

Hannah Arendt and Our Times

The written speech by Dr. Reza Gholami on December 3, 2024, at the House of Iranian Wisdom in Vienna, Austria

Introduction: The Importance of Hannah Arendt's Ideas in Modern Political Thought

Hannah Arendt is one of the most prominent thinkers of the 20th century whose ideas have profoundly shaped our understanding of politics, power, freedom, and totalitarianism. Her works, including *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *The Human Condition*, go beyond merely analyzing historical events. They represent an effort to rethink the foundations of politics and collective human life. Arendt, with her critical yet original perspective, dissected the crises of modernity and explored the collapse of values and institutions essential for preserving human freedom and dignity.

What sets Arendt apart from other political philosophers is her focus on human experience in confronting modern phenomena. She believed that totalitarianism, as an unprecedented phenomenon in human history, not only posed a threat to democracy but also endangered thought and human freedom itself. Drawing on her personal experiences of statelessness, exile, and living in a world dominated by totalitarian ideologies, she developed a deep understanding of the dangers inherent in populist and totalitarian ideologies.

On the occasion of her anniversary, we aim to revisit her ideas and briefly demonstrate how her precise analysis of totalitarianism and the role of ideology in politics provides us with the intellectual tools needed to comprehend and confront contemporary crises.

The key questions addressed in this written discussion are:

1. Why is Hannah Arendt's thought important today?
2. What similarities exist between Arendt's world and our contemporary era?

3. What is her central idea that holds the most relevance today?
4. If artificial intelligence is seen as the major philosophical-political challenge of the future, how might Arendt have approached it?
5. Can Arendt's concept of the "animal laborans" be applied to the consequences of artificial intelligence?

In the following sections, we will explore answers to these questions in detail.

Part 1: The Relevance of Arendt's Ideas for Our Time

Arendt's thought has gained renewed significance in the contemporary world amidst the resurgence of populism, extreme nationalism, and crises of democracy. She urges us to reconsider the meaning of freedom, civic responsibility, and the dangers of unchecked concentration of power.

Arendt believed that politics was not merely a struggle for power but a space for dialogue, collective action, and the creation of a shared world. In her view, whenever this space is destroyed by totalitarianism or populism, human freedom and dignity are endangered. Today, in a world witnessing the resurgence of far-right movements, populism, and systemic violence, Arendt's ideas remain both inspiring and cautionary.

The following reasons highlight why her ideas are more relevant now than ever:

1. The Re-Emergence of Totalitarianism and Authoritarianism

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt explains how societies facing economic, political, or identity crises tend to gravitate toward authoritarian regimes. The rise of populism, authoritarianism, and the weakening of democratic institutions in recent decades underscores the enduring relevance of her analyses.

2. The Loss of Truth in the Age of Post-Truth Politics

In her essay *Lying in Politics*, Arendt warns that the erosion of truth and the spread of misinformation threaten the foundations of healthy politics. In today's world, marked by phenomena such as fake news, information manipulation, and a crisis of trust in media, Arendt's ideas appear more pertinent than ever.

3. The Crisis of Migration and Identity

As a stateless refugee herself, Arendt explored the concept of the “right to have rights” in her works. This idea remains profoundly relevant in a world grappling with crises of migration, displacement, and rootlessness.

Part 2: The Parallels Between Arendt’s World and the Present

1. Political and Social Crises

Hannah Arendt lived in an era when fascism, Nazism, and Stalinism had become global crises. These movements emerged from economic, social, and political upheavals. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt provided a profound analysis of these conditions. Similarly, today’s world is witnessing economic inequality, migration crises, and environmental threats that destabilize societies. This situation bears a striking resemblance to Arendt’s lived experience.

2. Distrust in Institutions

Arendt highlighted the failure of modern institutions in preventing human catastrophes such as the Holocaust. Today, widespread distrust in democratic institutions, the media, and international structures has created fertile ground for the rise of extremist and populist movements.

