



# Newsletter

June 2010

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## Secretary

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## Farewell Letter from the President

Dear Fellow Historians of Sociology,

Let me take this farewell message as an opportunity to reflect on some of my experiences as the President of our Research Committee over the last four years. When I took over the job from Jennifer Platt in Durban 2006 it was definite that someone would also follow me as President at the next World Congress in Gothenburg. As you all know, the newly elected President for the period 2010-14 is now Peter Baehr. Congratulations to Peter and many thanks to him for volunteering for this post. I wish Peter and the whole Executive Committee all the best for their time in office.

Looking back, I think the most outstanding activity of our Research Committee was the Interim Conference in 2008, organized by our Swedish colleagues. Thanks to Hedvig Ekerwald, Per Wisselgren, and Björn Wittrock for making our collective 'Nordic expedition' such a stimulating event. A lot of new people showed up in Umeå and the quality of their contributions was as good as one could possibly expect and wish for.

Besides the Interim Conference and the preparation of the sessions at the forthcoming World Congress the activities of the RC were more modest. I think this is probably the only shortcoming of our Research Committee. History of sociology isn't a field which is marked by continuous collaboration between researchers. In this respect it almost seems as if the history of sociology is less developed than other fields. There are several reasons which might have contributed to this situation. First, history of sociology doesn't occupy a well-defined place in our curricula; at some places it has found a home within classical sociological theory but often it seems to have been outsourced to neighboring disciplines. Second, our field of research suffers from an agenda that appears often unclear in its contours and, as a consequence of this, lacks regular and well-established cooperation. The latter follows from the sole concentration on individual sociologists as subjects of our research, something that is usually accompanied by an absence of comparative dimensions. Similar things could be said in relation to our 'unit base' of research, which is almost exclusively defined by the borders of the nation state in which we live and in which we do our research. Third, it seems to me that the majority of the members of RCHS is committed to research in our RCHS field but is, additionally, interested in at least one other field or area, too. As a consequence, leaving the field happens more often than in other sectors.

I don't have any remedy for this but at least I wanted to point out that there is a problem which we might need to address. Gothenburg is a good opportunity to exchange ideas on how to overcome some of these shortcomings.

Last but not least I would like to thank all those who have been active in the Research Committee over the last four years, in particular our outgoing secretary Andreas Hess.

Christian Fleck

## Gothenburg Announcements

### Final Programme

The final programme of the Gothenburg, including of course all our RCHS sessions, is now available on the official website ISA Congress website: <http://isa2010.aimit.se/start>

### Young scholar competition

RCHS is announcing a competition for **young scholars** (500 Euro for the best paper submitted). **Eligible are papers submitted to this year's History of Sociology sessions at Gothenburg. Authors should be in the early stages of their career**, i.e. they should be either PhD candidates or their PhD should not be older than three years (the degree should have been awarded 2007 or later).

Submission should include the **paper and a CV** and it should reach the three jury members and the RCHS secretary **no later than July 1, 2010 by email**.

The prize committee will meet at Gothenburg and **the winner of the competition will be announced during the business meeting of RCHS.**

Please send your essay and CV to the three following jury members:  
[christian.fleck@uni-graz.at](mailto:christian.fleck@uni-graz.at), [irmela.gorges@hwr-berlin.de](mailto:irmela.gorges@hwr-berlin.de), [marcel.fournier@umontreal.ca](mailto:marcel.fournier@umontreal.ca)  
and an additional copy to the acting secretary: [a.hess@ucd.ie](mailto:a.hess@ucd.ie)  
(Please note that due to administrative reasons the prize money can only be made available after September 1, 2010.)

**RCHS Business Meeting, Thursday, July 15 (17.45-19.45, see official ISA programme for location)**

For our business meeting we only have a preliminary agenda, so if you should have any additional suggestions please let the acting secretary have them asap.

Preliminary Agenda:

- (1) Items not on the agenda;
- (2) Brief report from the acting secretary;
- (3) Welcoming the newly elected President and the new RCHS Executive;
- (4) Interim conference 2012 in Dublin;
- (5) Announcement of the winner of the RCHS Young Scholars Competition
- (6) Any other business.

