Arendt and America. By Richard H. King. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 412p.
doi:10.1017/S1537592716002188

— Roy T. Tsao, *Brooklyn College, CUNY*

Richard H. King's *Arendt and America* is a big book, the most ambitious and comprehensive study of Arendt to appear in some time. Its stated purpose is twofold: to examine "the impact of the New World on [Arendt's] thought," and to explore the "impact of Arendt's thought

on American thought and culture" (p. 21). King pursues both aims simultaneously, following the arc of Arendt's career from her emigration to the United States in 1941 (at the age of thirty-five) to her death in 1975.

Unlike many other well-known émigré authors of her generation, Arendt came to America with but few publications or academic credentials to her name. Her first major book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, was written after she had settled in this country, and published in the year she obtained U.S. citizenship, 1951. King makes effective use of little-studied writings from that epoch in her life to show that her basic attitudes toward American society and politics had already crystallized by that time.

King finds in those attitudes a duality strongly reminiscent of Tocqueville, whom he deems Arendt's chief predecessor and guide in this matter. On the one hand, the absence of European-style class barriers and unprecedented economic prosperity gave the United States an increasingly homogeneous, conformist mass society. On the other hand, robust traditions of republican government made for a liberal constitutional order more vital and enduring than anything known to the nation-states of (continental) Europe. King makes the intriguing suggestion that Arendt's kinship with Tocqueville extended to her self-understanding as a thinker and writer, insofar as she took it upon herself to educate Europeans about America's distinctive political heritage.

Arendt and America provides a wealth of information concerning the milieu in which Arendt wrote, and a useful survey of her writings' critical reception. For this reason alone, it deserves to become a standard reference for scholars in the field. By drawing attention to Arendt's American context, the book offers a welcome corrective to the disproportionate emphasis some interpreters give to her debts to her teachers Heidegger and Jaspers. Yet readers who seek fresh traction on the finer points of Arendt's thought, or fresh illumination into its obscurities, are likely to find King a frustrating guide.

King is an intellectual historian, not a political theorist. That difference might not mean much, but King is an intellectual historian of a certain sort, to judge from this book. More often than not, his chief concern is to locate Arendt in the known intellectual topography of the era, as defined by the interests and opinions of prominent contemporaries. When King can't locate her on one map, he'll try another (so long as it's certifiably American). When he finds her on none, he tends to lose interest.

King writes at length on Arendt's 1959 essay on school desegregation, "Reflections on Little Rock." Much of what he has to say consists in endorsing the strictures laid upon that essay by previous critics, and deploring Arendt's insufficiencies relative to the era's most progressive thinkers on American race-relations. Of her 1970 essays on "On Violence" and "Civil Disobedience," he has less to say than one might have expected, once he's through with the topic of their author's failure to stay abreast of the New Left. He's unable to muster much interest at all in her long essay on U.S. involvement in Vietnam, "Lying in Politics" (1971), which he gives just a page's worth of perfunctory summary.

King is more enthusiastic about *On Revolution* (1963). He seizes on Arendt's praise of the American Founders' success in establishing a viable constitutional order, and concludes that "her political thought was . . . anchored in the work of the Framers" (p. 271). (By "Framers," King appears to mean the Founders generally.) Here, too, King is concerned less with getting to the bottom of Arendt's thinking than with fixing its position in relation to better-charted currents of American thought. As King sees it, *On Revolution* is significant mainly for having broken with a then-prevailing scholarly consensus about the American Founding, in a manner that anticipated a later wave of scholarship: "Arendt's major historiographical claim in *On Revolution*," he declares, is "that the origins of the American system were republican (civic humanist) rather than liberal" (p. 23).

King is so intent on making *On Revolution* out to be a recovery of American "republicanism" that he seems not to notice that she had other things on her mind in writing the book. King finds it noteworthy that the term "republicanism" occurs only once in the pages of Louis Hartz's 1955 classic, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, a book that King takes to exemplify the then-dominant "liberal" reading of American history (p. 230). I'm sorry to have to point out that this is also the number of times that the term appears in *On Revolution*.

King is determined to see *On Revolution* as a precursor to the now-familiar "republican turn" in the historiography of the American Founding (p. 220). He finds Arendt referring to Machiavelli and to classical Rome, and so surmises that her interest in the "civic humanist" influences on the Founders must be much the same as J.G.A. Pocock's in *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975). This won't do. Pocock sought to trace the after-life of Florentine republican thought in the Anglo-American world of the seventeenth- and eighteenth centuries. Arendt had an altogether different agenda. It was her peculiar, persistent conviction that the "men of revolution" were misled and ill-served by their prior European antecedents, whether Machiavelli's or Cicero's. Much as she claimed to admire the Founders' achievement, she tended to regard their theorizing as the stuff of hackneyed irrelevancies, utterly inadequate to what she judged genuine and important in their experience of revolution. A judgment like that is hardly intelligible except from the vantage of Arendt's own theoretical enterprise. King's procedures don't offer much help with this.

Nor do those procedures seem so helpful when it comes to investigating Arendt's "impact" (which takes up a good part of the book). A chapter that promises to "explore . . . the widespread impact of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* on American intellectual and academic life" (p. 21) turns out to consist almost solely of a survey of

the book's initial critical reception—that is to say, book-reviewers' assessments. For a book that's remained continuously in print since 1951, that makes for a skewed sample, to say the least. With some of Arendt's books, King casts his net more broadly, extending to assessments in more recent scholarly commentary. But that still leaves out a lot.

For instance: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was a formative influence for Jeane Kirkpatrick, Ronald Reagan's ambassador to the U.N.,—and equally so for Samantha Power, Barack Obama's. Her writings have elicited thoughtful, searching responses from the poet Robert Lowell, the Catholic devotional writer Thomas Merton, and the crusading anti-war journalist Jonathan Schell. Her ideas are a recurrent point of reference in the writings of the social critic Christopher Lasch, the sociologist Richard Sennett, and the architecture critic Kenneth Frampton, to name just a few. She has been credited as an inspiration by scholars as various and diverse as the gender theorist Judith Butler, the constitutional jurist Bruce Ackerman, and even —yes—the historian J.G.A. Pocock.

Of those figures, only Pocock makes the cut in King's reckoning of Arendt's impact on American thought—and it's an exception that proves the rule. King makes much of the fact that Pocock singles out Arendt as a stimulus to his thinking in *The Machiavellian Moment*. But King misremembers the reference, and draws the wrong lesson. The book of Arendt's named by Pocock isn't *On Revolution,* as King would have it, but *The Human Condition* (to which King gives little attention). A small mistake, but a revealing one. It's no surprise that a scholar with Pocock's interests (and scruples) would find little to learn from Arendt's handling of early American thought. What's more interesting is that he'd care to name Arendt as a source of ideas, nonetheless. It's Arendt as a *thinker* whom Pocock found stimulating—and the same can be said of all the figures I just named. Every one of them surely found much in what she wrote to be wrong-headed or incomprehensible, yet they still looked to her for ideas and insights that they found nowhere else. *Arendt and America* would come closer to attaining its stated aims if it gave more attention to why that might be.