

The passion for freedom



Hannah Arendt
in 1944

Study Center reveals the latest on Hannah Arendt's thoughts about the responsibility of thinking

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In an age of extremes, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) was courageous and wise enough to use the classical world as a basis for supporting her moral and political beliefs. Although well known today, until a few decades ago, she was only known to political factions on the right and left, which considered her a controversial figure. It is because of her work, however, that totalitarianism, the human condition, and the “banality of evil” have become key concepts in understanding modern times. Hence it is important to disseminate her perennially relevant body of work, and this is one of the most important purposes of the recently opened Hannah Arendt Study Center (www.hannaharendt.org.br), which is linked to the Norberto Bobbio Institute. Both are managed by Raymundo Magliano Filho, former president of the BM&FBovespa, and organized by Cláudia Perrone-Moisés, professor of the School of Law at the University of São Paulo (USP).

“Arendt is a classic in line with Bobbio’s own thinking: she is an author whose concepts, although developed in the past,

The writings of Hannah Arendt still serve as food for thought when approaching today’s problems

still offer something that helps us understand the world today,” says Celso Lafer, president of FAPESP and a student of Arendt during the 1960s at Cornell University. “All of her work remains utterly relevant today. During the 1950s, she was already discussing the consumer society, and she used her work to examine the now essential question of responsibility in the relationship between thinking and judging,” says Perrone-Moisés. The center grew out of one of FAPESP’s Research, Innovation, and Diffusion Centers (RIDCs), the Center for the Study of Violence (NEV-USP), which housed the Hannah Arendt Study Group and Archives between 2004 and 2010. “This month, the first set of studies on *Responsibility and Judgment*, a collection of essays, courses, and talks produced during the 1960s and 1970s, are slated to begin,” says Perrone-Moisés. It was in these works that Hannah Arendt first proposed that ethics be visible in public actions and policies, underscoring yet again the decisive role of reflection and criticism.

“She is a provocative writer who always incites us to new readings. Every generation feels the need to interpret her in its own way,” notes Lafer. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt describes the process by which human rights, inherited through the tradition of revolution, began to be put to the test after the peace treaties that ended the First World War. “Considered to be nonexistent for a whole group of people perceived to have no rights because they were stateless, human rights proved to be ineffective when not tied to citizenship,” explains Perrone-Moisés.

According to Perrone-Moisés, Arendt’s criticism of the question of human rights

refers to human rights in the abstract but becomes concrete at the moment when the support of citizenship ceases. Human rights had been defined as inalienable because they were presumed to be independent of any government, but when individuals cease to have their own government, no authority is left to protect human rights, and no institution is prepared to guarantee them. “According to Arendt, the emergence of totalitarianism only became possible because it was preceded by a process, in the period between the wars, that she called human destitution,” concludes the researcher.

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt focuses on the destruction of the conditions for human existence in the modern world by society as a whole. In 1961, one event would determine Arendt’s intellectual path: her trip to Jerusalem to attend the trial of Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann and cover it for the *New Yorker* magazine, an experience she later recalled in the book *Eichmann in Jerusalem – A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1961). That experience resulted in her return to philosophy. The expression “banality of evil,” coined by her in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was another point of contention because it was seen as a trivialization of what had happened. “For some, Arendt had betrayed the idea of ‘radical evil’ she had previously defended, considering it simply ‘banal.’ What happened, however, is that Arendt did not abandon ‘radical evil’ – rather, what she saw in Jerusalem did not fit that definition. The banality of evil was linked to the inability to think and to the automatic carrying out of the tasks of modern bureaucracy,” says Perrone-Moisés. Nothing is more 21st-century than that. ■ C.H.