



41º. ENCONTRO INTERNACIONAL DO COMITÉ DE ESCRITORES PARA A PAZ

DO P.E.N. INTERNACIONAL

25-29 Março 2009 – Bled (Eslovénia)

Understanding versus acting: a silent effect?

The well-known assertion by William Faulkner that the past is never dead, because it is not even past, has found since its formulation in 1951 infinite possibilities of utilization, namely within the realm of memory studies, following the intention to precise and differentiate historical narratives. In our global time and space, the conscientiousness about the fact that such historical narratives come closer and closer to fictional writing, has come to the surface and has become a discursive evidence.

Historical memories may therefore be seen as one of many discursive strategies that we use by our task of understanding. I hereby recall Hannah Arendt's answer to Günter Gaus on a TV-Interview, after having been asked whether the job of thinking, of constructing political theories, would not be a specifically masculine task. We must remember this happened in 1964! The answer of the non-feminist Arendt could lead us to the fringes of gender role clichés, when she told the interviewer – among thick smoke waves, by the way, since smoking was at the time not generally forbidden yet – that while men wanted so terribly to *act*, to produce effects, she would rather try to *understand*, as if this meant to make a step backwards from the action arena, towards a reflection platform.

In our communicative world, we may no longer stay aside the processes which lead to decisions that might be of some importance and contribute a little bit to make the world more human, or less inhuman. At least we must not remain any more mere individuals *de jure*, just enjoying the fact of having civil rights, since the new technologies are increasingly



putting at our disposal means which allow us to exercise our faculties of understanding, judging, *and* acting, in order to feel as a part of a huge communicating world and to insert ourselves in a process which may make us to individuals *de facto*, that means, citizens who stand for their words and deeds, even under life risks.

We know that Hannah Arendt rather ranged herself to a shadowy private domain, in order to observe how the different realms of the world interacted. This was reaffirmed several times, including in her last speech, delivered upon receiving Denmark's Sonning Prize in 1975, several months before she died. Her position has, in my opinion, less to do with a possible self-judgement about a feminine incapacity to act or to carry the existence of a political person, than with her sense for the correlative proportion of understanding, which would also imply judging and acting. In some sense, we could say that understanding and acting, rather than excluding themselves mutually in the sense of situational option, are mutually related similarly to the invisible and visible parts of an iceberg.

A most interesting, and perhaps less known, proof of an unusual sense for an urgency to act by Hannah Arendt has been a series of articles by her that were published during the forties in several American magazines, in English and in German, concerning the Palestine issue and the foundation of the Israel state. Here is no more the speech about a reflexive interaction between understanding and acting. On the one hand, we feel the pressure of urgency by her pointing to the Palestine Jews the necessity of taking political measures and acting in a dialogical way, the necessity of neither letting themselves enrapture by Zionist policies nor failing to criticize all situations of violence and injustice. On the other hand, Arendt's urgency, in this particular case, of judging by acting and acting by judging, could not be understood by us, as her readers, without knowledge about her philosophical and political working and living processes and experiences. But let us for the moment merely presuppose these aspects and proceed.



“There is still time”: this is perhaps the most acute assertion that we might read or hear, when we know that it was formulated just a few days before the proclamation of the Israeli state. The article, published in May 1948 in the New York magazine *Commentary*, meant the “Jewish homeland”, which in H. Arendt’s opinion still could be saved, both as *an* idea and as *a* reality, not as a result of Zionist claims based upon a militarist and expansionist practice, but upon *the* neighbourly reality, at each moment made possible by negotiations, most of the times at the edge of incommunicability, between Jews and Arabs. This simultaneous reflection, about the conditions of the possibility of acting politically and the subsequent communication about it within an influent Jewish community, turns around the polarity of what “should never have happened”, as she said during that mentioned interview concerning the Holocaust.