**RCHS Executive Dinner**

It is a tradition that past and newly elected members of the RCHS executive and other interested RCHS members join together for a dinner at the ISA world congress. *The dinner should be held after the RCHS meeting on Thursday.* No restaurant booking has been made as yet. For those interested please indicate to the acting secretary asap whether they will be able join so that we can get a realistic picture of how many people will be able to attend. Please let me also have your eventual suggestions as to the restaurant (this is obviously for those who know the Gothenburg scene).

## **Author meets Critic(s): Peter Baehr**

For the exact time and place please check RCHS's sessions in the official ISA conference agenda: <http://isa2010.aimit.se/start>

### **Hannah Arendt, Totalitarianism, and the Social Sciences** (Stanford University Press: 2010)

**Passion and Antipathy**

This book examines the nature of totalitarianism as interpreted by some of the finest minds of the twentieth century.

Russian Bolshevism and German National Socialism, personified by Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler, were responsible for not only the most devastating war in

human history; excluding Chinese and Japanese casualties, it killed around 36 million soldiers and civilians. Nazi and Bolshevik aggression also produced camps and slave labor colonies that murdered millions more. Only a minority of those marked for extermination, exile, or forced labor were determined enemies of the regimes that slaughtered them. Given the opportunity most would have kept their heads down, connived and colluded to be left alone. But totalitarian governments were the foe of tranquility. They unleashed wars, purges and show trials. They demanded that completely innocent people admit to impossible crimes. They mobilized whole populations for conquest. They assigned death by category; it was not what you did that damned you, but what you were - a Jew, a Slav, an intellectual, a kulak. Animating this culture of death were rituals and ideologies that prophesied earthly redemption: a world of brotherhood or of race purity. Onlookers were baffled. What had caused such convulsions? What did the atrocities they perpetrated imply about the elasticity of human nature and its potential for evil? Were the Bolshevik and National Socialist experiments totally new phenomena or exacerbations of earlier tyrannies? Once defeated, could similar governments rise once again?

No writer asked these questions more searchingly, or arrived at more arresting answers to them, than Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) a thinker of Jewish-German origin who, following Adolf Hitler's appointment as Chancellor, and her own brief detention by the Gestapo, fled Berlin in 1933. Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) is a classic – perhaps the classic – treatment of Bolshevism and Nazism. It was an improbable achievement. A student of

Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, the stars of German “existentialism,” Arendt was in the 1920s a young woman of intelligence, sensitivity, and academic promise, but, judging by her doctoral thesis on *Love and St. Augustine* (1929), by no means an exceptionally gifted thinker. If she possessed an identity, it was as a philosopher, continuing the tradition of German letters and cultivation. She had no firm plans for an academic career. Being a Jew meant little to her. It meant everything to the Nazi movement. Compelled to become a refugee, she watched, first from France, later from the United States, as the world was shaken by a force of unimaginable brutality which she, and others, called “totalitarianism.” Henceforth, Arendt employed all her creative powers to articulate its conditions and implications, even when dilating on the most arcane subjects – the faculty of thinking, the concept of action, the meaning of authority. Investigating totalitarianism was her ruling passion.

She was not alone in her endeavor. Many writers in America and Europe struggled to comprehend the totalitarian enigma. Quite a few she knew personally. Some remained life long friends; others she fell out with. This book makes no attempt to chart the whole of Arendt's network. It is not a biography of Arendt's life though it contains many details of her intellectual relationships. It attends only to a portion – albeit the most innovative portion – of her writings. Readers looking for an Arendt conspectus must search elsewhere. My topic is a group of Arendt's most acute social critics, men of the caliber of Raymond Aron, David Riesman, and Jules Monnerot. All, in their fashion, were impressed by Arendt's originality, by the boldness and

paradoxical quality of her arguments. But all were skeptical of her theory of totalitarianism. In turn, Arendt had strong disagreements with them on subjects that straddled politics, ethics, and the interpretation of history.

