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Serena Parekh. *Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Modernity: A Phenomenology of Human Rights.* New York: Routledge, 2008. xiv + 220 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-96108-0.

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Arendt and the Necessary Fragility of Human Rights

Serena Parekh has taken on the ambitious project of analyzing the scattered thoughts of Hannah Arendt on human rights, and she has largely succeeded. While she uncovers the ultimate fragility of human rights under the conditions of modernity, she also demonstrates the deeply held hope Arendt had in peopleâs ability to take action to make human dignity and political freedom an enduring reality.

Parekhâs analysis proceeds through engagement with topics and ideas that Arendt dealt with at different stages in her academic life. Parekh believes that the central problem here is the difficulty of finding a foundation for human rights in the modern world. Arendt defined modernity as the loss of transcendence and the rise of the scientific worldview, which creates doubt in sensory experience and contributes to the loss of a common experience of the world. Totalitarianism and its antecedent, mass society, emerged out of this feeling of not belonging to a common world.

In the first chapter, Parekh formulates âthe paradox of human rightsâ (p. 11)–when people become stateless, at the very moment their human rights become an issue, they become insignificant and irrelevant to the rest of the world. Arendt traced this problem to the avoidance of the most fundamental human right, âthe right to have rightsâ or the right to belong to a political community. Only people who belong to a state can have their rights effectively protected; those who are stateless, who are ânothing but humanâ (p. 25), have no such protection, and thus, no rights.

Following this, Parekh examines what Arendt called âthe ethos of modernityâ (p. 43), drawing largely from Arendtâs *The Human Condition* (1958). What makes a truly human life difficult in the modern world is the decline of both the private and public realms and the rise of âthe socialâ (p. 44), the celebration of human beings as both consumers and as workers, which undercuts participation in public life and makes the recognition of a person *qua* person through political action nearly impossible.[1] Given these difficulties, Parekh then looks to what makes a common world possible in Arendtâs thought,

which occurs through the activities of promise-making, *doxa* (or opinions shared and discussed), and judgment.

Parekh delves more deeply into Arendtâs thoughts on the relationship between politics and freedom in the fourth chapter. There is a fundamental tension and lack of harmony between the private and public realms, though both are necessary for a full life. People find the deepest expression of their identities and dignity in political action, because that is the realm in which human freedom finds it ultimate performance. For human rights, this points to a politics focused on solidarity among people around the world .

In the fifth chapter, Parekh examines Arendtâs understanding of human rights in relation to two camps of contemporary thinkers on the subject. She compares essentialist theories of human rights found in the work of David Little, Jack Donnelly, Amartya Sen, and Alan Gewirth and in the work of legal positivists H. L. A. Hart and Joel Feinberg, to anti-essentialist theories of Michael Ignatieff, Richard Rorty, Beth Singer, John Rawls, and Thomas Pogge. Parekh thinks that Arendt straddles a middle ground between essentialism and anti-essentialism in her focus on the lived experience of statelessness and her phenomenological engagement with intersubjective understanding.

Parekh finds a foundation for human rights in individual conscience, drawing on Arendtâs later work on morality, thinking, and judgment. Arendt understood morality primarily as a relation to oneâs own self, and conscience represents a limit on what one may do, based on what one is willing to live with internally. Conscience is not simply arbitrary preference, but is grounded in the act of judging. The process of judgment draws upon oneâs ability to consider the viewpoints of others, creating a âcommon senseâ in the act itself.

In the conclusion, Parekh draws the readerâs attention to the two main reasons why Arendtâs âright to have rightsâ is not taken seriously today. The first is political reality: no state wants to assume responsibility for the stateless. The second is ontological: the bare human life of the stateless, with no public identity and no legal status, has no compelling significance.

The only criticism I have of Parekhâs book is in her brief engagement with the work of Giorgio Agamben. Agambenâs own political project involves a similar trajectory, making sense of human rights within modernity, and it includes a deep consideration of the meaning of the Holocaust in Western history. One of his key terms, âbare life,â is frequently used by Parekh. There is a short conceptual muddle in the conclusion, where Parekh juxtaposes Arendtâs thoughts on the priority of âlifeâ in contemporary political thinking (which is discussed in the second chapter) with Agambenâs theory of âbare lifeâ in the construction of the modern sovereign state. There are certainly parallels here with the work of Arendt (Agamben himself draws upon Arendtâs work), and Parekh seems to be aware of them, but it is not something upon which she follows up.

Parekh does a good job of making sense of Arendt on human rights, but this book will challenge readers who are not familiar with Arendtâs work. Arendtâs standing in contemporary political theory is without question, but she is less well known in the fields of international relations and comparative politics, and her deeply philosophical (though rigorous) approach might turn away more empirically minded readers.

What makes Parekhâs book unique is her sustained focus on Arendtâs philosophical background in phenomenology. Phenomenology arose from the work of German philosopher Edmund Husserl, who sought to bring philosophyâs attention back to how the world presents itself to the human mind. In this vein, Arendtâs work looks to political history and to contemporaneous events as occasions for philosophical reflection. Parekh rightly emphasizes Arendtâs understanding of human rights through her experiences with totalitarianism in Europe and postwar life in the United States. Her phenomenological method allowed Arendt to avoid unnecessary attempts to ground human rights in an understanding of human nature and to seek prematurely pragmatic justifications for human rights. Human rights are already the foundation of political life in a free society, and revolutionary struggles throughout modern history have been attempts to bring them onto the political stage.

Note

[1]. The concept of âthe socialâ is examined in depth by Hanna Finichel Pitkin in *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

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