I cannot help asking myself, again and again, what that assertion (“there is still time”) really could have meant, since Hannah Arendt knew too well the irreversibility of the creation of the Israeli state, under the banner of the Zionists. She knew about the long history of the Zionist fiction of a so-called “land without people for people without land”. She knew about the total disrespect of Zionist groups and their armed troops such as Irgun and Stern, not only towards their Palestine neighbours. She knew about the long coexistence practices between Jews and Arabs under the Ottoman Empire or the British protectorate. She knew about criminal military “operations” against Palestine people and British since April 1948, in order to protect settlements outside the territories included in the UNO decision of November 1947. She knew about the massacre at the Palestine village of Deir Yassin on 8.5.1948, where 254 people, mostly women and children, were brutally killed. She knew the complexity of the historical relationship between Jews and Arabs, which the Zionists were about to reduce to a *tabula rasa*. She knew what we also know today, since the reigniting of the Gaza war has lead to a wave of eagerness to be informed about a past, which is not even past.



And yet – is there still time? We look at the waste land of Gaza, we have heard the permanent bombings and the intransigent statements by Arabs and Jews during the war by watching to Al Jazeera, which seemed for a while to be the only bearable TV channel, because it was close to a reality which we knew that it was too real but yet unable to let us come out of our daily life, no more than the financial crisis.

Yes, there still could be time. Time to reset the capacity of thinking back to the complexity of a situation which carries not only geopolitical but ideological, religious and symbolic aspects. Understanding could mean, in the context of the Palestine issue, deliberately *not* to act in a first moment, in order to ask how to break the violence spiral, which is itself a twisted product of too many violence chains.

Is the Israeli-Palestine conflict really so original in the universal History? In his booklet against fanaticism, Amos Oz asserted that both peoples have to be ready, like two men who agree to be amputated of a limb to save their lives, to make most painful concessions that, in his opinion, should lead to a peace to which the Europeans had needed an unequally longer time. Hannah Arendt stresses in the forties an immaturity of both sides, reflected by emotional, nationalistic and illusionary forms of behaviour, made possible by the umbrellas of the Ottoman Empire and British protectorate. As a “late nation” like Italia and Germany, Israel has until today continuously reinforced its symbolic legitimacy with the Holocaust tragedy, which leads an Irish journalist to ask for an end of the same legitimacy in order to allow the world to judge the Israeli war crimes and daily humiliations inflicted to the Palestine people.

Is there still time to re-act like a symbolic new birth, starting from a mined political platform, a clash of intransigent interests? In any case, the analysis by Hannah Arendt about the violent clashes around the creation of the Israel state points us, *mutatis mutandis*, the necessity of deconstructing the Israeli colonization of Palestine, as a tragic case where dominators and dominated live next door and not in a distant continent. In spite of not



being a feminist, and perhaps just because she was none, Hannah Arendt allows us to understand better the reasons of long self-legitimizing, humiliation, aggression, that means, a long chain of irrational aspects not really beyond but rather in-between the daily life of Israelis and Palestinians. In these sense, the letter by a Jewish woman to Barack Obama, written to the new president of the USA on the day of his election and begging him to come to the disputed “homeland” and release her for the pain of carrying the guilt of a brutal colonization (“Obama, take away the pain in my stomach”), shows us a similar preoccupation for caring for real people without having to support any more forms of daily military violence.

Next to, or beyond the analysis of materially detectable and describable aspects remains perhaps the biggest part of the problem, perhaps as big and silent as the hidden part of an iceberg, or as sinuous as a labyrinth thread that leads to a perpetuation of violence chains, out of symbolic, ideological, religious, historical issues that clash in a long spiral. The way that leads to negotiations seems to be blocked by a genuine dilemma, out of the necessity of a mutual recognition on the one side, which is on the other side blocked by the fear of getting into great dangers by recognizing the other, the first of them being losing the own face, the next being giving up own rights and forms of legitimacy. Men - Hannah Arendt would perhaps say again, if she would live in this precise moment – want so dreadfully to keep humiliating and shooting and bombing their neighbours, but women have had enough of trying to understand that and want once for all to sleep in peace, raise their children, cook a meal in order to invite all the neighbours, Arabs and Jews. There is always time for a common meal.

Teresa Salema (Portuguese P.E.N. Centre)