In great intellects, a ruling passion is often complemented by an abiding antipathy. Arendt loathed the social sciences in general and sociology in particular. Her second published article was a review of Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (1929) which she chastised for denying the autonomy of thought and for suggesting that philosophy's traditional focus on ontological questions was less illuminating than understanding the shifting finitude of everyday life, the alleged source of the philosopher's categories. Bearing the impress of her university education, Arendt wrote as a champion of *Existenz* philosophy, defending it against what she saw as sociology's reductionism and aspiration to replace it. The tone throughout her essay on Mannheim is restrained, the language turgid, the subject recondite. Dissent is tempered by a spirit of intellectual generosity. When Arendt confronted sociology again in the 1940s and 1950s under the wider rubric of "the social sciences," the landscape of her life and her conception of philosophy had been radically reshaped. Behind her lay the ruins of the Weimar Republic, the capitulation of her teacher, Martin Heidegger, to Nazism, the horrors of a genocidal war, and the painful experience of her own exile in France and, at least initially, in America. Her tone was now urgent, the language limpid, the subject of her reflections charged with incomparable and immediate gravity. Once more, she attacked social science analysis but this

time it was the alleged failure of such approaches to explain *totalitarianism* that was her prime concern. The earlier spirit of engagement with sociology is replaced by tempestuous root-and-branch dismissal of it. It is this period of Arendt's life with which we are centrally concerned in this book.

Arendt was one of a group of Weimar intellectuals transplanted on American soil for which the social sciences were anathema at worst, deeply suspect at best, "an abominable discipline from every point of view, educating 'social engineers'." This distinguished group of thinkers included Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and such prominent members of the Frankfurt School as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse. Arendt's relations with Horkheimer and Adorno - those "bastards" - were strained by personal repugnance, sharply contrasting political attitudes, and major philosophical differences. But she shared with them not only her Jewishness and the status of being a refugee, but also the key ordeal that brought Jewishness and immigration together: the experience of Nazism and the Shoah. It was this experience above all that led her to view sociology with growing distrust and to see the social sciences more generally as deeply compromised by the mass societies they purported to explain. Arendt insisted that sociology was parasitical on "the social", a modern sphere of life characterized by conformity rather than distinction. She argued that social scientific explanations couched in terms of structural theories of causality denied the existence of human freedom. But, most of all, Arendt believed that the social sciences had chronically misconstrued the nature of Nazi and Bolshevik regimes. In her

account, “totalitarianism” refers to a type of regime that, no longer satisfied with the limited aims of classical despotisms and dictatorships, demands continual mobilization of its subjects and never allows the society to settle down into a durable, hierarchical order. In addition, totalitarian domination rules through total terror; pursues, by means of the secret police, “objective enemies” or “enemies of the people” who are typically not subjective opponents of, or genuine threats to, the regime; offers an all-encompassing ideological framework that abridges the complexity of life in a single, axiomatic, reality-resistant postulate that allows no cognitive dissonance; and is predicated on an experience of mass superfluity attendant on the growing mobility, insecurity, and “worldlessness” of modern human beings. Arendt considered totalitarianism to be modern, unique and singular. It was not a phenomenon that had early modern roots; nor was it the logical outgrowth of a peculiar national tradition or culture, even German culture, or of the rise of secularism and godlessness. Totalitarianism was the result of an avalanche of catastrophes - World War I, the implosion of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, and a global capitalist economic crisis - that brought the victory of a movement and the consolidation of a regime that was structurally different from classical dictatorship or tyrannies. In sum, Arendt argued that totalitarianism was a cosmos so alien that it had rendered obsolete our familiar repertoire of concepts and judgments. Social science attempts to capture its essence in stock analogies and “ideal types” failed miserably to grasp its uniqueness.

Most studies of Arendt are composed by philosophers and political

theorists. By disciplinary formation, they tend to share her antagonism to the social sciences, and sociology in particular. My approach is different. A critical admirer of Arendt, trained in a tradition she distrusted, I look sympathetically (Chapter 1) at her objections to social science and show that her complaints were in many respects acute and justified. Yet this book does more. Avoiding broad brush disciplinary endorsements or dismissals, it reconstructs the theoretical and political stakes of Arendt’s encounters with, or rebuttals by, men like David Riesman, author of *The Lonely Crowd*, with whom Arendt corresponded in the 1940s about the limits of totalitarianism (Chapter 2); Raymond Aron, who argued that much of totalitarianism could be explained as an amplification of revolutionary ideology and violence (Chapter 3); and Jules Monnerot, with whom she sparred during the 1950s, in the pages of *Confluence*, a journal edited by Henry Kissinger, about the nature of “political religion” (Chapter 4). Along the way, we greet other writers whom Arendt either reproached or failed to convince, including Theodore Abel, Hans Gerth, Alex Inkeles, Talcott Parsons and Philip Rieff. It may appear odd to some readers that Daniel Bell plays only a cameo role in this book. To be sure, Bell was the foremost sociologist among her friends and a brilliant social thinker in his own right. But his critical engagement with her was meager. He was unhappy about “mass society” theory, and alluded to her in that connection. But Arendt appears in a list of five “varied uses” of mass society that, Bell cogently argues, fail to reflect the “complex, richly striated social relations of the real world.” A similar treatment graces his comments on totalitarianism in which, once more,

