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Matthias Bormuth

## AN INTELLECTUAL AFFAIR – MEETING HANNAH ARENDT

### An Interview with Richard Bernstein<sup>1</sup>

New York, February 2017

**Bormuth:** Richard Bernstein, You are teaching at the New School of Social Research for over four decades. It is known as a famous university where many German immigrants were finding their place after 1933 as scientists and intellectuals. Hannah Arendt was one of them. You got to know her personally and closely during her last years. She was encouraging your beginnings as an intellectual whose first book *Praxis and Action* caught Arendt's attention. So it is wonderful that you take your time for talking with me about your way of becoming a philosopher and encountering Hannah Arendt. How did everything start?

**Bernstein:** I came from a Jewish home of immigrants in Brooklyn. My family came from Russia around 1900 and was not particularly intellectual. After high school, I had the chance to go to the University of Chicago, a remarkable institution at that time. I did not know anything about philosophy before I went to college, but fell in love with it in my first two years.

**Bormuth:** What made you want to become a philosopher at that time?

**Bernstein:** The College of the University of Chicago was a unique place where every undergraduate student had to take a required curriculum that was very philosophical. I had the impression that we read Plato or Aristotle in almost every course. Therefore, philosophy became a discovery for me and I wanted to continue my studies more intensely.

**Bormuth:** And where did you go after your early years in Chicago?

**Bernstein:** I went back to New York and studied at Columbia University for another two years. I studied a variety of subjects, mostly Philosophy and

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Bernstein: Professor, the New School of Social Research, New York; [bernstern@newschool.edu](mailto:bernstern@newschool.edu).

Comparative Literature. However, I wrote my PHD dissertation at Yale, which was a genuinely pluralistic philosophy department. There I took a course in Hegel's *Phenomenology* which terrified me first. Then I had to report on the section on *Antigone* and experienced a break through. Ever since Hegel has had a deep influence on me.

**Bormuth:** What was the result emerging from this encounter with Hegel's thoughts?

**Bernstein:** My book *Praxis and Action* is an interpretation of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy presenting it as different reactions towards themes raised by Hegel. The chapters, which discuss Marx, Existentialism, Pragmatism, and Analytic Philosophy, begin with a reflection how they are reactions to something in Hegel's philosophy, and particularly to his *Phenomenology*. Hannah Arendt contacted me when she read my book.

**Bormuth:** How did this happen?

**Bernstein:** The editor sent a copy of my book to Hannah Arendt. She took the opportunity to contact me when she visited Haverford College (where I was teaching) a year later to give a lecture. I remember very vividly where we met and how long we were together. It was at the Haverford Hotel at about 8 o'clock, and we talked until two o'clock in the morning. We argued fiercely because I was very critical of her readings of Hegel and Marx. It was astonishing how openly she discussed issues with me. She was quite distinguished at this time while I was just a beginner, not well known. However, it made no difference to her. She thought I was trying to do something original in my book. That tells a great deal about Hannah. She might have asked: "Why didn't you write about my work? I'm dealing philosophically with the same issue of action." However, she did not. She was more interested in what I was saying. Later she invited me to the estate of William Jovanovich her publisher. There we had lunch with him and Mary McCarthy her best friend, a well-known writer and member of the New York Intellectuals. At the end of a lovely afternoon Jovanovich said, I want to publish your next book. This was because of Hannah. It always seemed to me to have been a wonderful and intense intellectual affair meeting her.

**Bormuth:** What was it like to become member of the faculty at the New School?

**Bernstein:** The New School was originally founded in 1919. In 1933, the president, Alvin Johnson, decided to found a new branch, The University in Exile for scholars fleeing from Nazi Germany. In 1972, she wanted me to join the philosophy faculty at the New School, but there was some opposition to my appointment. Arendt wrote me a letter that says a lot about her critical attitude towards the academic life: "I do not think that the opposition was due to Byzantine intrigues as such. The reason as I see it, is very simple. I just reread your book *Praxis and Action* which I also use to discuss Marx in the seminar

and was again struck by the freshness and originality of your thought. The first reaction of the academic milieu to somebody who quite obviously strikes out on his own is always negative. And a number of doctoral students, not all, react the same way as a faculty. Glenn Gray who was here and is as you probably know a friend of mine admires it and is very much in favor of your employment. He told me that he found among the general reaction to your book either great enthusiasm or a certain hostility.” And then she goes on to say: “I know the situation very well, because I was for a very long time the object of similar reactions. And I must say that I find this only natural. One shouldn’t be bitter about it and one should not acquire persecution complexes. All academic writing whether right, left, or middle, is conservative in the extreme. Nobody wants to hear, what he hasn’t heard before.” I joined the faculty of the New School much later in 1989.

**Bormuth:** These words are wonderful. They must have been a great encouragement for you while establishing at the New School as a philosopher?

**Bernstein:** I share this letter with my graduate students who encounter resistance when they attempt to write something fresh and original.

**Bormuth:** What fascinates you on Arendt’s thinking?

**Bernstein:** Certainly, I think that Hannah Arendt has developed the finest phenomenological description of tangible worldly public freedom that anybody has ever given. Her understanding of action, natality, plurality, and power are striking and has deeply influenced my own work. I also think she has a deep sight into genuine thinking. I am always learning something new from her thoughts.