3. The Phenomenon of Rootlessness

Arendt saw rootlessness as a defining feature of the crises of modernity. In today’s world, large-scale migration, globalization, and the expansion of digital technologies have further separated individuals from traditional identities. This rootlessness has made extremist and populist ideologies more appealing.

4. Religious Tyranny and the Banality of Evil

Although Hannah Arendt did not specifically address religious tyranny, her views on totalitarianism and the role of ideology in suppressing human freedom offer valuable insights for analyzing this phenomenon. One of her famous quotes encapsulates this concept:

“Evil, when it takes root, no longer requires wicked people; ordinary individuals who fail to think are sufficient.”

This statement, rooted in Arendt’s concept of the banality of evil, illustrates how absolutist ideologies—including distorted religious ideologies—can turn into tools of oppression when controlled by corrupt or power-hungry individuals.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt also wrote:

“Ideologies dispense with truth and claim to provide a complete explanation for everything.”

This perspective underscores how distorted religious ideologies can give rise to tyranny by monopolizing truth and challenging free, inquisitive, and critical thinking.

5. The Rise of Populism and the Far Right

In Europe, far-right parties focusing on nationalism, anti-immigration policies, and opposition to the European Union have gained significant power. Countries like Italy, Hungary, France, and Sweden have witnessed the rise of these movements. Leaders of these parties exploit public fears about migration, economic challenges, and national identity, offering extreme solutions. This trend bears notable similarities to the fascist movements of the 1930s and 1940s.

Trump: The Embodiment of Populism

The re-election of Donald Trump, as a symbol of global populism, reflects the enduring influence of this trend in contemporary politics. Trump’s use of simple language, nationalist slogans, and his “America First” policy have channeled widespread dissatisfaction, drawing substantial support from far-right groups. His emphasis on strengthening borders, opposing immigration, and disregarding international institutions reveals parallels with fascist ideologies.

Fascist Traits in Today’s Far Right

The far-right movements of today exhibit traits that Arendt identified as hallmarks of totalitarian regimes. These include:

- **Targeting a Common Enemy:** Immigrants, minorities, or the media are often portrayed as the primary threat.
- **National or Racial Supremacy:** Emphasis on national or cultural identity against “others.”
- **Fear and Crisis as Tools:** Far-right leaders amplify real or imagined threats to persuade people to support extreme policies.

The Genocide by Israel and the Holocaust Paradox

If Hannah Arendt were alive today, she would likely be a sharp critic of the Israeli government’s actions in Palestinian territories. As a Jewish intellectual and a survivor of displacement after the Holocaust, Arendt, especially in Eichmann in Jerusalem, criticized the misuse of Holocaust memory to justify unethical policies.

The Israeli regime, which initially gained legitimacy by invoking the suffering of Holocaust victims, is now accused of actions that many view as genocide and modern apartheid. Policies such as illegal settlements, the blockade of Gaza, and military attacks on Palestinian civilians—including over 35,000 women and children—can be analyzed as part of a neo-colonial and racist project.

With her critical perspective on totalitarianism, Arendt would likely classify these actions as examples of modern totalitarianism. She might argue that, under the pretext of national security and Jewish identity, the Israeli government violates fundamental Palestinian rights, creating an apartheid system that segregates people based on religion and ethnicity.

Totalitarianism and Modern Apartheid

The Israeli regime, backed by a vast propaganda machine and global powers, continues and escalates its violence against Palestinians. This situation, especially with the complicity or silence of some nations, mirrors the forms of totalitarianism Arendt analyzed:

- **Ideological Frameworks Justifying Violence:** Israel legitimizes systemic violence against Palestinians in the name of protecting “Jewish identity” and combating terrorism.

- **The Erasure of the Other:** Palestinians, as a nation and identity, are either denied or reduced to second-class citizens in official Israeli discourse.
- **Using Fear and Crisis:** The Israeli regime consistently emphasizes security threats—real or exaggerated—to justify internal repression and military aggression.