Arendt's distinctive arguments are absorbed into a more general catalogue of criticism. Bell's assessment of Arendt specifically is hence muted and cursory. That cannot be said of Riesman, Monnerot and Aron. There we see dissonance that is intensive and productive; we see great minds talking back to Arendt in a nuanced and elaborated form. Her critique is itself criticized; her refutations are contested; her alternatives disputed. Sociological explanation emerges as far more angular and robust than her categorical denunciations suggest.

If the first objective of this book is to retrieve debates that have been largely forgotten, the second objective is substantive: to distil from these disputes a series of issues that continue to tax the modern mind. Notably, to say that the social sciences were intrinsically unable to grasp unprecedented phenomena begs the question of what "unprecedented" actually means. How does one recognize things that are utterly strange? Arendt gives us little to go on so we need to develop answers of our own. This book was written in the shadow of the West's struggle with radical Islamism. Giles Keppel, an informed and honest modern commentator on Islam, remarks that "naming the adversary [has] created the illusion of having identified it," short-circuiting "the search for operational concepts that could assimilate a complex reality and, in the process, restructure existing cognitive categories." What, then, is the alternative? How might we more adequately grasp this "complex reality"? That is a quintessentially Arendtian question and I give my own response to it in the final chapter. Or take Arendt's blistering attack on the concept of "political" or "secular" religion. Arendt believed that describing National

Socialism or Bolshevism as religions, secular or otherwise, was a travesty when it was not a heresy. Can we today – faced with new religious radicalism - extract from her indictment, and Monnerot's rejoinder, a less polarized perspective on the relationships between religion and totalitarian politics? I show that we can.

### **The Title of this Book and its Scope**

Why does the title of this book refer to the social sciences and not simply to sociology? In the first place, Arendt typically invoked the latter when she sought more generally to excoriate the former. She saw sociology as the most egregious example of a modern intellectual trend that concatenated structural history, empiricist political science, and psychology. Writing before the ascendancy of rational choice theory, she believed economics to be a rather provincial discipline dealing with a rather basic activity, the satisfaction of material needs. This "initial science" had been extended, or rather eclipsed, by "the all-comprehensive pretension of the social sciences which, as 'behavioral sciences,' aim to reduce man as a whole, in all his activity, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal." She continued:

If economics is the science of society in its early stages, when it could impose its rules of behavior only on sections of the population and on parts of their activities, the rise of the 'behavioural sciences' indicates clearly the final stage of this development, when mass society has devoured all strata of the nation and 'social behavior' has become the standard for all regions of life.

Sociology, the putative science of the social founded by Marx more than Comte was symptomatic of this broader decadence, but it did not work alone. Positivist political science and, in particular, psychology were its dehumanizing allies and, in consequence, additional targets of her scorn.

A second reason why this book, notwithstanding its sociological bias, summons the social sciences more generally is because Arendt's interlocutors had complex intellectual identities. David Riesman, for instance, was originally a student of law. He later wrote as a social commentator, or culture critic, rather than as a specialized sociologist. Raymond Aron – who like Karl Mannheim was originally trained as a philosopher – was as much a political writer and a theorist of international relations as he was a sociologist. Jules Monnerot mixed sociology and psychology.

We should also appreciate that Arendt's assault on social science reasoning was part of a much larger appraisal of the Western intellectual tradition. Originally enamored by classical philosophy, Arendt was increasingly struck by its limitations. From Parmenides and Plato, through to Spinoza and Heidegger, she spied an entrenched prejudice against Man as a terrestrial and transitory being, and a denial of the dignity of human affairs. "The tradition," as she summarily called it, had repeatedly denigrated the realm of action while elevating the contemplative spirit. It craved peace and tranquility, distrusted the body and its passions, and oscillated between utopia and despair. Politics, from this standpoint, was secondary to the life of the mind, the *bios theōrētikos*; worse, the confounded noise of politics - its long drawn-out and

inconclusive discussions, its haphazardness, its entrapment in sense perceptions, and hence its failure to conform rigorously to a template of the Good or the Rational – was essentially demeaning. More elevated was the soul, the quest for ultimate, disembodied Truth, and for refuge in heaven.

