

Unplanned, Spontaneous & Just in Time

Skye C. Cleary

We Are Free to Change the World: Hannah Arendt's Lessons in Love and Disobedience
by Lyndsey Stonebridge
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When the philosopher Hannah Arendt was thinking, she would cup her chin in her hand and let her cigarette dangle from her fingers as smoke drifted up over her face. It was Arendt's signature move in interviews and lectures, and also in 1933 during her eight-day interrogation in Berlin during which the twenty-six-year-old Jewish woman charmed a Gestapo officer into buying her cigarettes, good coffee, and letting her go.

In her book *We Are Free to Change the World*, Lyndsey Stonebridge, a professor of human rights at University of Birmingham, introduces Hannah Arendt's life and charm, pointing to ways her thinking might be applied to political challenges of the twenty-first century. Stonebridge was intrigued by Arendt's innovative and multifaceted thinking, as well as her stubborn disinterest in following rules. Arendt's style of philosophizing refused to conform to academic norms and methods.

We Are Free to Change the World is written in a similarly disruptive but engaging style. The dynamic narrative jumps between decades, circles back to pivotal moments in Arendt's life, and crisscrosses her works. The ten chapters are loosely structured around themes in Arendt's major publications, especially her "first mature" book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* published in 1951, which established Arendt as the "intellectual nemesis" of totalitarianism.

Arendt's romance with Martin Heidegger before and after his Nazi party membership is infamous, but Stonebridge shows why we should pay more attention to Arendt's philosophy of love. In a love letter to Arendt, Heidegger referenced Saint Augustine: *Volu ut sis* meaning "I want you to be." Heidegger had misquoted Augustine but the idea sparked Arendt's 1929 PhD thesis titled *Love and Saint Augustine*.

For Arendt, to love is to appreciate our differences. Wanting others to be creates new worlds because it affirms our uniqueness, enables plurality to flourish, and makes us part of a collective. "We are all strangers in need of welcome," Stonebridge reflects, "which is why *I want you to be* remains one of the most powerful statements in her thought." In 1938, Arendt experienced an intense lack of *Volu ut sis* when her German citizenship was cancelled and she became one of many, stateless, Jewish people.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt argues that forced statelessness is a weapon of inhumanity. Governments still strip people of citizenship in the name of national security. Stonebridge notes: "By casting people out you create new generations of stateless and rightless people. It is foolish to think that this



Untitled (wisteria/Cimitero Monumentale, Milan) by Scott Trelaven. Collage from artist's 35mm negative prints 2024

makes anybody more secure." This reasoning underpinned Arendt's concern that creating the Jewish state of Israel would alienate many people and exacerbate hostilities.

Love wields huge power and can become politically dangerous when—in the name of ideologies, religion, tradition—it's expressed with passionate rage instead of neighborly love. Stonebridge notes, "Today, howls of injured outrage fill our timelines, while policy advisers keep daily watch on the barometers of the inchoate rage that they believe, correctly, is the cheapest source of political power."

Arendt considered modern dictatorship to be particularly perilous because of its expansive power which takes root in propaganda, surveillance, censorship, racism, terror, and greed. Like an onion, the stench of totalitarianism's inhumanity permeates every layer. Stonebridge writes: "not a person, an institution, a mind, or a private dream was left untouched. It squeezed people together, crushing out spaces for thought, spontaneity, creativity—defiance." The odor of oppression becomes so normalized that some people stop smelling it at all.

Arendt reminds us that loving life means protecting human rights, which can mean being disobedient. In her 1970 essay "Civil Disobedience," Arendt proposes that violence is a failure of politics. Civil disobedience is better thought of as a way of "breathing together." An example of how this thinking is relevant in the twenty-first century: when Darnella Frazier recorded Derek Chauvin murdering George Floyd on her phone in 2020, Stonebridge notes, "Frazier acted alone from moral conscience, but her courage transformed Floyd's dying 'I can't breathe' into a movement of people breathing together—and breathing hard."

