Review

Rethinking political judgment: Arendt and existentialism

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Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, vii+263 pp.,

ISBN: 978-1474429993

Contemporary Political Theory (2020) **19**, S247–S250. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-019-00341-z>; published online 5 August 2019

Mrovlje's book is an insightful contribution to the contemporary debate on political judgment. Through a reading of Sartre, de Beauvoir, Camus, and Arendt, it offers a view of political judgment as inescapably plural and situated, and therefore recalcitrant to ready-made models of rational deliberation. Turning unabashedly to novels and plays, these authors help us to 'rethink the terms of our engagement with the world' (p. 12) in ways that align with the insights Arendt draws from Kant's aesthetics into political judgment. They get political judgment 'right' by virtue of the sensitivity to concrete, situated existence that literature affords them. Sartre, notwithstanding his literary sensitivity, remains caught in some of these philosophical strictures, but de Beauvoir and – especially – Camus and Arendt, break free of those. In the last two chapters of the book, Mrovlje argues for the potential of this understanding of judgment in tackling two contemporary controversies: over 'dirty hands,' and the one about transitional justice.

While Hannah Arendt has enjoyed enormous success in contemporary political theory, the other authors Mrovlje engages have not. It is one of the main contributions of the book to bring them alongside such a widely read thinker to show their distinct contribution to political thought and possibly political judgment. The sensitivity of existentialism for the idiosyncratic, the inexplicable, the tragic, and the irreconcilable as something to be confronted rather than subsumed into grand rational designs, or swept under the rug of universalism, is certainly something that we ought to recover. Living with the loss of the dream of absolute control, and even seeing potential in that loss, is something that critics of modernity have long pointed to as the insecure but promising ground on which to build a less ambitious but more humane world. Arendt was certainly influenced by existentialism, although Mrovlje takes issue with Martin Jay's reading of Arendt's political existentialism as lapsing 'into aestheticized decisionism that refuses to be tamed by socioeconomic concerns or any other instrumental considerations.' (p. 98)

The book is suggestively written, and the author crafts each sentence with the pleasure of a lover of good writing. Arendt brings to the table the theoretical framework and the problem to analyze. Other authors are made to seamlessly fit into her categories, in sometimes insightful, but sometimes not completely convincing ways. One senses, by the end of the text, that the more perplexed and tragic strand brought by the existentialists is juxtaposed rather than integrated with Arendt's more hopeful understanding of politics. Mrovlje at times misleadingly suggests that the problem of judgment (as Arendt understood it) was at the core of the work of these authors (or many of the others she considers in the book). It was not, and the translation of what is defining in their work into the concept of judgment as Arendt understands it, is left unthematized, as is the link and compatibility between the existentialists' philosophical framework and Arendt's political theory in general. Let me give you an example.

Oppression is a recurrent concern for Mrovlje, and something that she thinks her understanding of judgment can help undermine by incorporating a plurality of perspectives on a given situation, which is her characterization of Arendt's notion of judgment. But what oppression is, and what to do about it, varies wildly for the authors Mrovlje considers. Oppression as a social and economic matter was more of a concern for Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus than it was for Arendt. Political oppression was a concern for all, but the path out of it differed significantly for each, as their rather different stances on the war in Algeria demonstrate. Is Sartre's view of the French government in Algeria compatible with making it an 'imagined plurality' at the table? Mrovlje discusses Sartre's views on violence briefly, and refers to secondary sources to blunt some of their sharper edges (p. 65). Sartre is coopted to bolster the bite of 'judgment' against oppression, but Mrovlje sides with Arendt on how action resonates 'in the common world,' rather than 'in terms of any "in order to"' (p. 177). But from the point of view of Sartre, the FLN, and Algerian fighters against colonialism there *was* no common world, and even Camus's proposal for a Franco-Algerian federation would efface existing (oppressive?) relations of power between the colonizers and the colonized. Mrovlje defends Camus's project against Sartre's criticism, maintaining that Sartre neglected Camus's 'plural perspective' and his attempt to reveal 'opposing sides as equal members of the shared reality' (p. 169). Indeed, following Kant and Arendt, Mrovlje notes the link between aesthetic judgment and disinterestedness: it 'contains "pure disinterested delight" at the existence of a beautiful object' (p. 32). But this means that those on Algeria are not differences in the political application of a model, but in the models themselves. One (in Mrovlje's reconstruction) strives to include all views as equal, while the other identifies asymmetries of power between the oppressed and the oppressor, and the latter as someone to be ousted, killed, or prosecuted. Mrovlje sides with equanimity towards all (in Algeria as in South Africa, as apparent in chapter 6), but without clearly disavowing the more militant view, for is oppression not something that entails the identification of an