Even those who later, like Karl Marx, believed that they had transcended philosophy, recapitulated much of its intolerance towards politics. Marx, after all, wished ardently for the dissolution of the state and identified politics with class domination. The Marxist notion that violence is the midwife of history justified the use of force to speed up the historical process, to aid in the "making" of history against defunct classes. But, for Arendt, the idea that history can be "made" was chilling; it implied that human beings were disposable objects of nature, a brute mass to be designed and re-created by a master fabricator. It also suggested that the theorist, like the craftsman, knows the end of the process he is manufacturing. But, short of apocalypse, history has no end. We cannot foretell or control humanity's future any more than we can foretell or control our own. We can only act in a web of relationships that is both open ended and indeterminate. Marxism lent itself to the totalitarian project "because of its perversion, or misunderstanding of political action as the making of history." A different kind of book to the one I have written might examine Arendt's evaluation of Western thought as a whole. My purpose here is more limited: to examine her estimation of twentieth century social science and her engagement with some of its most brilliant exemplars.

*Announcement*

## New Ashgate Series – Call for Proposals Public Intellectuals and the Sociology of Knowledge

Series Editors: Andreas Hess, University College Dublin  
and Neil McLaughlin, McMaster University, Canada

[www.ashgate.com/sociology](http://www.ashgate.com/sociology)

The sociology of knowledge has a long and distinctive history. Its function has always been to try to bridge the aspirations of the discursive and institutional founding fathers of sociology and the modern attempts to define the discipline through the study of the emergence, role and social function of ideas. However, since Mannheim first outlined his program in the 1920s, the sociology of knowledge has undergone many changes. The field has become extremely differentiated and some of its best practitioners now sail under different flags and discuss their work under different headings. This new series charts the progress that has been made in recent times – despite the different labels. Be it intellectual history Cambridge-style, the new sociology of ideas which is now gaining strength in North America, or the more European cultural analysis which is associated with the name of Bourdieu, this series aims at being inclusive while simultaneously striving for sociological insight and excellence. All too often modern attempts in the sociology of knowledge, broadly conceived, have only looked at form while downplaying or disregarding content and substance of argument or meaning. This series will help to rectify this.

If you have a proposal that will be relevant to this series, please email:

**Andreas Hess**, series editor: [a.hess@ucd.ie](mailto:a.hess@ucd.ie)

**Neil McLaughlin**, series editor: [nmclaugh@mcmaster.ca](mailto:nmclaugh@mcmaster.ca)

or **Claire Jarvis**, commissioning editor: [cjarvis@ashgatepublishing.com](mailto:cjarvis@ashgatepublishing.com)

### First volume in the series

#### Radicalism in French Culture

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Niilo Kauppi, University of Strasbourg, France

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This ground-breaking book furthers the internal sociological analysis of ideas and styles of thought by showing that the defining but largely neglected feature of what has become 'French theory' is a collective mind and style, with an explosive but fragile mixture of scientific and political radicalism. This will be a key text for social theorists and those interested in popular media culture within France.

November 2010 c. 160 pages

Hardback 978-1-4094-0783-6 c. £50.00

## RCHS Subscription

The basic RCHS subscription is US\$10 for one year, or \$30 for 4 years. For students, however, it is \$5 or \$15. This reduced rate also applies to others from non-OECD countries who can't afford to pay the full rate. If unable to arrange even the reduced rate, please write to the Secretary to explain the circumstances and ask for free membership. RCHS is a Research Committee of ISA, so RCHS members are expected to be ISA members. The ISA membership registration form is available on <http://www.ucm.es/info/isa/formisa.htm>. There is also now a new facility for paying directly with credit card to the central ISA; further details are available from the ISA website.

If you are not an ISA member you should pay your membership fees directly into the new RCHS bank account (see details below) and by additionally notifying the secretary via e-mail: [a.hess@ucd.ie](mailto:a.hess@ucd.ie) or via post: Dr. Andreas Hess, School of Sociology, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland. Please do NOT send cheques since extra charges apply.

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Membership in the RCHS is open to anyone interested in the field. You become a member as soon as your application form and money have been received by the secretary

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