

Philosophical History in Hannah Arendt's Political Thought

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The Author

Waseem Yaqoob received his BA and MPhil from the University of Cambridge. He submitted a PhD thesis entitled 'History and Judgment in the Political Thought of Hannah Arendt, 1951-1963' in 2013, and is now working on a project reinterpreting aspects of twentieth-century German political thought. Currently a DAAD Visiting Scholar at Humboldt University, Berlin, he will take up a Research Fellowship in Politics at Pembroke College, Cambridge in October 2014. He has two articles forthcoming in *Modern Intellectual History* and *Journal of European Studies*.

The Paper

Hannah Arendt has frequently been understood either as an abstract thinker who attempted to deconstruct putative philosophical and political tradition, or as a theorist who naïvely appealed to unmediated political experience. Reconsidering her as engaged in a form of philosophical history illuminates aspects of her political thought and intellectual milieu obscured by these characterisations. To this end, this paper contextualises the reading of the history of science and technology she articulated in her major work *The Human Condition* (1957). It shows that this reading, while driven by her theory of totalitarianism, was also part of a historicist account of thought and consciousness directed against theories of modernisation and scientific approaches to politics she viewed as prevalent at the time.

More broadly, this paper suggests that Arendt used historical narrative as part of a pedagogical endeavour to emphasise human agency in history, while also accounting for large-scale devoluntarising processes she considered formative for political modernity. The combination of these two aspects in her conception of history has often puzzled commentators. By reconstructing her trajectory during the 1950s leading up to and beyond *The Human Condition*, this paper shows that she did not straightforwardly argue for the present-oriented use of history, nor for a proto-constructivist account of historical truth. Contrary to anti-foundationalist interpretations of her thought by

political theorists, Arendt was engaged in a modernist endeavour to connect history, theory and philosophical anthropology. Far from being disconnected from the preoccupations of her political theory - speech, collective action, the sustenance of public space - this endeavour was central to her conception of the history and future prospects of political agency. Understanding Arendt's thought in this manner helps reposition her in the intellectual history of mid twentieth-century European émigré thought as a philosophical historian as much as a political philosopher.