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Emergency thinking

Angela McRobbie

Lyndsey Stonebridge, *We Can Change the World: Hannah Arendt's Lessons in Love and Disobedience*, Jonathan Cape 2024

A book about Hannah Arendt's lifetime of writing could hardly be more timely, especially one like this, written by a human rights scholar, and bringing to bear a new and distinctive perspective. This is a book that interweaves aspects from the biography of Arendt - her life in exile, her travels, her friends and intellectual community - with a significant interpretative undertaking. Stonebridge knits together a number of themes in Arendt's life and work: the important cases she makes for our human plurality; for living with difference; for love as a way of being in and caring for the world; and for the power of disobedience as a force for change and for freedom. In emergency times of authoritarian government, then and now, Arendt stands for the role of the unflinching public intellectual, for the urgency of thought.

Born in Germany in 1906, Arendt's concerns right up until her death in 1975 were quite astonishingly and presciently relevant to our own today: war, conflict, violence, totalitarianism, fascism, murderous regimes, camp mentalities, human evil, and crimes against humanity.

After studying in Marburg, Heidelberg and Freiburg in the 1920s, and living for some time in Berlin, Arendt fled Nazi Germany in 1933, going to Paris, where she became an activist working with Jewish organisations to support orphans' journeys to Palestine. By 1938 she was herself stateless, and in 1940 she was interned by the French government, before escaping and spending some time in hiding in the South of France, trying to evade the Nazis; during this time she kept company with and tried to raise the spirits of Walter Benjamin, a fellow exile. Arendt eventually got the

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papers she needed to travel to New York by boat from Lisbon with her husband, in 1941; however Benjamin had already died at the border with Spain, in September 1940.

Resolutely anti-Zionist, Arendt nevertheless kept an open dialogue going with Gershom Scholem, who had tried many times but in vain to persuade his friend Walter Benjamin to get on board a ship for Palestine. When Arendt left for the US she brought with her some of Benjamin's precious manuscript, the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', which she later transcribed and saw into publication. Stonebridge strongly conveys the fullness and moral seriousness of Arendt's life after she reached the US, where she threw herself into writing, translation, editing and publishing. When I first came across the work of Benjamin, in the early 1970s, I vividly recall seeing Arendt's name as the author of the introduction to *Illuminations*, a collection of Benjamin's essays that was published in 1972.

In the US Arendt was a contemporary of Susan Sontag, and her closest friend was Mary McCarthy. She was clearly a sociable woman, loved and admired by friends, including her former boyfriends and her first as well as her second husband. She hosted many parties and loved to get tipsy, if not roaring drunk. Stonebridge notes that following the death of her second husband (a former cabaret artist and working-class radical), and a few years before the end of her own life, Arendt received serious marriage proposals from, among others, W.H. Auden. She was also an intellectual woman of her own times - never a feminist, and someone who was not going to be drawn into discussing womanly issues.

Arendt was a European intellectual moving in post-war American leftist and liberal circles. She was a stubbornly unorthodox and independent thinker, and parted ways with various radical schools of thought; her compelling account of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, which was published in instalments in *The New Yorker* magazine in 1962, saw her lose many friends and colleagues. Though a reader of Marx, she does not share a common vocabulary with the Marxist or New Left tradition. Her concerns were different: her doctorate was on St Augustine's writings on love, neighbourliness and community; her *Habilitation* (the second PhD required of German academics) was on the bohemian German Jewish writer and organiser of salon events, Rahel Varnhagen. She is best known for her magisterial *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, published in 1951, an astonishing work of scholarship which she wrote in post-war New York, and for *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, the book which brought

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together her accounts of the Eichmann trial.

The Origins of Totalitarianism is an expansive history of Nazism and Stalinism, which, in this very drawing together of these regimes, was itself a controversial undertaking. Arendt must have been completely immersed in the mountainous volume of source material upon which she crafted her web of arguments; the footnotes often take up almost half of the page. One of the most compelling reasons for the work's relevance today is that Arendt understands the concept of race as fabricated and thus as a racialisation process, developed as 'scientific racism' to pursue the major projects of colonialism and imperialism. The histories and periods traversed move from the mid-nineteenth century through to Soviet times, and Arendt dissects the external and internal dynamics of terror; the uses of propaganda; the subduing of the masses; the monstrous self-belief underlying the relentless bid for world domination; and the need to persecute, terrorise and exterminate dissident voices.

