says, evil has to be understood in all its banality. Now, whether that entered her unconscious or was there, it's so clear that he's making the point shortly after the Second World War that she makes of course in the Eichmann book. Now on the other issue, I mean it is, I think, one of the more, more, uh, exciting and proactive themes of the inability.

Richard Bernstein: (17:55)

I mean, to really have the imagination to see if, I mean, that's one of the reasons she loves Kant. She loves the idea of, of the imagination traveling. And she certain wants to one of the threads. And when she says Eichmann can't, was thoughtless, was that he really lacked the capacity to imagine what it was like for his victims. That's what he really lacked. I mean there's a, I could make a reference to Hegel here, but I think that Eichman, he might have just been, he could just as well have been shipping cattle, the fact that he was shipping

human beings to their death is not something that really, and really seeing things from their perspective, really imagining is something. So that's one of the major strains, I think.

Samantha Rose Hill: (18:55)

And there, I think we, we see, we see the entanglement between radical evil and the banality of evil because in order to treat these human beings as objects, essentially, they had to be stripped of their humanity. And Arendt talks about this kind of three step process of stripping human beings of their humanity; killing the juridical person in that.

Richard Bernstein: (19:25)

I've always thought that one of the most brilliant things in Arendt is the threefold thing she, she makes in total, uh, in "Total Domination," killing the juridical, killing the moral, and then killing the spontaneity. And that fits with a thesis that I have about Arendt, which I think is now more accepted when I first was writing. And that's the, the following is that many people who begin with The Human Condition think that the whole basis of it is a nostalgia for a Greek polis that never really existed. And I'm convinced that it was really the, I mean, after all individuality and spontaneity are crucial for our conception of plurality, it was a systematic attempt to eliminate plurality that really then led her, I mean, she mentions it there, that let her to one of our deepest insights about action and politics.

Samantha Rose Hill: (20:36)

And that's why, and that's why she argues Eichmann has to die at the end of Eichmann in Jerusalem. It was because he violated this fundamental principle of humanity, plurality.

Richard Bernstein: (20:48)

I'm, I'm not entirely happy with that last passage.

Samantha Rose Hill: (20:52)

You're not? No? Tell me what, tell me why? Most people, most people go back to it.

Richard Bernstein: (20:56)

I mean, I think it makes the major theme that if you will that certain people disappear from the earth, that's a violation of everything I most deeply believe in plurality. Okay. Um, the reason, um, have some qualification is that, um, it lends itself to an interpretation, which I don't think is a correct one, but it lends itself to it, a vengeance. That you are, that this is really a kind of vengeful reaction to what he did. And the indeed I think if I'm correct, I may be misleading, that that's the way Judith Butler reads it. You know, now I don't think that's quite correct, but if you just read it at a context, it can sound like this is the, this is the vengefulness of the victors, you know?

Samantha Rose Hill: (22:01)

Yeah. Yeah. I don't, I don't think I quite read it like that. I read it more as Arendt's intervention against the kind of, you know, if the first step of the process of dehumanization is to kill the juridical man, how can the juridical system hold the person accountable? It seems to be a claim about the veracity of the, the crime committed. I wanna go back. So you, you brought up the passage in Arendt's correspondence with Jaspers, which my broken in two volume is on the other side of the room and I'm tempted to get it because the passage you mentioned is on page 65. And where shortly after the war, if people wanna go grab it! and then later Arendt's correspondence with Heinrich Blücher, which she writes to him right after she arrives and after the first day of the trial. She writes to him her first impression and says that he's a clown in a glass cage. Right. And the whole thing is so damn banal. And then later in the Arendt-Jasper's correspondence Jaspers writes and says, I hear Heinrich gave you the concept of banality of evil and now you're the one taking the

responsibility for it. So you said earlier that you don't think Arendt's gets Eichmann quite right. What does, what does, what doesn't she get? Right.

Richard Bernstein: (23:26)

Well, the point is this, I mean, as I say, I wanted to distinguish, to conceptually distinguish the issue about whether the concept is an important concept for us today. And the answer is definitely yes, because we see this all the time. One of my favorite examples is Abu Ghraib in Iraq. Everybody immediately was very angry with the immediate officers who were making fun and so forth, et cetera. But what people did not point to is, is the administration Bush and Rumsfeld, who created the situation. They're guilty of the banality of evil, in my own way. But let me get back to what you're trying to probe me on. Historically, look, there's an irony here because I think the evidence for a correction to Arendt's view is her own description of what Eichmann did in Hungary. You know, I mean, after all, when Eichmann goes to Hungary to Budapest to organize the councils in 1944, everybody knows that the Germans are losing the war, including him.

