

TWO APPROACHES TO THE TRADITION IN HANNAH ARENDT'S WORKS

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Abstract

From the Latin «colere» which means «to take care», «to look after», «to protect» Arendt derives the notion of culture. Culture designates a safe and friendly place, a place that is easy to live in. The ancient Romans designed this place with pioussness, care, and devoutness. But Arendt dealt with another dimension of culture, namely, a Greek one and the ancient Greeks didn't care for tradition as the Romans understood it. They usually started from scratch. They believed that the love of beautiful things and beautiful ideas is possible only through spontaneous interaction with them and were self-made people. They did not imitate the canon because there was no such a canon and therefore they did not need the blessings of any future or past generations. It is not an accident that Plato corrected the poets in his Republic because tradition appeals to us while it is still valid for us and not sacred in itself. Tradition cannot be a storage box filled with mementos and memories. Hereafter we have two distinct concepts of tradition: the Greek one, which is active, creative, original, and forceful and the Roman concept, which is passive and receptive. In my paper, I would like to discuss these two notions of culture and the way Arendt dealt with them.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, culture, tradition, the ancient Greeks, the Romans.

I

Her eight exercises on political philosophy, Arendt begins with the recall of Franz Kafka's novel – «Er» (he). In his life the main protagonist is striving against two forces. One of them pushes him in his back and invades him from the past (and to some extent it is something already known to him); the second one is the enigmatic obstacle in fulfillment of future projects. Hence, «Er» is the object of influence of two powerful elements: the past and the future that ruthlessly pressurize him. If he wants to save his independence, his freedom he has to fight against the element of time which is «grammatically unqualified» (it is the teaching Arendt provides, Kafka – to the contrary – persuades *Er* to escape, and withdraw from the frontline of both powers to take stand of an independent arbiter). It

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is not difficult to guess that «Er» is simply every one of us, that the past and the future constitute border conditions of our existence.

«The first thing to be noticed is that not only the future – <the wave of the future> – but also the past is seen as a force, and not, as nearly all our metaphors, as a burden (that) man has to shoulder and of whose dead weight the living can or even must get rid (of) in their march into the future... This past, moreover, reaching all the way back into the origin, does not pull back but presses forward, and it is, contrary to what one would expect, the future which drives us back into the past».¹

Living between past and future, being in permanent fight with both modalities, a person takes undefined and atemporal place. But one cannot live outside the time! For this reason – making our life choices – we are forced to refer to our tradition. We can do this in two ways: Romanian and Greek. The Romanian approach to tradition is near to idolatry or blind adoration of the past. *Maiiores* – those who are greater than we are gave us the sacred fire of tradition, which we have to blow up and keep it alive. The sacred truth is always behind us and thanks to its light we are able to see the way on which we are strutting. Live memory of the past allows us to take part in the «big renovation», allows us to set from the very beginning the new order – of the city, of the Academy, of the State, of the Church – it depends on what event we consider fundamental. In this way we participate in «the miracle of the durable existence». In ancient Rome the values like tradition, authority, and religion were tied up together. To shake one of them meant a collapse of two others. For the Romanians the ancient Greece was an *arche* (the very beginning and the power as well) of the all things that are valid (like thinking, culture, religion). And it is because of the Romanian adoration of the Greek tradition that we – the contemporaries – can also deal with it.

«Without Rome's sanctification of foundation as a unique event, Greek civilization, including Greek philosophy, would never have become the foundation of a tradition, though it might have been preserved through the efforts of scholars in Alexandria in nonbinding, non obliging manner. Our tradition, properly speaking, begins with the Roman acceptance of Greek philosophy as the unquestionable, authoritative binding foundation of thought, which made it impossible for Rome to develop a philosophy, even o political philosophy, and therefore left its own specifically political experience without adequate interpretation».²

Not far from the Roman understanding of tradition there is its Greek equivalent. It is an agonistical one, expressed in a total disrespect for the norms, ideas, for the whole material culture that is inherited from the ancestors.