Arendt, who despised ideologies and regimes that reduced humans to mere instruments, would likely view this system as an example of modern totalitarianism and genocide. She might warn that leveraging past victimhood to justify current oppression and violence is morally untenable. The victim of yesterday must not become the oppressor of today.

Western Double Standards on Israel's Genocide in Gaza: An Analysis Through Arendt's Lens

Hannah Arendt's work, deeply engaged with concepts such as power, violence, totalitarianism, and moral responsibility, provides powerful intellectual tools to analyze the behavior of global powers. Her insights are especially relevant in scrutinizing the West's double standards on human rights regarding Israel's genocide in Gaza. These double standards undermine the universal values of human dignity and rights that Arendt so passionately defended.

Human Rights as a Tool of Power Politics

One of Hannah Arendt's implicit critiques of the modern world order, especially after World War II, is that human rights, instead of being treated as universal and independent values, are often used as tools in the service of power politics. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt points out that human rights, without political support, are nothing more than abstract ideals. She uses the example of refugees and stateless people to show how global powers only pay attention to human rights when their political or economic interests are at stake.

The Double Standards of the West and the Decline of Moral Responsibility

In her analysis of the crimes of totalitarianism, Arendt highlighted the global indifference to the fate of victims as a symptom of the collapse of moral and

political responsibility among major powers. In the case of Gaza, the double standards of the West are clearly evident: Western powers, which quickly condemn human rights violations in countries like Iran, China, or Russia, remain silent or justify the crimes committed by Israel using political arguments.

Arendt would likely view this approach as reflective of instrumental ethics, where the defense of human rights becomes meaningful only when it aligns with geopolitical interests. She might also call this contradiction a form of collective irresponsibility, where major powers, instead of accepting accountability, reduce acts of violence to “security necessities” or “legitimate defense.”

Human Rights in Crisis

Within the framework of Arendt’s ideas, the genocide in Gaza is not only a crime against the Palestinian people but also a sign of a deep crisis in the modern values of human rights. She would probably stress that Israel’s justification of violence in the name of security or combating terrorism represents a regression into totalitarianism that severely threatens human freedom and dignity.

The West’s Historical Responsibility to Preserve the Legacy of Human Rights and the Damage of Double Standards

The West, particularly after World War II, has positioned itself as a leader in promoting human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which grew from the ideals of the French Revolution and was finally formalized as a charter by the United Nations in 1948, serves as a foundational document for defining global human rights standards. This declaration emphasizes the natural and inalienable rights of every individual, including the right to life, freedom, and security. However, over the decades, the West’s double standards—often prioritizing geopolitical and economic interests over humanitarian principles—pose a serious threat to preserving and advancing this legacy.

After World War II, particularly with the establishment of international institutions such as the United Nations and international courts, the West assumed the role of a guardian of human rights. This historical responsibility arose from the bitter experiences of world wars, the Holocaust, and various forms of tyranny, which led to the elevation of global ideals of human rights. Principles such as freedom of

speech, access to education, minority rights, and social rights became widely embedded in Western policies and were used as benchmarks for evaluating other nations.

In this context, Western governments, especially the United States and European countries, played a crucial role in introducing and promoting human rights. They frequently employed tools such as sanctions, diplomacy, and even military interventions to defend human rights in various parts of the world. While these actions were sometimes driven by specific political goals, the principles underlying them were largely accepted by the international community as global standards.

The Damage of Double Standards to the Legacy of Human Rights

However, the West's double standards—particularly when addressing human rights violations by its political, economic, or military allies—have significantly undermined the human rights legacy. This selective approach, where human rights are emphasized or ignored depending on political and economic considerations, has fostered global mistrust toward the West's commitment to these principles.