Richard Bernstein: (24:42)

Okay. And yet, as we also know that, uh, between March of 1944 and the fall 400,000 people were sent to Auschwitz. Now, I don't see that as simply. And indeed what he does know also is said of doing this behind the back of Himmler. Now that seems to me in my category is a bit more fanatical than just, I mean, I don't see it fits the picture of a person, just, you know, advancing himself, doing his duty and so forth. There's something fanatical about why send all these people to the death when you know that it's not serving any function. And when you know that one of the first times in your life, you are violating what you take to be higher offices. I mean the acclaim, well, that's what Hitler would want. That seems to be weak. I think that action is a little bit hard to fit with the banality of evil.

Richard Bernstein: (25:49)

You see, there's another kind of aside. Do you know the Woody Allen movie Zelig? Yes. Okay. I think Eichmann is more like a Zelig figure. And what I mean by that is when you are to act like a vicious Nazi, that's what you do. When you are to act as a responsible person answering questions in a court, that's what you do and do. So with his ability to take on different personas or different roles in different situations in a certain way a variation of the theme of the banality of evil that's real, there's no depth to him. He would do whatever he, he was whatever situation he was thrown into. What I do not accept is the thesis that some people have developed. In fact, I, even myself suggested I agreed with it, but I don't agree with it, that he was being manipulative, that he knew what he was doing, that he was just playing a role. I don't think he was self conscious. I think the Eichmann in the court is one Eichmann and Eichmann, you know, um, among his Nazi friends in his Argentina is another Eichmann and he didn't see any discontinuity. That's real

Samantha Rose Hill: (27:11)

oh, I think,

Richard Bernstein: (27:12)

But that's Bernstein. That, that's not Arendt.

Samantha Rose Hill: (27:14)

Well, that's, I'm here for Bernstein on Arendt! So how did you meet Hannah Arendt?

Richard Bernstein: (27:34)

The story of our meeting is a wonderful story and is a story that tells a great deal about Hannah. Arendt. Uh, in the early 1970s, I had written a book called Praxis in Action. Okay. At that point in my life, I was not interested in Hannah Arendt at all. In fact, I was very

critical of her. I thought that her interpretation of Marx and Hegel are outrageous, and I still, still do think that they're outrageous.

Richard Bernstein: (28:10)

But I published this book ultimately with the University of Pennsylvania. But I had published an earlier book with Yale and the editor at Yale was a bit annoyed that I didn't send the book to her. And so she said, send it. I did. And she took the, uh, upon herself to send it to a reader. Even though I had made a contract already with University of Pennsylvania. The review I received is the most perverse review I have ever seen. It was clearly written by a German émigré who was indignant that I would discuss Carnap and Dewey in the same book that I discussed Hegel.

Samantha Rose Hill: (28:50)

Haha!

Richard Bernstein: (28:51)

And in the 1970s the number of people writing about Hegel you could count on one hand and why didn't I cite this German source, why didn't I cite that German? And so in my mind, I asked, this was the question: who do I know, who I think is an arrogant German émigré? It's Hannah Arendt. So I had imagined that she's my enemy. Okay. She was invited to give a lecture. It was actually the "Lying in Politics" lecture at Haverford College in 1972. I didn't invite her. It was a colleague of mine. She said, I want to meet Richard Bernstein. And I had no idea what you wanted in me, me, me for. Well, it turned out that my editor man, by the name of Frederik was a personal friend of hers and had sent her my book. And she came to tell me how much she liked the book.

Richard Bernstein: (29:43)

I mean, the mindset had to change completely, cuz I thought here's an enemy and so forth! And there's a matter of fact that led to her. She wanted me to come to the New School in 1972. It didn't work out, but she became a great supporter. Something magical happened that night. We talked from eight, or we argued from eight o'clock to two o'clock in the morning. And in one of the things I dedicated to her, I said it was erotic. I mean, in the sense that there was a kind of deep attraction and at the same time agonistic, we were fighting, arguing! And that was the beginning of our friendship. She asked me to then give a paper at the first conference that there ever was on Hannah Arendt that took place in Toronto in 1972. This is the part of the story that I like to tell. Arendt is a very distinguished person at this point, it's after the Eichmann book. Dick Bernstein is just starting out on his career.