«Plato's violent treatment of Homer, who at the time had been consider the <educator of Hellas> for centuries, is for us still the most magnificent sign of a culture aware of its past without any sense of the binding authority of tradition».³

The Greeks always started everything anew, beginning from themselves. They coped with tradition only by permanent revision of petrified forms. They did not care about it. It was rather like Penelope's fabric, they tore it apart to sew it again. For sure, they raped the tradition – they didn't know another way. Let's take an example. Almost all of the philosophical handbooks I've ever seen spin a yarn about transcendent theory of ideas that are eternal measure for the world; that the world – temporary, contingent, nonsolid, and material – is their mere reflection. According to this interpretation, there exists only that what is eternal, invisible and beyond the world; and that there doesn't exist anything what seems to exist, what one can smell, touch, or taste. What nonsense! Yet, «the good as such», as well as «the good in itself», or «the good for itself» doesn't exist. The good is the earthly invention or it does not exist at all.

«The notion of good (*agathos*) has no connection here with what we mean by goodness in absolute sense; it means exclusively *good-for*, beneficial or useful (*chresimon*), and is therefore unstable and accidental since it is not necessarily what it is but can always be different».⁴

Plato's idea is not good from the outer space. Its sense should be permanently negotiated, considered «for the sake of». I'm talking here about conversation (*dialeghestai*), which is not an empty rhetoric or persuasion, but which is a dialogue. One reaches the truth «throughout the reason», dia-logos, through the conflict of claims, through the diversity of perspectives. The transcendental truth is the enemy of the appearance and perspective, and the one who demands it, in the same way tries to destroy human life, to sacrifice it on the altar of invisible reality. So, are the ideas of goodness, truth, justice mere arbitral conventions? Only in the narrow sense.

The world is not unanimous and we cannot extort unanimity from it. Community of equal people is not based on forgetting of the differences but on their artificial leveling. Let's imagine a group of people where each person understands the good and justice differently than others. One can say that only in a discussion, or during a quarrel (*agon*) particular ideas appear. This activity (it doesn't matter if it is action or thinking) is not good or bad as such. It is good or bad «for the sake of».

«Only in such a manifold can one and the same topic appear in its full reality, whereby what must be borne in mind is that every topic has as many sides and can appear in as many perspectives as there are people to discuss it».⁵

It does not mean that platonic ideas are conventions, the result of agreement which, with a mood swing, shall be changed or canceled. Only during permanent conversation discussed ideas draw in solidity, become tradition to which one can always appeal to, or if it is necessary, to shake it off or amend it (as Plato «corrected» Homer). But the same ideas that first were the object of discussion then became the object of agreement

now are «transcendent», which means that they oblige us unconditionally. Once again: there are no ideas free from human stain. Each idea, each perspective is burdened with human evaluation, prejudice, gossip. Therefore, one has to check continuously their sense and verify credibility.

II

It is such a long time we've been *Romans* now, that we finally forgot about it; never questioning the nature of our antiquary life experience – concerning ourselves and our world. The values that allowed the Romans to remember about tradition, to look after it, and take care of it, turned out to be the empty boxes, the boxes first obviously plundered and deprived of their valuable treasures. Or quite on the contrary: these boxes were filled with bizarre lumber, requisites that reflect the human past.

Can we turn back the time and start pretending that tradition is still important to us? Can we think about ourselves differently than in quotation marks? No, we cannot. – Arendt has this to say. It would be a consequence of bad faith, a result of admiring rubbish that pretends to be the tradition. So, in this sense – what does it mean to «shake off» tradition and when does it appear? Does it happen when the old and saint notions lack their power and authority? Not necessarily.

«The end of a tradition does not necessarily mean that traditional concepts have lost their power over the minds of men. On the contrary, it sometimes seems that this power of well-worn notions and categories becomes more tyrannical as the tradition loses its living force and as the memory of its beginning recedes; it may even reveal its coercive force only after its end has come and men no longer even rebel against it».⁶

Nietzsche, Marx, Kierkegaard – the three great 19th century demystifiers of the tradition recognize in their works its twilight. They pushed away the past which pressed on them, albeit at the same time they were half in its grave. Kierkegaard who brings doubts into faith (although he still believes); Marx who overcomes the theory (philosophy) in favor of the praxis (although he still philosophizes); Nietzsche who votes for life for the sake of will to power (although it is a reversal of Platonism). This all, according to Arendt, could be a great opportunity for us. Behind this great revaluation of the traditional contents and values «is the great chance to look upon the past with eyes undistracted by any tradition, with a directness which has disappeared from Occidental reading and hearing ever since Roman civilization submitted to the authority of Greek thought»⁷. Following her German masters, Arendt stakes on the conflict, incites conflicting interpretations; and extends her own perspective.