Arendt, who consistently emphasized the importance of individual and collective responsibility in politics, would likely see this trend as a form of forgetting moral obligations. She would recognize the danger of turning human rights into mere tools of power, threatening fundamental human and ethical values. For Arendt, human rights must not serve the narrow interests of powerful states but should be upheld as a global responsibility, independent of political or economic considerations.

The Need to Return to Universal Principles of Human Rights

What is urgently needed today is a return to ethical principles and collective responsibility that underpin human rights. The West must abandon its double standards if it is to truly defend these rights. To preserve the legacy of human rights, the West must move away from selective and opportunistic policies and respond to every human rights violation, regardless of political or economic interests.

If the West remains faithful to its historical responsibility to protect human rights and abandons its double standards, it can not only play an effective role in ensuring global justice but also make a significant contribution to the civic advancement of humanity.

Conclusion: Lessons from Hannah Arendt's Warnings

In conclusion, Hannah Arendt's works call us to a deeper understanding of human crises and the consequences of totalitarian ideologies. From the rise of populism and the far-right to the genocide by Israel, the modern world reflects many of the warnings she issued about the dangers of ignoring human values and rights. Arendt, who herself experienced rootlessness and homelessness, would likely see Israel's genocide as the ultimate manifestation of modern immorality and the collapse of human values.

By comparing Hannah Arendt's world and our own times, it becomes clear that many of today's crises echo those of her era. The rise of populism, the far-right, and fascist tendencies in contemporary politics underscores the relevance of her thought in analyzing political and social crises. She warns us of how mistrust in institutions and identity crises can set the stage for history to repeat itself.

Section Three: Arendt's Central Ideas for Our Time

Many of Hannah Arendt's ideas remain highly relevant for analyzing and understanding contemporary political and social crises. Her works, particularly in the realms of human rights, democracy, and individual responsibility, continue to serve as guiding lights for modern societies. In this section, we will explore three key principles of Arendt's thought that are not only essential for her era but also hold significant relevance for our time.

1. "The Right to Have Rights"

One of the most important concepts in Arendt's philosophy is the right to have rights. She argues that before anything else, individuals must possess the fundamental right to have rights—a right that should not depend on nationality or ethnicity. Arendt views this right not merely as a set of citizenship privileges but as a foundational principle recognizing individuals as free and equal human beings.

This idea remains critically important in today's world, where crises such as migration, displacement, and homelessness have left millions of people without basic security. Governments often refuse to grant citizenship or legal status to these individuals for political or economic reasons, leaving them in a state of legal limbo. Arendt firmly emphasized that this right, transcending national and ethnic boundaries, must be guaranteed for all human beings. In a world where many are still deprived of even the most basic human rights, this principle serves as a fundamental guide in the pursuit of global justice.

2. Critical Thinking and Individual Responsibility

In her concept of the banality of evil, Arendt highlights how many of history's greatest atrocities were not committed by extraordinary or insane individuals but by ordinary people blindly following ideologies or orders from authority figures. This idea is explored in her famous works *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where she analyzes the trial of Adolf Eichmann, a Nazi official. Arendt reveals how unquestioning obedience to authority can make individuals complicit in evil acts.

This concept is still highly relevant in our era, which faces numerous moral and political crises. Many contemporary injustices—wars, oppression, and human rights violations—are often carried out under the guise of political ideologies or orders from leaders. Arendt's work urges individuals to think critically and take personal responsibility for their actions, especially when confronted with power. She invites us to think in the face of authority and to accept our individual responsibility for the events that shape the world.

3. The Importance of the Public Sphere

Arendt strongly emphasized the significance of the public sphere for democracy and political participation. She argued that healthy politics requires a free and open space where individuals can express opinions, engage in dialogue, and collectively make decisions. For Arendt, the public sphere is not just a venue for expressing ideas but a space where individuals can coexist as free and equal beings who recognize one another's rights.