People were critical of Arendt's laconic (she called it ironic) style in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. She herself was critical of the over-emotional setting for the trial, its theatrical elements. Her account of Eichmann himself was summarised in the much-quoted phrase the 'banality of evil', which was widely circulated and repeated in the global media, to the extent that, many years after her death, it is the phrase for which she is remembered. From the vantage point of now, one can understand why Arendt wanted to be there, and to look directly at the man who exemplified Nazi crimes, and was responsible for so many deaths. But she was never going to pander to a popular impulse of demonisation or 'monsterisation'.

In fact the consternation of critics such as Scholem was based on Arendt's high-handed tone, her refusal of anything remotely sentimental. He upbraided her for not loving her own people. As Stonebridge and before her Judith Butler show, this is a remarkably important work of scholarship, where the trial allows Arendt to develop her theory of cohabitation and diaspora. She works with elements of Jewish ethics to develop her idea of the unchosenness of those with whom we share the planet and the need for plurality, for living together on this basis, and living with difference, which was exactly what the genocidal logic of someone like Eichmann could not tolerate.

The Human Condition is probably Arendt's other most important work, and it too has a remarkable relevance to our current state of political catastrophe. But here

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there is more cause for hope, in that Arendt provides something of a template for protest and for assembly - arguing that in coming together as a form of action there is the chance to make something new, to create a new 'polis'. Speaking together, marching together, creating new vocabularies through the language of the banners and placards - these are all ways of changing the world, as Stonebridge so eloquently puts it.

(As a sidenote, I have often wondered why Arendt's writing was not on any of our collective reading lists at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s, although Sartre was, alongside some of Arendt's contemporaries, including Brecht and of course Walter Benjamin. The extensive bibliographies for her own teaching courses on political philosophy at various US universities are now publicly available as online documents and well worth perusing.)

Stonebridge documents the formidable intellectual influences which drove the direction of Arendt's work. There is a remarkably stable allegiance to various figures (Kant, Karl Jaspers), the most controversial of which is her former lover Martin Heidegger, with and against whom her major contributions evolved. Despite his membership of the Nazi party, his betrayal of colleagues known to Arendt (Husserl), his lifelong refusal to fully acknowledge the scale of the crimes that comprised the Holocaust, and his unrepentant stance when he was reinstated in his university post, not to mention his overtly antisemitic wife, who for some strange reason Arendt was willing to meet with in Germany and have tea with (Arendt did note afterwards that it was not a pleasant encounter) - despite all of this, Arendt derived a lifelong intellectual energy from that love affair, insofar as it gave her, against Heidegger's principle argument, a springboard for the development of her own unique contribution to political philosophy.

The ethical gain is what the world has to learn from Arendt's work. Perhaps this is how she settled her account with Heidegger. But this allegiance surely casts a shadow. Could so bold and courageous a thinker, and a Jewish woman forced into exile from Nazi Germany, not have found an occasion to formally reject and fully abandon her half-hearted lover? Perhaps the scale of her achievement was a detournement that she could salvage from Heidegger, turning the work around to help save the world? When they met she was a young Jewish student, he her tutor, soon to become a university vice-chancellor under the Nazi regime, in which role he would send out letters to colleagues announcing the termination of

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their contracts. Was she so driven by her early desires and sexual awakening that there remained an irresistible loyalty? Or is this question on my part superficial or 'prurient' as Stonebridge infers? Arendt herself would probably have shot it down as irrelevant to the force of her arguments, and a sentimental expectation. (She didn't care what people thought about her.) We are reminded that she was a woman who did not suffer fools gladly. Arendt did pull away from Heidegger throughout the fascist period, but in the post-war years she re-established a conversation with him, meeting him for long walks and discussing the same themes; and he was even present in the audience for one of her last lectures in Germany, in 1967; and, following the death of her husband, in her own later years, she once again grew close to her former lover.

Arendt's work considered major questions that ought never to have faded from the political agenda in the post-war period: conflict and crimes against humanity; genocide; human rights; racism; and the plight of refugees and those made stateless. She wrote and taught as a political philosopher consistently interrogating history to help us understand the present. Being a historical philosopher accounted for her isolation from the mainstream of philosophy at the time. She was not really interested in academic life, and the disciplinary boundaries necessary for certain kinds of career pathways.