To sum up. «Colere» in Latin means «take care», «look after». From this word Arendt derives the notion of culture – the place which is safe and proper to live. In ancient Rome culture and tradition guaranteed good life. One cultivated it with pietism and delicacy. The Greek civilization mix, mainly philosophy, art and politics, was taken by the Romans as a norm which was unconditionally obliging to them.

«... the great Roman reverence for the testimony of the past as a such, to which we owe not merely the preservation of the Greek heritage but the very continuity of tradition, was quite alien to them».⁸

The Greeks didn't care about their own tradition, because they reached everything on their own and from the very beginning. They believed that love of beautiful things and beautiful ideas demands praxis, practical application; at least not less active than creating new ones. In other words, they were self-sufficient. They did not imitate the canon (there was not any canon by the way), they didn't need any blessing of future generations. They simply hesitated to look for "tradition" beyond them – in a distant past or in unpredictable future. The whole tradition contained affirmation of their power, in the affirmative «I want this!» No doubt, there was a genius of artists behind this. Therefore one can assume that the Greeks gave more than took from the world, which was a simple consequence of the surplus of forms of their life; the consequence of cultural luxury and magnanimity. If the meaning of tradition lies in unifying the past and the present into one living system, tradition has to use violence in order to destroy its old forms in favor of the new ones. For the Roman epigones tradition seemed to be something different. According to them, one could cope with tradition only through others' eyes. While the Greeks were thinking, creating beauty, fundamentals of political philosophy, the Romans merely quoted them; they collected their wise sayings, and imitated their wisdom never adding anything new.

Hence we have two models of approaching tradition – the Greek one: active, creative, original, and forceful – on the one hand, and the Roman one: non-active, wholly receptive – on the other hand. In the long run, it was the latter that won. Roman experience was imitated for such a long time and up to the limits that it finally resulted in a disaster of all this immediacy. As the time went by once alive events lost much of their strength. Step by step they were replaced by legends, gossips, and prejudice which were used to fade contrast and muffle constant buzz. Then, moving the politics into the sphere of household put Greek hierarchy up side down. The Eternal City was replaced by the Eternal Church; a truly free person was the one who refused to be engaged in politics and whose freedom was limited to privacy, etc.

Today one cannot pretend that everything is fine – «one more century and even pure spirit will start stinking» (to quote Nietzsche). The traditional philosophy doesn't offer any solution. Only its great destroyers, its active apostates are still trying to take new, dangerous, and sometimes hopeless paths. Nietzsche who philosophizes with a hammer in order to reevaluate all values; Marx who brings to us the self-interpretation of a human being as the *animal laborans*; Kierkegaard who calls for dignity of faith in spite of modern tendencies of the contemporary world. Facing all those destroyers, Arendt tries her own way of thinking. One can say that throughout her works she is constantly trying to shake off tradition in order to show the risk that such a break could bring. At the same time she tries to stitch up those tears that appeared on the solid body of tra-

dition, she tries to resist – even in herself – the all-encompassing abyss. Arendt oscillates between a Roman antique shop with souvenirs (where she is drawn by Walter Benjamin) and original Greek thinking (to which she is prompted by Martin Heidegger). The true greatness of Arendt is that she chooses neither of these ways, and finally she retreats into the narrow gap between these two models of culture, the burst between the past and the future.

References

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- ² Arendt, H. (2006) *The Promise of Politics*. NY. P. 53.
- ³ Ibid, p. 54.
- ⁴ Ibid, p. 7.
- ⁵ Ibid, p. 169.
- ⁶ Arendt (1977), *op. cit.*, p. 26.
- ⁷ Ibid, p. 28–29.
- ⁸ Ibid, p. 213.