Richard Bernstein: (30:46)

You know, this was of no significance for her. She says, I have just reread your book and I find two reactions; those who are very sympathetic and those who are extremely critical. And then she goes on to say, you know Dick, all academic writing left center and right is conservative. Nobody wants to hear something which is new and different. It's beautiful, beautiful. I give that passion to all my PhD students. You know, because you know, young people are faced with this all the time that they are doing. And I think that she's right. And, and she says, adds, I know this from my own experience. Uh, like, so I think it's a beautiful statement about Hannah. Always like to tell the statement, tell the story, because one of traditional views is that she's arrogant and elitist, but here she's completely open and reaches out to a young person who's got no status, who's not, not famous, not part of a New York intellectuals. And that became, I mean, the friendship was wonderful.

Samantha Rose Hill: (32:10)

How has your relationship with her changed in the past 50 years? You knew her from '72 to '75 and you've carried her around in your thinking and teaching and carrying on the philosophy program at the New School for Social Research. How has she shifted in your imagination and thinking over the years?

Richard Bernstein: (32:35)
You want me to be honest?

Samantha Rose Hill: (32:37)
Yes, please!

Richard Bernstein: (32:38)
I'm even more impressed. You know, I can read her works right now. I'm teaching. This is my last semester of teaching before I retire.

Samantha Rose Hill: (32:49)
Is it really?

Richard Bernstein: (32:50)
Yeah,

Samantha Rose Hill: (32:51)
I wanna, can I come to one of your classes?

Richard Bernstein: (32:54)
It's on Zoom so you can do it. But, um, I thought I would teach two of the courses that people come to study with me; one on American pragmatism, one on Hannah Arendt. And by the way I have some fantastic students in this course. And you know, today, as a matter of fact, just before I was reading *On Revolution* and I began seeing things about what she had to say about [inaudible] and about rage, which I really hadn't deeply noticed before. So I'm always discovering something new. I mean, this doesn't mean, you know, you probably know that I wrote this very critical article on the social and the political. And since I gave it to my class, I thought I might reread it. I wrote that in the, at the end of the eighties, but I still think that she took a wrong turn here. I try to defend her, but I think she overdrew the distinction and not to her advantage.

Samantha Rose Hill: (33:56)
Okay. So what does our get out outrageously wrong about Marx and Hegel?

Richard Bernstein: (34:06)
Uh, yes, I think when she wants to reduce them in the last analysis, she wants to reduce them of moving from freedom to a philosophy of history and both subscribing to the idea of historical necessity. You know, now that's not uncommon in interpretations to Marx and Hegel, but it doesn't bring out the nuance. I mean, you know, Marx is not a person, I could talk about either one, but Marx is not a person who thinks that there's just a necessary thing that's rolling along and is gonna bring out freedom. I mean, that's a caricature so that I think is really wrong. I mean, it doesn't bring out, you know, what I would call the nuances in Marx. You see, let me do this in terms of critique of Arendt. It's a wonderful statement that she makes in and in, in the interview, that's in the *Crisis of the Republic* "Thoughts on Revolution"

Richard Bernstein: (35:09)
where she says politics is not for everyone, like the publicness, but everyone has to have the opportunity. Okay. Now I think, this is Bernstein on Arendt. I don't think she thought that

out. Because if you take that seriously, then you have to think hard about what are the material conditions that are required in order for people to engage in politics. And this is not just an abstract issue. It's a very concrete issue that we're facing today because, you know, we could speak the high language of the liberation and discourse, but we're just neglecting all those populations that really don't have the ability to do that. So you have to think more seriously about using the Marxist term, the material conditions that create the possibility that people can be political and that I don't think or Arendt did with full seriousness.

Samantha Rose Hill: (36:16)

No, she takes it for granted and her writing, I think, and kind of begins from an assumption that certain material conditions' been filled.