Perhaps the main lesson to take from Arendt's huge body of work, which Stonebridge has so carefully distilled, and so accessibly presented, is the need for vigilance towards and protest against the new authoritarian and hard-right regimes of today (from Trump to Orban, from Putin and Le Pen to Netanyahu and Meloni); and Arendt also teaches us to be alert to events during the four recent decades of neoliberalism, which have seen the dismantling of so many layers of democratic infrastructure, in the US, in west and east Europe, in India, and elsewhere. The resurgent right, the far right and the mainstream right currently pose a formidable challenge, as they wage a war of attrition against all aspects of our social institutions, playing hard and fast with them, with the apparent intention of seeing how far they can go, across so many fronts. Often the challenge is evident in a total disregard for the law, or for post-war organisations like the UN; on other occasions it manifests itself in a provocative intervention such as the recent meeting in Potsdam (Wannsee), Germany, in January 2024, organised by the far right and attended by members of AFD, where the idea of 're-migration' was mooted. In the last decade,

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and particularly during and after the Trump administration, there has been an increase in this kind of far-right brinkmanship: pushing to undo human rights law and to disavow the place of the International Court of Justice; disavowing the notion of war crimes; storming the Capitol; ignoring the Geneva Convention. And contemporary social media has created ample opportunity for fear-mongering on an unprecedented scale, offering a platform for the scapegoating of migrant people, and for the assumption that refugee populations need to be pushed back - returned to their place of origin or decanted to Rwanda (as the UK government would prefer).

Stonebridge reminds her readers that Arendt was adamantly not prescriptive. Her claim was that thinking with and through difference could open up ways for the radical re-organisation of our lives; for planetary cohabitation; and for a kind of diaspora of and for everyday life. Arendt was troubled by the idea of a Jewish state in Palestine. She wanted to provoke and make debate happen - she had a disputatious persona - but this was because she saw constant dialogue as a moral and political necessity, including as a way of keeping the legacy of the Holocaust on the agenda - though in 2024 this has spiralled out in ways that even Arendt could not have imagined.

For those looking for more extended discussions on these issues, now of such critical importance, there are resources, notably Judith Butler's remarkable book from 2012, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. Over the space of two chapters in this book, Butler engages in a close and intense interrogatory dialogue with Hannah Arendt on these topics, as well as dealing with some of the paradoxes in her work. Stonebridge's contribution is to bring this whole body of work to a wider readership. She has brought Arendtian thinking to the forefront in our own emergency times.

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How pharma co-opts the dream of scientific progress

Alena Ivanova

Nick Dearden, *Pharmanomics: How Big Pharma Destroys Global Health*, Verso 2023

For most people cocooned in the relative privilege of western societies, the story of global health is a story of remarkable progress - and it thus rarely merits the attention devoted to existential crises such as climate breakdown. This complacency is only rarely disrupted. Yet when it is, as with the experience of the global Covid-19 pandemic, the inequalities of access resulting from the commodification of health - which threatens all of us - are quickly revealed. But the issues extend way beyond Covid-19. Behind the scenes, as Nick Dearden tells us in this book, global health outcomes are stalling, and in some cases progress is being reversed. And while established political parties refuse to engage with or contest the evident corporate capture of public health by private corporations for gain, bad-faith actors and movements jump at the opportunity to fill the gaps.

Data from the WHO's World Health Statistics starkly illuminates the damage done by allowing business free reign over funding and disseminating health research: previous decreases in rates of malaria and TB are now going into reverse; there has been no new research into antibiotics; and no substantial resourcing of cures for neglected tropical diseases - to name but a few current serious causes of concern.¹ Meanwhile, falling rates of immunisation cover tell us about the successful spread of some of the dangerous narratives that are currently tapping into people's anxieties about Big Pharma. Last year Unicef warned that the perception of the importance of child immunisation has fallen in 52 out of 55 countries it studied since the start of the pandemic - and that people under the age of 35 are most likely to doubt its

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usefulness.² Younger people do not have the historic collective experience of serious health conditions being eradicated by the introduction of a vaccine. However, they are very aware of the corporatisation of healthcare: the inequality of the Covid-19 response clearly showed pharmaceutical companies in the driving seat and making vast profits. Unless the way we develop, reward and disseminate health innovations changes radically, the gap in trust is likely to grow further.

None of us are safe until we are all safe. While this is ultimately true, the story of the pandemic harrowingly told in *Pharmanomics* further demonstrates that this mantra so often repeated by well-meaning but ultimately handicapped WHO officials can, and will be, stretched in time until it is rendered meaningless. Societies under equal threat to their safety, but in possession of a large portion of the very unequally distributed resources to deal with this threat, tend to be comfortable with redefining the 'we', the 'safe' and the 'until' under the rules dictated by global capital.

