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The Walls Inside Us Or: What Kind Of Resistance Is At Stake?

Which are the poles of resistance, active and passive, conscious or unconscious, that impeach us to do the right things? In the prologue of her work *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt asks herself and the reader whether the emancipation and secularization of the Modern Age, “which began with a turning-away, not necessarily from God, but from a god who was the father of men in heaven”, should “end with an even more fateful repudiation of an Earth who was the Mother of all living creatures under the sky” (p. 2). Fifty years ago, there were already good reasons to worry about the Earth, regarding the agonistical escalation of nuclear weapons in the Cold War, the paranoia represented by the stubborn clashes of ideologies between the blocks of the so-called free world, against the so-called socialist world, or, in reversing terms, of the so-called imperialist world against the so-called totalitarian world.

Historians often speak about the century of ideologies, the Era of the Extremes, etc. Umberto Eco even said in an interview that he *believed* that the 20th century had turned to be “hyperreligious”. The irony is not accidental; I just had to stress once more how the analyzing subject is himself a constitutive part of the analyzed object. But what is the core of the problem, if there is ever one? In any case we should retain the accurate analysis by Hannah Arendt of what she called “world alienation” that means several forms of subjectivity, of withdrawal from the reality in the name of some paradise searching, of aggression of the objects in the name of some survival or welfare or even profit interests.



But we also know that this is a general problem of setting limits inside us, of judging what is right or wrong not according to moral norms but in consequence of the judgement about a concrete situation; we must “play it again”, and again, and again, repeating the question about the Here, about the Now and most of all about the Who – that means, about the place and the time, about who is really concerned in a crisis situation. But if we think simultaneously historically and globally, we correspondingly risk to generalize but also to particularize. Excuse me if I mention Hannah Arendt several times, there are surely the usually expected reasons for doing so (her 100th birthday and the conferences and meetings everywhere last year), but there is also a leading idea by her that I would like to stress, about the possibility of being symbolically born again and again by having the courage to act according to our judgement, made possible by reflection and completed by communication and interaction. This is by no means a system of rules drawn by the book and out of reality, but on the contrary a conscientious presentation of our whole philosophical tradition as a sort of treasure arch from which we are free to get inspired in our reflecting connections with the real world. If Hannah Arendt refused, in the famous TV-interview given to Günter Gaus, to be labelled as a political philosopher, and instead of that she claimed to be called a political theorist, this was because she knew too well that the treasure arch threatened to turn into a Pandora box with claims to make ideological readings of the world and subsequently to take possession of it, following an idea, or – even worse because higher placed – an ideal. Instead of that, theory should rather be a tool which anyone could use, even in precarious situations, even in dark times. She stressed, in the same interview, that there are always ways to act with dignity without risking one’s life. We know the History, we know what she was talking about. We can spare ourselves the recalling of her analysis of totalitarian systems in the late forties, her report about Eichmann’s trial in Jerusalem in the early sixties. But we must remember that she refused to anthropologize the political contingency, to sustain that there is an Eichmann inside each of us, who could act in the same way as he did, under the same circumstances.

My own point by mentioning H. Arendt is above all to think reality, and correspondingly History, in a holistic, systemic way, that means by trying to observe the observer. As a matter of fact, this author offers a most interesting, I would even say, passioning example of the difficulties of getting along



with the “hardships of the plains” after having experienced the “hardships of the mountains” – the words are from the poem “Wahrnehmung” (“Perception”) written 1949 by an already disillusioned Bertolt Brecht, and chosen by H. Arendt’s biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl as the epigraph for the chapter about the post-war period. In the so-called dark times men (a problematic designation, which includes Rosa Luxemburg among Lessing, Jaspers, Heidegger, Brecht, H. Broch, W. Benjamin and Pope Johann XXIII; but I don’t intend to follow the path of gender studies) could fight, had to fight against outside barriers; afterwards, in times which we don’t really dare to call full of light, people who have gone through all forms of totalitarian darkness due to the suppression of the possibilities of living the differences in the public spaces, such people have to face a sort of inside barriers, that means interiorized walls.

How come these walls remain – or even arise anew - in a democratic society? Here we must pay attention not to throw away the child with the bath, therefore not to anathematize economic progress as a factor that brings along short-sighted, materialistic perspectives and behaviours: we know too well the cynical cartoons that pointed out (not only with the pencil, there are many words with cartoon effect, as we know) the rush of East Germans towards Coke and bananas after the Berlin Wall came down; it is then too logical to proceed with a really Wailing Wall litany against the loss of orientation and values, about the dissolution of violence monopole, about the incapacity of common people to fight against more or less sophisticated forms of criminality in the era of globalization, as if there remained no alternative than to become “one of them” or to remain sitting on a cosy couch and read the last world best-seller about conspiracy theory.

But we don’t live in a Brave New World, but just in a time where the information speed confronts us with the simultaneity of the unsimultaneous, we may call it the clash of civilizations and yet do not really understand what is going on. I must correct myself: we begin understanding even if cognition goes a slower way, we always begin understanding when we feel how contradictions and paradoxes of our time go through our complex psychosomatic system and leave traces.



In this sense post-totalitarianism might be a new illustration of the fable of the wizard apprentice: the big broom is not only broken but also replaced by a lot of small brooms, which seem to work together to produce a similar paralysing influence, however with a significant difference. Totalitarianism was a visible wall, which created within the tradition of human rights the wish to regain them again, the will to fight against injustice. The small brooms are the “hardships of the plains”, under the shape of the comfortable belief about already reached utopias. But is that really so? Can we afford to quit climbing mountains, and not only for fun or fitness? At the moment I write this, I see the TV news about the disclosure of a planned terrorist conspiracy in Great Britain to kidnap and execute a soldier – but I also hear after that the wonderful lyrics by David Gilmour, and I ask if we can hear them, again and again, without a chill, which is more than a mere goose skin reflex, but a sense of real freedom of choice, a real capacity of determination, that breaks the walls of indolence inside us: “On the day the Wall came down/They threw the locks onto the ground/And with glasses high we raised a cry for freedom had arrived” (Pink Floyd, *The Division Bell*). Can we still complain about becoming conformists, can we still – raising the cynical parade – be glad about the existence of reasons elsewhere to fight for freedom? Let me quote H. Arendt one last time, sustaining in a letter to Kurt Blumenfeld that wrath was a more positive feeling than hope...

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