Richard Bernstein: (36:26)

You see all of this comes back. I mean, to a theme that I think is where there's still a little bit of difference between us is, um, in order for politics in Arendt's sense not to be empty or hypocritical, a word that she uses, then you have to think out what are the, I mean, in terms of not just getting away from poverty, but education, discourse to be able to enter the arena? I mean, cause mean that, um, whether we think of Indigenous movements or the Women's movement and so a lot of it was concerned about how that class of people are excluded. Not only are they legally, but are really respected in a kind of political world. So I'm a bit more radical than Arendt on this issue.

Samantha Rose Hill: (37:23)

Yeah well, so am I. What do you think made Arendt turn away from those movements aside from, aside from the ideology part, which she was adverse to, do you think there was something else that made her kind of look away from those questions?

Richard Bernstein: (37:44)

I would put it differently.

Samantha Rose Hill: (37:46)

Okay.

Richard Bernstein: (37:46)

There's another wonderful exchange with Jaspers. Actually discussing the book of Rahel Varnhagen, okay. Mm-hmm and in, I mean, I'm paraphrasing a course, but Jaspers did in effect say, Hannah you exaggerate. And she answers back, Exaggeration, exaggeration. You can't think without exaggerating! And besides, look at the world out there.

Now I am convinced that in this deep desire to restore= the dignity of politics and broaden the critical standard, even today that Arendt overstates, the case, you know, that she exaggerates and for good reason, because I mean, you know, outside of an Arendtian world, we just, people are blind to what she's talking about. Mm-hmm can you imagine a politician understanding, I mean, may pay lip service, but today understanding? Well, it's got to do with opinion, exchange, discussing in the public, dealing with peers. I mean, that's almost, I think certainly, I mean, in the Trump world, that's, that that's not politics. They would say, you know, politics is politics is what she's always critical of; getting what you want! That's the idea of rulership that she's so critical of. I just love those phrases when she says that politics is a world of no rule. Sometimes there are wonderful juxtapositions in Arendt. Bureaucracy is a rule of nobody. Yes. Politics is a rule of no rule.

Samantha Rose Hill: (39:31)

And I mean, that brings us back to Eichmann in a way, but I wanna, I wanna circle go back to the beginning of the conversation and ask what you, you know, thinking with Arendt

today, what do you think has kind of fundamentally and irrevocably changed about our world since 1975? What are some of the elements that we need to be attentive to now?

Richard Bernstein: (39:57)

I think she would be horrified about what politics has become. You know, say we can think of just the American situation. I don't think she would be horrified by the new authoritarianism. She feared that. You know, as some time to think that the most, uh, devastating statement in *The Origins* is the one that concludes the section on domination, that totalitarian means will still, you know, even when the totalitarian regimes are gone, that they will still be appeal to the people when they're, they can't deal with the issues in the civilized world. We live in that world. I mean, you know, who would've ever expected that after, after World War II, there would be massacres like Rwanda? Who would've expected that we would've not only had torture, but try to justify torture? So she's right about that. And I think part of the power of her and

Richard Bernstein: (41:04)

one of the reasons why I think that so many people are reading her is because, um, you can see, I mean, after all her analysis of totalitarianism is an analysis of subterranean tendencies in the modern world that crystallized and they could crystallize again. Okay. And that I think is, um, one of the reasons that she's so appealing because she's illuminating. Um, if I could just say one more thing about this, because I always like to counterbalance things. Um, I think that few people had a deeper understanding of the darkness of our times, remember the darkness of our times for Arendt it's not totalitarianism. It's when you know, there's no credibility when truth is trivialized. I mean, one of the, the essay that I always think could have been written yesterday is "Truth in Politics." Okay. So, um, you know, I see that as a, uh, a deep theme relevant for us today. I also think again, in Arendtian fashion and taking seriously, um, what I call "characteristical thinking," she said, do not use my categories just as [inaudible]. I mean, think of the easy ways in which people speak about all kinds of things as being totalitarian. Um, and that

Samantha Rose Hill: (42:42)

Everything is fascism now.

Richard Bernstein: (42:44)

Well, okay. And Arendt would object to that. I mean, the whole art of thinking is making distinctions. And you know, we're not living, there are many, many tendencies in Putin and others and the authorities, which are, you know, you can see their, their affinity with totalitarianism attends, but we're not living in a world in which people are being sent to concentration camps, being murdered, the use of terror in quite that, that sort of way. Nuance, nuance is what she calls for and nuance, requires real thinking!