oppressor and an oppressed? And does resistance to oppression not demand a militant view, one that does not look at the matter as an impartial observer? One may also ask whether a model that relies on a disinterested outlook and the ability to recognize the perspective of all others is not too demanding in contexts of transitional justice, especially in their early phases.

There is also a subtle ambiguity, throughout the book, in the characterization of what judgment is and who ‘does it.’ As the practice that allows us to mend societies in the wake of colonialism or civil war by looking at all perspectives involved, it seems to take on the form of a collective endeavor, and I am left wondering whether this fits Arendt’s understanding. Judgment remains in Arendt the practice of an individual who is imagining and making present the plurality of others, representing them for herself, but *as an individual* who is ultimately and individually responsible for her judgment. The judgment is her own, not that of a society or a group of people. Mrovlje, on the other hand, seems to take the connection between judgment and action in concert as given. This relationship between the individual and the collective also marks an important difference between Arendt and the existentialists. Their view of the relationship between individual and society was far more tragic than it was in Arendt.

‘Action in concert’ is sometimes dramatized by the existentialists Mrovlje considers in their novels (think for example of Dr. Rieux’s team in Camus’s *The Plague*), but even in Camus it is overshadowed by the loneliness of each character. And can we really talk about ‘love of the world’ for authors whose focus was on the absurd as a world-alienating experience, or who had one of their characters proclaim: ‘hell is other people’? Literature can certainly be seen as dramatizing judgment insofar as an individual author ‘represents’ different points of view, but the judgment that materializes in good novels, insofar as it materializes at all, is the individual work of the reader, not the conclusive and representative mediation offered by the author or the characters. When discussing de Beauvoir, Mrovlje notes that ‘her narrative judging sensibility,’ ‘views political action as the lived movement towards others, and towards general human values’, (p. 77) but what are those values, and is a convergence towards them thematized by de Beauvoir? Is there not a trade-off between the tragic and this march towards general values?

Thematization of this point is really important, because it gets to the distinctive contribution of existentialism and Arendt to what Mrovlje thinks judgment can do for us. It cannot, for either Arendt or the existentialists, build a homogeneous political community. It cannot build institutions or even guarantee action in concert of a specific kind. All it can do is to animate the political *agon* starting from individuals who make the choice, for love of the world, to think representatively. Although there is a recurrent emphasis on ambiguity, perplexity, and complexity, there does seem to be some normative content in Arendt’s understanding of political judgment: it eschews ‘pregiven,’ ‘predetermined,’ and ‘prefabricated’ universal and absolute standards in favor of an ever-changing and situational

perspective. By the end of the book, however, the reader is struck by how this process seemingly cannot fail and most importantly, does not end in an impasse, but rather unfailingly produces meeting ground for the recomposition of the most radical conflicts. But again, how do we move from perplexity and tragedy, to action? How does a fragmented plurality come to act in concert? What can go wrong?

Given the very broad topic on her hands, Mrovlje has had to dive into a considerable range of sources, between the works of the prolific authors themselves, critical writings on them, the material consulted to reconstruct the history of the concept of judgment in the first chapter, and the literature on dirty hands and transitional justice. Perhaps because of this breadth, the reconstruction of complex debates is often left to strings of names and years in the Harvard citation style. At times that is, of course, inevitable, but other times this reader would have wanted to learn more from the author's research on the book's more relevant themes and the critical debates around them. Yet the contributions of this book remain valuable, both for the range of sources consulted, and for the substantive insights provided. It is a powerful cautionary tale about our drive to control and to regard plurality as a threat to be subsumed rather than a resource to cherish. Though in its constructive side it relies on an unproblematic notion of a world in common, it displays an earnestness and a commitment to building it that can inspire both students of politics and its practitioners.

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