Dearden's book uses what little light remains from the pandemic spotlight to launch an important and wide-reaching enquiry into the corporate capture of global health, but also into the nature of the so-called knowledge economy. Although the book relies on a solid foundation of research - and an at times overwhelming volume of facts about where research originates and how it is funded - this is a call to action rather than an academic piece of record-keeping of all that's gone wrong with the ways we reward scientific achievement. Dearden, who is director of Global Justice Now, draws on the insights on trade and global inequality he has gained from his campaigning work on access to health, and there is also a distinct campaigner's voice to the structuring of the narrative and the choice of stories told.

My own reading of *Pharmanomics* is through the lens of my experience in the People's Vaccine campaign. This was a global campaign engaged in an often exhilarating but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to bring accountability into the criminal vaccine apartheid that pharma companies engineered and governments and supranational bodies acquiesced in during the Covid pandemic. After two years I left the work, but others were more resilient in face of the disappointment and were in it for the long haul - just like the cast of characters in *Pharmanomics*.

Dearden spins an engaging if brief history of intellectual property as a value-extraction tool, and situates it within larger narratives of the financialisation of every productive aspect of our economy. The stark health inequalities perfectly illustrated by hospital wards run for profit are of course just one aspect of the reality that our

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economic order and the hegemonic dogma of liberalised economic development has brought to the global majority. The parallels with the colonial era are inescapable, and, as an activist working in multiple synergies with global movements, Dearden is well placed to tease out some of these. Where the true heart of the book as a campaign tool shines through is in its choices about the characters who populate it. Dearden uses the platform he's been given to let others tell of their struggles - a noble impulse and perhaps also a professional quirk. The book tunes into a variety of different narratives from the frontlines of the fight against the corporatisation of our health, including, among many others, the stories of artist and campaigner Nan Goldin, whistleblower Dr Nancy Olivieri, and formidable activist and politician Walden Bello. All of these offer important insights into the global conversation about public healthcare, intellectual property and profit. But there are moments when the thread that binds them into this one work seems to falter, though it subsequently picks up again. It's not until chapter five, which deals with the recolonising of the global economy, that the book begins to narrow its focus onto a potential path for remaking this deeply unequal status quo.

Dearden speaks passionately and convincingly about the emancipatory potential of scientific initiatives on the periphery that aim to plug the gaping holes in provision which Big Pharma has left in global health. Given the suffering and injustice we've been introduced to through the early parts of the book, this hopeful turn feels urgent and is gratefully received by the reader. It is, however, difficult to see how the tools that have been so effectively wielded to build this deeply unjust but highly profitable system could be laid to rest without facing a formidable fightback by corporations and their lobbyists. Unlike the fossil companies, pharmaceuticals are still perceived as knowledge creators even if perhaps overly greedy. At the same time, the small-scale public and academic facilities where the real innovators work simply do not have the resources or infrastructure to scale up and step into the role.

At heart, the positive vision described is one of an alternative system that is woven together by various semi-autonomous stakeholders around the globe, and, crucially, is woven around the failures of the highly financialised pharmaceutical industry in the global north. But for this vision to have the opportunity to flourish and thrive, it is incumbent on western governments to rethink their approach to both pharmaceuticals and health philanthropy, and to re-engage in regulation

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and collaboration on the international scene in ways that countervail the huge effort and investment by the industry in lobbyists. The book itself tells the story of multiple failures to organise global health provision along such lines. But western governments simply do not seem to have the appetite for an ambitious regulatory challenge to Big Pharma and corporate power at the scale needed to create meaningful change.

Over two billion people are due to go to the polls in 2024, but there is little evidence that the fight to wrestle global health from the monopolistic control of a handful of corporations is on the agenda in any of these contests. While Dearden has clearly presented the ethical, moral and economic arguments for making this issue central to the electoral agenda, it is perhaps his campaigner's duty to offer us the hope - rather than evidence on the ground - that can ultimately convince us that we have the power, as citizens, to push for such an agenda.

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Notes

1. *World health statistics 2023: monitoring health for the SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals*, World Health Organization, Geneva 2023, Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.
2. Unicef, *The State of the World's Children 2023*: <https://www.unicef.org/reports/state-worlds-children-2023>; see also: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/apr/24/vaccination-rates-fallen-children-england-ukhsa>.