Samantha Rose Hill: (43:23)

Yes. I think that's, you know, I, there were, there were two conversations I had that really, that I held in my imagination while I was writing. One was with Jerry Kohn, we met for lunch and he told me the story about Anna a, you know, jumping up on her kitchen table and lifting her skirts and dancing and singing Bertholt Brecht in German "Three Penny Opera." And I loved that image of a dancing, which also comes out of a Günther Anders' story. And then when we met at the New School shortly before the pandemic, you really brought to life, used the word erotic earlier in that kind of true platonic sense. You really brought, I could feel the erotic energy of Arendt through you. You told me the story about fighting about Karl Marx until the wee hours of the morning and imagining, you know Arendt so engaged and lit up and vivacious.

Richard Bernstein: (44:31)

I mean, look it's 50 years, that is my image that's with me today. Well, it's perfectly clear to you that she had special meaning as a person, in addition to her, you know, her writing and the thing, but just as a human being. Open and encouraging, interesting ideas, not worried about barriers or who, what, what your status is. I think status had no significance for her. And that is a remarkable trait. I mean, you know, this is now my personal view, but it's also Arendt's, that one of the greatest goods in this world is real friendship. And even though it's only a few years, that's what I had with Arendt, real friendship. And what is real friendship? Real friendship is where you can be open with the other, where you can say what you want, where you're not afraid of being criticized and so forth, you know, on ideas that you can discuss issues and still come away disagreeing and respecting each other.

Richard Bernstein: (45:40)

And I consider myself very fortunate, I've had this with a few other people, but I had it with Arendt. I mean, I've also had a relationship like that with Habermas, you know, which is also a person I know from that very year. And the way you're with a person and you feel, in the case of Jürgen and he's still alive, where you feel perfectly at home. When Arendt talks about being at home in the world and loving the world, you experience that in real, you and I, I think what's so sad is that I don't see much of that around today, that kind of friendship. There's another type of thing, which I think is, um, characteristic. I mean, Arendt is an older generation, but I consider myself very fortunate coming to, you might say intellectual life and the love of the life of the mind after the Second World War.

Richard Bernstein: (46:40)

I mean, this is a wonderful period in which you felt that ideas counted that your ideas could make a difference. You know, that, so it was, um, in fact, um, this, this is really off the topic, but I will say it, uh, two other close friends were Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas, there was a famous dinner party, I say, it's famous 'cause it's in both their biographies, that took place here where we connected. And when I found so interesting, here is Habermas growing up as a person who was just being conscious of what the Nazis has done when he's a teenager, here is, Derrida growing up in Algeria, being thrown out of school, his Dick Bernstein growing up in Brooklyn. And yet at the profoundest level, I think our whole understanding of intellectual life was something we deeply shared. And certainly that thing that I discovered in Hannah Arendt.

Samantha Rose Hill: (47:51)

Do you think that it's possible to nourish that kind of intellectual friendship today?

Richard Bernstein: (47:59)

You know, you know, let me go back to a theme, which I haven't mentioned, which I really think is important. We talk about Arendt in terms of understanding totalitarian tendencies, authoritarianism. But this is another beautiful aspect of Arendt of illumination. Of the sense in which, you know, the real belief in new beginnings and in freedom. I think that's, so I think that's tremendously important in terms of young people today, because it's so easy to become cynical, it's so easy to turn off from things, but the attitude, the belief, which I take very seriously, that we can still come together, you know, collectively act and make a difference in the world. It's a beautiful Arendtian theme. You have to be careful not to sentimentalize it, to go over it because after all she thought that most revolutionary spirit was always being killed, but she did not believe that it was killed because of necessity. So in that interview "On Thoughts and Revolution," and she says, well, what do you think should be that former government? That's where she talks about the councils and maybe the next revolution this would happen and she says, maybe next time it would be there. So there's always the openness and the hope.

Samantha Rose Hill: (49:26)

Thank you, Dick. Bernstein. Thank you!

Richard Bernstein: (49:29)

Okay. I enjoyed it! And I hope that this works

Samantha Rose Hill: (49:46)

Hannah Arendt: Between Worlds is a co-production of The Goethe-Institut Institute and Brooklyn Institute for Social Research. It was produced and edited by Lisa Bartfai. Music by Dylan Mattingly. And it was hosted by me, Samantha Rose Hill. We have more episodes for you on thinking with Hannah Arendt now. Until next time!