However, in today's world, the public sphere is increasingly under pressure. Social media, especially in Western societies, often serves to amplify polarization and deepen divisions rather than fostering constructive dialogue. Moreover, in many societies, politics has been reduced to a struggle for power rather than a focus on public interests and dialogue. Arendt reminds us that true democracy is only possible when the public sphere is preserved as a space for dialogue, exchange of ideas, and the formation of shared agreements.

In an era where representative democracies are heavily influenced by ideologies and partisanship, and where politics often serves narrow interests, rebuilding the public sphere and strengthening open and responsible discussions can be seen as a path to revitalizing democracy and addressing political and social crises. Arendt reminds us that politics should not be reduced to power games; it must be a space where individual and collective rights are respected, and everyone has the opportunity to participate.

Arendt's ideas, forged in response to the bitter experiences of World War II, fascism, and totalitarianism, remain highly relevant for analyzing contemporary issues. Concepts such as the right to have rights, critical thinking, and the importance of the public sphere offer valuable solutions for addressing today's global crises. In the face of ongoing human rights, political, and social challenges, returning to these principles can help rebuild democracy and justice while preventing a descent into authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

Section Four: Arendt's Possible Reaction to Artificial Intelligence

Hannah Arendt would likely approach the issue of artificial intelligence (AI) through her unique philosophical framework:

1. A Challenge to the Human Condition

In her work *The Human Condition*, Arendt identifies three fundamental human activities:

- Labor: Activities necessary for survival.
- Work: Creating objects and technology.

- Action: Human interaction and political engagement.

AI has the potential to transform these dimensions:

- Labor: Automation replaces many jobs, fundamentally altering humanity's role in production.
- Work: Machine creativity displaces humans from the position of world-builders.
- Action: AI influences the public sphere, restricting free interaction and dialogue.

2. Critical and Ethical Thinking

Arendt emphasized independent thinking. She would likely warn against the impact of AI on diminishing critical thinking and moral responsibility. The risk lies in humans delegating decision-making to algorithms, thus shirking their ethical duties.

3. The Crisis of Truth and Disinformation

Arendt believed that truth is the cornerstone of healthy politics. She would probably see the use of AI in generating disinformation and manipulating public opinion as a severe threat to democratic politics.

4. Connections to Totalitarianism

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt explains how surveillance technologies can become tools of authoritarian control. With its advanced capabilities, AI could become a dangerous instrument in the hands of totalitarian governments or multinational corporations with exploitative and dehumanizing agendas.

The Concept of the “Animal Laborans” Versus AI

What Is the Animal Laborans?

Arendt uses this term to describe a dimension of human life focused solely on survival and biological needs. In contrast, she values the Homo Faber (the world-builder) and political action, which give life meaning and value.

Adapting to AI:

1. [Elimination of Human Roles in Basic Labor](#)

AI automates many essential tasks. Arendt might ask: Does this transformation free humanity or reduce people to passive consumers?

2. [Reinforcement of the Animal Laborans](#)

Arendt worried that modern societies turn humans into consumption-driven beings. AI, by creating new needs and facilitating consumption, may accelerate this trend.

3. [Loss of Creativity and Meaning](#)

If AI replaces humans in creating technology and ideas, Arendt might question whether humanity retains its role as the builder of the world.

As a Conclusion, Hannah Arendt's philosophy, with its emphasis on critical thinking, the importance of the public sphere, and individual responsibility, provides valuable tools for analyzing modern issues, including AI. If Arendt were alive today, she would likely call for a reevaluation of humanity's role in the technological era, urging us not to allow machines to replace human thought, creativity, and action.

As is evident and emphasized throughout this written lecture, Hannah Arendt's ideas remain highly applicable for describing, analyzing, and critiquing contemporary events. However, it is crucial to ensure that her thoughts are neither distorted nor misinterpreted. By staying faithful to her fundamental principles, we can adopt her perspective to better understand the social and political phenomena of the modern world.

[Thank you for your attention.](#)