**Bormuth:** What do you think about her idea of political freedom?

**Bernstein:** Hannah Arendt did not believe in democracy as simply majority rule: it is the idea of the republic where the plurality of voices is possible and necessary. It is the basic idea of participation, of citizens participating in the political life with their peers. Moreover, since Trump and his administration are in office there is a great renewed of interest in Arendt.

**Bormuth:** Her thoughts seem to me to have a clarifying impact on recent argument of alternative truths which arose in your country.

**Bernstein:** And it seems as if her thoughts on irony which come close to my own written down in a little book are also relevant today in academic life as much as they were in here times. Arendt provides in her essay “Thinking and Moral Considerations” a beautiful description of Socrates and his irony when talking of him metaphorically as a gadfly, ray or midwife which sting, irritate and help our thinking. She, like Socrates, indicates that we encourage independent thinking by infecting others with our own perplexities.

**Bormuth:** There is also the early lecture on Socrates from the 1950s focusing on the question of thinking, opinion and the challenges and limits of public truth.

**Bernstein:** I am waiting for someone to write on Socrates' significance at various stages of Hannah Arendt's thinking. Socrates seems to be crucial for her thought throughout her life.

**Bormuth:** You were writing on two socratic aspects of friendship, its agonal and erotic character. One might guess that this is connected to the experiences you had with Arendt.

**Bernstein:** It is not just her, although she was a decisive experience of agonal and erotic moments in my intellectual life. I consider myself very lucky, because many of the people that I have the highest respect for intellectually, became my friends. That is true of Gadamer. That is true of Habermas. That is true of Arendt and Derrida. In addition, I should also mention Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor – some of the most significant thinkers, in my opinion, of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and they were all friends and, in each case, there were both, agreements and arguments between us.

**Bormuth:** What do you think can be seen as the secret of making them your friends?

**Bernstein:** We all belonged to the generation that made its way in the post-World War 2 period. Hannah Arendt's years of intellectual formation happened a generation earlier. It was still a period when philosophy was strongly connected to the Life of the Mind. It was not a profession in a dry sense confined to the ivory tower. But things changed rapidly. In addition, right now we have to face an age of extreme academic professionalization and bureaucratization at the universities, a process that does not leave the character of philosophy departments unchanged. There is a wonderful statement by Hannah Arendt, when she said: "You know I can live without acting but I cannot live without understanding." There are many independent thinkers like Arendt today.

**Bormuth:** What is the role of philosophical friendship in this horizon?

**Bernstein:** It should encourage the possibility of friendly disagreement. There is a point when one can ask: "What do I accept and what do I reject of his or her thoughts?" The challenges of plurality, freedom, discourse and openness come along with it.

**Bormuth:** And would you think this ability of being in dialogue with other philosophers who appear with different opinions is something that is missing nowadays in the philosophical discourse?

**Bernstein:** Oh, yes. I think the need for both hermeneutic generosity and agonistic disagreement is necessary. However, I am not very optimistic that we find it in academic philosophy today. With the purely analytic style of philosophy, we approach more or less a legal form of exchange of arguments. However, I have also had the experience of friendly agonistic dialogue in my philosophical

conversations with Jürgen Habermas whom I first met in 1972. He became interested in American pragmatism while my passion grew for Hegelian Marxism. We have had many discussions and arguments over the years.

**Bormuth:** Would you say that Habermas' idea of communication is connected to Arendt, who developed specially in her friendship with Jaspers her own idea of communication.

**Bernstein:** Habermas was surely fascinated by Arendt's idea of political friendship. He met her during his first visits to the New School in the 1960s. Habermas described his visits to the New School as entering into the spirit of the Weimar Republic. Everybody at the New School was speaking German. However, there are striking differences between Arendt and Habermas – especially concerning the role of a rational consensus. She was always worried about unity of the opinion, claiming differences. In other words, if I am going to have an argument with you, it is not just common ground; there is also difference between us. This is fundamental for her idea of plurality. That agonal aspect of philosophizing was her strength while Habermas stressed the ability to achieve certain agreements.

**Bormuth:** In Arendt's essay on Lessing the polemic and pluralistic perspective is enlightened and friendship is seen as a means for political discourse. What do you think of that?

**Bernstein:** For Arendt, there can't be a public, unless there's a shared world and the world is not just a matter of objects, you know, but a matter of exchanging opinions in a world that has some stability and permanence. A shared world means shared opinions. I think it is important to keep these themes alive. One of the exciting things about Hannah Arendt is her understanding of the American Founding Fathers who created a new republic. Arendt sought to keep alive the lost treasure of the revolutionary spirit where tangible public freedom comes alive.

**Bormuth:** Are the universities responsible to lead young people on this way?

**Bernstein:** Yes. Certainly, this was Arendt's viewpoint. She was very alarmed in the 1960s that the student rebellion against the university would destroy the university, would destroy the only possibility for real thinking and seeking for truth. Another danger nowadays is that our academic life becomes more and more specialized and professionalized.

**Bormuth:** It was always impressive for me that Hannah Arendt somehow stayed in certain distance to institutions.

**Bernstein:** Hannah was never really an academic. She did not even have a full-time position until the 1960s. She taught at Princeton and Berkeley, but never identified with these institutions. Reading the essay on Lessing we can say in his words she was a *Selbstdenker* – an independent thinker. That's what she really was.

