

A Note on Max Weber's Impact on Hannah Arendt's Thought

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Abstract

Among Hannah Arendt scholars, Max Weber's impact on her thinking and writing remains unrecognized even today. Arendt's and Weber's thought has been compared surprisingly little. This negligence casts an unhappy shadow over the understanding of Arendt's 'methodology'. This article argues that Arendt adopted Weber's ideal-typical method and used it as one of her most important analytical tools especially in her writings on Jewish pariahdom and analysis of totalitarianism. It is not generally understood that Arendt's approach to the formation of Nazi totalitarianism is profoundly ideal-typical. The article also claims that Arendt drew from Weber's ideas on responsibility and judgement even though they were not exclusively identical. Their understanding of these concepts has to be related to their conceptions of politics: Weber emphasized the conflictual character of politics, while Arendt focused on its creative dimension as a potential new beginning.

Keywords: Hannah Arendt, Max Weber, ideal-type, responsibility, political judgement, Nazi totalitarianism.

The literature does not tell us any precise information about young Hannah Arendt's familiarity with Max Weber's texts. Even though many of his ideas were relatively well known in the form of slogans, his thought was usually rejected by his contemporaries as old-fashioned liberalism, individualism, and neo-Kantianism (see, e.g., Bolz 1989). Nevertheless, one may assume that young Arendt did not join the ranks of this widely spread criticism because her teacher in Heidelberg, Karl Jaspers, was a devoted and tireless admirer of Weber. Jaspers both knew Weber personally and drew from his thinking, especially from the method of ideal-type, which provided him with a permanent tool of analysis. In addition, despite the fact that Weber personally did not imagine himself to be a charismatic leader, during the 1920s Jaspers believed, with many other members of Weber's circle, that if he had reached the political leadership of Germany in 1918–19 the coming catastrophes could have been avoided or at least mitigated. Thus it is