In Arendt's view, the human condition is fragile and vulnerable, but political engagement motivated by wanting others to be makes us human. A life connected to others in mutually respectful ways harbors the possibility of meaningful change. Stonebridge explains: "Real freedom—and I have come to think this is Hannah Arendt's central political insight—requires the presence of others so that we can test our sense of reality against their views and lives, make judgments, probe, and learn."

Stonebridge notes, "Watching and reading Hannah Arendt, I am often captured by the sense that there exists something she will not give up; something precious, mysterious even to herself, but very strongly present." The book succeeds in sharing a strong sense of Arendt's presence. Yet, like the cigarette smoke that often masked Arendt's face, mysteries remain, most notably: How can we know if our thinking goes astray, as Arendt's did sometimes?

One such questionable path was the 1959 *Dissent* essay "Reflections on Little Rock" in which Arendt argued against desegregation of schools. Stonebridge notes that the "lofty and chiding" essay was problematic because Arendt neither understood the situation nor checked the facts. Arendt's philosophy advocates for thinking as relentless contemplation and interrogation amidst perplexity. But in this instance, Arendt's thinking failed. Sometimes, according to Stonebridge, thinking with Arendt "means thinking against her."

Like Arendt, Stonebridge's advice is anti-authoritarian. It's up to each of us to do the hard work of thinking ourselves. We must stay vigilant against comforting dogmas and attuned to the hazards, vulnerabilities, and perplexities of human reality. Stonebridge offers that "there is a wisdom in knowing that change has come before and, what is more, that it will keep on coming, often when you least expect it; unplanned, spontaneous, and sometimes, even just in time. That, for Hannah Arendt, is the human condition."

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ARB PHILOSOPHY

Because All We Have Is Each Other

Jesse Spafford

Arguments for anarchism often focus on social structures, imagining radical new forms of self-governance and defending their viability. But anarchism is, at its core, a moral view that asserts how society should be arranged and how we should treat each other. The tools developed by contemporary moral philosophers make clear that anarchism is a set of commitments that, together, form a coherent philosophical position.

Non-anarchists generally take states to be legitimate, believing that, when a state passes a law, everyone within its territory is morally obligated to obey that law—and obey it *because it's a law*. By contrast, the consent theory of legitimacy holds that people are obligated to obey the state's laws only if they have consented to this arrangement. However, given that practically no one has consented in this way, there are no legitimate states. While we have many obligations, these obligations do not exist in virtue of the laws of the state.

Anarchism has a libertarian strand, but rejects private property rights favored by libertarians. On a standard libertarian moral picture, all of the Earth's resources—its land, timber, wild fruit, etc.—start out unowned, anyone is morally permitted to use these resources as they see fit. Each person is then taken to have the power to appropriate these resources, transforming them into private property. This transformation gives the appropriator ownership rights over the resources, including rights against others using these resources as well the power to waive their rights or transfer them to others. There is also a tradition of libertarians who argue that the power to appropriate is constrained, endorsing John Locke's proviso that appropriation can occur only if "there is enough and as good

left in common for others." No one can be left worse off in virtue of their compliance with the established property rights.

But this constraint is never satisfied when it comes to external resources, as private property always leaves (or could leave) someone worse off. Thus, the Lockean proviso supports the classical anarchist rejection of private property.

Property owners also seem to possess the exact same moral power as the legitimate states discussed above: in both cases, anyone who enters the state's territory or the owner's land must do what the state or the landowner says. If states can possess this power to oblige only after receiving the obliged parties' consent, then the same must be true of property owners! And, given that property owners have similarly never received the required consent, it follows that they also do not actually own their claimed property in a moral sense.

In the absence of external private property, each person must be assigned egalitarian rights over resources. Each person has a right against others using resources in ways that would leave her worse off than anyone else (unless she acts in certain negligent ways). Together, these concepts make explicit the egalitarian, private property-rejecting, state-skeptical position endorsed by most anarchists.

The moral foundations of anarchism are solid. Let this bolster our moral self-confidence as we work to realize a better world.

Jesse Spafford is the author of Social Anarchism and the Rejection of Moral Tyranny published by Cambridge University Press, available for free on CUP's website.